

Women and migration in Albania: a view from the village

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ABSTRACT

Since the fall of communism in the early 1990s, Albania has experienced migrations of epic proportions: 17 years later almost one in four Albanians has emigrated and lives abroad, primarily in Greece and Italy. Albanian emigration has by and large represented a typically male-dominated model, whereby men have ‘led the way’ and women have followed as family members. In spite of the considerable participation of Albanian women in this migration, their roles and experiences have been largely ignored in the relevant literature. Based on in-depth interviews with rural migrant women and their families, as well as other ethnographic material collected during 2004-2006 in Albania and Greece, this paper aims to contribute to filling this knowledge gap. The findings demonstrate the various ways in which Albanian rural women participate in the migratory process. They are often the most important pillar for supporting the family migration strategy through their productive and reproductive labour when remaining behind. They are also closely involved in decision-making about migration of other family members. Furthermore, they have been amongst the pioneers of the early 1990s migration themselves, including taking the long and risky journeys across the mountains to Greece. Overall, their contribution to the migrant household is beyond their presumed reproductive role and includes a strong economic component.

Whilst some ‘traditional’ norms and values persist and are reinforced during migration, change *does* take place, albeit at a slow and gradual pace. However, for the emancipatory benefits women could accrue through migration to be enhanced, immigration policies need adjusting to address their position as fully autonomous economic and social actors, thus reducing their dependency on male ‘bread-winners’.

Albanian women’s particular migratory experiences combined with their increasing numbers as migrants make a compelling case for further attention in research and policy circles.

Keywords: Albania, migration, post-communist women, gender

INTRODUCTION

Since the demise of the communist regime in the early 1990s, Albania has experienced migrations of epic proportions: 17 years later around one million Albanians, or one quarter of the country's total population, have emigrated and are living abroad, primarily in Greece and Italy. Many Albanians also moved internally during this time, principally from rural to urban areas. Albanian emigration has, until recently, represented a typically male-dominated model, whereby men 'led the way' and women followed as family members. Although independent female migration did take place, this was generally limited to women from urban intelligentsia and cadre, primarily from the capital Tirana, but also coastal cities. In spite of the considerable participation of Albanian women in migration, their roles and experiences in the migratory process have been largely ignored in scholarly research. Literature on Albanian migrant women, beyond the issue of trafficking for participation in the sex industry, is limited to a few studies examining Albanian women's integration and lives in destination countries.

Although the usefulness of a gendered approach which studies both men and women relationally is appreciated, this paper focuses on women alone. Its aims are threefold. First, to make visible the experiences of Albanian women engaged in migration processes, either as a family member staying behind, or as a migrant. Second, to explore the ways in which Albanian women participate in the migratory processes. Third, to explore some gendered relations which are perpetuated, challenged or transformed through Albanian migration.

The paper is structured as follows. The first section provides essential background on women's position in Albanian society, especially during communism and the post-communist transformation. This is followed by a review of key literature on Albanian migration, by focusing specifically on women. The third section outlines the methodology used to collect the data on which this paper is based. The empirical core of the paper then follows, organised around women's experiences and participation in migration including decision-making, journeys, arrival and settlement. The final section draws conclusions and makes recommendations for future research.

WOMEN IN ALBANIA

Albanian society has been described by anthropologists as strongly male-dominated, where women become part of their husbands' family upon marriage and all inheritance follows the male line. However, the degree to which these attributes apply to different parts of Albania and at different times varies. Northern Albanians, also known as *Ghegs*, have been affected by different historical and socio-economic processes than the Central/Southern Albanians, also known as *Tosks*.¹ Historically, the *Ghegs* were strongly organised around clans, along the lines of the large extended family or *zadruga*, sometimes constituting up to a hundred people. They possessed a certain degree of autonomy in regulating their own affairs even during much of the Ottoman occupation. The key regulating mechanism was the Kanun or Code of Lekë Dukagjini, an unwritten body of customary laws, observed by the *Ghegs* of Catholic and Muslim faiths alike. The Code sanctioned the total submission of women to men, structured around the notion of shame and honour (related to women's chastity).²

On the other hand, Central and Southern Albania became quite early on semi-feudal, where landowners exercised great influence over the peasants and collaborated with the Ottoman authorities to preserve their position of power. Other customary laws were in use in these regions, and amongst some Muslim populations a localised version of the Islamic law shaped gender relations, including polygamy. Over time the *Tosks* of Southern Albania, particularly Orthodox Christians, emigrated widely throughout the Ottoman Empire, and later on, in the early 20th century, overseas to the Americas and Australia. This opened up avenues for outside influences and changes in the societal system, including the position of women. It is thus rather problematic to generalise findings from research from Northern Albania, especially when presenting the Kanun of Lekë Dukagjini as the explanatory key for social phenomena observed in other parts of the country. However, generally women's geographical and social mobility has been historically controlled by men, albeit at various degrees in various parts of the country.

Besides the geographical differences, the temporal aspect needs to be taken into account. Although Zog's interwar government (1925-1939) introduced legislation aimed at equality between men and women, in practice implementation failed. On the eve of WWII, 90 percent of females countrywide were illiterate and the country had only 21

female teachers, whilst less than three percent of secondary school students were females

Women's emancipation became a key aim of the post-war communist government.³ Although women's productive and reproductive roles were imposed in a top-down approach by the communist state, a number of positive achievements did take place. The most important of these was the dramatic improvement in literacy rates and increased female participation in all levels of education. Indeed, in the 1980s almost half of university students were female. Political participation also improved, albeit through allocated quotas. For instance, between 1970 and 1990, women constituted around 30 percent of the People's Assembly representatives, whereas their participation prior to 1945 had been nil. Furthermore, women increasingly joined the labour force outside the home and by 1989 around 80 percent of working-age women were employed. However, three issues of concern need emphasising at this point. First, the majority of women worked in what were regarded as female professions such as medical services, education, social welfare, as well as the textile and shoe industries, whilst rural economic sectors were also highly gendered. Second, only few held high managerial positions. And third, paid employment was added to the work women continued to perform within the home. As the roots of patriarchy in the private sphere were not fundamentally shaken, and as women shouldered what has been coined the 'double burden' of productive and reproductive labour, the claimed emancipation has been widely challenged. Although this situation was very similar to that of women in other Eastern-bloc countries, the problems in Albania were exacerbated by the persistence of the concepts of honour and shame, which remained largely ingrained into the society. Some women like Musine Kokalari (founding member of the Social-Democratic party in 1946), who approached emancipation as independent thinkers, were shunted away in prisons and exile, whilst those who stayed in decision-making institutions largely followed the (communist) party line. Although the cadre of professional women had increased, by and large feminism and a conscious women's movement did not really emerge in Albania until the mid-1990s.

With the collapse of the communist regime, the supporting system of kindergartens and day-care nurseries that had been put in place to enable women to perform their role of the 'Heroic Worker', also crumbled. Some of their achievements gradually eroded,

especially during the early years of the 1990s, amidst a power vacuum created by the dissolution of the previously omnipresent (communist) state. The 'substitute social orders' that emerged were strongly based on the re-invention of tradition and the re-generation of patriarchy. In the post-communist societies the position of women became precarious as they were the group most affected by the lack of personal security and economic opportunities. In addition, women's emancipation was stigmatised by association with the communist past and thus widely rejected. Consequently, women withdrew into the private domain where they were subject to other forms of insecurity, such as domestic violence. Although not unique to Albania, the greatest concern is that here it continues to be widely condoned by the law enforcement authorities and the wider public. According to Ekonomi *et al.*, in Albania domestic violence is considered as 'normal, as a means of education and a form of communication within the family'. Many women are compelled to stay in abusive relationships because they lack economic opportunities, but also for the sake of their children and to preserve the 'honour' of their family. These issues are compounded in rural areas.

Although women participate widely in education, their employment prospects are grim. Official unemployment rates for 2004 were at around 18 percent for women, but this only related to registered unemployment and did not include rural women who are considered as fully employed by reason of the family's ownership of land. Of those employed, most continue to work in health and social care, education, the welfare services and mid-level managerial positions. Less educated women work in the few small-scale garment and shoe factories that exist. Owning and running a business is even more difficult due to limited time to devote to business, curtailed freedom to travel, the risk of being exposed to (sexual) violence and lack of confidence in them by the society, including themselves.

Political participation and representation has suffered greatly since 1990, particularly as politics continue to display masculinist and at times violent features. In 2005, only 10 out of 140 elected members of parliament were women, whilst representation at local level was only one percent in the 2004 elections. Excluded from politics and from economic prospects in the public and private sectors, most professional women who did not emigrate turned to the NGO sector. However, being highly donor-dependent and less driven by issues and agendas at local level, NGO's representation of various groups of

women, especially young and rural women, as well as the outcomes for the enhancement of women's socio-economic role generally, have been questioned. Whilst one can appreciate the 'third-wave' of feminism that Calloni proclaims enthusiastically as the cooperation between Western and transition countries' feminists, the connection between urban and rural women within post-communist countries themselves has yet to materialise. By the late 1990s the women's movement in Albania was practically non-existent in rural areas; and by 2005, of the 100 registered women NGO's, only six focussed on rural women. The presence of women's NGO's in rural areas is extremely limited, and is often initiated by foreign donors. In spite of these limitations, it is important to emphasise and recognise their work and achievements over the past 15 years.

During the post-communist years, women's adverse situation was compounded by large-scale emigration of men, particularly from rural areas. However, women also emigrated themselves. As INSTRAW states, '[W]omen's migration [within and from developing countries] ... is inextricably linked to the situation and status of women in society'. Indeed, from the above analysis we can conclude that women emigrated for a variety of reasons that reflected their position and status in Albanian society, including poverty, lack of economic opportunities, improvement of career prospects and personal advancement, being with their family, as well as in order to escape the constant surveillance of their local communities and the social consequences of practices related to 'honour' and 'shame'. Thus migration combined with post-communist transformations, especially access to global communication, have brought significant changes in gender relations in Albania, especially amongst the younger generation and in urban areas. However, whilst emancipation has been the case for some women, emigration has reinforced the 'traditional' gender roles for others, as will be shown later on in the paper.

ALBANIAN WOMEN AS MIGRANTS

Albania's history and tradition of migration was interrupted by 45 years of isolation, during which internal movements were highly regulated, whilst emigration was regarded as an act of treason punished by imprisonment and even death. The country's violent exit from the communist years was accompanied, amongst others, by large-scale international and internal migration. Albanian emigration presents a unique case not only in post-

communist Europe but also more widely, by reason of its massive concentration over a short period of time and its specific features. Van Hear has described it as ‘a new migration order’, King considers Albania as a ‘laboratory for the study of migration and development’, whilst Carletto *et al.* talk about a ‘country on the move’. Indeed, between 1989-2005 more than one million Albanians – a quarter of the country’s population – were estimated to have emigrated and be living abroad, primarily in Greece (600,000) and Italy (250,000), but increasingly in the USA (150,000), the UK (50,000) and other Western countries .

There has been a proliferation of studies on Albanian migration over the years, particularly related to migrants in Greece and Italy, including a number of key analyses and theorisations such as Barjaba and King , King , King and Mai , King and Vullnetari . Very briefly, contemporary Albanian migration has involved three major episodes. The first, during 1990-93, was triggered by the violent and chaotic exit of the country from 45 years of communist oppression, poverty, unemployment and almost hermetical closure to the outside world. The second intense movement followed the collapse of the dubious pyramid investment schemes in 1997 and the breakdown in law and order throughout the country, especially after the looting of the arms depots. And the third point refers to the migration influenced by the Kosovo⁴ crisis of 1999-2000 and the subsequent arrival of almost half a million refugees in Albania. Migration between these episodes and after 2000 has continued, albeit at a lesser pace.

The peculiar conditions of Albanian migration, particularly during the first two episodes, have led scholars to describe migrants as ‘economic refugees’ , since the mixture of motivations for migration blurred the distinction between economic migrants and refugees. Over the years the typology of migration presented by Barjaba has *evolved* and diversified in terms of motivations, migrants’ profiles, as well as migration trajectories and destination countries. The *intensity* observed during the 1990s has diminished somewhat; migrants have increasingly regularised their status in host countries shifting thus from an *irregular* to a more regular situation; this in turn has helped replace the *to-and-fro* movements – especially to Greece – with permanent migration as well as a degree of transnationalism. In recent years family reunification and student migration have been on the increase, as well as highly skilled emigration and the migration of older people . As a result of this evolution and settlement in various

countries, emerging transnational practices and embryonic diasporic communities have become reality for Albanian migrants as well .

However, women's role and experiences in this migration remain under-researched. The course seems to be similar to that which the theories and literature on migration generally followed for many years, until a rebalancing – started by Phizacklea's *One Way Ticket* – took place. Consequently, female migration, and gendered relations and processes in migration, have now become essential components of any multidimensional analysis. Some of the reasons for this prior neglect are applicable to the Albanian situation, such as the emphasis placed on economic motives, for which male migration is presumed to take precedence, 'an underestimation of women's activity and labour force participation; a general neglect of women in [Albanian] scholarly social science research;... and, in particular... inadequacies in existing data on women's migration' .

Although Albanian migration started off as a typically male-led phenomenon, *i.e.* men migrated first and then women followed, its diversification in recent years has resulted in a more balanced picture. First, as a result of family reunification, both through clandestine migration and the regularisation of migrants in the two major destination countries, Albanian women now constitute more than 40 percent of Albanian migrants in Greece and Italy . The prevalence of permits for family reunification amongst Albanian migrant women is indicative of the male-led model of migration to these countries . However, their economic contribution to the household needs to be taken into account. Second, migration to other destinations such as to the USA through the Diversity Visa Programme (known locally as the American lottery) has enabled more women to emigrate, particularly as principle applicants. And third, student and highly skilled migration have both involved considerable numbers of women, especially from urban areas, a number of whom have settled in North America .

A distinct group often written about is that of women who participate in the sex industry. The problematic portrayal of the 'innocent, naïve, young, uneducated village girl, often of Roma ethnicity' is far from the reality of the complex continuum of age, education, social class, geographical background, consent for migration and participation in sex work etc. In most accounts these women are denied agency and infantilised by often being categorised together with children. In addition, incredulous claims of figures are damaging, especially since all sources accept the lack of reliable statistics and that

multiplier effects are often used in calculations . According to some such reports, the number of ‘trafficking slaves’ by 1999 had reached 30,000, which means more than 10 percent of all Albanian female migrants around that time!⁵ Furthermore, ‘entire villages and towns in Albania’ are claimed to have been ‘robbed’ of their young women . Whilst exploitation and violence should be addressed at every stage, care should be taken that women’s experiences, including of those outside NGO shelters or police stations, benefit from multidimensional and dispassionate analyses .

In the highly gendered labour markets of Southern Europe, where most Albanian women have emigrated to, domestic work is a key sector of employment for migrant women, including Albanians. Campani argues that behind the demand in this specific sector of the economy stands the combination of, on the one hand, increased levels of professional mobility amongst local (Greek and Italian for instance) women, and on the other the withdrawal of the welfare state from providing support to these women, especially for the care of the elderly and the children. Indeed, the Greek census of 2001 reported that more than half (52 percent) of Albanian migrant women in Greece worked in the census category ‘other’ which includes mainly those working in domestic services as cleaners, hotel maids, carers of Greek elderly and children etc. The remaining half were employed in tourism (19 percent), agriculture (15 percent) and industry (9 percent) . Although specific gendered data for Albanian migrants in Italy are limited, the picture very much reflects these patterns of employment in Greece; the majority of women are again employed in the domestic services sector. Although women earn their own money, under the ‘traditional’ norms discussed earlier, this often forms part of the income of their husbands’ household. This is particularly strong amongst migrants originating from northern Albania, as King *et al.* (2006) found amongst those who had emigrated from this area to the UK. According to their findings, women’s earnings were pooled under the administration of their husband, and the money was then sent to *his* family in Albania, where it was again the male head of the household who received these remittances and overwhelmingly made decisions on their use. Although some changes were observed, by and large, the authors conclude that the ‘*gendered geography of power*’ is enhanced during migration through the economic impact of remittances (emphasis in the original). For migrant women in Greece, Vaiou and Stratigaki argue that although the dominance of men in the family and their prime role in the migration project has remained the

characterising feature of Albanian migrant families there, the very fact that women *are* earning their own income, which is at times more regular than men's, is empowering in itself.

Albanian women arriving in Italy and Greece were initially stereotyped, often as 'prostitutes', the media being responsible for much of the hysteria around their presence. This image influenced their relations with the host communities and often justified their discrimination and marginalisation. In her study of Albanian and Filipino domestic workers in Greece, Lazaridis showed that Albanian women were amongst the most exploited groups in Greece. The double discrimination and marginalisation they suffered resulted from the deep-seated Greek xenophobia towards Albanians on the one hand, and the sexist and patriarchal gender relations that exist within Greek society itself, on the other. However, for some women change has taken place as they have used their agency and social capital to improve their position, as well as act as bridges in the incorporation of their families into the local neighbourhoods and communities. Zinn and Rivera also conclude that the presence of women amongst Albanian migrants, especially in married couples, acted as an important regulator for relations with the Italian neighbours. Kelly emphasises that this improvement however is primarily observed in Albanian women's personal relations at the micro-level, whereas the public discourse seems to have been almost unaffected. The single and married women she interviewed in Bologna, continued to face difficulties finding adequate housing and moving up the social ladder from jobs related to the domestic services sector, even when they were highly educated. Generally, however, they experienced their migration to Italy as emancipatory. Dervishi's study of Albanian migrants in Italy also confirmed this, especially in relation to marrying an Italian partner. This inter-marriage was perceived as emancipatory for women, but as 'threatening the authority' of Albanian men. In contrast to these studies amongst, mostly, lower skilled migrant women in Europe, Orgocka showed that her highly-skilled respondents perceived discrimination from the US institutions as related more to their identity as migrants and as foreigners, than to their gender or to their specific Albanian ethnicity.

Although most migrant women are young and of working age, there is an increasing trend of 'migrating grannies'. These are grandmothers who travel to provide child care for their migrant sons' (and less often daughters') families, and transmit socio-cultural

practices to the young generation. On the other hand, there is a risk of reduced provision of care for the fragile elderly left behind in Albania by their migrant family members – tradition often requires the youngest son and his wife to take care of *his* parents in old age – as the monetary benefits for Albanian young migrant women to care for elderly Greeks and Italians are much higher . Albanian women's incorporation into the global care chains is thus slowly becoming a reality .

METHODOLOGY AND DATA

This paper now proceeds with its first-hand analysis of women's role in Albanian migration by focusing on their perceptions and interpretation of their situations and experiences, thereby presenting a platform for their voices to be heard. It draws on empirical data collected during fieldwork in 2004-06 in Tirana (the capital) and south-east Albania and in Greece.

The empirical material and analysis presented here draws on 160 in-depth interviews with migrants and their families, 10 in-depth interviews with key informants in all four locations and multi-sited ethnography. It proved difficult and impractical to interview an individual alone in rural areas, since other members of the family were present and often contributed with pieces of information. In such situations there was a tendency for the man to dominate the conversation, although not as prevalent as has been reported in other studies involving migrants from northern Albania . In fact, there were occasions where the woman took complete control of the interview and left very limited space for her husband to speak out. In both situations, I used probing questions to open up opportunities for those less heard to have their say. On the other hand, interviews with migrants in their urban internal and international locations included more one-to-one conversations. In addition, being a woman myself and employing empathy with the interviewees made it possible to interview women alone without problems. Recorded interviews were transcribed and translated into English.

MIGRATION FROM RURAL AREAS

Participation of Albanian women in the migration process takes various forms from support of the residual household in Albania, decision-making about family members'

migration, to migrating themselves and working abroad. Let us now look at each of these aspects in turn.

Part of (residual) family

Women in the literature on Albanian migration have been often portrayed as part of the residual family 'left behind' by the male migrant, implicitly presumed to have a passive role in the migratory process. However, a more complex and nuanced situation is often the case. *First*, women are involved by their support to the migration project as a family strategy, often being the main pillar on which most household responsibilities rest, after their male relatives emigrate. In addition to looking after the household and working in the fields, they will support their migrant children by providing care for the left-behind grandchildren. Particularly middle-aged women in their 50s and 60s may have to look after their older parents-in-law in their 70s and 80s as well as the young children of their migrant sons and sometimes daughters. The case of Lule illustrates this very well. Lule is in her early 50s and lives in rural Albania with her 80-year old mother-in-law, two granddaughters of four and two and her son aged 16. Her husband works as a migrant in Veria, north-western Greece, and comes home only once in a few months, especially when there is intensive farm work to be done in the village. Their eldest son and his wife live near Athens and have left their two young daughters in Albania, freeing the wife to undertake paid employment. The youngest son is not interested in helping with the household chores, as this is not what men are supposed to do; like most Albanian rural youth he is looking for a way out of farm work, often a chance to emigrate. This leaves Lule to shoulder all the everyday work around the house, such as cooking, washing and cleaning, as well as looking after the family cow, work in farming, looking after the two young granddaughters and, when mother-in-law is unwell, after her as well. Calling her a 'heroine' as in communist times would not be an exaggeration. Thus, her contribution to the family's income-generating strategy through the reproductive (care) as well as productive (farming) work is crucial and indispensable. She represents an all-too-common scenario in contemporary rural Albania.

Second, women are also actively engaged in the decision-making process on migration, as the following two examples show. In this context, it is important to bring age and marital status into the analysis. Older married women have a more influential

position in the Albanian family than younger married and single women. Nicholson argues that marriage can lead to empowerment, but this in fact is a process that requires many years of hardship, including endurance of at times abuse and violence, as was shown earlier in the paper. Emigration of young single women abroad from these rural areas, unaccompanied by other family members, continues to be frowned upon, unless it is for educational purposes.⁶ In order to avoid bringing the family into disrepute, often parents insist that daughters get married before they leave, passing them from their tutelage to that of their husbands. Whilst talking to me about her daughter's migration, Adelina, 54, expressed her satisfaction that she was proud to have married off her daughters and sent them off to emigrate in the proper way, with their husbands, as they should. Although highly educated, the daughters seem to have accepted their mother's decisions, even though they had a chance to emigrate independently as they were the principle applicants for the US Green Card lottery.

... the eldest, was studying marketing. She continued for two years before winning the lottery for America... *I then got her* engaged, and then married and she left [with her husband]... After three years the youngest went there... [In Albania] she had entered into two competitions to study management and nursing and she won both. However, I insisted that she study nursing, because it is for women [female occupation] and I liked it very much. My daughter listened to me... She was in her last year and had probably three months of traineeship left, when she won the [US Green Card] lottery. Because she wanted to leave, *I got her* engaged and then she left with her husband.

Whilst migration to the USA through such regular channels remains a dream for many young Albanian women, others' migratory route was to be closer to home, towards neighbouring Greece, and under less envious circumstances. Although often deleted from the literature, women *were* amongst the pioneer migrants of the early 1990s. One of them, Eleni, went to Greece in 1990 walking over the mountains, in search of her son who had left a week earlier in order to re-establish contact with their long-lost Greek

relatives in the city of Thessaloniki.⁷ Unfortunately, Eleni had passed away at the time of the interview, but this is how her niece reflects on those days:

In the beginning, it was my aunt who came here [in Thessaloniki]. You know that her mother was from here [Greek]... It must have been 1990-91. She was amongst the first [migrants to cross to Greece from this area of Albania], the wire fence was still along the border. She left with my brother... who was 13-14 at the time... and a guy from the village who knew the way... (Kristina, 33, migrant in Thessaloniki).

The journey

The literature on Albanian migration often depicts the difficult and dangerous journeys of male migrants, who were indeed the majority to emigrate this way, but ignores the experiences of women in such journeys altogether. Some scholars go so far as to exclude the possibility that women undertook such risky routes. As the second example above showed and as the following quote reveals, although accompanied by male relatives throughout the journey, women took enormous risks travelling, at times even during their late months of pregnancy and also with very young children.

... that time I came here in July 1998. My husband left before me, by paying money. Then he worked so we could have enough money for me to go... I was told we had to walk for two hours... we started our journey... I was shivering. I knew what that meant, *I had done it before*. But now I had two children to take care of as well. My son was nine months and my daughter two years old. I started breastfeeding my son so that he wouldn't cry and he was like an angel... my brother-in-law [who was accompanying them just for the mountain crossing] was carrying my daughter. The young guide, who had our bags, was walking in front, me and my son after him, and my brother-in-law with my daughter at the back... We were told [to walk] two hours perhaps to give us courage, but we must have walked at least four hours... I walked fast like the lightning. I didn't feel my feet at all, over stones and cliffs... but I am sure that there

are angels up there who protected us... my son slept all the way and didn't make a noise... when I entered the house [in a border village in Greece where she and her children were being sheltered that night], when the Greek woman opened the door, that's when he woke up and started crying... she and her husband then took us to meet Genci [her smuggler], who drove us all the way to Athens (Lira, 35, migrant in Thessaloniki).

Other such testimonies from women migrants and their relatives showed how they took deliberate actions in spite of the dangers, in order to be with their family members and improve their life. Albanian patriarchy is certainly important in shaping such relations and actions, but women do carve out spaces for themselves and embrace opportunities which enable them to exercise agency.

Recently a trend of migrating grandmothers has been on the increase as migrants regularise their stay in the host country and start their new families. In addition to joining family members, Albanian grandmothers' migration displays two important features, and very specific to the Albanian migratory context. First, they provide much-needed child care, thus freeing the migrant wife to participate in paid employment, which often leads to an improved economic situation. Second, they are transmitters of the Albanian language and culture to the younger generations, sometimes the only such link children have with their cultures of origin. Adelina, whom we met earlier, also plans to emigrate and join her daughters' families for these very reasons. However, for other families such important generational links are made next to impossible, due to various obstacles visa regulations put in their way, as Burbuqe tells:

... my grandson was born recently in Greece. I would have liked to have had him here now [in the village], or to be able to go there. To cherish him. When he is able to come here, he won't know who I am (Burbuqe, 63, mother of migrant sons).

Arrival and settlement

After the arrival in the host country, women will usually take on the roles they have played in Albania. However, whilst some features of these roles are reinforced, over time

others change, albeit slowly. Circumstances created by migration as well as Albanian patriarchal relations are important factors in shaping such changes. The *first* remark to make at this point is related to the peculiar family organisation of Albanian migrants in the early 1990s and women's role therein. In these years when the majority of migrants were single men, or had come to Greece without their wives and children, and in order to save money, migrant relatives and sometimes friends would share accommodation amongst themselves. In such arrangements, the only woman in the group would stay at home to cook, clean, wash and shop for sometimes more than 10 people. The men would all go out to work – often in very physically demanding jobs and for long hours – and contribute towards the common budget. This situation went on for several years until other female family members – often wives – would arrive and the reunited couple would move out to a new place. Under these circumstances, the women had very limited opportunity and time to interact with local people, and thus learn the language or enjoy other migratory benefits.

I have started part-time work now and will start full-time in September after the holidays. I have stayed at home all this time because I have had to look after many people, all our relatives and kin (Drita, 54, migrant in Thessaloniki).

Where we lived before we only had one room... very small. Then we had relatives coming to stay with us and I would help them: a friend of my husband with his wife, they stayed two months, he worked and they returned to Albania. Then my maternal cousin and my husband's cousins, all in that small room... Then my brother and brother-in-law came to stay with us... but later my brother moved to another place because his wife will be joining him, whereas my brother-in-law was caught by the police as he has no papers and was returned to Albania... I couldn't change accommodation [during this time] because they would stay for two or three months and go. I would then have to pay the rent and everything for the rest of the year... (Edlira, 28, migrant in Thessaloniki).

This situation was characteristic for the 1990s, but it continues to take place, albeit on a smaller scale and involving perhaps one or two relatives.

The *second* observation is related to the difficulties women migrants face to hold on to regular employment, due to their role in the family as mothers-to-be and then as mothers. The majority of my female respondents in Greece were employed as cleaners, often in domestic situations, but sometimes for office complexes and cleaning the stairs of apartments; as day-carers for elderly Greeks; in catering such as fast-food outlets or restaurants where they have to work until the early hours of the morning; and in small garment factories. The findings reflect the general pattern amongst Albanian migrant women in Greece as revealed by the 2001 Greek census data, but also other qualitative research. Because most of this work is carried out as part of the informal economy, they are rarely insured and often dependent on their husband's insurance for medical care or their staying permits. An additional problem is the lack social security contributions towards the later years of their life:

... of all [Albanian] women who work here [in Greece] none have pensions. About 10 percent of women may have *ensima* [social security stamps], but the other 90 percent who work cleaning houses, do not (Zamira, 43, migrant in Thessaloniki).

Lack of insurance causes their exclusion from access to social benefits especially during childbearing and motherhood, such as paid maternity leave etc. The dependency on their male relatives increases around this time, as they are affected not only economically, but also regarding their status in the destination country, since a permit renewal is dependent on having a job. As Zinn and Rivera argued in their research on Albanian women who emigrated to Italy in the early 1990s, "women may be penalized by their special conditions as child bearers because they are ignored by laws designed for a 'universal' male subject".

I have been here [in Greece] seven years... Both of my children were born here... I have not worked because I was on my own [in looking after the children]. In the beginning we had my husband's relative stay with us. So

I stayed at home... I tried to find a job when I came here in the beginning, but I didn't speak the language. It was difficult... Then I decided to have a baby... When I was pregnant I used to be all day at home, I was unhappy, although when my husband and his cousin would come back from work we would go out. But the city was far from where we lived and we didn't have a car... when my son was three I found a job in a garment factory... and I paid an Albanian older woman to look after him for some hours... But then I became pregnant and couldn't work there anymore [her job was to do the heavy ironing]... I had only worked there for two or three months and so couldn't get benefits... Then my daughter was born... I breastfed her for a year, where could I leave her? There are some [mothers] who sacrifice their children. I couldn't... so I haven't worked since then (Alma, 28, migrant in Thessaloniki).

The *third* aspect is that at times traditional gender relations may be exported and reinforced in the host country, but they are also challenged as well. At home it was usually the migrant women who did most of the chores, as well as looked after children's education even when they were working long hours. Women's work was often considered by men as less tiresome than their physically demanding jobs in construction or factories. At other times women worked fewer hours in order to have time to look after the household. In fact, Albanian women from this area see these tasks as part of their identity and derive pride from performing them well. Part of a woman's self-esteem amongst peers and the wider community is in this context her propriety and housekeeping skills. A significant part of this is however *appearance*. As such, living in more down-sized households in migration without the mother-in-law dictating everything within the home, as well as under less community scrutiny and surveillance, there is a sense of liberation amongst many women. Entela, 35, who lives in Thessaloniki with her husband and their two children, explains why she enjoys the freedom she has as a woman in Thessaloniki as compared to Albania:

We discuss these issues amongst us when we are with other friends, couples. For instance the way a woman dresses. Perhaps she wears a short

skirt... I am not talking about Tirana, because that is different [from the rest of Albania]. We always ask ourselves if our husbands would allow us to dress like this if we were living in Albania. Or if we would be able to go out like we do here... Even when we go there and our parents see the way we dress, my mother asks me: does your husband allow you to dress like this? The young teenage girls now are starting to dress like their peers here. But most women cannot go out at night like they do here, three or four friends going out to have an ice-cream, or taking their children for a walk... Husbands do not allow them in Albania. Something which we do every day here, with or without our husbands. Things are more limited there. We live here like them [the Greeks], something which we like.

Several interpretative remarks can be drawn from this quote. First, that Albanian migrant women in Greece have more time and enjoy more freedom to associate with their friends, not only at home but also in public spaces. This has also come as a result of their improved economic situation after years of living and working in Greece. Although some women have less financial opportunities and time to do this, generally there is a mentality that life should be enjoyed as well. Second, the husband's opinion remains important for these women even to the extent of (dis)approving the manner in which they dress. Thus, although there is change in migration, it is slow and far from fundamental. Third, it shows the complex generational change and continuity in Albania as the young teenage girls may dress like their peers in the West (read: Greece), whilst the older generations continue to observe 'traditional' norms and values and expect their migrant daughters to fully obey their husbands. Fourth, the intensity of changes depends on the geography, which highlights the large gap and cultural and socio-economic polarisation between Tirana, the capital of Albania, and the rest of the country, especially rural areas. This is why most potential returnees intend to settle in Tirana upon their return, provided they have the financial means to afford its Western-like living costs. And finally, the quote shows how change is part of the incorporation process of migrants into their host societies, which in this case reflects the adoption of host societies' norms and values relating to gender roles. It must be remembered however that the Greek and Italian societies where the majority of Albanian migrants have settled, are themselves rather

patriarchal and display unbalanced gender relations. It is thus not surprising that the scale of change may not be that significant.

The *final* observation is related to women's role as bridges for migrants' incorporation into the host communities. Other research in Italy and Greece have shown Albanian migrant women's key role for further incorporation of the entire family into the neighbourhood and wider host society through contact and interaction with local women. As mentioned earlier, the majority of Albanian migrant women work as domestic helpers, where their main contact point with the host society is often a local Greek or Italian woman. The domestic sphere thus becomes the arena where a number of relations are negotiated: between migrants and locals, between women of different ethnicities, age and class, but who might share similar gender-related positions within their own ethnic groups. Often these relations result in positive outcomes which enable further incorporation of migrant women and their families into the host society, particularly since the boundaries between the formal and personal in such work environments are often blurred.⁸

My [female] employers are all in their late 40s and early 50s... They are all friends with each-other. I started working for one, she recommended me to her friend, she in turn to her sister, she to her own friend and so on... They all have good jobs: hotel owner, warehouse and store owner, opera singer, bank officer etc... I have very good relations with them, especially the one I got to know first. Any problems or troubles I share with her... they all help me a lot (Edlira, 28, migrant in Thessaloniki).

However, as Campani argues, these relations should be problematised and questioned, as they are often based on unequal and at times exploitative frameworks, where class and ethnicity play important roles. It is also not clear if women act as bridges to wider incorporation more than men do, which could be best addressed through a gendered analysis of such relations.

CONCLUSION

Migration has been the defining feature of post-communist Albania, as tens of thousands of men and women have sought their fortunes abroad. In spite of significant female participation in this migration, their experiences remain under-researched. This paper has highlighted the importance of such inclusion into the relevant literature, by drawing on previous research and presenting new empirical material. The findings show that Albanian women have participated largely in the migratory processes, through support for their migrant relatives when staying behind in Albania, and as migrants themselves. First, as their family members emigrate they are often the most important pillar for supporting the family migration strategy through their productive and reproductive labour when remaining behind. Second, they are closely involved in decision-making about migration of other family members. Third, they have been amongst the pioneers of the early 1990s migration, including taking the long and risky journeys across the mountains to Greece. Fourth, upon arrival in Greece some norms and values that limit their autonomy persist, whilst change may be slow and gradual. Although mostly employed in domestic services, where relations with their local female employers are often shaped by exploitative frameworks that exist within the Greek society, they manage to carve out spaces as well as embrace opportunities to change their lives. However, their efforts towards improvement of emancipation and autonomy are negatively affected by the 'gender-biased' immigration regulations that regard men as principle 'bread-winners' and women as their family dependents. As this paper has shown, women's contribution to their migrant households should be considered beyond the limits of their presumed reproductive role and as transmitters of cultural values. Immigration policy should reflect the strong economic, as well as the social role migrant women play in migratory projects. Therefore, policy should be adjusted in order to address this bias and enable women to enhance their position as equal socio-economic actors to men, as well as enhance their emancipatory benefits of migration.

This paper has presented for the most part the experiences of Albanian migrant women of rural origin and overwhelmingly with lower educational levels. Therefore, these experiences cannot be generalised across Albania, and further research is needed to compare them with those of urban women, especially professional migrant women, as well as women migrants in other destinations, where opportunities for personal freedom and advancement are much greater. However, the importance of multidimensional

analyses that include age, class and ethnicity as much as gender, in enabling a deeper understanding of women's roles in Albanian society and changes brought about by migration, cannot be overemphasised.

REFERENCES

NOTES

¹ The two names also reflect the two major dialects of the Albanian language spoken in these areas. The geographic division is the Shkumbin river which cuts present-day Albania roughly into a northern and a southern half.

² Shryock argues that honour is 'the prestige structure *par excellence* in traditional Albanian society'.

³ Some scholars argue that women's emancipation in ex-communist countries was not an end in itself, but a tool used by the government to facilitate its political goals. However, as Logoreci maintains, Albanian women should be given more credit and agency for demanding recognition of their rights in society, especially after they had massively participated alongside men in the communist resistance during the war.

⁴ The internationally recognised spelling 'Kosovo' is used without inferring any political stance.

⁵ Estimating Albanian emigrants abroad at 800,000 by 2000 and presuming that 40 percent of these are women.

⁶ Education is highly regarded in Albania, including in the study area, and for young women in particular it is considered as a means to upward social and geographical mobility.

⁷ There is a significant ethnic-Greek community in Albania, living in the south and south-eastern districts along the Albanian-Greek border. The socio-economic and kinship relations that existed amongst inhabitants of these border areas suffered as the fall of the Ottoman Empire gave way to the new countries of Greece and Albania in the early 20th century. Contacts were further limited during the almost 50 years of Cold War, only to resume in the early 1990s, as ethnic-Greek Albanians were amongst the first to emigrate to Greece. See also Hatziprokopiou for cross-border movements of ethnic-Greek Albanians from south-east Albania.

⁸ Iosifides *et al.* suggest that informality is *the* predominant feature of Albanian migrants' social incorporation into the Greek society.