



Policy Brief

Migration and Women Empowerment in the Western Balkan countries¹

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In the last twenty years, Albania has been often associated with migration. Starting with only 127.639 emigrants in 1990, the stock of Albanian emigrants reached almost a million and a half in 2010 which means 45.4% of Albanian population. The Albanian migration in the beginning of the migration cycle (1990) was mainly male-led with a strong tendency of increased female migration in the following years. Main destination

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countries of Albanian migrants are Greece and Italy.

Throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina's history, either voluntary or forced migration has been prevailing. The stock of Bosnian emigrants has reached over 1.5 million in 2010. With regards to the migrants' profile, women are slightly over 50% of Bosnian emigrants. The Bosnian migration pattern seems to be relatively constant, stable, gender-balanced and portraying migration as predominantly family migration. Main destination countries include Croatia and Germany.

Macedonia, as a matter of fact, is an emigration area. More recent statistics confirm that the current stock of migrants abroad from Macedonia is around 700.000, which is around 35% of the country's population. Emigrants are often young married males who depart for the purpose of earning money abroad. However, it is often implicitly assumed that migration patterns are gender neutral and migration demographics have become increasingly diversified. Women in the case of Macedonia form around 50% of emigrants. Main destination countries of Macedonia's emigrants are Italy and Germany.

Apart from massive migration, the strong patriarchal tradition which often impinges on women's rights is another common feature of the Western Balkans countries. Gender stereotypes and traditional mentality help preserve a structural gender gap in economic, political and social areas. In all these countries migration was historically initiated as a male phenomenon; men migrated leaving their wives and children behind with their extended families or alone. Migration of women alone was almost inexistent and increased participation of female migrants took place usually through family reunification or family formation.

The migration literature does not show a clear picture about the effects of migration on women's empowerment. One of the main channels of how migration effects women empowerment is through the acceleration of family nucleation. In this aspect, while nuclear family households have increasingly become a norm in Western Europe, the extended family households still exist particularly in the rural Balkans. Within an extended household, women have a subordinate status and limited participation in decision-making. If remittances sent by the migrants are used to acquire separate housing, the change from an extended to a nuclear household may lead to an increasing participation of women in the family decision-making.

From a normative point of view, changes in gender roles may not always be considered as empowerment or emancipation. In other words, increased responsibilities assumed by women when husband migrates shall not necessarily be considered as empowerment; a sudden increase in responsibilities (in child rearing and breadwinning,

loneliness and isolation) may be both physically and mentally unbearable and consequently to influence women unfavourably.

The literature tackling the migration-women empowerment causality in the Western Balkan countries is almost lacking. There are but few studies written mainly by sociologists and anthropologists based on qualitative data and in-depth interviews.

Main findings of the study

The study aimed to investigate how migration acted as a catalyst for expanding the opportunities of women economically, socially and in inter-personal relations in the Western Balkan countries of Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia. Women's perceptions about migration's influence in their roles within their families have been subject of investigation.

The research questioned whether own migration or migration of (male) family members has any impact on the woman's empowerment in traditionally patriarchal societies of Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia.

Main findings for Albania

While, during the Albanian communist era when gender equality achieved on the labour market was not transformed into empowerment in the household decision-making and in gaining bargaining power, in the post-communist era women's roles have undergone important transformations and progressed much faster than those of men. This advancement of women is strongly linked with the social and economic transformations of the whole society and driven by a set of underlying factors. Migration is

Definition of empowerment

The concept of “empowerment”, was originally associated with the community development movement, and has become very popular across wide range of scientific disciplines. Given that the empowerment discourse is often constructed around the dichotomy between “persons in power“ and “powerless persons“ who should be empowered, the term itself is most frequently used to describe less favourable, disadvantaged, vulnerable and unprivileged position of certain groups within the wider society, such as woman, people with disabilities or poor people.

This research has defined "empowerment of women" as a possession of the following qualities:

- Having access to and control of relevant information and resources;*
- Having a range of options from which choices are made (existence of choice);*
- Having decision-making power (use of choice); and*
- Having capacity to achieve desired results (achievement of choice).*

generally acknowledged to be one of them.

The findings of the focus groups conducted with **Albanian women**, validate the important influence of migration on women empowerment across several dimensions. First, the positive impact of migration on freedom of movement has been realized through the adoption of new

social and cultural norms of the Western European and North American countries – the westernization – and also through strengthening of couple relationship due to “migratory” isolation from other family members. In this line, the direct impact of migration (own migration) seems to be more effective than the indirect one (husband’s migration). Secondly, migration appears to have increased women’s awareness towards gender neutral child education. Empowered women acknowledged that female education brings further empowerment and therefore want to transmit these values to their daughters. Thirdly, own migration experience appears to have shaped women’s mind-set as regards to the inheritance rights which, according to them, should follow the principle of the individual rights without discriminating between sons and daughters. The impact of migration on women economic empowerment appears to depend on their pre-migration status. Unless they do the same job in migration country as in Albania, women recognize the impact of migration on their economic independence as well as on the increasing opportunities of managing their personal businesses. A general advancement in terms of decision-making and intra-household bargaining power, as resulted from the field research findings, is often attributed to migration itself in case women experienced it.

Main findings for Bosnia-Herzegovina

In the case of BiH, migration in combination with other background factors, such as education level, pre-migration employment status and urban/rural characteristics contribute to both empowering and disempowering

outcomes regarding the economic position of women. Notably, empowering effects of migration positively correlate with prior non-working status, low education and rural background. The most profound positive change in economic position of women is found in less educated, rural migrant women who never worked in paid employment prior to migration. Unfortunately, these empowering effects proved not to be long-lasting. Upon return, women usually conform to their role as housewives again as their rural context is marked by poverty and no employment opportunities. Opposite pattern is observed in the case of urban migrant women, highly educated and in paid employment prior to migration. Being forced to take up less awarding, less demanding and poorly paid jobs, this group of women experiences severe negative change regarding its own economic position as a result of migration. Further, research findings suggest that male out-migration or experience of migration in the family has no significant impact on economic emancipation of women. Rural women left behind – despite being relatively educated - tend not to work, whereas urban women with the experience of migration in the family seem not to depend on cash or other remittances of their family members living abroad. No stronger or reliable links between migration and empowerment of women in socio-cultural and domestic decision-making dimensions is found. Despite variations in degree of power and autonomy of the women covered by the present study, they all function within the framework of non-patriarchal and constantly changing gender regime. Women's perceptions do not support the idea that women are subject to subordination in their families. Women's environment structured by less strict and more women-friendly

formal and informal social rules contributes to higher degree of power and control over their own lives. It undoubtedly points at high degree of women's self-consciousness among urban and rural women/highly educated and less educated as well as employed and unemployed women who do not take gender inequalities as given, natural or unquestionable. Nevertheless, there is large space for improvements in the area of reproductive health among rural women, regardless migration status which should be better targeted by public (health) policy interventions as well as by civil society organizations dealing with women issues to ensure tangible improvements in their empowerment with regard to reproductive health. There are no considerable or substantial differences between women with and without migration experience in the sphere of domestic decision-making. As the nuclear family model dominates, research results picture the image of empowered Bosnian women who have a strong say in domestic decision-making process. Women and men are both included in the process of decision-making. Women's bargaining powers in domestic decision-making are not questioned by their husbands/partners. Women have control over domestic resources, e.g. decisions regarding child rearing, health and education as well as household expenditure. In the case of male out-migration women have been transferred decision-making powers. As a result, they independently make everyday household decisions and inform absent husband about them.

Main findings for Macedonia

In sum, migration has a different influence regarding various aspects. Migration had in this aspect of freedom

perception positive influence on the women who stayed abroad, but negative once they returned home. In the aspect of child rearing, migration had positive influence on paying more attention to women's education felt in cases of women with family but not own migration experience. In this aspect of ownership rights evident is positive migration experience through way of raising awareness about ownership rights of women especially felt in cases of women with family but not own migration experience. On the matter of economic empowerment, the migration had more negative than positive impact on these participants' economic empowerment: the positive was in acquiring skills through studies and negative that they used to work abroad and now they are either unemployed or employed with lower salary. Regarding the family/interpersonal dimension, there have been few cases of single and unemployed participants from the group with family but not own migration experience, rural area with greater influence in the decision making in their homes. Some participants (group with migration experience, rural area; women with family but not own migration experience, urban area) reported also male or elder dominated decision making, especially in the case of the single participants. Regarding the married participants, they in most cases decide equally with their husbands. On the other hand, some divorced participants after returning to the former family house may experience less decision-making power, even worse if she is unemployed too (women with migration experience, rural area); however some reported that they are consulted in the decision-making (women with family but not own migration experience, rural area; women with migration experience, urban area). Some

participants (women with family but not own migration experience, urban area) recognized a positive impact from migration in decision-making in the household. On the topic of mixed questions almost all participants of various groups (especially Albanian Muslim) from all groups would not abort or are against abortion since it is a sin according to the Islam religion. In many cases of the Albanian participants from all groups it was the case that in case of pregnancy before marriage the woman has to marry the father of their child. Women of all various groups choose their partners or have chosen them on their own, however arranged marriages have happened and are wanted in some cases (for example one participant from group with migration experience, rural area), which however in present time means that the matchmakers only arrange the meeting, but the partners decide on their own. This part does not show almost any positive influence of migration on these sex related issues such as abortion, even negative impact regarding issues as marriage.

Policy Recommendations

These results might be helpful in identifying, adopting, implementing and promoting public policies and interventions which would lead to desirable and sustainable impact of migration on empowerment of women. From home country perspective, special attention needs to be given to the following issues:

- a. This study suggests that empowerment happens when the people are given choices and opportunities. Empowerment is about freedom of people and freedom can be enhanced through building up overall democratic capacities that

will nurture the feeling of the freedom in the Western Balkan societies.

- b. Education is proven to be source of change for all, but particularly for women. Therefore, national authorities should consider undertaking measures for increasing the access of women to education and for increasing their school enrolment and completion rates especially in rural areas. The measures that can be undertaken include: instituting compulsory secondary education; system of cash transfers conditional on school attendance for poor families; and improvement of school infrastructure.
- c. Patriarchal mentalities and traditions, although decreasing, appear to be widespread in the region, in particular in rural areas. Patriarchal norms concern the whole society; as such, a large-scale education reform needs to be undertaken in gender equality terms in order to increase the awareness of gender inequality in the society.
- d. The research findings show that women empowerment and economic development have causal links. Therefore, measures that aim to further economic development should be complemented with policies targeted towards women and gender equality. Also, family nucleation has been proven to be a source for women empowerment. As such, governments should

consider granting privileged loans for purchase of housing to young couples.

- e. Migration, despite its pitfalls, has been helpful for empowering women. Therefore, origin country's policy makers should pay special attention to migration experience and knowledge transfer among returnee women through initiatives that will increase public awareness about the impact of migration on women.

From destination country perspective, effective policies that enforce women empowerment through migration should be considered as follows:

- a. The research findings demonstrate that women often experience a mismatch in job/education in destination countries. Therefore, international recognition of education degrees and qualifications earned in sending countries might help women to find adequate jobs and social position. As the nature of migration changes and migration becomes increasingly associated with "brain-drain", in order to foster empowerment of women, it is crucially important to enable migrant women to make use of their professional skills and knowledge in the host country.
- b. The research findings indicate that often the position of women worsens upon return, both in social as well as in economic terms. Therefore special socio-economic and psychological services aimed at facilitating

reintegration of migrant women should exist.

Finally, as this study has shown, both official statistics as well as literature on migration and on women empowerment is still limited in the Western Balkans. Further studies should be carried out with a special focus on these two major phenomena characterizing the Western Balkan societies. For that, adequate data are needed to conduct qualitative and quantitative research in order to ensure that women's empowerment extent to every phase of the migration process.

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