

From Saint Nino to Women in Georgia's Winemaking

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ABSTRACT

The “Grapevine Cross” of Saint Nino symbolizes the sacredness of the vine and wine in Georgia. Despite the prominence of female images in the country’s heritage, a patriarchal culture and gender segregation have survived through centuries in Georgia. This state of affairs applies to winemaking – a key sector for the economy and social life. However, against all odds, the recent decades have seen an incredible women’s arrival in the Georgian wine scene. Women break barriers and destroy outdated stereotypes by building successful businesses focused on premium wines with high export potential. While contributing to the renaissance of Georgian wine culture, they also establish themselves as valuable players in the country’s wine community.

Keywords: Georgia, winemaking, wine industry, culture, gender, economy

INTRODUCTION

Symbols and Culture

The Grapevine Cross is a major symbol of the Orthodox Church of Georgia – a mountainous country where Europe meets Asia. To bring Christianity to Georgia, Saint Nino traveled from either the Eastern Roman Empire or Jerusalem in the 4th century carrying a cross made from grapevines (Cross of St. Nino, 2024). Since then, Georgian church architecture and paintings have used the vine leaf as one of the most distinctive motifs. The 6th-century Jvari Monastery in Mtskheta – the continuous religious center of Georgia – has a painting of the Virgin Mary holding grapes for Christ as a child.

Leaping from ancient to modern times, the Mother of Georgia sculpture, which overlooks Georgia's capital, Tbilisi, holds a bowl of wine in her left hand to greet those who come as friends and a sword in her right hand for those who come as enemies (Mother of Georgia, 2024). Representing the spirit of resistance and hospitality, the sculpture also reminds us that Georgia is the “Mother of Wine” – the birthplace of this ancient drink that has been made and celebrated continuously there for the last 8,000 years (Maghradze, 2016; Lordkipanidze, 2017; Georgian Wines, 2017; Georgia: The Cradle of Wine, 2024).

The vine and wine are considered holy in Georgia. Through female images, they symbolize the country's rich religious, cultural, and socioeconomic heritage. They also reflect the Georgian national character, as the hymn *Thou Art the True Vine* is the most important sacred song (Culture of Georgia, 2024).

Yet, despite strong women in Georgia's history and present time – from Saint Nino to the most famous ruler, Queen Tamar of Georgia's Golden Age (12th–13th centuries) (Rayfield, 2019; Jagiashvili, 2024), and the country's president since 2018, Salome Zourabichvili (see Exhibit 1) – patriarchal culture and gender segregation in family roles and occupations have persisted in Georgia. This endurance of old patterns applies to Georgia in general as well as to its wine industry – a significant sector that produces the second most exported commodity (Exports by Commodity Groups, 2024), provides a multiplier effect on the economy through secondary activities, and is critical for both economic growth and employment.

METHODS

This paper aims to demonstrate that, against all odds, a change in gender patterns is coming to Georgia. This change is tangible and visible in winemaking – a key sector of the country's economy long dominated by men. To trace gender-related

developments in Georgia, the paper seeks to determine whether the country's legislation and international agreements have translated into progress in women's labor participation, wages, political power, and cultural attitudes. The analysis of Georgia's general context helps pinpoint the difficulties of rooting out gender stereotypes, task segregation, and men's control over land, finances, and decision-making in winemaking. The objective is then to identify the strategies female winemakers undertake to break multiple barriers to success.

The employed research methods include desk research, analysis of Georgian national and international statistics, interviews conducted in May–June 2024 as part of the author's Fulbright Scholarship in Georgia, and observations during participation in a meeting of the Women in Wine Industry and a visit to a wine tourism site in Kakheti. The snowball sampling of interviewees through persons with knowledge of Georgian winemaking or referrals by previously selected participants made data collection feasible within the two-month time frame and helped integrate interviews into other research methods. The interview guide, which was partly used for conversations with female winemakers, received an exemption determination by the George Washington University Committee on Human Research Institutional Review Board. The research could, therefore, proceed without further oversight as it adhered to common guidelines of studies involving human subjects.

The paper builds on previous research on gender relations in Georgia, including national evidence and international assessments by UN Women, the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, USAID, and the European Union. It benefits from articles about pioneering female winemakers worldwide and trailblazers in Georgia, as well as reports of their support by national and international organizations. These sources offer useful background for making sense of the author's interviews with Georgian female winemakers.

The paper is organized into five sections. The introduction reveals a contradiction between the veneration of women throughout Georgia's history and patriarchy in culture and economy. The second section sets the objective of the paper and designates methods that seek to unpack this contradiction in reference to winemaking. Supported by a variety of research methods and available literature, the third section assesses Georgia's strides toward gender equity, from commitments through questioning male domination to women's breakthrough into winemaking. The fourth section discusses the profiles of female entrants into Georgia's wine scene and their paths to success, focusing on specific approaches to getting ahead and advancing the country's reputation for wine. The conclusion spells out women's strategies to change the status quo and position themselves within Georgia's wine community.

RESULTS

Toward Gender Equity

Georgia's Commitments to Gender Equality and Current Status

In the last thirty years, Georgia has made strides toward creating an enabling environment for gender equality (Georgia: Country Gender Assessment, 2018, p. X). The Constitution of Georgia recognizes the equality of all people before the law, regardless of gender (Constitution of Georgia, 2020). The Law on Gender Equality, adopted in 2010, prohibits discrimination in all spheres of social life and creates conditions for the implementation of equal rights and freedoms for women and men. It also determines the functions of the Gender Equality Council as a permanent body in the Parliament of Georgia to coordinate work on gender issues (Information prepared by the Government of Georgia, 2024). Furthermore, Georgia has become a party to international treaties and conventions promoting women's rights and gender equality (Treaties and Conventions, 2024; Key Findings, 2023).

However, progress in implementing the national legislative and international commitments has been slow. Over the past ten years, the labor participation rate stood at about 62–67% for men and 40–46% for women (Women and Men in Georgia, 2023, pp. 63, 75). The discrepancy among younger women can be attributed mainly to the burden of unpaid care work, including caring for small children below school age (Georgia: Country Gender Assessment, 2018, p. XII). Gender differences in wages remain significant, as women earn less than two-thirds of men's average monthly salary, and the gender pay gap was 31.7% in 2022 (Women and Men in Georgia, 2023, pp. 63, 75; Figures 1 and 2). Men are generally employed in higher-paying professions and attain more senior positions than women. However, even accounting for demographic and job characteristics, women in Georgia earn roughly 16% less than men (Molineus, 2022).

Georgian women have also made little progress in their political influence and power. In the top executive branch positions, the share of women varies from 17% among government ministers to 19% among ambassadors. The share of female members of the Parliament of Georgia was 18% in 2022, not significantly higher than in 2016 (Women and Men in Georgia, 2023, p. 123; Figure 3).

Georgia ranked 69th in the 2024 World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Index (WEF GGI) – behind most European countries and Armenia (Global Gender Gap 2024, 2024, p. 12) – and lower than in 2006, when the country was ranked 54th (Georgia: Country Gender Assessment, 2018, p. X). While Georgia's advances in institutional frameworks and instruments move the country toward gender parity,

some perceptions and attitudes slow down change. According to a UNDP study based on face-to-face interviews with a nationally representative sample of around 2,500 citizens and focus group discussions in five regions of Georgia, 48% of Georgians believe that women's primary duty is to take care of the family rather than seek a professional career, and 39% believe that men are better business leaders than women (Men, Women, and Gender Relations, 2020). Given these entrenched views, it is no wonder that according to the most recent data, the number of men founding businesses is almost twice as high as the number of women (Women and Men in Georgia, 2023, p. 95).

Traditional Male Domination of Winemaking

A Georgian traditional stereotype is that men dominate both public and family life, while most housework is done by women (Culture of Georgia, 2024). According to the Caucasus Barometer Report, traditional gender roles are held to be "ideal": only 1% of Georgians said that the main decision-maker at home should be a woman, and only 2% considered a woman an ideal breadwinner (How Does Gender Determine Roles, 2024). Surveys conducted for the World Bank's gender assessment of Georgia revealed that 31% of respondents had a preference for sons, and 57% of respondents in rural areas preferred to have a boy (Country Gender Assessment, 2021, p. 6). As a result, the skewed sex ratio at birth persists: the number of boys born per 100 girls was approximately 107.2 in 2023 (Women and Men in Georgia, 2023, p. 6).

Much of vine-growing and winemaking happens in rural areas, where gender stereotypes and patriarchal attitudes are especially deeply entrenched and prevalent. Women often play submissive roles in families and communities as traditional gender roles impede their economic functions and decision-making abilities in villages (Country Gender Equality Profile, 2020, pp. 75, 84).

Men have controlled the Georgian wine sector for centuries. Though winemaking has always been a family-based activity, men occupied leading decision-making roles in wine businesses, while women participated in the auxiliary operations of vineyard treatment and helped with harvesting (Country Gender Equality Profile, 2020; Berekashvili et al., 2008, p. 9). Winemaking was essentially considered "man's work," and superstitions often restricted women's entrance into traditional masculine activities (Berekashvili et al., 2008, p. 10). (See Exhibit 2.)

Gender segregation of tasks in winemaking reflects a legacy of the divide between stereotypically male occupations and female care- and service-related jobs or unpaid subsistence farm work (Georgia: Country Gender Assessment, 2018, p. XIII;

Analysis of the Gender Pay Gap, 2020, p. 8). Even though Georgian women are legally entitled to own and inherit land and property, men enjoy property inheritance, ownership, and administration privileges. It is essential for winemaking that according to the agricultural census data, 70% of total agricultural holdings were operated by men (Georgia: Country Gender Assessment, 2018, p. XIII). The latest statistics confirm that the share of agricultural holdings whose heads are women has been steadily around 32%, and the annual average profit from the latter holdings in 2020 was 43%-51% less than from the holdings headed by men (Women and Men in Georgia, 2023, p. 105). Insufficient assets and inadequate access to finances have been additional impediments faced by women seeking to become entrepreneurs (Country Gender Equality Profile, 2020, p. 60).

Women's Breakthrough into Winemaking

Given the Georgian context, women's advent in the wine scene has been remarkable. Change is bubbling in the country's wine sector, and it happens against all odds. Women manage to break multiple barriers and destroy outdated stereotypes. To venture into winemaking, they display passion, courage, and determination. They also need mutual support to sustain their new wine businesses, gain recognition, and reap benefits.

The founding of the Women in Wine Industry (WIWI) association in 2019 was a significant milestone. Manana Akhlediani, a vibrant, energetic woman with experience in the Soviet-period wine industry and a penchant for unifying people, was the mastermind behind this association (Interview with Manana Akhlediani, 2024). In recent years, WIWI forged ties with the National Wine Agency, the Wine Department of the Ministry of Agriculture, and the agricultural program of the Ministry of the Economy. These ties helped to sponsor several tours of association members to European countries – including Belgium, the Netherlands, and Poland – to present their products. The association and its supporters also enabled women's participation in wine fairs and festivals, professional business training programs, and study tours abroad. These engagements have advanced women's communication, marketing, and management skills, stimulated their businesses, and uplifted their image and prospects.

By coming together, Georgian female winemakers walk in the footsteps of pioneering female winemakers around the world who have been developing international partnerships to exchange knowledge and experience and elevate their status in the global wine industry (Povey, 2024; Women Who Influence, 2024; The History of Women, 2022; Morning Star Darling, 2021; Mariani, 2024). Building on worldwide practices, female trailblazers in Georgia enjoy the support of international organiza-

tions. Within the project titled Women in the Georgian Wine Business, the German Society for International Cooperation (GIZ) has worked to enhance the visibility and capacity of female winemakers, integrate them into cooperation networks, and promote their products. The establishment of a close partnership between WIWI and the German association “Vinissima – Women & Wine” was one of the tangible outcomes of the GIZ project (Georgia: A Gently Fermenting Revolution, 2024).

The United Nations Development Programme and the European Union have also stepped in to support the entrepreneurial spirit of female winemakers in Georgia via grants, technical and consultative assistance, fostering innovation, and enhancing competitiveness (Tchitchinadze, 2023). As part of A Joint Action for Women’s Economic Empowerment, UN Women has supported entrepreneurs from western Georgia engaged in agritourism and winemaking to expand their businesses and move up the value chain. The program, held in partnership with the Georgian Farmers’ Association, involved a study tour co-hosted by Le Donne del Vino, the Italian national association of female winemakers and experts in related sectors (Women Entrepreneurs, 2018).

Madam Wine

The Madam Wine company, founded by Manana Akhlediani in 2010, is a great example of an innovative marketing and business approach that shatters archaic stereotypes and disrupts Georgia’s wine scene. Produced by women, Manana’s wines are primarily intended for women. Catering to a range of wine varieties for women of different characters, the Madam Wine labels include names such as “Lovely Woman,” “Coquette,” and “Rose.” One wine marketed to men, which is stronger than the ones for women, shows women’s lips on the label, following the saying, “Your lips are red as this wine.”

Having identified her unique niche in boutique wines, Manana was able to employ a European-style factory following European standards, extend her connections, and present her wines to Western distributors. She now exports to Europe, including Estonia, Germany, Poland, and the United Kingdom. By building her business, she also inspires and assists other female winemakers – as a successful entrepreneur and the leader of the WIWI association (Madam Wine, 2024).

DISCUSSION

Female Winemakers’ Paths to Success

The community of Georgian female winemakers is diverse and effervescent, but a few features are common to many newcomers to the industry.

Family Connections

Most of the women who entered the wine field have family connections or grew up watching their fathers produce wine. This is not surprising because winemaking is a family affair in Georgia. Baia Abuladze, who was named to Forbes' 2019 30 Under 30 Europe entrepreneurs list (Sorvino, 2019), is a fourth-generation winemaker. She grew up on the family farm and helped her parents manage it. Following traditional methods and rules, she now produces an average of 40,000 bottles of wine a year, mostly exported to the United States (Foucault, 2023). Tamara Bidzinashvili named one of her Saperavi wines "Temo" in honor of her father-in-law, who helped her develop her business. She found her place among natural winemakers and also exports to the West (Foucault, 2023). Sommelier Lika Nebieridze, who works for the prestigious Château Mukhrani—a successful modern enterprise that revived the winemaking traditions of Prince Ivane Mukhranbatoni (Gelashvili, 2024; Château Mukhrani, 2024)—was born and raised in the Mukhrani village amidst vineyards (Interview with Lika Nebieridze, 2024).

Sharp Focus

With a few exceptions, pioneering female winemakers are involved in small-scale enterprises focused on premium-level wines. This approach is consistent with the strategy highlighted by Julie A. Peterson, Managing Partner at the Marq Wine Group and a former contractor of the National Wine Agency of Georgia. "Georgia needs to make exceptional wines and to align the types of wines with trends in wine consumption," said Peterson, referring to the benefits of entering the U.S. market with its 19 million wine consumers. Georgian wines are sold for an average of \$5.15 per bottle in the U.S. market and only for \$2 per bottle in Russia; some wineries can sell for \$9–\$11 per bottle (Interview with Julie Peterson, 2024).

Manana Akhlediani's efforts to orient WIWI (Women in Wine Industry) association members toward the premium wine category are driven by her interest in improving the quality of Georgia's wines and prioritizing the country's higher-value exports to the West. She is also concerned about recovering the original 525 varieties of grapes grown in Georgia in the 19th century and diversifying the types of wines that Georgia can produce and export (Madamwine, 2024; Interview with Manana Akhlediani, 2024).

Skills

Education and experience in winemaking are essential for professionalism and enterprise success. Ketevan Kochiashvili, a close colleague of Patrick Honnef, the German-born CEO of Château Mukhrani (Gelashvili, 2024, p. 226), is second only

to him in making decisions about producing high-quality wines. Ketevan received a bachelor's degree from the Agricultural University in Tbilisi and a master's degree from the Technical University in the field of microbiology. She was also an exchange student at Geisenheim University in Germany, which offers excellent programs in viticulture and wine business (Interview with Ketevan Kochiashvili, 2024). Ketevan is much valued by her boss, who hired her fresh from university and promoted her to a high position in his company (Interview with Patrick Honnef, 2024).

Similarly, Ane Parjiani represents a new generation of winemakers who combine academic knowledge with practical experience. She recently earned her winemaking diploma. While working as a cellar employee at Château Mukhrani, she benefits from learning from master winemaker Honnef and also builds on her background in South African vineyards (Foucault, 2023).

Some female winemakers accompany lifelong learning by sharing their expertise, including teaching at local universities and offering courses through professional entities such as the Georgian Wine Guild, which offers certificates in viticulture and viniculture. These programs are accredited by the Ministry of Education of Georgia and supported by the government and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations (Interviews with members of the WIWI association, 2024).

Promotion

Effective marketing is critical for the success of start-up women-owned and women-managed enterprises and their sustainability. Promotion of their products happens at wine festivals, exhibitions, and fairs, as well as via social media and personal contacts. The COVID-19 pandemic intensified reliance on social media. Tinatin Jakhua, who was educated in information technology, is skilled with computers and worked as a social media manager, started her wine business by publicizing her products on Instagram. She now exports her wines to Holland, France, India, the U.S., China, Poland, and other countries (Interview with Tinatin Jakhua, 2024; Tinatin Wine, 2024). The Madam Wine company attracted new clients and explored new export markets by increasing its online presence. In this endeavor, it was helped by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development through funding from the European Union's EU4Business initiative (Madam Wine: EU4Business Helps, 2024).

From Winemaking to Wine Tourism

Female winemakers increasingly link their businesses with wine tourism to raise their exposure and benefit from cross-fertilization of related economic sectors.

“Tasting local cuisine and wine” was the most popular tourist activity in Georgia in 2023, as 78.1% of international visitors cited it (Conducted Activities, 2024). Since many rural producers in Georgia do not have distribution contracts enabling them to retail their wine, the openness of their establishments for visitation and direct sales is indispensable (Georgia’s Alcoholic Beverage Industry, 2024).

Nina Qochiashvili is one of those who ventured to complement winemaking with a wine tourism site. Benefiting from the Produce in Georgia program of the national government in cooperation with USAID, which supports start-up businesses with loans (Produce in Georgia, 2014; Overview of Agriculture Sector, 2017; USAID Celebrates, 2024), she bought a 19th-century historical house in the Kardenakhi village, one of the best areas for winemaking in Kakheti. Restoring the decrepit house and the adjacent wine cellar was a giant undertaking. However, now Nina and her husband Kakha can boast the availability of six guest rooms for wine and food tourism, including space for holding conferences and tastings. Nina’s high-quality wines are sold to Germany, Japan, Poland, the U.S., and the United Kingdom, as well as locally. Blending winemaking and wine tourism is certainly a challenge, but it is also a promise of higher business profitability and resilience (see Exhibit 3).

CONCLUSION

“Georgia is extremely exceptional: it has a perfect story—amazing history, tradition, sustainable farming, and also good wines, including natural ones,” stated Peterson, a U.S. consultant (Interview with Julie Peterson, 2024). This positive assessment was shared by Honnef, who referred to a “renaissance of Georgian wine culture” (Interview with Patrick Honnef, 2024). Female winemakers are now part of this exciting story and Georgia’s wine renaissance. Having chosen the wine sector as an avenue to express their creativity, they have made headways in turning their enterprises into sources of both pride and livelihood. They have challenged old stereotypes and heralded a new age of women-led winemaking. What are the strategies that they have employed to change the status quo and establish themselves as valuable players in Georgia’s wine community?

First, women’s breakthrough into winemaking did not happen in a vacuum. Georgia’s advances in the institutional frameworks intended to move the country toward gender parity have created a better climate for women-owned and women-managed businesses. Even though the agenda for gender equity is far from finished, national legislation and Georgia’s acceptance of international commitments have enabled the support of female winemakers by government structures—including the National

Wine Agency, the Ministry of Agriculture, and the Ministry of the Economy— and programs, such as Produce in Georgia. International bilateral and multilateral organizations also provided assistance.

Secondly, social capital is imperative for success in Georgia in general and in wine-making in particular. Friends and family networks can nurture start-up enterprises and help them flourish. Formal and informal associations serve as important forums for the exchange of information and best practices. The Women in Wine Industry association is one of those venues that offer both camaraderie and business advice.

Thirdly, finding a specific niche is an effective strategy to break barriers and venture into a new field. Women's smart choices to concentrate on producing high-quality natural wines, so-called boutique wines, and prioritizing exports to the West have brought them into a premium league in winemaking. Although most of their enterprises are small-scale, they can generate decent revenues because of the category of wines and their buyers. Another business strategy is bridging winemaking with wine tourism, which increases the customer base and benefits from a variety of promotional measures.

Fourthly, professionalism is a condition for the competitiveness and sustainability of the wine business. Many female winemakers are not complete novices as they can rely on family traditions in winemaking. But to build a modern and profitable enterprise, they need experiential knowledge acquired through training and internships. Lifelong learning includes both being mentored by world-class wine gurus and sharing the gained expertise with others. Future research can further explore the evolving role of female professionals in the wine industry and wine-related tourism from both national and global comparative perspectives.

Finally, all of the above ingredients of success would yield results only if they are mobilized and reinforced by individual and collective inspiration and determination. Georgian female winemakers who burst into the field and managed to favorably position themselves have proven to be intelligent, enthusiastic, and resourceful warriors. Their battles are not over, but their wins are already visible and consequential.

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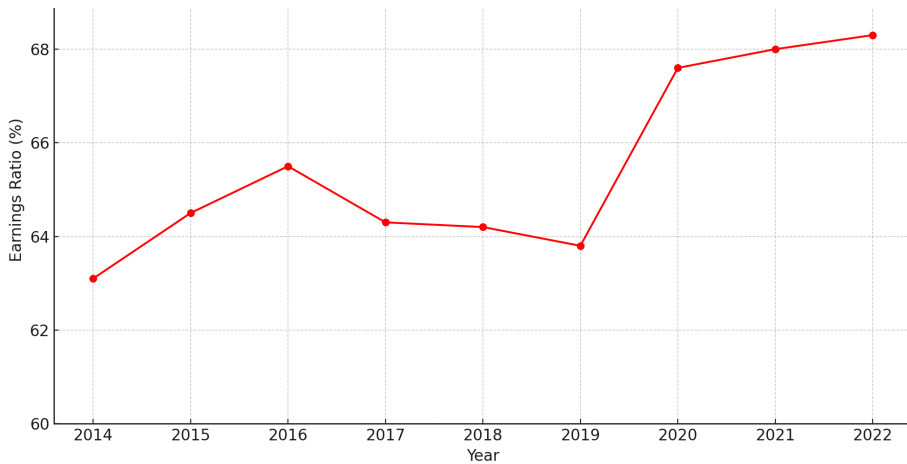
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Exhibit 1
Strong Women of Georgia.



Figure 1
 Women’s Average Monthly Earnings Ratio with Respect to Men’s Monthly Earnings (%)



Note. Reproduced from *Women and Men in Georgia: Statistical Publication*, National Statistics Office of Georgia, Tbilisi, 2023, p.74. (https://www.geostat.ge/media/58119/Women_And_Men_In_Georgia_2023_ENG.PDF)

Figure 2
 Unadjusted Gender Pay Gap (%)

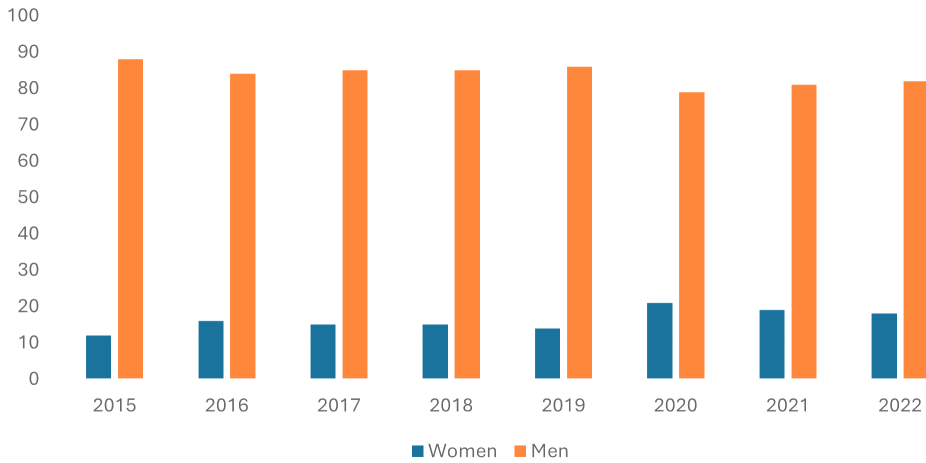
| 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 |
|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| 34.5 | 35.7 | 35.8 | 36.2 | 32.4 | 31.4 | 31.7 |

Source: Establishment Survey (Survey in Enterprises and Organizations).

Note. Reproduced from *Women and Men in Georgia: Statistical Publication*, National Statistics Office of Georgia, Tbilisi, 2023, p. 75. (https://www.geostat.ge/media/58119/Women_And_Men_In_Georgia_2023_ENG.PDF)

Figure 3

Distribution of the Members of the Parliament of Georgia (as of 31 December 2022)



Note. *Reproduced from Women and Men in Georgia: Statistical Publication, National Statistics Office of Georgia, Tbilisi, 2023, p.123. (https://www.geostat.ge/media/58119/Women_And_Men_In_Georgia_2023_ENG.PDF)*

Exhibit 2

Men in Georgia's Winemaking



“Vintage” by Niko Pirosmiani



Carriers of wine



Family-style traditional winemaking

Exhibit 3
Women in Georgia's Winemaking



Baia Abuladze



Manana Akhlediani
Photo by author, 15
May 2024.



Ketevan Kochiashvili
Photo by author, 29
May 2024.



Nina Qochiashvili
Photo by author, 20
May 2024.