

## *Gender, work and migration from Bulgaria and Albania to Greece*

Paper presented at the international workshop “**Gender, Work and the Household, Comparative Perspectives**” Mytilene, 30-31 March 2007

Riki Van Boeschoten, University of Thessaly

### Introduction

I am here to present Mytilene's sister project on gender and migration. In Volos we have been studying the life stories and the daily practices of migrants from Albania and Bulgaria, male and female. We have chosen these two groups for two reasons: because they are numerically the most important groups of post 1990 migrants to Greece and because they present very different migration patterns and therefore lend themselves to a comparative analysis. While both migration flows were the direct result of the collapse of communism, their timing, gender composition and migration systems were very different.

Migration from Albania was initially almost exclusively composed of young males, who, right from the beginning of the 1990s, crossed the border illegally. This migration followed the patterns of the *pechalba* system of temporary migration inherited from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, whereby groups of young males left their villages, leaving behind their wives and sisters to care for the household. This pattern changed radically after 1997 as a result of the internal upheaval in Albania after the collapse of the pyramid system, but also following the first regularization program in Greece. Since then the percentage of women migrating from Albania has increased dramatically and now, ten years on, most Albanian migrants live in families.

In Bulgaria the collapse of communism did not immediately lead to mass emigration. Although Bulgarian immigrants are the second largest group after the Albanians, they make up only about 5-6% of the total immigrant population, against 60% of the Albanians. As our life stories show, many Bulgarians tried first to find other solutions to the new problems posed by the transition period, some of them by opening their own private business. Most of our informants arrived in Greece after 2000. This difference has an important cultural consequence for the ways in which migrants from both countries view their migration experience: for most Albanian

migrants their migration was at the same time a move from one country to another and a move from one economic system to another. For most Bulgarian migrants their migration was to a large extent the result of a disappointment with the promises of improved living conditions under a market economy. This being said, the main difference between the two groups concerns the gender composition and the household structure. The great majority of Bulgarian migrants are adult or elderly women who work as live-ins in Greek households and have left their families behind. With their wages they support their families and many have in fact become the head and breadwinner of a transnational household. This implies a major shift in traditional gender roles, a point to which I will come back.

### The project

In this project, entitled "Gendered aspects of migration from Southeast Europe: labour, public culture and intercultural communication" we have collected 60 life stories with male and female migrants from Albania and Bulgaria, backed up by participant observation in Volos and in Albania. The main distinctive features of the projects are the following.

- The project is strictly qualitative, focusing on migrants' narrative strategies and their subjective responses to transnational migration. In order to understand the respondents' cultural backgrounds and their biographical resources, our interviews were not limited to the migrants' experiences after crossing the border, but included their memories of the past (esp. the communist past) and their ideas of the future.
- As for the theoretical approach, we focus on the interaction between structures and agency, but attach specific importance to the role of migrants as active agents of their own destinies, instead of viewing them simply as victims or passive receivers of the migrant regime in their host country.
- Data collection and analysis: we adopted two overarching axes of research: gender and "integration", and three underlying axes of research: labour, public culture and intercultural communication. The two overarching axes of research

were included in all interview schedules, while we have elaborated separate interview schedules for each of the underlying thematic axes.

- As for gender, we have chosen not to focus on women alone, but to include on equal terms the male perspectives as well, with particular revealing results.
- Another important innovative feature of our project is our generational approach. Instead of focusing only on adult migrants, we have included young adults and adolescents (age group of 17-25). As our first results have shown, this age group is particularly important to obtain better insights into the gender-related tensions developing within migrant families and the perspectives of future integration of migrants into Greek society.
- Finally, our project does not limit itself to the analysis of speech acts and the observation of daily practices, but includes a special focus on visual practices and new technologies. For example, we have asked some informants to select pictures from their personal photo-albums and videotaped targeted interviews in which they comment on these pictures. We have also observed their use of the Greek, Albanian and Bulgarian media and of other new technological devices, such as video cameras and mobile phones. Some aspects of this research will be included in our website, which is still under construction.

### Labour, gender and gender ideologies

The time at my disposal is too short to present our main findings on each of our three research axes. Instead I will focus on a subject which is central to the topic of this workshop and can help us to place our discussions in a wider context: the relation between labour, gender and gender ideologies. Our data has revealed an apparent contradiction between shifting gender roles - with the empowerment of women through their work and their role as breadwinners - and the reinforcement of traditional patriarchal gender ideologies. This contradiction had led to tensions within migrant families (between spouses and between generations) and this tension has in turn important implication for the "integration" process - or - to avoid this much-used but ambiguous term - the relations of migrants both to their host country and to their country of origin. I will first briefly describe our interview material related to these issues, then develop an argument about how to deal with these problems in the research process and finally suggest an explanation based on an anthropological, but

also historical approach to migration issues. My main argument is that this retraditionalization process is mainly linked to the new experiences of migrants in their host society rather than being a perpetuation of atavistic Balkan patriarchal traditions.

### *Interview material*

#### *A. Male narratives*

Adult Albanian men construct their narratives on the journey across the border as a heroic tale of male bravery, adventure, defiance and male companionship. They also use their narratives of their work experience in Greece to build a strong male identity, based on bodily strength, endurance and male working skills. Work is absolutely central to adult men narratives. Their work experience is presented as a personal success story of linear progress in which regularization is marked as a turning point in their personal biography. "We came to work" "People see me in the street and greet me". Work and male labour skills are used as symbolic capital, as a means of moral recognition and an informal passport to Greek society. As a narrative strategy, this discourse is also used to counter negative stereotypes of Albanian men as criminals and poor underdogs and thus to strengthen their national identity. By contrast, their Greek colleagues are portrayed as lazy and feminine: one of our informants, who used to be an actor in Albania, was derided by his Albanian colleagues on the construction site. They told him he was "working like a Greek" and that, like the Greeks his hands were "too soft" to work like a real man.

Young Albanians who came to Greece as adolescents also use the heroic border crossing trope, but their motivations are less linked to economic reasons and more to a desire to escape the constraints of Albanian society, including those of the patriarchal family, to discover new worlds beyond the border. In many accounts the journey is also presented as an initiation to adult malehood. In their narratives work is linked to masculinity, as in those of their adult counterpart, but they have developed a different work identity. Work is not presented as an aim in itself, but as a means, through the money they earn, to gain access to consumer goods, entertainment and leisure time. In other words, adult Albanian men seek to become part of Greek society through work, young Albanians through entertainment (mainly bouzouki clubs). In their leisure time, these young Albanians mix freely with Greek boys and girls of their own age. But

when they reach the age to create their own families, they often resort to traditional practices such as arranged marriages and seeking a "clean" virgin bride from Albania. In their own words, what they are after is "a wife for the home", a condition for which few Greek women would qualify. In the narratives of most Albanian men and some Albanian women, Greek society is portrayed as a dangerous place of pleasures and sexual liberation. They feel it as their duty to protect their women folk from these dangers and thus reinforce traditional gender ideologies.

The few Bulgarian adult men we were able to spot during our research did not dwell on their journey to Greece. Some, however, presented stories of male adventure, bravery and companionship which played a similar role as the heroic border-crossing tales of Albanian men. These narratives concerned experiences of male labour migration to remote parts of the Soviet Union during the socialist era. Like their Albanian counterparts, Bulgarian adult men attached the utmost importance to their work experience, which they linked to their idea of masculinity. However, the social recognition they seemed to seek through these narratives appeared to be addressed rather to an audience in their home country. In fact, all Bulgarian immigrants appeared to be oriented towards their country of origin, a fact which is clearly related to the structure of households of Bulgarian transnational families. As for gender relations, Bulgarian men recognized that a certain equality between the sexes had been achieved during the socialist era, both in the home and at the workplace. But at the ideological level, they stressed the predominant role of men as breadwinners and providers.

Young Bulgarian immigrants are mostly people who had been left behind during their childhood and joined their parents, often against their own will, at a later stage. In the narratives of young working males we found the same link between work and male identity, but also the transmission of male values from father to son within the family. Young Bulgarians conveyed a strong sense of insecurity, partly linked to their migrant identity and partly to their family history (e.g. high divorce rates). Some reproduced in their narratives the discourse of their fathers about the "dangers" of Greek society, which in the case of the Bulgarians included not only the police, drugs and sexual promiscuity, but also the presence of other migrants, esp. from Albania. Without resorting to the extreme traditionalist practices of their Albanian counterparts they too

seemed to be seeking a new security in marriage with a “safe” Bulgarian bride without social experience.

### *B. Female narratives*

For Albanian adult women work is an important part of their life, but contrary to the men and in spite of the "female" character of their work they don't use their narratives to build a female identity. Moreover, we observed an important degree of differentiation in narratives (much more than in male stories) about work experiences in Greece depending on whether they came from a village or urban setting, their level of education, the nature of their work experience prior to migration, their motivations to migrate, and the nature of gender relations back home.

Most Albanian adult women came to Greece to be reunited with their husbands. Although this might seem as a confirmation of traditional gender patterns, from another perspective it also indicates a reversal of traditional gender relations, as women now seek to control the sexuality of their men, instead of the other way around. This reversal of gender relations is even more evident in the case of women who migrate alone, support their families with their wages back home and thus become the head of a transnational household. Some women, whether they follow their husbands or migrate alone, decide to make the journey in order to escape the constraints of the patriarchal extended family, esp. control by their mother-in-law. For these women, independently of the degree of job satisfaction, work in Greece guarantees them a certain degree of autonomy they did not have at home. But the evaluation of the work experience is very different for women from a village background and educated urban women. For village women who used to work in the fields, work back home did not count as work, as it was counted as part of their domestic chores. Work is transformed into labour in Greece through fixed working-hours and wages. In their narratives, it is not working skills or pride which appears as a core value, but money. It is their money which they can spend according to their own criteria and allows them to free themselves from the moral standards of their village community, for example by buying modern, "feminine" clothes. In this sense they value their work experience positively.

On the contrary, educated urban women who exercised a profession in Albania, view their work in Greece as a down-grading and humiliating experience.

They feel trapped in a closed labour market which does not offer them any opportunities to exercise their skills because of the ethnic division of labour. Their narratives convey a strong sense of insecurity, which is linked to their impossibility to join the Greek health insurance system and thus to obtain an autonomous residence permit. Therefore they are utterly dependent on their husbands.

On the contrary, many young working Albanian women develop in their narratives a strong rhetoric of female empowerment and autonomy in which work is seen as the main means to obtain this goal. They openly reject traditional patterns of gender relations which imply the submission of women to the male members of their household. Even when they exercise the same kind of jobs as their older counterparts, they hope to open an autonomous path for themselves through education. On the other hand, young Albanian girls who are still in the education system focus their narratives on the strong control exercised by their parents on their personal lives and the intergenerational conflicts generated by this control. They resist the rules imposed by their parents and try to renegotiate their gender identity. They too hope to gain independence through education and their future employment.

The narratives of adult Bulgarian women present us with a complete reversal of traditional patriarchal gender relations. In spite of the closed environment in which most of them work and live, they use their narratives to build a strong, empowered female identity. They present themselves as active heads of their transnational households and often talk in unmistakably denigrative terms about the husbands they left behind. In many cases their decision to migrate was as much inspired by the need to support their children as by a desire to escape the constraints of patriarchal gender relations. In this sense, their migration is often a form of informal divorce.

Younger Bulgarian women develop a similar rhetoric of empowerment through their work. In addition, due to their younger age, they feel more concerned by the negative stereotype of Bulgarian women as sex-workers: they stress that their “work” is “clean” and complain about sexual harassment by Greek men at the workplace.

### Conclusion

As these narratives show, women migrants' labour has brought about an important shift in traditional gender roles in both ethnic groups, although this change is more dramatic in the Bulgarian case. On the other hand, male narratives can be seen as a counter-discourse, stressing instead the value of traditional gender ideologies. Moreover, accounts by both Albanian and Bulgarian adult subjects of actual gender practices at home during the recent communist past reveal a certain degree of emancipation of women from the constraints of traditional patriarchal families. Therefore it seems that we are dealing here with a retraditionalization process which is at least partly linked to migration. This is a major point coming out of our research.

### Explanation

I suggest that this apparent contradiction between gender roles and gender ideology as well as between male and female narratives can be explained if we shift our attention from the national context of the host country alone and look at it at a transnational level. More specifically, new insights can be gained if we see it as an interaction between the cultural capital these migrants have brought from their home countries and the new challenges they face in their host country. I also suggest that our analysis of these phenomena should be grounded in a thorough historical knowledge of their development through time. In other words, I think it is important to take into account the cultural background of migrant communities as this was shaped first during the procommunist period and then changed successively by the communist regime, the transition and the migratory experience. Finally, I think that this cultural background has in turn effects on the integration process or on the way in which adult and young migrants relate to their host and home country. This is work still ahead of us, but I would like to conclude my talk with some preliminary thoughts pointing to future directions.

Although this may seem an outdated concept, I think that male honour is a good starting point. In both countries, but especially in Albania, male honour was and still seems to be a crucial marker of male identity. Traditionally, male honour was linked to the role of men as providers and breadwinners and to their role in the defence of the family's honour through the control of their women's sexuality. Although communist ideology pruned gender equality, it also strengthened the link between male identity



and work through the image of the worker hero of the Stalinist era. Although women could and did also become worker heroes, they could accomplish this role only by assuming a male identity. One of the Bulgarian women we interviewed, who worked for many years in a coal mine, is a good example of this. Reflecting on her own working past in Bulgaria, she said she was a “manly” woman. For Albanian men, male honour is also linked to hospitality and the idiom of besa, implying that every Albanian man, head of a household, has the duty to protect his guests. This seems particularly relevant to a context in which migrants have to face often “inhospitable” treatments.

This notion of male honour has been threatened by a variety of factors, both during the transition period and during migration.

- a) Unemployment, which undermined the traditional role of men as providers
- b) The inability for Albanian migrant men to protect their women folk back home from violence (during the riots of 1997 in Albania) or from prostitution networks.
- c) The insecurity of migratory regimes in the host country
- d) Daily humiliations by police and employers
- e) Negative stereotypes of migrant men in the media of the host country
- f) The image of Greece as a country of sensual pleasure – an image which emerged strongly from our interviews with adult Albanian migrants
- g) The potential loss of control of the second generation.

In the light of these considerations, it seems that the strong male discourse we encountered in male migrants’ narratives, as well as the retraditionalization process itself, is mainly a male response to the perceived threats affecting traditional notions of male honour and male identity. This return to traditional gender practices and values seems to affect not only Albanian and Bulgarian men, but also part of the Albanian adult women, especially those of rural origin. On the other hand, most Bulgarian women and young Albanian women have already broken the bonds of patriarchal gender relations or are ready to do so in the near future. Migrant labour has played an important role in this process. For the moment being, migrant labour has not improved the perspectives of integration of migrants into Greek society, quite on

the contrary. But his may change in the future, as the second generation will enter the labour market.