Gendering Migration and Remittances: Evidence from London and Northern Albania

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INTRODUCTION

Ever since Annie Phizacklea’s One Way Ticket (1983), feminist researchers have highlighted the role of gender in migration, challenging and overturning previous studies which either ignored the ‘female side’ of the migration story, assuming somehow that all migrants were male, or were ‘gender-blind’ in that males and females were included in the statistics and surveys but with no attempt made to separate out their highly differentiated roles and experiences. Genderless studies of migration contain a fatal flaw: descriptions and ‘explanations’ for the migration of ‘people’, by aggregating the very different characteristics, motivations, agencies and relations of men and women, end up by failing to portray accurately the migration of either sex. Pre-1980s scholarly literature on migration too often assumed males as having the ‘breadwinning’ role, with women only migrating as wives, dependants and ‘followers’ of their ‘pioneering’ menfolk.

Phizacklea’s landmark volume and other significant statements about female migration in the 1980s (e.g. Morokvasic, 1984; Simon and Brettell, 1986) did not provide all the answers; rather, they were the first stage in a debate which is still ongoing. In recent work, Phizacklea (1998, 2003a,b) has reappraised her earlier formulations, acknowledging that migrant women had been too readily cast in a structural straightjacket...
which defined them as a gendered and racialised class fraction at the mercy of capitalist forces. Moreover, an exclusive focus on women in many of these ‘first-wave’ writings of the 1980s tended to treat them in a non-gendered way by simply examining their behaviour without trying to comprehend the constraints which derived from their sex and their position in society and the family – what Tastsoglou and Maratou-Alipranti (2003: 5) called the ‘add-women-and-stir’ approach. In other words, such studies overlooked the function of gender as a relational category implicated in a range of social relations connected to the process of migration (Anthias, 2000: 24). As a relational concept, it is crucial to appreciate the various ways in which one gender (either male or female) is structured in relation to the other. In other words, the migration of both women and men ‘is predicated on the time–space strategies of persons of the other sex’ (Bjerén, 1997: 226, emphasis in original). And yet, the relational character of gender risks a binary and heteronormative distinction between males and females in migration, ignoring the reality that women and men articulate their migration projects in relation to the time–space strategies of the same, as well as of the other, sex. Phizacklea, for her part, now argues for a more flexible conceptualisation of migrant women and of gender relations in migration; she proposes a transformative interpretation of female migration by viewing structures as both constraining and enabling (1998: 26) – as ‘both the medium and the outcome of the practices they recursively organize’ (Giddens, 1984: 25).

This is but one strand in the ‘second wave’ of literature on gendering migration that has emerged since the 1990s. Another is the ongoing research on women, gender and migration carried out through the lens of transnationalism (Bailey, 2001). In a recent review of gender and transnational migration, Pessar and Mahler (2003) are rather harsh in their critique of the transnational approach for not paying more attention to gender. This may be because the main proponents of the transnationalist framework of migration studies (e.g. Portes et al., 1999; Vertovec, 1999, 2004; Faist, 2000) do less gender flag-waving and subsume reference to gender dynamics in their more subtle accounts; or it could really be a case of a new paradigm ignoring old fundamentals. For their part, Pessar and Mahler propose a new theoretical framework based on ‘gendered geographies of power’ in order to allow a ‘more nuanced transnational examination of how gender articulates with migration’ (Pessar and Mahler, 2003: 817). Their framework (Mahler and Pessar, 2001: 445–8) is composed of three elements which we shall selectively use to examine the Albanian case:

- **geographical scale** recognises that gender operates simultaneously at several socio-spatial scales – the body, the family or household, the ethno-national group;
- **social location** denotes individuals’ positions within interconnected hierarchies of material wealth and privilege – these may change through migration to a different socio-economic and cultural setting;
- **power geometries** (cf. Massey, 1994: 149) acknowledge that time–space compression produces new geographies of power and patriarchy – again these may be changed, even reinforced, by migration to another country, as well as rearticulated through time, as with the time-compressed Albanian post-communist transformation.

Two final introductory remarks, in order to bring this Albanian study into sharper focus. The first is a simple heuristic dichotomisation of the interpretation of migration as a potentially liberating and transformatory experience: on the one hand, migration is seen as emancipating for women, enabling them to regain a measure of control over their lives and destinies and to renegotiate relations with the men in their families and with patriarchy as a wider social structure; on the other hand, the end result could be much more negative, whereby migration is yet another layer added to the multiple oppression (cf. Lazaridis, 2000) suffered by migrant women – as women, as migrants, as members of the labouring underclass, as ethnically stigmatised, and finally as accepting of these oppressive structures. We ask: how do Albanian migrant women fare in comparison with these two types of outcome?

The second point is to justify remittances as a specific focus for this paper. Migrant remittances are increasingly seen as an effective strategy for coping with poverty and stimulating development in migrant-sending countries such as Albania (Russell, 1986, 1993; Taylor, 1999; Nyberg...
Sørensen et al., 2002; Sander, 2003; for the Albanian case, see de Zwager et al., 2005; Nikas and King, 2005). Billions of dollars are annually remitted across the world: much more, indeed, than aid flows (Gammeltoft, 2002). The analytical construct of ‘power geometry’ suggests ways in which we could examine how these flows are managed and gendered within a migrant community, in both the sending and receiving contexts: in Albania and London.

So, to set the scene, this paper is located conceptually within the ongoing debate on gendering migration studies. It presents qualitative data from field research on Albanians who have recently migrated to London. We are the first to research this migrant group in the UK. Secondly, this paper is one of the first to focus explicitly on the gendering of remittances. This is a relatively new theoretical perspective in the study of migration and development, as we shall see in the next section.

GENDER AND REMITTANCES

As noted above, there is a considerable literature now on gender and migration, and an equally substantial literature on remittances and their role in developing migrants’ home countries. Until very recently, these two literatures barely touched each other. Now, some reviewers (Nyberg Sørensen, 2005; Piper, 2005: 10–12; Ramírez et al., 2005; Kunz, 2006) are beginning to explore what we call the ‘gender–remittance nexus’. These authors point out that nearly all remittance research stems from an overriding concern with economic development and focuses on the magnitude and utilisation of financial remittances in poor, migrant-sending regions. Most remittance studies do not take a gendered approach, have not questioned or explored the decision-making processes behind remittances, and have not acknowledged that remittance flows consist not just of monetary transfers but also of social remittances: ideas, practices and social capital.

There are several simple yet profound questions to be asked about how remittances are gendered:

- Who sends remittances?
- What stipulations do they put on their use?
- Are women more generous and reliable remitters than men?
- Who receives remittances?
- Who makes the decisions on how remittances are to be deployed?
- How are social and family relations mediated between senders and receivers, and within partial household units in each location (the migrant unit abroad and the ‘residual family’ household at home)?
- Above all, how are wider gender relations affected by the process of sending money, gifts and ideas deriving from the work of migrants in foreign places?

Our Albanian case study will not answer all these questions, but will shed light on many of them.

Estimated at US$100 billion in 2004, registered remittances to developing countries represent a large proportion of global financial flows, outstripping official development assistance and equivalent to more than half of foreign direct investment to developing countries. Remittances are said to be more stable than private capital flows, less volatile to changing economic cycles (indeed, they may have a counter-cyclical function), more directly oriented to individual families who need support, and more widely distributed socially and spatially than foreign aid which is often tied to prestige projects (Nyberg Sørensen, 2005: 1). Increasingly, poor-country governments and international development agencies see migrant remittances as ‘manna from heaven’ – strategic resources to be ‘captured’ and incorporated into national development strategies (e.g. Government of Albania, 2004; International Organization for Migration, 2005). This line of economic policy focuses on the maximisation both of overall remittance transfers and of their channelling into ‘productive’ investment in enterprises such as efficient farms, small businesses and service industries; spending remittances on housing, consumer goods and ritual and celebratory events is seen as ‘wasteful’. Such a view, however, tends to reflect a narrow, ‘masculinist’ interpretation of economic development, with a lack of attention paid both to broader social aspects of development (health, education, gender equality, democratisation, etc.) and to the heterogeneity and complexity of
migration experience based on gender, age and other variables (Piper, 2005: 10). Feminist scholarship has questioned the notion of ‘productive’ investment as the only measurable and ‘real’ aspect of remittances. Investment in ‘consumer’ goods such as food, education, health and improved housing should be seen as investment in human capital. Criticism of the ‘ostentatious’ spending of remittances on social events such as parties and religious celebrations diminishes the emotional, symbolic and communitarian value of these types of investment for different societies (Ramírez et al., 2005: 18). A gender analysis also highlights more the role of social remittances, usually defined as ‘the ideas, practices, identities and social capital that flow from receiving to sending-country communities’ (Levitt, 1996: 2). Social remittances constitute a thus-far neglected local-level counterpart to macro-level global monetary flows, and are key to understanding how migration modifies the lives of both migrants and those who remain at home (Nyberg Sørensen, 2005: 5).

The traditional view in migration literature is that it is mostly men who migrate for work and income; women are mainly remittance recipients. This ‘passive receiver’ stereotype ignores two important considerations. Firstly, women need to take on extra responsibilities in the absence of their husbands and other male household members: bringing up children on their own, attending to the home, the farm and other livelihood duties, and facing social pressures by living with the male household head absent. On the other hand, there is also evidence that women are empowered and increase their agency in undertaking these wider responsibilities. Pribilsky’s study of Ecuadorian migration to New York shows that the women who remain in their Andean villages enjoy a higher status through their new role as ‘remittance manager’: husbands become dependent on wives to make wise decisions in the deployment of remittances between competing ends (Pribilsky, 2004: 327–9).

Secondly, women are increasingly important as remitters in the new age of globalised and feminised migration, within which women have become both more numerous and more independently active in international mobility (Castles and Miller, 2003: 7–9). Where women migrate alongside men, or as semi-independent parallel streams, recent literature tends to argue that women send more remittances than men, despite the fact that, on average, female migrants earn less than males. As Piper (2005: 12) points out, this may be because women are more likely to be temporary migrants, who generally are more committed to sending remittances than long-term migrants who have become more settled abroad. The literature also suggests that unskilled and semi-skilled migrants generate more remittances than the highly-skilled and professionals, and women are more likely to be in the former category. Much also depends on age, marital and life-cycle status. In truth, the limited evidence that can be mined from existing studies is fragmented and inconsistent, with different circumstances and cases producing different results, even in the same country (Taylor, 1999: 76).

It is, however, often asserted that, in certain contexts – the Philippines and Somalia are often quoted – women are the more consistent remitters: they send more, and more regularly, than men (Tacoli, 1999; Salazar Parreñas, 2001; Horst, 2002; Abdi, 2006). The ‘nurturing nature’ of women, and their stronger sense of obligation and responsibility for family matters, are often advanced to explain this difference; men are often accused of being selfish and not fulfilling their family obligations. We have the feeling that this is ‘truth’ created by assertion and repetition, rather than validated by rigorous scientific investigation. Feminist scholarship on this topic is in danger of fashioning its own myths and stereotypes. Statistically valid comparisons are rare.1

As recipients of remittances, too, there are claims that women tend to use the incoming resources in a more sensible way (channelling them into better nutrition, education and welfare), whereas men are more likely to abuse these funds (Nyberg Sørensen, 2005: 3; Piper, 2005: 12–13). It is also suggested that, once migrant women marry, their remittances shift from their own families to their husbands’ families, especially in patriarchal societies (Piper, 2005: 13). We will see how relevant this statement is for our Albanian study later in this paper.

ALBANIAN MIGRATION

Albania constitutes the most dramatic and large-scale instance of emigration accompanying and following the political and economic revolution
and restructuring of the former ‘Iron Curtain’ countries. Starting on a small scale in 1990, when the communist government of Ramiz Alia, successor to the 40-year regime of Enver Hoxha, was still in power, and then escalating with the ‘great exodus’ of 1991–92 when around 250,000 are thought to have fled over the mountains to Greece and across the Otranto Strait to southern Italy, the relative scale of emigration from Albania has been greater than from any other country in Eastern or Central Europe (Barjaba, 2000; King, 2003). Emigration continued throughout the 1990s and since, reaching another peak in 1997–98 during the violence and political chaos surrounding the collapse of a series of corrupt pyramid savings schemes. Many emigrants had invested their foreign earnings in these schemes which, when they folded, entailed a loss of $1.2 billion, equivalent to half of Albania’s GDP for 1996 (Olsen, 2000: 24).

Key features of the Albanian emigration were its suddenness and intensity (emigration having been banned for the previous 45 years); its high degree of clandestinity and (in the eyes of receiving countries) illegality; its focus, at least initially, on neighbouring Greece and Italy; and the fact that it affected all sections of the population, from scientists and government officials to former worker-peasants and socially marginalised groups such as Roma (Barjaba and King, 2005). Over time it has become more ‘regularised’ (through legalisation campaigns in Italy and Greece since the late 1990s) and also more diversified geographically, with significant numbers moving to other European destinations and to North America. Britain has become a key destination for Albanian migrants since the late 1990s, in reaction to the pyramids’ collapse and to the Kosovo crisis of 1999, when half a million Kosovan Albanians crossed into northern Albania.

Recent estimates of the scale of emigration from Albania confirm that no other country in Europe has been so affected by population loss due to migration in the last 15 years. The 2001 Albanian Census recorded a net loss due to emigration of 600,000 during the prior intercensal period (1989–2001); however, this excluded short-term emigrants of less than one year’s absence (INSTAT, 2002: 19). More recently the Government of Albania (2004: 40) has revised the estimate to around 1 million, including 600,000 in Greece, 250,000 in Italy, and 50,000 in the UK, the third most important European destination. Emigrants now account for one in four of the Albanian population.

Most authorities – both individual scholars and development-oriented teams from organisations such as the World Bank, UNDP or Oxfam – agree that ‘emigration has been the single most important means Albanian families use to survive’ (Olsen, 2000: 37). In the World Bank’s report on Poverty in Albania we read that ‘migration is the principal means of coping with economic difficulties’, making the ‘difference between being relatively prosperous and being poor’ (De Soto et al., 2002: xiv). And in the Albanian Human Development Report for 1998 it is likewise asserted that ‘emigration remains one of the most important... means for securing the economic future of individuals, families and society as a whole’ (UNDP, 1998: 37). Virtually all families have immediate household members or close relatives abroad, often distributed in two or more countries. This crucial role of emigration, and its payback of remittances, in alleviating poverty and stimulating future development is especially salient in the context of the collapse of collective farming and state-run industries in the transition to the neo-liberal economic policies pursued by the first Berisha government, with full Western support, in the years between 1992 and 1997.

Most emigration to Britain originates from the mountainous north of Albania, where poverty is most intense and widespread (King, 2004; Zezza et al., 2005). The emigration rate is also high from the southern uplands, but most of this is to nearby Greece. What further distinguishes the north is its high rate of internal migration to Tirana and other towns of the central, coastal region, the economic core of Albania. Migrants in Britain may therefore have family and remittance links to households in the north of Albania or in the Tirana region, or indeed to both.

Males have always been a majority in Albanian emigration, reflecting the traditional Albanian saying: ‘A man becomes a man out in the world, a woman becomes a woman rocking the cradle’. This blatant gendered division of labour sets the scene for some of our subsequent analysis. During the Ottoman era, kurbet (which translates as ‘out in the world’) was an established practice for Albanian men: a response both
to the harshness of the agro-pastoral economy of a predominantly mountainous country and to the opportunities available elsewhere in the frontier-free Ottoman Empire. Kurbet entailed the sacrifice of living and working away from home, but it was also seen as a rite of passage and, to some extent, as a ‘golden era’ because of the wealth generated by the savings and remittances of the migrants for their families (Barjaba and King, 2005: 9–10; de Rapper, 2005: 177–8).2

Since 1990, males have again outnumbered females in the migration streams, especially in the early years of disorganised departure. Through time, however, the sex balance has moved towards normalisation. Clear evidence for this comes from records of Albanians in the two main destination countries, Italy and Greece. Regrettably, no figures are available for Albanians in the UK. However, if the Italian data are in any way indicative, the picture is one of a rather traditionally gendered model of Albanian migration, with males departing first, followed by women and children (Bonifazi and Sabatino, 2003; King and Mai, 2004).

REMITTANCES IN ALBANIA

Remittances have made a major contribution to shoring up the Albanian economy at a time of great political and economic turmoil. According to estimates from the Bank of Albania, which include both formal-channel transfers (via banks, Western Union, etc.) and informal channels (by hand, private courier, etc.), remittances have steadily increased over the past decade, from $275 million in 1993 to $500 m in 1996 (dropping to $267 m in the ‘pyramid year’ 1997), to $615 m in 2001 and exceeding $1 billion in 2004 (de Zwager et al., 2005: 21). Figure 1 graphs the trend. In per capita terms, remittances have risen from around $100 in the early 1990s to exceed $200 in 2001 and $300 in 2004 (total remittances divided by the resident population of Albania). Throughout the period 1993–2004, remittances have contributed around a sixth of GDP. On this criterion Albania ranks fourth in the world, after Tonga, Lesotho and Jordan (Sander, 2003: 15, based on data for 2001). In addition, remittances have consistently been twice the value of exports and have compensated in great measure for the commercial trade deficit (Nikas and King, 2005: 254).

How have these remittances been used? Evidence from both qualitative surveys (de Soto et al., 2002: 39–47; Uruçi and Gedeshi, 2003) and from sample surveys and questionnaires (Kule et al., 2002; Gedeshi et al., 2003; Arrehag et al., 2005; de Zwager et al., 2005) gives a fairly clear picture, which will be corroborated by our own qualitative data later in the paper. Most remittance income goes on consumption rather than investment, reflecting the dominant nature of Albanian migration as a survival strategy. In approximate order of priority, remittances are spent on:

- daily needs – food and clothing;
- improvement in quality of living – furniture, electrical goods etc.;
- enlargement and improvement of residence – new roof, extra rooms, piped water, proper bathroom, etc.;
- acquisition of luxury items – new or second-hand car;
- maintenance of family and community traditions – weddings, funerals;
- investment in an economic activity – farming, industry, trade and services, etc.

The surveys cited above reveal that the overwhelming majority of remittance income is spent on the first three in the above ranking. Probably
the greatest uncertainty – and the liveliest policy debate – surrounds the last on the list. If the propensity to invest remittances in business development could be increased, then the longer-term economic impacts of the remittance inflow (beyond short-term impacts of construction and consumer purchases) could be enhanced. At present the prospects of this happening are rather slim because of the poor economic climate, lack of trust and of a business ethic (memories of the pyramids fiasco are still fresh), and the poor state of key infrastructure – water, energy, transport and communications. Whilst there is some anecdotal evidence of returned emigrants developing micro-enterprises in the more productive parts of southern Albania (Nicholson, 2001, 2004), the overall scale of ‘productive return’ is still small – most investments that are made are targeted at small commercial concerns such as bars or filling-stations (Gedeshi et al., 2003: 54–5). On the other hand, the division between productive and non-productive use of remittances is increasingly viewed as a false dichotomy. Housing, for instance, can be considered both as a form of consumption and as a productive investment; as the value of land and housing goes up, so money spent on improving property can be considered a productive investment, producing economic rent that can be cashed in at a later date. Having said this, there is a widely-acknowledged need for better management of the remittance-investment process (Government of Albania, 2004: 43–7; Piperno, 2005; Uruçi and Gedeshi, 2003).

THE STUDY

This paper stems from research commissioned by Oxfam on emigration, remittances, poverty alleviation, return migration and development in Albania.3 The core of the project was six months of field research divided into two phases: London (and some nearby towns) and Albania. Semi-structured in-depth interviews lasting around an hour were first carried out in the London area to a non-probability sample of 26 Albanians accessed through a variety of avenues, including one of the author’s personal networks. We interviewed 19 men and 7 women: as far as we can tell, this roughly corresponds to the gender ratio of Albanians in the UK, but there are no figures to confirm this. It is readily apparent, however, that most Albanians in the UK are young working males in their 20s and early 30s. Because of these migrants’ vulnerable status, it proved extremely difficult to get people to agree to be interviewed. Several refusals were encountered, and agreement was usually only reached when absolute confidentiality was repeatedly assured. Hence there are no names, locations or revealing details in the extracts below. For similar reasons, only eight interviewees consented to be taped; for the rest, detailed notes were taken during and immediately after each interview.

The interview schedule followed a condensed life-course approach, starting with background profile data and moving through reasons for and means of migrating to the UK, employment, family relations, remittances, plans for the future and return. Throughout this sequence of themes, prompt-and-probe questions sought insights into gender dynamics. All interviews were in Albanian.

The second phase of the research, in Albania, went much more smoothly in terms of accessing interviewees; 46 interviews were made, most of them tape-recorded, transcribed and translated. The interviews were with households with members who had migrated to the UK, including a few where the migrant had returned, either voluntarily or through repatriation. The interviews were distributed across a wide swathe of northern Albania (districts of Shkodër, Kukës and Mat) as well as in peri-urban settlements outside Tirana and Durrës in central Albania, where internal migrants from the north had relocated. Four interviews were taken in the south, in the districts of Lushnjë and Vlorë. This overall distribution reflects the geographical pattern of origin of Albanians in the UK; the locations, communities and even individual households were identified through the London-based interviewees.

In selecting the sample in Albania, an attempt was made to interview an equal number of men and women. In practice, it proved very difficult to interview women away from the rest of the household, due to the nature of Albanian rural society and the lack of separate space within the dwelling. In nearly all cases the encounters were family interviews, with the male head speaking on behalf of the household. However, every attempt was made to involve women in the interview. Usually the interviewing context was

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3 The study was conducted in 2001–2004. The first author was a British-Greek cultural memoirist who grew up in the UK before returning to study and work in Greece, a country with a long history of emigration. The second author is an Albanian sociologist who has spent much of her life in the UK, where she has worked as a researcher and teacher. Their collaboration on this project reflects their shared experiences of migration and remittances, and their commitment to understanding the complex dynamics of these processes in the context of Albanian society.
extremely friendly and relaxed – unlike the situation in the UK. The main topics covered by the interview were general questions about the family structure and members involved in migration, especially to the UK, contacts and relations with emigrants from the household, and a particular focus on remittances. We particularly wanted to know who received remittances, how decisions were taken about their use and investment, the impact of remittances on the household economy, and expectations about the future return of the emigrant family members – usually the sons and daughters of the interviewees.

GENDER IN ALBANIA

Before presenting and discussing the interview data, we need to say something about gender relations in Albania. This is a potentially huge topic involving both regional variations (generally the north is more socially and culturally conservative, as are rural areas in general) as well as complex dynamics of change from pre-communist to post-communist times. In giving a brief account there is a great risk of oversimplification and essentialism.

Northern Albania is the land of the Ghegs, whose traditional clan organisation and dispersed settlement patterns contrast with the compact villages and land-owning peasant social structures of the south, inhabited by Tosks. In northern Albania, much – probably too much – is made of the legacy of the customary code of law known as kanun. Developed during the Ottoman occupation, the kanun laid down specific rules governing all aspects of Albanian life, including gender relations, conceptualised within a tribal society imbued with extraordinary levels of patriarchy and subjugation of women. Although essentially an oral tradition, a version of the kanun – that of the fifteenth-century Albanian leader Lek Dukagjin – was collected and translated by Gjecov (1989: xiv) who noted that ‘it has left its mark on the character of the people as is demonstrated in their moral and ethical standards such as a sense of honor, vengefulness, courage and decisiveness in critical situations and a feeling of closeness within the family, the brotherhood and the clan’.

In the absence of effective government (the modern Albanian state dates only from 1912), the kanun survived until the communist era when it was partially repressed, only to resurface in mutated forms in the post-communist period. The problem for scholars of contemporary Albanian society, which must include the study of migration and of gender, is exactly how to evaluate these mutated forms; too often, it seems, the ‘old kanun’ is reified as the secret key to understanding the alleged complexities and mysteries of modern Albania – a trap that many NGO reports, travel accounts and even scholarly studies repeatedly fall into. We are ourselves aware of the danger, in mentioning the kanun, of replicating the stereotype whilst deconstructing it at the same time. However, we have to provide this brief but unsatisfactory sketch because kanun was mentioned in many of the interviews, including some selected for inclusion in this paper.

What do these background notes on Albanian social history mean for post-1990 migration, especially to the UK? Two things. Firstly, the revival of vendetta killings – which today often have more to do with recent disputes than with honour-bound obligations of the past (Schwandner-Sievers, 2001) – is a motive for the emigration of some young men who are implicated, either as potential victims or as obligants of future revenge murders. Some of our male interviewees claimed that they came to England to escape a blood feud – although we do not discount the possibility that this was fabrication (as has been suspected in some asylum cases) or exaggerated. Secondly, the relationships between young women and the men who accompany them in the migration process – including their brothers, cousins and fiancés – have sometimes led to their involvement in prostitution abroad (Mai, 2001). For the purposes of this project, it was decided that this topic was ‘off limits’. There is, however, some evidence from criminal investigations, police records, newspaper reports and television documentaries of Albanians’ involvement in the sex industry in London.

As regards the current situation of women in Albania, the picture is very much in flux, but on the whole still rather negative. Relevant data are presented in the 2005 Human Development Report for Albania (UNDP, 2005), which focuses almost exclusively on gender issues, in particular the impact of post-1990 economic trends on the welfare of women, whilst useful statistical back-up is provided by the Albanian Statistical...
Institute’s publication *Gender Perspectives in Albania* (INSTAT, 2004), based on the results of the 2001 Census. Interestingly, in the former source the sections on ‘Albanian women and decision making’ and ‘Women and migration’ are immediately juxtaposed (UNDP, 2005: 73–6), yet no links are made between the two; so the role of women in decision-making about migration and remittances remains unclear and unacknowledged. The main message of the UNDP study, however, is that there are strong inherent biases against women in the transition period, with economic reforms increasing social, spatial and gender polarisation. Quoting from the report’s executive summary:

‘...the situation and social position of women in Albania has NOT changed markedly over the past decade. There is an increasing gap between rich and poor, opportunities and benefits between men and women, and rural and urban sectors of society. Gender inequalities can be seen in leadership and decision-making, employment and income generation, domestic violence, trafficking of women, education and the health sector. Economic and career opportunities for women are still restricted. Societal attitudes are of critical importance in keeping women in a secondary place... and out of public life and public management.’ (UNDP, 2005: 15)

Much of this situation was rather different under ‘the regime’ when women were – at least nominally – more equally treated. We say ‘nominally’ for two reasons. Firstly, there is a suspicion that some of the regime’s measures, for instance placing women in public life, were tokenistic, with the main decision-making still in the hands of men – and above all, of course, in the hands of one man, Enver Hoxha, the patriarch par excellence. Secondly, in addition to their state-provided work, women were expected to carry the main burden of work in the home. This ‘double burden’ of women as workers and as mothers/carers is an old socialist mentality (as well as a capitalist one, consistent with women’s entry into the workforce) that still lingers on in Albania. Nevertheless, certain statistics are revealing: for example, women made up about a third of MPs in the 1970s and 1980s, but only 6–7% in the elections of 1997 and 2001.

Overall, there is no doubt that, for Albanian women in all walks of life, economic and personal insecurity have increased since the early 1990s, despite the fact that in other respects Albanian women have more freedom under democracy and despite the probable greater ability of women – especially in urban areas – to respond to the new regime of flexibility in the post-communist era. The large-scale closure and breaking-up of state industries and farms and the scaling-down of government bureaucracies have caused high unemployment amongst women, who have generally been the first to lose their jobs in deference to the priority of limiting male ‘breadwinner’ redundancies. As a result, women have become more dependent on their families and husbands, and more detached from social life and the public sphere (Olsen, 2000: 55). On the other hand, in rural areas, where many men have migrated, women have taken on all the farm work, in addition to other reproductive work; as such, they do participate in the public sphere, albeit not as equals. Yet also in rural areas, and especially in the north, families have become more concerned about poor levels of personal safety for their womenfolk, especially young girls who, it has been alleged, have been lured and even kidnapped by ruthless men (including relatives) for involvement in sex-work migration (Lawson and Saltmarshe, 2000; Mai, 2001).

**MIGRATION: ALBANIA TO THE UK**

We now move to our own data, drawn from 72 interviews in London and Albania. The relatively small size of the sample (especially in the UK), and the role of personal contacts in the interview access process, do not allow us to claim statistical representativeness; but neither is there any reason to believe the sample is unduly biased, bearing in mind that we were asked by the research sponsors to focus on migrants working in low-skilled jobs in the UK, who constitute the overwhelming majority.

**Reasons for Migrating**

Reasons for migrating varied according to gender, and to a certain extent also according to age and family status. Three sets of reasons were referred to most frequently:
general conditions of poverty and lack of work in Albania;
• the more specific situation of economic and political insecurity in the wake of the pyramids’ collapse and the Kosovos refugee crisis, as well as occasional reference to the blood feud (males only);
• family reunion (mainly for women).

The economic motive was the most commonly cited; often this was linked to political instability. This conforms to most interpretations for Albanian emigration (e.g. Barjaba, 2000; De Soto et al., 2002; Kule et al., 2002; King, 2004; Nicholson, 2004; Zezza et al., 2005; de Zwager et al., 2005). There is no need to labour this point, so just one interview clip is sufficient. The interviewee is a middle-aged man who managed to get to the UK with several family members. The route is a familiar one for Albanians aiming for the UK: a Schengen visa and then the back of a truck from Belgium or northern France.

‘I left Albania because the country was collapsing, it was straight after the 1997 pyramid crisis, criminality and political corruption were widespread . . . I just felt that my family was in danger and that I could no longer secure a future for them. I sent my first son to the UK in 1997 because my brother was already there. Then I came here as well with the rest of my family in 1998. Since I had a tourist transportation license in Albania, it was relatively easy for me to obtain a Schengen visa for all of the family. I contacted somebody working in Belgium, paid him 3000 US dollars and then . . . we were all smuggled into a truck heading for the UK.’

Other reasons were articulated instead of, or alongside, the economic one of low incomes, unemployment and the pyramids’ collapse. Some young men referred explicitly to the blood feud:

‘I left Albania in 2000 because lots of killings were happening in the village I used to live in. My brothers-in-law were involved in a blood feud. Insecurity and the killings are based on the kanun. Once the first killing starts . . . it will never end.’

For female migrants two trajectories emerged from our small sample. Most common is the family reunion route:

‘My husband went to Italy and after he had been there for about six months he left for the UK. After another six months he brought us over. We decided to go only because of our children. We wanted to give them a proper education.’

‘I left because I was engaged . . . my fiancé came here because he thought that this was the place where we would stand the best chances for a better future. I waited for three years to join him.’

The two brief extracts above illustrate the traditional role of Albanian women as ‘followers’ in the migration process, which we noted earlier was also characteristic of migration to Italy and Greece. This is the ‘model’ followed by the majority of women coming to the UK from Albania. But there is a second route followed by individuals coming from less patriarchal backgrounds, or those with the desire and the wherewithal to escape such structures – like this woman in her 20s from a small town in northern Albania:

‘I left because of the Albanian mentality about women . . . particularly about the way women should behave according to age . . . I mean, if a woman passes the age of marriage, which is usually 20 years of age, you will get a lot of gossip from other people about why you are not getting married and this hurts . . . . Where I come from women usually marry when they are between 16 and 20 years old . . . . In the small towns, when you finish school or university and you are still not engaged, they look at you differently and this makes you pessimistic.’

The Journey

Most males migrating to the UK do so alone – although they may rely on family members and trusted contacts, as well as less trusted and often unscrupulous agents, along the way – and follow a similar route. Many have worked first in Greece, where it is easy to cross the border and work short-term in the informal economy, typically in agricultural or construction jobs, in order to save money to finance the much longer and more expensive trip to England.10 This usually proceeds by buying a passage (the cost is a few hundred dollars) on a high-speed dinghy
between Vlorë and the south Italian coast. In Italy too it is possible for an Albanian to live and work as an undocumented migrant for some time. But the real value of Italy is that it is part of the Schengen area which stretches overland all the way to the Channel coast. The journey across this large territory of frontierless Europe is usually by train to Belgium where Albanian agents facilitate – again for considerable fees – attempts to cross to the UK in the backs of lorries, generally without the knowledge of the driver. Women and children are also conveyed in this way, although some may fly in to join their husbands or relatives if their travel documents are in order and they have the money. The following account is from a young woman arriving to join her husband:

‘One person accompanied us, a man from the same village I come from. We first went to Greece with a Schengen visa and then moved on to Italy by boat from there. From Italy we went to France by train and from there we took a lorry to the UK. The first time we tried, the driver caught us. He called the police who sent us to the camp in Calais. We had to go back to Paris again and found no luck there. We could only arrange to leave again on the fourth day of our stay in Paris. We did not eat or drink anything, and it was cold. We embarked in a truck full of rubbish. There were six of us. We stopped in St. Albans [a town just outside London]. The driver reported us to the police when he noticed that we were making noise in order to attract his attention. They first washed us. Later, the police took us to the social security office. When we were sent to a hotel, I phoned my husband. We agreed on the place where we would meet up and then went to the place he was living.’

Although the precise details of the route vary, this description of the journey to the UK is typical for both men and women. In fact, some accounts are much more harrowing, involving being dumped in the sea at night off the Italian coast, theft by agents along the way, violence and bribery, and near-suffocation in the backs of trucks (for examples see Dalipaj, 2005: 54–66; King et al., 2003: 42–6). The risks and hardships involved reflect the desirability of getting to the UK which, since the late 1990s, has been perceived as a much better place to be than Greece or Italy, the two primary destinations for Albanian migration.

Life, Work and Gender Relations in London

Most of the males interviewed were employed in low-skilled casual jobs in the London area, typically in construction and related trades, but some in other sectors such as garages, car valeting and catering. Wages are low; much work is done ‘off the books’. With time, as migrants’ knowledge of English and of ‘the system’ improves, and as some of them sort out their immigration status (e.g. being granted exceptional leave to remain or, since 2002, humanitarian protection status), so their relationship with the labour market gets better, with higher wages, more secure contracts of employment, and in a few cases independent small businesses – for instance as a painter and decorator (King et al., 2003: 46–9).

Women, if they take part in paid work at all (most are at home looking after young children), tend to work as assistants in shops and catering establishments, or as cleaners in hotels and private residences. Again the level of pay is low, sometimes below the minimum wage, since these too are mainly informal sector jobs. The two accounts below are from female married interviewees, but they also shed light on male employment and, in a subtle kind of way, on gender relations amongst Albanian households in the UK. The speakers also vocalise a masculinist version of the economy and of the dominant role of male social networks in accessing work.

‘When we first arrived here we didn’t know anybody. There was nobody waiting for us. My brother came later on. We did not speak English. No one promised us jobs and no one offered us a hand. My husband could only find a job after we were here some months. He worked in construction. That job was badly paid, very tiring and in the black economy. He earned £25 per day for 8 hours of work. He found that job through friends. Now the situation has changed. He still works in construction but now he is well paid, £60 per day. However, he is still working ‘in black’ and he is paid less than his English colleagues. I have not worked here. I only attend classes as I have two small children to care for.’
‘He found the jobs himself. He went around asking in the neighbourhood. In other cases he found a job through employment agencies. But his Albanian friends are always the ones who give him advice and help him out with work. I think right now he is satisfied with his current job. His colleagues are English and he did not tell me about any particular problem at work… but he does not like talking about these things. … I think he has a contract now … All his friends work in construction because their asylum applications were refused. Employers usually do not ask for an insurance number in the construction business.’

Although emigration to the UK has offered Albanian women and men the possibility of getting paid work and of experiencing themselves and each other in new ways, most migrants seem to reproduce the same canons of masculine and feminine roles and behaviour they brought from northern Albania. The next three quotes illustrate this point from different perspectives. The first is from a young woman in her 20s, married to an Albanian whom she joined in London.

‘Albanian women don’t get to know that many people here because it is very difficult for them to go out … you know the Albanian mentality goes on here as well. They have kids, they must take care of the place … there are very few possibilities for them to be free. My situation is different … for women like me it has changed a little bit … with my husband we understand each other, but in the end it is him who decides … the money we make we put it together, in the same account, and if I need something I have to ask him. He never says no, but I still have to ask him. My money goes straight into his account, just like in Albania’ — ‘My money goes straight into his account, just like in Albania’. … ‘If I need something I have to ask him’ — but also some acknowledgement that ‘for women like me it has changed a little bit’. Albanian female behaviour is then contrasted with that of English women, who are perceived to be too free, spending every night in the pub. This latter point is echoed in the next extract, from a young single male who, in response to a question about friendships or relationships with Albanian or non-Albanian partners, answered:

‘Yes, I had foreign girlfriends… mainly Spanish but also English, Polish, Russian. … I do not have any problems! The main problem Albanian men have with foreign women is that after a while they want to leave, but Albanian men cannot accept that and try to keep them by all means. I cannot stay with a foreign woman for a long time. … However, I haven’t been with an Albanian woman for a while. Indeed I do not know them at all. Maybe I would prefer to be with an Albanian woman because of the language and because they are different from foreign women, I think they are more stable and mature. It depends also on the man. If the man is smart and strong the Albanian woman will be even better. I mean, there is no one like an Albanian woman, she listens to you, while the English woman will simply tell you she is going to the pub, whether you like it or not. … [But] … it is difficult to meet up with an Albanian woman … they are kept like in a prison, as if they were living in Alcatraz … they are always controlled by their families.’

Again, this last point is picked up, from a different angle, by the third quote, a cri de cœur from an Albanian teenager living with her family in England:

‘My family continues to control me. My older brother controls me, he interferes in everything. He is over-protective and won’t allow me to have a boyfriend. He gets in my way even more than my father does. There are lots of Albanian men here and very few Albanian girls, who came with their families. They
usually spend their time projecting themselves as pure and playing the role of virgins in order to show Albanian guys that they are good. Because Albanian men want you to be pure, to be a virgin. Our families keep us closed in at home, under surveillance, because they are afraid of gossip. All Albanians here came from the North and everybody knows everybody. An Albanian guy threatened to marry me... and now my parents want to force me to marry him. I don’t want an Albanian man, because he does not care about you. He thinks only about his own pleasure... I had an English boyfriend once... it was completely different from an Albanian guy. I hate Albanians. All my friends are foreign, not Albanian... [But] my family wants me to marry an Albanian man, because they are fanatical, they think English men do not respect you... They want to go back to Albania one day, but I don’t, I want to stay here and go to college, to enjoy myself. They do not understand me. I do not want to marry now. I want to be independent. I want to choose the one my heart wants. I want to go away from these fanatics. We are not in Albania.’

The above three quotes offer fascinating insights into how ‘Albanian’ gender roles and positions are mobilised in relation to their English equivalents as experienced, or perceived, in London. In the interview narratives the two behavioural codes are expressed contrapuntally, each contrasting and interweaving with the other, but in different ways. Sometimes the ‘Albanian way’ is seen as superior to the English, sometimes it is inferior. And note how, in the final quote, there is a generational and family dynamic combined with the contrasted behaviour of Albanian and English young men.

A further example of this contrapuntal construction of Albanian and English cultural and behavioural norms around gender comes from a different interview context, this time in Albania. We met George by chance late one Saturday afternoon. We were on the battlements of Berat Castle, in south-central Albania, admiring the view. A large Mercedes came bouncing up the castle ramparts and a man aged about 30 got out, accompanied by his teenage girlfriend. Hearing us speaking English, George came over and told us he had lived for many years in England. In many respects George’s story was typical of young men migrating from Albania; in other respects it was unusual; above all it was notable for his insights into the contrasts between the English ‘way of life’ and the Albanian mentality, and for the irony by which his apparent self-awareness of what he had learnt about ‘English’ behaviour contradicted his own behaviour at the time of the interview.

George had started his migratory career in the early 1990s, working as a seasonal migrant for several years in the tourist sector on the Ionian island of Zakynthos. Mostly he had worked as a barman. One summer he had met, and later married, an English girl on holiday, Tracey. Relocating to the London area, he worked in the catering sector, rising to an assistant manager position. He and Tracey then separated, and he returned to Albania where he planned to open a hotel down on the coast.

Several interesting contrasts emerged during George’s narration of his migrations. Whilst Greece was OK for earning money and was close by, he railed against the negative view of Albanians held by Greeks, limiting the possibilities of what an Albanian migrant worker could do. In England, on the other hand, there was no limit to what he could achieve – people were taken for what they were worth. Unlike Greece, where ‘the family’ stifled everything, England was where he was able to ‘find himself’ and be rewarded for his efforts and talents. George went on to stress how much he had learnt in England about different modes of behaviour, especially towards women, allowing them independence and the right to speak for themselves. English people, he said, were calm in a crisis, unlike Albanians (and Greeks) who would quickly flare up. And yet George also displayed patriarchal views and behaviour typical of the unreconstructed Albanian male. He criticised Tracey for drinking too much vodka on Zakynthos. He talked often about his duty to his father, whose other four children were all abroad, and never about his mother. Most revealingly of all, he completely ignored his girlfriend, who sat silently by his side throughout the hour-long discussion. Eventually, when she showed signs of restlessness and boredom, yawning and wandering off, we expressed concerns about her feelings. George dismissed our worries peremptorily: ‘Oh, don’t worry about her, she’s OK’.

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SENDING, RECEIVING AND GENDERING REMITTANCES

In this section of the paper we return to the remittance-related questions posed earlier, namely who sends remittances, to whom, and how the decisions about remittances are negotiated (or not) within the changed personal and family/household dynamics that emigration inevitably brings.

We draw mainly on interview data from the Albanian fieldwork, most of which was carried out in the sending context of rural north Albania and the out-of-town informal settlements that surround, but are physically apart from, Tirana and Durrës. This enables us to match up insights into how remittances are handled from both ends of the migration spectrum, Albania and the UK. Happily the results are both complementary and consistent, albeit with different nuances. The complementarity derives not only from the two geographical settings, but also from the different nature of the interviews and interviewees: in the UK mainly younger people in their 20s and 30s; in Albania mainly families dominated by middle-aged and older people, the parents of the migrants in Britain.

The Family Setting

A first approach to analysing the interview material on remittances is to set it within the context of the family, the importance of which was made plain in numerous interviews. In this first extract, a middle-aged man from a village near Kukës, in the northeast highlands, explained to us forcibly:

‘Look, you have to understand something. The mentality here is very different from the one in the developed world you live in, because an immigrant, even if he earns money with great sacrifice, has to look back to his family and its most important needs... which are, firstly, the house, the living conditions... then marriages, funerals and stuff like that. Not only the members of a family must take responsibility, but all relatives are responsible and must help each other, uncles, cousins, grandmothers, grandfathers, small children, they all are part of the same picture. Nobody helps you but your family.’

The extract above places stress not only on the moral authority of the family and its extensions, but also indicates some of its spending needs. The same point about the primordial importance of the family as ‘the regulator of people’ is made below in this interview exchange between one of the authors and a middle-aged father in rural north Albania, who not only is concerned to find a wife for his son in the UK (and offers to find one for the interviewer too!) but also sheds interesting light on the harshness and traditionality of life in this remote part of Albania.

‘Family is the regulator of people... life does not finish with us... you have to think about the future, about the continuity of your bloodline. I think you are a human being only if you have family. Time spent without a family for me is lost, wasted. It is for the family that it is worth sacrificing one’s labour, one’s youth. It is only worth it if it is for the family... We are a bit worried now about the son who lives in the UK. He keeps telling me: “wait a bit more, wait a bit more, I am not ready yet”. And we wait, but he is already 25, by this age he should have children already... Without family? Never. Why would you want to migrate if not to start a new family? What other reason could there be?’

But has your son got a girlfriend, I mean, whom should he marry if he hasn’t got anybody at the moment?

‘I’ll find one for him, from the village, a good girl... If you want I can find one for you as well, no problem! [general laughter]. It is true that here in the north we are different from the rest of the country, for the fact that many families were involved in feuds, that living conditions were harder and therefore illnesses more serious, one was forced to have many children, as some would die in one way or another.’

Of course, the family has its gendered contrasts within it, as was made clear earlier. One which is particularly pertinent to the phenomenon of emigration and the impact of remittances is the ‘rule’ that females become part of their husband’s parental family upon marriage. This means that wives become part of their husband’s lineage also for remittance purposes, even for the wives’ earnings as workers abroad. Such a gendered
channelling of remittances clearly works to the advantage of families with many sons, and against those with daughters – as was lamented to us by an Albanian father who had five daughters (some of them abroad and sending remittances to their husbands’ parents) and no sons. From the London interviews several instances were given of how this traditional patterning of parental obligations and remittance destination was being re-negotiated. In this first example, a young married woman describes the traditional pattern:

‘You know how it is where I come from... once you marry you become part of another family... you cannot really help your family [of origin] any more.... I might send a present to my mother every now and then, so that she can buy something special for herself, but the rest of the money I get is for my own family here and my husband’s at home. We put the money in the same account and then he sends some home whenever they ask for it.’

In the second example the interviewee relates how a fairer division of the spoils has been agreed, but not without tensions, which arise over the amounts sent and the constant demands coming from her husband’s side of the family:

‘We have supported both of our families, although more my husband’s. The money was used to build the new house and to buy new furniture. My husband is paying monthly for the education of his brother. He is also sending money to his sister who is completing a university degree. However... they are never content with what we send... they always ask for more. They think that it is easy to make money here. We sent a lot in the beginning, up to £2500 per year, but not any longer. Sometimes I argue with my husband because he always agrees to give them money... and they decide how to use it as well... all they do is ask my husband for money and he gives it to them.’

Finally, in the third example, this time from an older woman in her 40s, an equitable distribution had again been negotiated, but then, at the end of the quote, the formal gender roles reassert themselves ‘as it was before in Albania’.

‘I have helped my family in Albania. We have helped the brothers and sisters from both sides. Every time they have problems they give us a ring and then we call them back. When this happens they always ask for money. My husband has sent money to his two brothers. He sent 2 million Lek [equal to roughly $20,000] to one of them because he wanted to buy a car, and 4 million Lek to the other one because he needed to buy some material for his business. He also sent money to his sister, so that she could buy some land to build a new house in Tirana. I sent money home too, 5 million Lek to my brother who wanted to buy a new house in Durrës. My husband has bought some land in Tirana. He thinks either to build a house or to buy a flat in Tirana. We send the money via Western Union... my husband does everything... he keeps all the money in his name, in his bank account. No one else has access to it. He still takes decisions as it was before in Albania.’

Sending and Spending

Understanding the way remittances are sent and spent enables us to uncover the gender-power and generational dynamics operating both at home and abroad. In the traditional system a married woman has no economic responsibility towards her parents, but only towards her husband’s family; it is left to the woman’s brothers to support her/their parents. When remittances enter the picture, this cleavage becomes even more apparent, and the three prior quotes illustrate various degrees of conservation and re-negotiation of the traditional pattern. Daughters/wives may only be allowed to help their parents or relatives in certain circumstances or on special occasions, when ‘presents’ may be sent; at the same time, they are still expected to contribute to the well-being of their husband’s parents. In the majority of cases, even where a fairer division has been agreed, it is the husband in the UK who manages all the financial transactions; and typically, as we show below, it is the male head of the family back in Albania who receives and deploys the remittances.

Two further comments on the generalisations just made. The first is that there may be female circuits of remittances which are ‘hidden’. Female migrants might be able to squirrel part of their earnings or savings and convey this money secretly to their parents, perhaps most likely to...
the mother. Such payments would not be revealed to their husbands, and equally not to us in interviews. Subversion of the hegemonic gender role is therefore not easily documented. However, in other conversations with Albanians living in the UK we have ‘soft evidence’ that this takes place. For instance, an Albanian female postgraduate student told us:

‘When I have transported money given to me by married Albanian women in the UK, to give to their parents back in Albania, I have the suspicion that the amount given to me didn’t correspond to the one agreed with their husbands. In addition women are the ones who do the shopping for food and clothing for the family, since their husbands are at work almost all day. In this way, they control how much money is really spent on the maintenance of family and how much is put aside in a “secret” envelope.’

This important quote suggests that women in these migrant Albanian families have more agency than is immediately obvious, although not as much as in an ideal situation. Further hints (but not in taped interviews) on this ‘secret’ remittance circuit came out in some conversations we had with migrant households in Albania.

The second comment is much more openly supported by evidence and this concerns a measure of intergenerational power shift in favour of the son, who may become more centrally involved in how money is spent by the residual family back in Albania. This emerges clearly in the following conversation in London with a young male migrant from northern Albania:

‘My father is the one who decides everything . . . but now he listens to me a lot more. Now, if I don’t agree with something he usually respects what I say.’

Is it because it is your money now?

‘Well, look, we don’t put it that way . . . this is the money of the family and my father is simply the head of the family.’

Does your mother have a say? Can she disagree with the way money is spent?

‘Well, it has never happened . . . if my brother or my father decide something . . . I mean they would not decide something if somebody in the family would disagree . . . if they decide to build a new house they do so for the whole of the family . . . not just for themselves.’

What about your wife, can she disagree?

‘It doesn’t make any difference, I mean, she is still part of the same family.’

But what about the place you might go back to live in, in Albania . . . maybe she would rather live alone with you in a different place than with your parents?

‘No, no. She knows very well what our economic conditions are.’

And is neatly corroborated by this family-setting interview in a north Albanian village:

Who gets the money coming from abroad?

‘Father gets it [chorus].’

‘Yes, I get it and put it into the account. But I spend it for the family, according to what my sons say as well. When they are here, they decide what they do with the money directly. Sometimes I disagree about priorities. For instance I would have rather built a new cowshed instead of buying this new washing machine for my wife, but my son came and started saying “we must get rid of this old wreck” and that was it. What can I say? After all it’s their money we are talking about.’

However, in many interviews in Albania our question about ‘who decides’ the spending of remittances coming from the UK and elsewhere was met with a measure of incredulity. This reaction reflected two sentiments: firstly that there should be any suggestion that the male family head should not be in charge of such decisions; and secondly that, in the dire conditions in which many families were living, there should be any discussion over the needs which were so obviously apparent – food, clothes, furniture. The next two quotes, both from female interviewees in north Albania, reinforce these points, and express a note of near-ridicule that there was any discussion to be had:

‘Who decides? It is the man who decides as usual . . . but the real problem is that we do not have enough money, we need much more,
although our sons are doing all they can to help us.’

‘Would I have liked to use it [the money] differently? I do not understand. Do you mean we do not need windows or a door? Or do we not need to eat? We don’t need to be warm? There are not that many decisions to take when you live like this.’

The cross-generational passage of decision-making power over the use of remittances referred to earlier is clearly exemplified in the next extract, from an elderly father in Bathore, outside Tirana. As well as a nice touch of humour, this conversation reveals another aspect of traditional Albanian family organisation: the responsibility of the youngest son to ‘stay behind’ and look after his elderly parents.

‘Who decides? My younger son, he is now in charge of everything . . . when they [sons living in the UK] want to do something they phone him up and then they decide, altogether, because this place will be left to them.’

What about the mother, does she decide anything?

‘Of course she is there as well when they talk and she says what she thinks . . . and she runs the place, the housekeeping economy of the family.’

But does she decide or not?

‘Well, I give you an example, if they decide that we need some beer, then it is up to her to decide which brand to buy.’

Impact of Remittances and the Likelihood of Return

The field evidence on the use of remittances fully supports findings from other remittance surveys reported earlier in this paper. All over Albania, the story is the same: the first priority for remittances is the basic survival needs of the family and an improvement in the quality of accommodation. Most of the dwellings we visited in Albania were still modest, despite improvements financed by remittances. Such improvements involved various small projects: moving the toilet indoors; repairing or replacing windows, doors and roofs; buying new furniture and domestic appliances such as TV sets and refrigerators, and so on. Water and electricity supplies remain problematic; some households had purchased small generators to cope with intermittent power provision.

The contrast between dwellings where migrants abroad were sending remittances, and those housing families or individuals without remittances, was all-too-visible in the areas we visited. This interviewee describes the contrast at Katund i Ri, on the plain outside Durrës, where many families originally from the north have settled:

‘In this area there are about 15 people abroad, the majority in the UK, but only the younger ones have managed to get documents . . . Why have they left? To help their families! I only get 6000 Lek [about $60] per month . . . . There are 11 of us in this house – how could we survive? That is the only possibility, otherwise we would have to borrow money even to eat, and that has happened in the past. All of us, all our families can only survive because we get money from abroad. The living conditions cannot be compared: those with relatives abroad live in houses, the others live in shacks.’

Living arrangements for those who do not receive remittances are usually hard, even primitive, as this woman living in a nearby shack relates:

‘Well, what can I say? . . . We live in a shack . . . we live in very difficult conditions . . . eight people together . . . we have nobody abroad. My only son is married and lives here with his wife and three daughters. We live on social support, about $25 per month for all of us. We try and make do with what we have. I bake bread in the oven at home, we live with what the garden produces. We don’t have water, or electricity. My son can’t leave because he is the only man in the family here . . . now he is unemployed . . . we are lucky if he gets work one day a week.’

Beyond improvements in the household’s basic living conditions, other priorities for using remittances are related to the wish to secure the respect of the extended family by allowing them to witness important events such as baptisms, weddings and funerals. These events are hugely significant because they mark the history and future of the family, and its status and honour.
Such ceremonies may also have a powerful long-term economic rationale: spending remittances and migrant savings on weddings, for instance, is often parlayed against the plan that the inter-family networks and alliances created by such ‘social investment’ will pay off in another time-space. Some of these issues are well illustrated in this family interview in a village in Kukës district:

‘When the older son came to visit us from Greece the first time, he fixed the water pipeline to the house... the younger one also came back from Greece and offered to move the toilet indoors and to improve the kitchen with new appliances... then we had to marry four daughters and that is a lot of money... about £2000 each... that’s British pounds, because it was our son in England who helped us with the last marriage. I mean, all of this furniture, everything you see here, the television set, the heater, that sofa you are sitting on, we bought it all thanks to their work abroad.’

However, the sending and utilisation of remittances also depend on often complex interlocking factors to do with earning capacities in different countries abroad (highest in the UK, lower in Italy, lowest in Greece), legal status in the destination country, and the shifting plans of the migrants to stay abroad, form new families (abroad or at home), or return. Gender roles cross-cut many of these processes. This next testimony, from the mother of two sons living in Italy and the UK, reveals how both the way that remittances are spent, and the migratory project as a whole, are shaped by hegemonic family patterns, gender roles and economic necessities.

‘I have two sons and three daughters. Only the two younger daughters are here with me now, they are still at school. One son is in the UK, the other is in Italy, with his sister. He is the one who could help us more, as he can rely on his sister for everything. She cannot help us as she has got her life... I mean she is married and must help her new family. She sends us some presents, but that is all she can do personally... but she also helps us in other ways because she takes care of her brother and organises everything [for him]. Because he lives with her, he gives her everything he earns, and then she saves some for us and gives him back something for his everyday life... she is like a “regulator”. The one in the UK now has lost the welfare assistance and has got to pay for everything. So now he is not helping much, but he used to send so much money before... I mean there was nothing here before my children left, and with the money they all sent we brought the water to the house, bought new furniture and a new heater, we improved the little food shop I run... and we even bought a piece of land in Shkodër to build a new house for when we will be old and the children will be back, if they will ever come back.’

At the end of the above extract there is reference to future plans to move to Shkodër, the main town in northern Albania. Other interviewees also referred to similar projects, demonstrating how international migration can be used to finance an internal migration to a place seen as more desirable for the family’s future (King, 2004). As an aside, the interlocking between internal and international migration is an under-researched field in population and migration studies (Skeldon, 2006). The next quote exemplifies a family migration project which sees the sequence reversed: first, an internal move away from the remoteness of village life in northern Albania to a place in central Albania, which then acts as a platform both for a better life for the family as a whole, and for the emigration of some of its younger members.

‘We moved from Tropojë to Durrës in 1992. Then my older son went to Greece for six months. He did not like it there but he helped us a lot... thanks to him we built a new home from scratch... before we used to live in a shack made of wood and metal... He then went to Italy and sent money from there too. Now he lives in London, he’s been there two years.’

But as sons and daughters emigrate, they may get married and form their own families abroad, at which point their remittances are either lost or decrease markedly. The inevitability of this was accepted by the interviewees in Albania – after all, for their children to get married is exactly what they would want – but it also raised questions about whether they will return, and if so, to where in Albania. A return to the harsh
mountains of northern Albania is seen as obviously problematic, since the developmental potential of this region remains limited; resettlement in the more urbanised lowland of central Albania may be more attractive. Even in this more developed part of Albania, however, parents are skeptical about whether their sons and daughters will return. The next interview extract, from peri-urban Tirana, shows a typical case of how, after a first phase in which the migrant sends home as much as he can to improve the living conditions of the entire family unit, he then starts investing in his own family, building a separate household close to the parents’ house. It also reveals how the purpose of houses built from remittances changes along with the migratory project. When the reality of returning becomes more unlikely, these houses become signifiers of belonging and proof of achievement, to be enjoyed only during visits or holidays.

‘In the beginning the first son helped us a lot, me and my wife, but then he started thinking about his own family and sent 100,000 Lek [$1000] to get his wife and his children to the UK. . . . Then he helped his brother and his little sister, she’s still going to school, with money. With the money he sent us we fixed the place . . . overall we spent about 300,000 Lek to improve it, new furniture and stuff, but then we also had to go to hospital and that was where the rest of the money went. However, each of the three brothers built a place for when they will be back . . . for holidays, I mean . . . because if they get documents they will all stay abroad . . . they will not come back for real . . . they will live and work there and return here more often.’

Alongside the obvious use of foreign earnings for day-to-day living expenses and improvement of housing and other material aspects of life, we also investigated whether migrant households were using remittances to finance a business project. We found very little convincing evidence of meaningful business investment of remittance income in northern Albania. This example of modest agricultural improvement indicates the limited horizons of business development in this part of the country:

‘Well, we hired somebody with better tools, in order to work the land deeper. We do not have the tools or the strength to work the land. . . . I am the only man in the family and I am over 70 years old. . . . Then we bought some better seeds. . . . But we lack an irrigation system here and it is very hard work to carry the buckets from the well around the field. We bought a pig once, to feed him up and then eat him, but he used to eat more than all of us together!’

Down on the coast and around the main urban centres of Albania the prospects for a more productive investment of migrant remittances are somewhat better, as Nicholson (2001, 2004) found in her field studies in southern Albania quoted earlier. Along some stretches of coast there are embryonic tourist developments underway, although the international market for tourism to Albania remains extremely small – most ‘tourists’ using these beach areas are returning migrants on holiday, the small Albanian elite from Tirana, and foreign personnel (especially aid and humanitarian workers) based in Albania. But in general the risks involved in developing tourist facilities are seen as too great and the level of investment required is way beyond what most migrants are willing to commit.

As yet there is little evidence of definitive return migration. During the mid-1990s some returns occurred of migrants who had been part of the first mass exodus of 1991–92 to Greece and Italy, but the pyramid crisis interrupted this trend and drove many returnees abroad again, sometimes to new destinations such as the UK. Now there are signs of another return wave (Labrianidis and Hatziprokopiou, 2005), but the scale is still relatively small, and it is still mainly from Italy and Greece. Given the recency of Albanian migration to the UK, most having left in the late 1990s, return is so far only discussed, rather than acted upon. Evidence from UK-based migrants suggests that much would have to change in Albania before return could be seriously contemplated. Here is one typical reaction from a young woman in the UK:

‘If only I had the money I would invest everything I have here . . . for my own future, but most of all for the future of my new family here and the well-being of my family back in Albania. . . . What would have to change in order for me to return to Albania? Everything, from water to electricity, the government . . . I mean, everything.’
In fact, return is probably less attractive to women than it is to men. Although most women have followed a traditional, male-led migration model, their objective conditions of life are better in England than they would be in Albania, and they identify strongly with their children’s future chances of success abroad, and so they are reluctant to return. In this sense, women do gain a certain measure of freedom and authority within the family when they migrate abroad. For men there is the return to their parents’ dynasty and extended family, a relocation and restoration of their family status and masculinity; for married women the return is towards the family environment of their in-laws where their mother-in-law, in particular, can play a dominant and constraining role. For the small number of more independent, single women in the UK, the return to Albania is likely to be an even less attractive option. Similar findings emerged from Orgocka’s study of skilled Albanian female migrants in the US: many contemplated return, but concerns over ‘personal security, professional satisfaction and economic benefits’ weighed against actualising the desire to go back (Orgocka, 2005: 149).

Interviews with ‘residual households’ – typically the parents of migrants in the UK – reveal an ambivalent narrative, a kind of ‘myth of their children’s return’. They certainly hope, and would want, their children to return, for only then can the ‘normal’ Albanian multi-generational family recompose itself and be complete, and lend status and fulfilment to their lives as household and family heads; but they also acknowledge that, both from an economic point of view and because emigration brings cultural change, the return may never happen. In this next interview exchange with a middle-aged couple in Albania, further interesting gender differences can be noted in the father’s and mother’s attitudes towards the likelihood of return, and any cultural changes that their three sons in the UK might have undergone. First, the father:

‘They like their life over there . . . and they don’t want to come back . . . I have found a wife for one of them but he does not come back . . . in fact he can’t come back because he’s got no documents . . . I haven’t seen my sons in four years; if only I had the money I would go there and see them for a week or so.’

Aren’t you afraid that they will have changed, that maybe now they don’t want to marry any more? Maybe they want to live a different life?

‘No, we don’t have these problems here.’

However, when the mother spoke, a more nuanced understanding emerged:

‘Well, the first one is very determined [to come back and live in Albania] but the second and the youngest one . . . they have abandoned our traditions a bit . . . they say they don’t want to marry, especially not an Albanian girl . . . . I am not sure they will come back; they say that they like it there.’

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has attempted a gendered analysis of Albanian migration and remittances, based on data drawn from 72 interviews with Albanian men, women and household units in the London area and in various parts of Albania. The choice of this migration stream is apposite because Albanians in the UK mainly originate from northern Albania where strongly gendered life roles are still deeply entrenched. We draw on the argument that both men and women shape the gendering of remittances and that patriarchy provides one lens through which this relationship can be understood in the Albanian context. The case study presented demonstrates how gender operates both as a structure and as a process, behind and within migration. It vindicates the argument that ‘gender organises migration . . . and that gender relations both facilitate and constrain women and men’s migratory practices’ (Nyberg Sørensen, 2005: 3, emphasis ours).

Let us round up and reinterpret our findings in the light of key concepts set out in the introduction to this paper. Firstly, the notion of gender as a relational concept, in which the migration of women is predicated on the time–space strategies of men (Bjerén, 1997: 226), comes across loud and clear: women’s ‘strategies’ of migration are, in most cases, absolutely dependent on the prior migration of their male partners – husbands, fiancé, ‘protectors’. We have observed a very ‘traditional’ model of migration, where women migrate after their male partners to join them abroad. Once in the UK, the woman’s role is to support her husband, look after children and the
home, and to send remittances to his parents in the country of origin. The gendered geography of power is maintained throughout this migration process, even enhanced in strength through the economic impact that remittances introduce into the inter- and intra-family dynamics. So, as a transformative experience (cf. Phizacklea, 1998), Albanian female migration has its limitations: the gendered structures of power inherent in Albanian society, and maintained throughout the migration cycle, are constraining rather than enabling.

This generally negative conclusion does, however, need further elaboration. Some changes have been observed, and the situation has to be compared with what the women’s lives would have been like had they not migrated. In some cases we noted a re-balancing of remittance flows, so that not all were channelled to the husband’s family in Albania, although the ‘tool of compromise’ here was often to call the remittances sent to the wife’s parental household ‘presents’ rather than regular cash flows. Thus, there were subtle rather than profound changes in the power geometry of remittance flows – note that, even where the destination of remittances had been re-negotiated, all the responsibility for accounting and managing the sending of money remains with the husband, except in those few cases where partial evidence suggested the existence of ‘secret’ remittance transfers activated by married women to their parental households. Much the same conclusion was found in the remittance receiving context. Household patriarchs – males/husbands/fathers – were in charge, with only tokenistic involvement of wives, and no involvement of other female household members such as daughters or emigrant daughters-in-law. Where decision-making power over the management and sending of remittances has been modified, it has been across the male generation, not across the gender divide.

Many of these subtle and partial changes are encapsulated in this final quote, which comes from one of the few interviews undertaken in the south, in Lushnjë district. The interviewee is a farmer, a former agronomist under the communist regime, who had been able to utilise remittances from his son in the UK to develop intensive agricultural production, including greenhouse cultivation, in this fertile part of the country – one of the rare examples of long-term productive use of remittances we came across.

‘Well, I receive the money and in the end I am the one to make decisions . . . but we all take part in decisions, especially my wife, but now also my son, since he is an adult. We have to decide together because we also work altogether. We all work for the same enterprise, our enterprise. My daughter goes to school, but when she comes back she prepares food and cleans the place. My wife takes care of the household administration, my son helps me out with everything else. Now we are better than when we used to live only on remittances. We earn more and do not need the money from abroad anymore.’

In this quote we see both a re-mapping of gendered and generational responsibilities within the family enterprise, but also a rather ruthless throwaway reference to the daughter coming home from school and then preparing food and doing cleaning.

To sum up our findings on Albanian migration and changing gender relations, we return to the two binary types set out in the introduction, and then briefly contextualise our Albanian findings in relation to literature on other countries. Our evidence generally does not support the notion of migration to the UK as emancipating for women, since this migration is articulated through the traditions and power geometries of northern Albanian society, and represents a continuation of those structures in the UK, with only minor modifications. Whether migration to the UK can be seen as simply adding to the ‘multiple layers of oppression’ (the second type) is also a moot point. Compared with what their lives would have been like in the mountains of northern Albania, or in the mud of an unplanned peri-urban district of Tirana, women in the UK are probably economically better off, although this is tempered by separation from family and friends in Albania and by (in most cases) uncertainty about how long they will stay in Britain.

How much can we draw from this case study to help us understand the gender dynamics of remittancing more widely? Mahler and Pessar (2001: 441–2) posed the question as to whether remittances have the effect of reaffirming or reconfiguring gender ideologies and relations across transnational spaces. Like most
binary-type questions, the answer is to some extent ‘both’. On the one hand, northern Albania does seem to be an extreme case given the intensely patriarchal character of gender relations, so that emigration has generated new means for men to exploit women, for instance through trafficking for sexual exploitation (Mai, 2001; Schwandner-Sievers, 2001), or through the constrictive channelling of female-earned remittances to husbands’ families in Albania. On the other hand, we have presented evidence to show that, in some cases, remittances do trigger changes in social relations within families, which become a site of struggle and negotiation over the distribution of resources, mediated by gender, patriarchal and generational relations.

Above all, we demonstrate that exploring the gender dimensions of remittances produces complex and contradictory findings. Our Albanian evidence, on balance, questions the ‘new wisdom’ that women remit more than men. This view, in any case, is predicated on a simple sexual division of remittance flow management. As Kunz has recently pointed out (2006: 12), it is vitally important to take into account the cultural specificity of remittance practices. Research by Zontini (2003, 2004) on Filipina and Moroccan migrants in Bologna and Barcelona is revealing in this regard, and has interesting parallels with the Albanian results. Zontini finds that the obligation to send remittances is not as strong for Moroccan women as it is for Filipinas. Many Moroccan women do not send remittances at all, as they migrate to escape rigid gender roles within their society of origin (including abusive husbands). Those who remit do so often to their widowed mothers – an example of female-only remittance chains (Zontini, 2004: 1123, 1128). Zontini also finds evidence, as we did in London, of women sending money secretly because their husbands would never approve (2003: 253). In this way remittances become ‘agile transactions’ (Ramírez et al., 2005: 15) through which women are not only able to improve the lives of their female relatives back home, but also function as a site of resistance against patriarchy.

We must acknowledge, finally, that our findings are to some extent conditioned by the nature of our sample, which was deliberately focused on workers at the lower-status end of the labour market. We did not, for instance, interview any Albanian students at university in the UK, at least not specifically for this research. For female students this is regarded as a legitimate independent migration route, not dependent upon a prior male migrant. They may see migration to the UK as a way of escaping the patriarchal and conservative mores of Albanian society; however, they achieve this by ‘conforming’ to the highly-valued quest for education, thereby bringing prestige (and hopefully some future economic benefit) to their parents’ family. The theme of Albanian highly-skilled female migration has been opened up by Orgocka (2005) in the US context; further work needs to be done in European destinations, particularly insofar as geographical proximity might make such women more likely to return (than their North American sisters) to challenge the post-communist reassessment of male hegemonic power in Albanian politics and society.

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NOTES

(1) Curiously, one of the few quantitative comparisons between remittance patterns from male and female Filipino migrants found that males remitted more, contrary to the commonly accepted notion that it is Filipino women migrants who are the ‘better’ remitters (see Semyonov and Gorodzeisky, 2005).

(2) This ‘fortune-seeking’ migration continued in the early decades of the twentieth century by new migration chains, almost exclusively from southern Albania, leading to the US and Australia.
However, we should acknowledge that this historical framing of kurbet as a ‘heroic migration’ also reflects the ways in which social categories are created and mobilised in order to control populations. Migration may be seen as an act of resistance against poverty created by repression, but focusing on migration should not lead us away from an appreciation of the true historical-structural nature of that repression. This point, and this period of Albanian migration, are dealt with in more detail in King and Vullnetari (2003: 17–22) and Papailias (2003).

(3) The project represented Oxfam’s first significant expression of interest in the home-country development potential of international migration, and Albania was attractive as a manageable case study, not least because it was known that Albanians had recently become quite numerous as workers supporting the low-skilled informal labour market in the London area. The project lasted for one year over 2002–03, and the general results were published as Exploding the Migration Myths (King et al., 2003). Dalipaj’s MPhil thesis (2005) also spun out of this research.

(4) However, we must acknowledge that the ‘scene-stealing’ by the male household head in the family interviews and the difficulty in talking to women on their own (except single widows) have some implications for our data. The female voice does emerge quite strongly in the interview extracts quoted in the paper, but to get women to talk individually would have required a more ethnographic approach to our fieldwork than was possible within the time and financial constraints of this project.

(5) For a much more detailed analysis of regional variation and of transitions into and out of communism, see the excellent reference text by Derek Hall, although his section on the position of women (1994: 82–90) is not the strongest part of the book, and his overall account of the post-communist era is becoming increasingly outdated by the fast pace of change since the early 1990s.

(6) For a typical example of this, see Robert Carver’s The Accursed Mountains (Carver, 1999: 302–12), and for a brief but devastating critique of the utilisation of the kanun as the ‘master template’ for explaining all aspects of Albanian social actors’ behaviour since the fall of communism, see Pandolfi (2002: 205–6).

(7) Although even this image has its limitations. There is some evidence that Hoxha’s wife Nexhmije held considerable decision-making power, especially in Enver’s last few years prior to his death in 1985. One suggested scenario is of an old and incapacitated dictator weakened by several illnesses including diabetes and dementia, while his wife and Ramiz Alia (Hoxha’s eventual successor) held the reins of the country in their hands. There is more than a hint of this in the standard histories of modern Albania (e.g. Vickers, 1995: 207–9; Vickers and Pettifer, 1997: 10–12).

(8) The ‘kidnapping for sex work’ scenario needs major qualification. Media hysteria has exaggerated the problem, as have some of the ‘victims’ themselves who find that they receive more help and sympathy from NGOs and law-enforcement agencies if they report themselves as kidnapped rather than ‘voluntary’ sex workers. Furthermore, girls who disappear are often reported by their parents as kidnapped, whereas they may simply have eloped or run away.

(9) Other Albanians in the UK include students and intellectuals, with whom we have also held discussions, but not within the remit of this project.

(10) In the last three years (i.e. since the fieldwork for this paper), it has become more difficult to cross this border, due to the enforcement of the Schengen visa regime in Greece and the surveillance of the border area by anti-trafficking units in accordance with intergovernmental agreements between Albania and Greece.

(11) This fast and short crossing was curtailed at the end of 2002 by the Albanian authorities under pressure from Italy and the EU, leading to the development of new, more circuitous routes north and south out of Albania.

(12) The reasons for this are complex and to some extent reflect the myths held about the UK, and London in particular, by Albanians. It is seen (mainly correctly) as a place where it is easy to survive and get a job as an ‘illegal immigrant’, with few controls (no ID cards). It is also seen (more inaccurately) as a place where it is easy to ‘get papers’ and become ‘legal’. This reflects, to some extent, the experience of Kosovan Albanians who gained asylum status (and some ‘true’ Albanians presented themselves as Kosovans and did gain entry and support in the UK in this way). For young men in particular, London is also seen as a liberal, exciting, cosmopolitan ‘world city’ where their life-dreams can be realised – where ‘anything goes’ and ‘everything can happen’.

(13) In the Albanian family hierarchy, if the father (in-law) is head of the family, the mother (in-law) is the head of the womenfolk.

(14) Interestingly, research on Kosovo Albanians in London by Kostovicova and Prestreshi (2003: 1086) came to a rather different conclusion. The migration of Kosovo Albanian women to Britain ‘has been an empowering experience’, albeit within certain limits defined by their community, such as the proscription of ‘marrying out’. Key
elements of this ‘limited liberation’ are the reduction of the social (and ethnic) pressures experienced in Kosovo, newly-gained personal independence following arrival in the UK, and supporting themselves by working.

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