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COMING HOME: CHALLENGES OF REINTEGRATION FOR RETURNED
MIGRANT WOMEN IN NORTHERN ALBANIA

A Dissertation
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy.
International Family and Community Studies

by
Marsida Tafilica
August 2023

Accepted by:
Dr. Mark Small, Committee Chair
Dr. Susan Limber
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ABSTRACT

Return migration is the movement of people from host countries to their country of origin after spending a period of time abroad. The aim of this doctoral research is two-folded: Firstly, it aims to explore migration and return migration experiences of Albanian women in order to understand the difficulties experienced during and after migration and how they handled obstacles. Secondly, it analyzes how women migrants perceive successful reintegration.

Drawing on qualitative in-depth interviews of 19 Albanian women who returned to the city of Shkodra, the research seeks to answer the following questions: (1) Upon return, what are the perceptions of women migrants experiences before, during, and after migration?; and (2) What are perceptions of how reintegration might be improved? The answers offer a comprehensive understanding of return migration and reintegration factors based on their lived experiences.

The outcomes in this qualitative study resulted from a constructivist grounded theoretical analysis. Sampling began as purposive and data analysis continued until saturation had been reached. Findings show that economic, social, and cultural difficulties in Albania and obscurity about the future influence reintegration. Implications for theoretical approaches to reintegration are offered. The research also evaluates the significant contributions return migrants make towards the future development of the city and concludes with recommendations for governmental and non-governmental structures to improve reintegration.

DEDICATION

To my beloved daughter Amina and son Amar!

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, praises and thanks to God, the almighty, for blessings throughout my research work and for giving me the opportunity and willingness to accomplish this dissertation successfully. This PhD has been a “journey” across two continents and I am eternally grateful to all the people who have assisted and supported me along the way. Basically, I am grateful and indebted to my supervisor, Professor Mark Small, for his great efforts, guidance, support, and patience since the beginning of this PhD journey. A special thanks to Professor Susan Limber, the head of the Doctoral school and member of the committee, and Professor Natallia Sianko for their support during the process of the doctoral study. Their contribution and advice have added value to this thesis. I would like also to extend warm thanks to Migena Kapllanaj, the coordinator of this program in Albania, for being the first impetus of starting PhD at Clemson University. I am grateful to all the members of the committee for their valuable comments on the previous draft of this thesis. I want to offer my thanks to Clemson University for providing me the scholarship to continue my dissertation thesis. In this regard, I want to thank all those who helped me accomplish this thesis. This PhD would not have been possible without all of the women who very generously shared their time, life experiences, and deepest feelings with me. I will never forget their courage, and how much I have learned from their insightful experiences. I deeply thank my parents, who sacrificed a lot for my success in academia as well as in other parts of my life. Words fail me to express my gratitude for your love, encouragement and the sacrifice you made to help me achieve this and all I have done in my life. I also thank my mother-in-law and

my sister that have been a great support for me. I am so happy to celebrate achievements like this with you. I would like my father in law to celebrate this accomplishment with me but unfortunately he cannot see these days. Last but never the least, many thanks go to my family for their love and patience throughout this process. To my children who kept me aware of what really matters. Particularly, I want to thank my husband for supporting this dream of mine. We survived every fortune of life together because your love, encouragement, and support are the greatest driver for me.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In the medieval period, many craftsmen in Europe would leave their native land to go and work further afield (Gittins & Fink, 2015). In recent years, however, the phenomenon of European migration is especially a predominant feature of migrants who leave their home countries to go and work in the West. The movement of individuals from one country to another continues to have an important influence on the political, economic, social, and cultural changes in the country of origin and the host countries. Since the fall of the communist regime, Albanian society has been faced with a great movement of external migration.

Albania has experienced a long history of migration and the return has always been part of this migration process. Even though return migration is an understudied area among migration studies and the research on reintegration is in infancy, return to the 'homeland' creates challenges for the countries of origin. While new migrants continue to leave Albania in search of a better life abroad, a considerable number of Albanians who migrated have been returning home, approximately 135 thousand people since 2001 (INSTAT & IOM, 2013) of which 26.3% are women. Return migrants have been demographically, economically, politically, and socially a significant component of Albania's population. The feature of the study lies in explaining the phenomenon of social, cultural, and economic reintegration of Albanian women return migrants, particularly those returning from the West to the northern area of Albania, in Shkodra. The research seeks to explore the following questions: Upon return, what are the

perceptions of women migrants' experiences before, during, and after migration? What are perceptions of how reintegration might be improved? The impact of return migrants in Albania has serious consequences for the economy and social functioning. Thus, the reintegration and rehabilitation of these returnees into the family, society, and existing economic structures has discussed recently by the government, some intergovernmental organizations, and non-governmental organizations, such as International Organization for Migration (IOM) and Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ).

Additionally return migration has received the attention of many researchers and policymakers. It has been largely studied from an economic and political perspective and very little from a sociological one. Thus, this study would be among the first of its kind in Albania with a focus on women and how to improve reintegration.

Significance of the Study

This PhD dissertation is relevant to both academia and policy. It takes a multidisciplinary approach drawing on the sociological, psychological, anthropological, and political science disciplines. The objective of this study is to contribute to the academic literature on return migration and reintegration, but at the same time to understand how the government and international organizations help in the reintegration of women return migrants. In this context, there will be a direct policy significance of this research in understanding how people reintegrate and how return and reintegration impact development that is worthy of attention.

One of the reintegration policy objectives should be the achievement of a “sustainable return,” which means that the return migrant does not re-migrate. Hence, to understand how women returnees have reintegrated, there is need to know their perceptions of reintegration, what constitutes a good reintegration, and what strategies were used to reintegrate.xii

Return Migration and Reintegration: A Comprehensive Overview

Return migration refers to a state where an individual who migrated to another country for some time goes back to her or his country of origin (Dumont & Spielvogel, 2008). According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2004), return migration is “the movement of a person returning to his/her country of origin or habitual residence usually after spending at least one year in another country. This return may or may not be voluntary” (p.56). This means, as Gmelch (1980) has pointed out, migrants returning home for a short time (e.g. vacation, holiday, or business trip), even if undefined, without the purpose of remaining are usually not defined as return migrants. For a long period of time, there was a paucity of research on return migration being conceptualized as the least known episode of the migration process. This might be as a result that return was initially considered as the endpoint of the migration cycle (Gmelch, 1980). Even though migration studies have historically been focused on migration towards the West, there is an increasing attention of return moves as an important part of the migration phase in the literature (Cassarino, 2004; De Haas et al., 2015; Gemi & Triandafyllidou, 2021). The current studies have outlined the multifaceted nature of return, reintegration, and the drive of remigration and circulation (Gemi &

Triandafyllidou, 2021; Kuschminder, 2017; Triandafyllidou, 2013) proposing that return should be considered as a stage in the wider migration cycle. The significance of this process is encountered in Cassarino's (2004) words that, "return migration is a part and parcel of a circular system of social and economic relationships and exchanges facilitating the reintegration of migrants while conveying knowledge, information and membership" (p. 262).

Most pertinent studies have focused on remittances and the investments that return migrants can make to economic development in their countries of origin (De Haas, 2005; Jung, 2015; Jushi et al., 2021). There has been quite limited research on the individual and appropriate factors which define return migration. Consequently, it is anticipated that most strategies undertaken to support return migration have not been successful (De Haas, 2015; Dustmann, 1996).

As a result, nowadays, return migration is extensively analyzed by primarily comprehending the motives for return migration (Kunuroglu et al., 2017; Mohamed & Abdul-Talib, 2020). In this view, regarding who returns and why, is crucial to figure out the overall (re)settlement experiences and the dynamics upon return.

Regarding the literature review on return migration in specific countries, the main reasons to return to their homelands are not economic but rather are related to family ties, lifestyle, and social networks (Gmelch, 1980; King & Christou, 2014; King, Christou & Ahrens, 2011). In further research, Potter (2005) and Jain (2013) found out that the return was above all due to economic reasons such as better job opportunities. However in Tsuda's (2016) study, economic factors might be the principal reason for return, but

ethnic connections and emotive factors play a crucial part in the decision as well. Particularly this is the case of migrants returning from Western developed countries to their quite less developed ethnic homelands, where familial ties are significant incitements to return (Cassarino, 2004). In the end, a migrant will decide to return home voluntarily when the disadvantages of being in a host country are higher than returning (Dustmann & Weiss, 2007; Richmond, 1983).

Return migration has been studied in diverse branches but still remains a relatively under-theorized area (Cassarino, 2004). Mainly efforts to theorize return include its insertion or application to general theories of migration (King, Christou & Ahrens, 2011).

Field Site in Albania: Shkoder

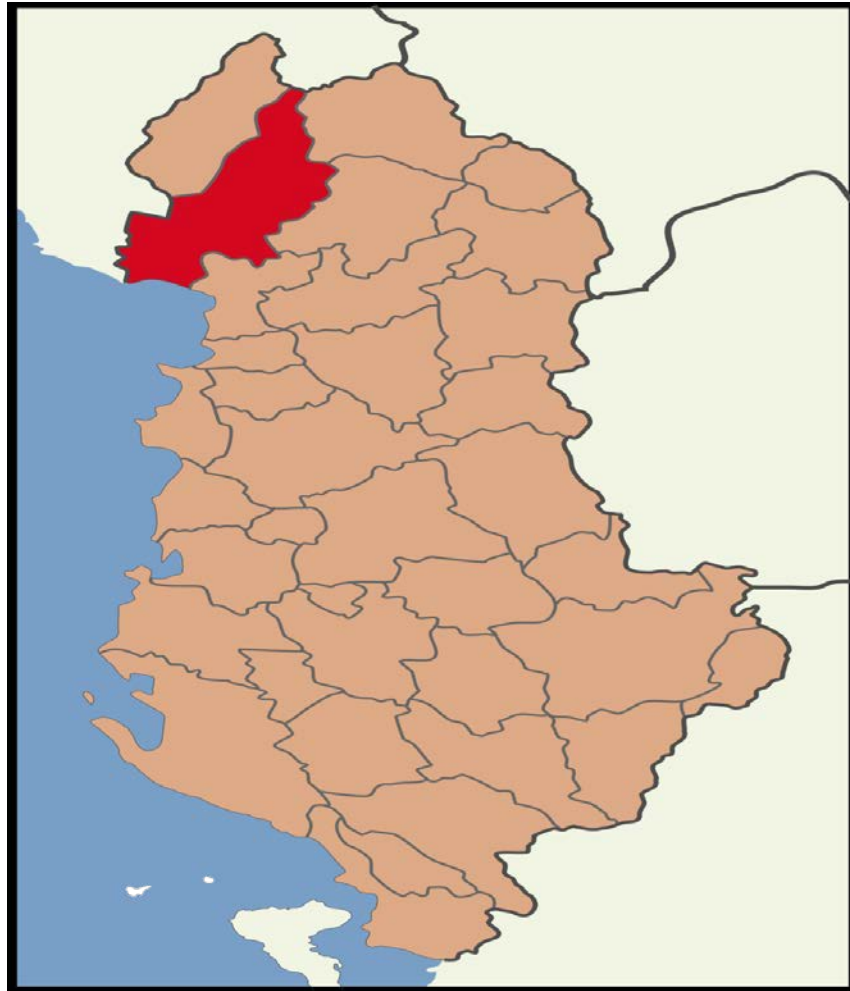
The field of study for this research is the city of Shkodra, located in the northwest of Albania. Shkodra is the largest northern city of the Republic of Albania and the most significant administrative center for economic, social, and cultural activities in the North. It currently has the sixth-highest population density in the country with 193,009 inhabitants or 6.9 % of the Albanian population (INSTAT, 2022).

The city lies on the shores of the lake under the same name and below the hill of the Rozafa castle and is one of the most interesting places in Albania. Shkodra starts from the confluence of the rivers Buna, Drini, and Kiri, in a field of rare beauty and traces of the past. The appropriate geographical position has placed the city of Shkodra in the center of the important trade routes that in the past connected Albania and regional countries giving the city a significant boost in terms of economic, social, and cultural

development. Due to the economic and social development that this city has known throughout history, it is a developed city in Albania with historical evidence and also an important economic, cultural, and spiritual center of northern Albania.

Shkodra marks the first anti-communist demonstration in Albania and it took a year to overthrow the communist regime, the last dictatorial regime in Eastern Europe. This event, due to its importance and the time in which it took place, was rightly considered the first anti-communist demonstration in Albania (Idrizi, 2017). It resonated inside and outside Albania, and was analyzed and commented on by the international media because it paved the way for other democratic developments throughout Albania, and its democratic fruits were not delayed. Considering all these factors, Shkodra became a very influential city in Albania, particularly in the north of the country.

Figure 1.1 Map of Albania



Overview of Dissertation Structure

This study consists of six chapters. The first chapter presents the phenomenon of return migration and argues the necessity of the institutional and societal response in the country of origin to reintegrate returnees. In addition, this chapter introduces the purpose of the study, its specific objectives, research questions, and its significance for choosing the north of Albania.

The second chapter follows an in-depth literature review of return migration and reintegration. This chapter deals with the historical background of Albanian migration

and return migration. It also argues the rationale for returned women and the role of gender in migration and return migration. Again, the research questions to be addressed include: Upon return, what are the perceptions of women migrants experiences before, during, and after migration? What are perceptions of how reintegration might be improved?

Chapter three reflects the methodology used in this study, the selection of qualitative research methods, and an explanation of Constructivist Grounded Theory. The theory is argued in the function of scientific research in the field of migration. It explains also the philosophical perspective of this study involving pragmatist ontology, constructivist epistemology, relativism, and symbolic interactionism.

The fourth chapter examines the approach in addressing the research questions of the study, the analytical approach, and ethical considerations.

Chapter five and chapter six present findings and discussion of results respectively. They present them through three dimensions: life prior to migration, life during migration, and life after the return. Chapter six reflects also upon the main conclusions of the study. It provides implications of the reintegration strategies, recommendations for improving the reintegration mechanism in Albania, and reintegration assistance to returnees in general.

A Note on Terminology

In this section, the researcher wants to clarify the use of 'woman' instead of 'female.' Despite the preference some give to one over the other, there is currently a difference between the term 'woman' and 'female.' The term female was first

used to describe a woman or a girl, but after hundred years of its appearance, it began to be used for animals as well (Caxton, 1481). The woman has maintained its original meaning, leading to a unique and approximately 1400 years old term. Based on the English Dictionary Merriam-Webster, the word means – an adult female human being. While referring to the Oxford dictionary, the word female carries a purely biological meaning that is limited to the reproductive affiliations of a being; which can be a flower, bird, or animal. It is precisely the word woman, which makes the difference between human and social belonging. Throughout the years, women have fought for their position in society, for freedom, and for the right to vote. The term female carries itself a lack of evolution, a linguistic atavism, in the way women were perceived in an underdeveloped society where women mattered only for their gender attributes. Therefore, to define a woman as a female means to define her as a living thing, not as a human being. It was generally accepted by the beginning of the 20th century that *female* was of little worth term as it made no separation between humans and animals; instead, *woman* was the preferred term to refer to an adult woman.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

A literature review using INSTAT, Google Scholar, and Clemson University libraries was conducted to find out articles related to female return migration, in general, and Albanian female return migration, in particular. Search terms included “return migration,” “return migration in Albania,” “Albanian gendered migration,” “Albanian female return migration,” and “Albanian’s policy on return migration.” Journal articles were taken from different fields of study: migration analyses, ethnic research, developmental studies, gender studies, etc. The researcher also reviewed the reference list of the articles to retrieve other articles.

Inclusion Criteria: Studies were included if they were: (a) directly related to the topic; (b) peer-reviewed; (c) qualitative, quantitative, or both (d) mainly based on work that was undertaken in Albania.

Return migration is defined as a multi-layered, heterogeneous and long-standing sub-process of the migration cycle, which is a relatively new subject of study (King, 2017). The primary return migration studies were conducted in the 1960’s and 1970’s by authors such as Bovenkerk (1975), Cerase (1974), Davison (1968) and King (1977).

Return is the process of going back to one’s country of origin, and reintegration is generally the story of what happens next. Research on the reintegration of return migrants has been scarce so far. This is apparently because of the evident assumption that as people return home, reintegration is viewed as a straightforward process (King, 2017).

Regardless of the type of return, or the migrant's characteristics, there is an expectation that the returnee will be able to re-assimilate easily upon return. These assumptions indicate that there is still little understanding of this complex and multi-faceted process (Kuschminder, 2017).

Historical Background of International Migration from Albania

A new era of international migration began in 1989 with the fall of the Iron Curtain. The collapse of communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe allowed these nations' citizens to migrate; consequently, eliminating the main blockade to "international mobility" (King & Vullnetari, 2003, p.283). Furthermore, the dismantling of communism was considered a reflection of the right to freedom of movement, a right that had been denied for so long. To a large extent, the movement of these peoples has been chaotic and clandestine. But as King and Vullnetari (2003) noted, Albania has been profoundly involved in migration in the last years.

The biggest wave of migration ever seen in the history of Albania occurred in the 1990s. The first country to which Albanians fled, after a long period of dictatorship, was Germany. In the summer of 1990, in Tirana (the capital city of Albania), the German Embassy (initially), and other Western Embassies (subsequently) opened their "doors" to accept Albanian refugees (De Waal, 2005). A massive influx of people headed toward these embassies, coinciding with the first step of Albanians toward long-denied right to migrate. After one year, a second exodus of Albanians was allowed to land in Italy, in extreme conditions, and in an overcrowded ship. The social-economic situation in Albania's political state went out of control. Albanians broke the borders heading to

neighboring countries, Greece and Italy, in search of “paradise.” The state and the communist government could not control Albanians, as it did during its 47 years of dictatorship rule. In 1991, some young university students and activists protested against the regime, trying to have a democratic state like all other Western European countries. Their protests helped to capsize Eastern Europe’s most closed and severe communist regime. After four days of demonstrations, a new party appeared (Democratic Party) headed by Sali Berisha. He was considered a reformer who had great support from the West to improve a destroyed economy.

During 1993-1996, the country appeared to have made progress in its economic growth (Bezemer, 2006), and a considerable number of migrants returned to invest in their home country. However, after 1996, the political and economic conditions in Albania began to worsen when a complicated system of pyramid schemes collapsed, leading to another phase of mass migration. Most Albanians who had invested in these pyramids lost their savings, in total \$1.2 billion nationwide, consisting of half the country's GDP (Bezemer, 2006). Much of the invested money in these schemes included the savings from migrants working in neighboring countries; therefore, a substantial portion of migrants and residents became bankrupt. Other political protests brought a breach of law and order that led to a worsening of the situation (Lawson et al., 2000). There was chaos throughout Albania, as weapons stores were blown up, prisoners escaped, and street gangs “ruled” most of the country. The southern part of Albania, including the port of Vlora, became the departure point for the clandestine transportation of Albanian migrants to Italy (Perlmutter, 1998).

The riots of 1997 ended when the leader of the Socialist Party, Fatos Nano, came to power bringing stability and order. After one year, the situation appeared to have gradually returned to normality, with the improvement of the primary state institutions. However, in March 1999, the arrival of 375,000 Kosovo Albanian refugees aggravated instability in many parts of Albania. Despite the presence of internationals, particularly NATO troops that helped to sustain order, continued instability in Kosovo did not help to solve migration issues.

Since 2000, a quiet political period prevailed. However, the phenomenon of migration continues to be present even today. Nowadays, as the migratory phenomenon changes through the societal transformation explained under the denomination of 'globalization', the return migrants remain an essential part of the continuing migration process (King & Zontini, 2000). Evidence from research shows that the primary reasons for return was positive economic factors, coinciding with the intention of providing better conditions upon return (Labrianidis & Kazazi, 2006). According to INSTAT (2013), a total of 133,544 Albanian citizens of the age 18 above returned to Albania during 2009-2013.

The push factors for Albanian migration continued to accumulate even during the COVID-19 crisis. According to Gedeshi (2021), the COVID-19 pandemic has pushed the Albanian economy into the deepest recession since the beginning of the post-socialist transition in 1991 and the events that happened afterward with the collapse of the pyramid schemes in 1997. COVID-19 was the second shock to hit Albania's economy after a devastating earthquake in November 2019. This is also due to the shrink of

tourism that remains one of the main sources of the country. As a result, the economic factors such as unemployment and less remittances increased migration, but the traditional destinations for Albanian migration (Greece, Italy) offered fewer opportunities due to their own economic crises. Thus, the mass of potential migrants was directed towards Germany and other EU countries (Gedeshi, 2021).

Return Migration to Albania

Return migration to Albania is a recent phenomenon that primarily took attention in 2009-2013 and largely coincided with the economic crisis that erupted particularly in Greece but also in Italy, and which had compelled many Albanians to reconsider their livelihoods in these countries (Gemi, 2014). Data on return migration has been sporadic, and there is some inconsistency in the estimated numbers of return migrants, though it is generally accepted that the flow of returnees has been on the rise since 2008 (INSTAT & IOM, 2013). According to estimates, over 70 percent of the Albanian migrants returned to their home country after 2001, when the socio-economic and political situation started to get better (Piracha & Vadean, 2010). The latest survey on return migration from the Albanian Institute of Statistics (2013) revealed that the returning stream expanded after the global financial crisis. Many Albanians migrate with the purpose to settle permanently in the host countries, but, many others aspire to return to their home country and invest what they have earned (Gedeshi, 2002; Nicholson, 2004). Many migrants make a decision before leaving how they are going to make use of money, and may have certain plans to be attained in series. The migrants are conscious that costs are much

lower in Albania than in host countries, thus their savings enhance in value when they are repatriated.

With regard to policy developments aimed at facilitating return migration, the Albanian Government established a policy measure entitled “National Strategy for the Re-Integration of the Returned migrants 2010-15” (GoA, 2010) to support the reintegration of return migrants. This strategy was developed to provide a sustainable return and support the readmission and reintegration process of people moving voluntarily and involuntarily.

The program stipulated support for the education and economic reintegration of the return migrants through employment support programs, including public vocational training courses, information on health services, social support, and agricultural incentives. The main reintegration mechanisms consisted of the allocation of Migratory Counters in each region of the country. These counters with trained staff were developed to offer support to returnees and to refer them to existing public services. The assessment of these mechanisms by INSTAT and IOM (2013) has indicated that very few individuals have received support upon return to Albania. This suggests that the uptake of government support offers has been low amongst Albanian return migrants. With regard to the financial situation, a large number of return migrants reported their situation has not changed since returning to Albania, while a significant number have reported their situation had deteriorated since their arrival (INSTAT & IOM, 2013).

Another project related to the reintegration of Albanian return migrants from Germany was launched by a German organization, Deutsche Gesellschaft für

Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), which took place in 2016-2020 (GIZ, 2020). The overall goal of this program was to activate existing resources and create new resources to provide each return migrant with coordinated and comprehensive assistance that ensures his/her reintegration. Meanwhile the main pillars of the projects included the provision of coordinated, comprehensive, and individualized return and reintegration assistance; the systematic participation and contribution of public institutions and NGOs at the local and central level in the reintegration of returnees; and increasing the capacities of local actors to provide assistance for reintegration.

The Rationale for Studying Women

At the start of the 1990s most migration from Albania was male-dominated; however, one decade later women comprised approximately half of Albanian migrants (Baldwin-Edwards, 2004; King, 2005; Vullnetari, 2007). In comparison to many other developing countries, Albanian women experienced relative equality in labor markets and educational systems, though there was still a traditional and patriarchal system (Lawson et al., 2000; Stecklov et al., 2010). Regardless of many attempts to involve women entirely in the economy, the status of women within the family had less development with restricted activity and strong dependence on male household members (UNDP, 2005).

Research shows that women who are not treated with respect and esteem have a higher stimulus to migrate abroad (Ferrant & Tuccio, 2015; Ruysen & Salomone, 2018). Albanian migrants in general and Albanian migrant women in particular, have faced discrimination and marginalization – and are often stereotyped as criminals and

prostitutes (King & Mai, 2008). Migration can be a transformative occurrence with great complexity for gender roles (Pessar & Mahler, 2003; Silvey, 2004).

The Role of Gender in Migration, Return Migration, and the Reintegration Process

King and Vullnetari (2012) noted that Albanian women were not often highlighted during migration in the early 1990s, even though their migration sometimes challenged gendered norms about danger (e.g., risky speedboat travel to Italy, unsafe mountain footpaths to Greece). Additionally, Albanian women who migrated to Italy and Greece were frequently stereotyped by the media as “prostitutes” (Zinn & Rivera, 1995). In her study of Albanian and Filipino domestic workers in Greece, Lazaridis (2020) showed that Albanian women were among the most exploited groups in Greece. “The double discrimination and marginalization they suffered resulted from the deep-seated Greek xenophobia towards Albanians on the one hand, and the sexist and patriarchal gender relations that exist within Greek society itself, on the other” (Vullnetari, 2012, p.12).

The relationship between migration and gender relations is complex, and according to Danaj (2019), this needs to be presented to policymakers who have a tendency towards simplified outcomes: i.e. ‘migration empowers women.’ In addition, if migration is empowering and does validate the agency of migrant women, this occurs not only at migrants’ destinations, but also in their place of origin, and the place of return (Erel, 2016).

Women’s roles in migrant families are the effects of women’s employment outside the house (Kosack, 1976; Munscher, 1984; El-Sakka & McNabb, 1999). Through

employment, women gain financial independence and therefore decision-making influence within their families. Likewise, some authors have shown that migration leads to women's emancipation (Lutz, 2010; Monforte & Dufour, 2013; Vullnetari, 2012). Contrary to this view, but within the same perspective, is that emancipation is not viable because migrant women have a minority status (Van Bergen, 2009). The absence of emancipation is evident among return migrant women as well as they implement old models of manners after return (Abadan-Unat, 1977). The list of factors supporting this behavior is the lack of employment and social norms in the country of origin regarding women's employment. For all that, "whilst emancipation has been the case for some women, emigration has reinforced 'traditional' gender roles for others" (Vullnetari, 2012, p.8).

Several analyses help to understand the embeddedness of gender and migration in the case of Albania, but few of them focus on the return-gendered experiences of female migrants. An analysis of the self-employment activity of return migrants from Bosnia, Bulgaria, Georgia, Romania, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan found out that entrepreneurship is a predominantly male activity (Lianos & Psieridis, 2009; Spitzer, 2016). Demurger and Xu (2011) also revealed that men are more likely to be self-employed than women in China. However, the role of gender in making possible or limiting access to entrepreneurial activities varies across countries and cultures.

In the studies of women's entrepreneurship in Albania, Albanian women entrepreneurs face many challenges (Beqo & Gehrels, 2014; Danaj, 2019; Heyn, 1995). The difficulties include discrimination against women during the process of establishing

a venture; problems when getting bank loans; and bureaucracy difficulties. Gender influences the process of opening a new business, putting women in a difficult set of affairs not only in informal spheres but also in state institutions, whose laws and policies supposedly encourage gender equality (Danaj, 2019).

Theorizing Return Migration

A theory of return migration should be reasonably part of a more wide-ranging theory of migration. Cassarino's influential 2004 study remains the principal proclamation on theorizing return migration. Some theoretical models, such as neoclassical economics and the new economics of labor migration, analyze the economic aspects of return migration at the individual and family levels. Other models explore aspects of macro and micro return migration (e.g., transnationalism, structuralism, and the theory of social networks). Potential theoretical models to be applied in this study are discussed briefly.

Neoclassical Economics and the New Economics of Labor Migration

International migration is related to the concept of wages between receiving and sending areas such as a migrant's prospects to gain more earnings in host countries. According to Cassarino (2004), the neoclassical model of return migration seems to be seen as the consequence of a failed migration experience in terms of employment and financial gain. Therefore, based on a neo-classical approach, return migration includes those migrants who wrongly estimated the costs of migration and who did not profit from higher earnings. Return happens as a result of their failed experiences in host countries or

because the outcome of their work was not rewarded as assumed. According to the theory of new economics of labor migration, return represents a logical result because immigrants achieve goals related to the migration plan. However, Cassarino (2004) draws attention to limitations of this approach, among which is the lack of analysis of the personal motives of returnees that may not necessarily be associated with economic well-being. Return motives may be affected by social, economic, and political factors in the host country and the country of origin.

The neoclassical economics and new economics of labor migration approaches vary as they conceive different points of explanation concerning return migration. Once neo-classical economists indicated that people make long-term plans to move and increase their wages in host countries, return migration is considered a failure. While new economics of labor migration argue that people make short-term plans to move and to accomplish their intentions in host countries, as a premise to return, return migration is considered an achievement. At the time such requirements are accomplished, return migration happens (Stark, 1996). Despite different explanations of return migration, both theoretical models provide useful contributions concerning the reasons that people move to another country and return to their countries of origin.

Finally, several studies have persuasively founded that the success or failure pattern cannot completely clarify the return migration phenomenon. Return is not only considered a personal concern but above all, it is considered a social issue, influenced by many factors.

The Structural Approach to Return Migration

Several theoretical and empirical findings have had a great contribution to improving the structural approach to return migration. This approach goes beyond the neoclassical and the new economy of labor migration model since it examines the return by taking into account the individual perspective of the returnees as well as social and institutional factors in the country of origin. Similar to economic perspectives, the structural approach to return migration displays how important are the financial and economic resources brought back to sending countries (Cassarino, 2004). Cassarino, referring to Cerase (1974), argues that the failure or success of returnees is analyzed by linking reality in the country of origin to the expectations of returnees.

Cerase (1974) classifies four different types of returnee, such as the *return of failure* that belongs to those migrants who could not integrate into their receiving societies facing prejudices and stereotypes. Their obstacles in participating actively or adapting adequately in the host countries were the crucial factors to motivate their return. *Return of conservatism* refers to returnees who made short-term plans to move, get enough income, and return home again. Based on these goals and strategies, the only aim of the conservative returnees leads to satisfy their personal needs, as well as those of their family members. *Return of retirement* involves retired migrants who have migrated and decide to return home and to get a piece of land and/or home to spend their old age. *Return of innovation* is another category of returnees, probably the most active category. It includes those individuals who acquired skills gained from migratory experiences and want to use them in their home countries.

Finally, some returnees do not succeed because they have been abroad for too long outside the traditional ways of thinking in their societies. They become disconnected from social relationships. In other words, migrants when abroad fail to maintain meaningful relations with their home countries.

Transnationalism and Return Migration

Transnationalism represents an attempt to formulate a theoretical and conceptual framework to better understand the links between the social and economic strengths of the host countries and the countries of origin in case of return migration (Cassarino, 2004).

According to transnationalism, the return is a link to the circulatory system of social and economic relations, as well as migratory exchanges with the country of origin to facilitate the reintegration of return. Thus, the return is prepared by periodic visits to the country of origin, and migrants are more in need of readjustment than for re-establishment in the country of origin (Portes, 1999). In other words, this view interprets how significant can be on the identities of returnees. Cassarino (2004) argues that the return occurs only when enough resources are collected and when the conditions in the country of origin are perceived as favorable. Yet, it is easily understood that this theory is appropriate for voluntary return, during which the returnee has time and possibilities to prepare the return. According to transnationalism, the migration story does not end as structuralists and the new economics of labor migration claim, but the migration cycle continues. They keep strong relations with their home countries and regularly send remittances to their family.

In the sphere of migration, the theoretical structure is based on two consistent areas of study: transnational identities and transnational mobility (Cassarino, 2004). Transnational identity has to do with the blended origin of migrants and with the identity they obtain in their receiving countries. Unlike the structuralists, who choose to argue about adjustment, transnationalism identifies the call for adaptation when they are back home. The process of adaptation for transnationalism does not require leaving behind the identities obtained in their host countries. Indeed, transnationalism points out not only the retention of strong connections among migrants and their families left behind but at the same time how migrants experience relationships with one another of their familiar ethnic origins. While transnationalism appears to accept that migrant transnationalism is not determined by ideological causes but by the reason of global capitalism (Portes, 2001), others, on the other hand, argue that transnational communities can possess considerable political, economic, and social control (Al-Ali & Koser, 2002).

Regardless of these important approaches, it is not easy to understand how the retention of strong connections with their migrant groups in the host countries permits the returnees to handle better the traditional social pressures that describe their societies of origin.

Social Network Theory and Return Migration

Same as the transnational approach, social network theorists present return migrants as being the holder of substantial and insubstantial supplies. It appears fundamental to study return migration with continuous reference to these components. Social network theorists also see returnees as migrants who keep strong connections with

their previous locations of settlement. Their resources are necessary to assure return home derives from the returnees' previous experiences of migration. Furthermore, the validity of these resources would appear to lie in the social capital which returnees gained before migrating.

Moreover, previous financial and social resources, which are guaranteed by the households, can frame the performance of returnees. Social capital belongs to the resources from which the return migrants may gain. Logically, the social capital and the possible participation of returnees in cross-border social networks may be seen as resources that fulfill and frame one another.

Essentially, economic refugees should be viewed as social actors who may get ways to guarantee their return to their countries of origin, and take place in the vigorous nature of cross-border networks. The involvement of return migrants in the social networks comprises frameworks of social relations that may have a collective basis.

Social network theory expresses two levels of study. Firstly, in the words of Cassarino (2004), "return migrants are seen as social actors who are involved in a set of relational ramifications" (p.15). By investigating the performance of network attachment, other concepts of investigation may emphasize the diversity of participations of these actors, likewise the sorts of organization that is significant in their behaviors. Secondly, again quoting Cassarino (1974), "different network structures offer different opportunities in a given context and different orientations and strategies. It may be from this perspective that actors derive their interests and that, at the same time, networks persist" (p.16).

To conclude, the earlier relative investigation of the theories of return migration predominantly lies on the economic motivations for return, and on the necessity to contextualize return, in a purposeful approach. Since there exist many push and pull factors that lead to international migration, there also exist many micro and macro factors that encourage return under particular conditions.

In the reflection of all these theories, successful return migration consists of three main parts: voluntary return, the act of return, and the reintegration in the country of origin. Each of these parts has an impact on the other and all are needed to determine whether the return will be successful or not. The concept of reintegration is inseparably linked to the concept of return migration; therefore any attempt to analyze reintegration should be an attempt to analyze firstly the context of return migration. All actors are interested in the successful reintegration of returnees from economic, social, and cultural perspectives. This study further advances the approach of migration theories by applying theoretical analysis to the Albanian context.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES

This dissertation is categorized as a grounded theory study but following a philosophical paradigm, it deviates from the primary tenets of classical Grounded Theory. It follows Constructivist Grounded Theory, based on the philosophical positioning of pragmatist ontology and constructivist epistemology, as well as by relativism and symbolic interactionism. Constructivist Grounded theory research is the most appropriate methodological approach to answer to the research questions of this study.

Grounded Theory (GT)

The roots of grounded theory took place in the 1960s when sociologists Glaser and Strauss published their research book entitled *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Charmaz, 2000; Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Through their work, they crafted a groundbreaking approach that allowed the social scientists to generate a substantive theory within empirical data without prior hypotheses.

At that point in time, the main research paradigm that presided over other paradigms was positivism, data deduced from theories after using quantitative experimental research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The goal of Glaser and Strauss (1967) was to help researchers to discover a theory that would fit the data and would work in the real world without being necessary to test actual theories.

Glaser and Strauss (1967) provide an initial definition of grounded theory. They state that it is a theory that "... will fit the situation being researched and work when put

into use. By fit we mean that the categories must be readily (not forcibly) applicable to and indicated by the data under study; by work we mean that they must be meaningfully relevant and be able to explain the behavior under study” (p.3).

Furthermore, grounded theory research offered a structured, potent, and reliable research design with the aim to explore open-ended research questions about individual experiences and social processes (Glaser, 1998; Stern, 2013). Up to that time, the prevailing influence of positivist approach made many qualitative researchers believe that their research was “impressionistic, anecdotal, unsystematic, and biased” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 1076). Hence, GT as a useful method, offered practical techniques to analyze qualitative data systematically in order to generate theory about social processes and individual experiences. It came out at a moment when qualitative research methods were being accused for an absence of systematic processes.

It strives to generate theory after using the information and analyzing the data (Howell, 2012). After data collection are coded and categorized into themes and subthemes, other data are gathered until saturation occurs (Hood, 2007).

Grounded theory research has shifted from sociology including also a range of different disciplines. Since the creation of classic GT in 1967 by Glaser and Strauss, the method has evolved passing certain transformations. Glaser and Strauss were two American sociologists whose their philosophical backgrounds were quite contrasting, with Glaser following a positivist tradition of Columbia University and Strauss approaching the pragmatism and symbolic interactionism (Birks & Mills, 2015). Glaserian version preserved original GT with its objectivity supporting the notion that the

researcher is an unbiased and impartial observer that should stay away from the process of gathering and analyzing data (Glaser, 1978, 1992, 2007).

On the other hand, Strauss took on a new initiative, shifting the original form into a revised form that offers a relativist perspective, which means it accepts that there is not only one reality (Corbin & Strauss 2015; Strauss 1987).

Ultimately, GT passed transformations, developing from its original version into different versions presented by Strauss and Corbin, and lastly by Kathy Charmaz (Glaser, 2007; Charmaz, 2017).

The main motive that pushed the researcher to select grounded theory for this research study was because the dissertation purposed to construct a substantive theory about reintegration of returned women in Northern Albania. Furthermore, grounded theory research can be applied when there is lack of research studies about a specific topic in view of grounded theory's analytic and inductive form of study (Mohajan & Mohajan, 2022). The preliminary literature search could not find a well determined theoretical framework for reintegration of returned women in Northern Albania, thus there is a necessity to expand an explorative theory.

Another rationale for applying grounded theory in this study was its resilience and use of simultaneous data collection and data analysis, and it may be a repetitive process until the saturation occurs. These allow modifying and apprehending the flow of a subject as situations change throughout the study time (Charmaz, 2014). A flexible research approach was appropriate because both return migration and reintegration are dynamic to continuing changes in perceptions, socio-economic, cultural, and political influences. As

indicated previously, this study questioned what the socio-economic, cultural, and political changes which enable reintegration to become a part of return migration experience are providing additional support that grounded theory was a suitable methodological choice.

Confoundly, the construction of words ‘grounded theory’ makes mention of the methodology, research design, methods; or, used interchangeably (Bryant, 2017). Consequently, this study used grounded theory as the methodology and method, with additional clarification about the particular grounded theory approach applied within the research design.

Besides the traditional grounded theorists such as Glaser and Strauss, the newest version of grounded theory (constructivist), situational analysis and individual experiences were analyzed based on the researcher’s philosophical positioning. Therefore, the researcher selected a constructivist grounded theory design.

Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT)

This theory is introduced by Kathy Charmaz. It clearly expressed philosophical positioning of ontological pragmatism and relativism along with impact of constructivism and symbolic interactionism. The significant points related to Constructivist Grounded Theory are as follows:

- Resembles to Straussian version of GT (interpretivist) but accentuates more on constructivism and the subjective role the researcher has in co-constructing understandings with the participants.

- Intends to build a new theory or further modify an existing theory with the aim to explore experiences and different situations.
- Flexible with data gathering and data analysis procedure and the general approach is a wide ranging process of an inductive approach.

The present study is conducted by grounded theory methodology to explore and understand the migration and return migration experiences of women returned in Shkoder, Albania. Selected as the principal approach, constructivist grounded theory justified the researcher's philosophical stance. CGT allows providing changes and additions because of its flexibility process. Also, one common characteristic of grounded theory is the active interaction of data gathering and analysis letting themes and categories to appear naturally from the observed data (Mohajan & Mohajan, 2022). This characteristic of grounded theory is particularly functional for the present study because of the type of the research questions – exploring how participants experienced migration, return migration, and percept the meaning of their reintegration after return through a bottom-up methodological approach.

To gain a profound and diversified meaning of reintegration experience through the lens of participants, it is essential to participate in open conversations and to permit participants to just tell their experiences and proclaim their personal stories. This approach contributes to explore what is significant for respondents, and to direct the researcher to follow the traces introduced by the participants. As such, the individuals understanding come into view from their perspective, rather than from researcher forcing an intentional framework of ideas.

Constructivist approach by Charmaz was criticized by some authors for not being an original grounded theory process because of its divergences with the traditional version. In the standpoint of Glaser (2007), the constructivist approach generated ‘descriptive theory’ by conducting qualitative data analysis and exploring an ‘explanatory theory’ was feasible only through the original version of grounded theory. By approaching a relativist epistemological standpoint through constructivism, the researcher focused to co-construct understanding, instead of discovering a theory. As such, the researcher aimed to build an explanatory theory in order to ‘explain’, and not just ‘describe’ the notion of reintegration meant to women returned from the West, as well as the influencing socio-economic and cultural changes.

Nathaniel et al. (2014) certified grounded theory methodology appealing to more than one principle by proclaiming “variation should be encouraged, so long as the differences are made clear” (p.59). They accepted that a constructivist approach offers more than simply describe data as a result of upper degree of forming an idea in contrast to qualitative data analysis. Additionally, Nathaniel et al. (2014) noticed: “It should also be clear that we reject any claim that constructivist grounded theory is not grounded theory” (p. 59).

Philosophical Perspective

Pragmatist Ontology

The word ontology originates from the Latin word ‘ontologia’ and from the Ancient Greek. Ontology is defined by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary as “a particular theory about the nature of being or the kinds of things that have existence”.

In research, ontology refers to the researcher's beliefs about the nature of reality. Regarding philosophical perspective, it refers to the study of our existence and the essential nature of reality or being. Beliefs about what is real determine what can be known about reality.

Pragmatism was central to the philosophy of the University of Chicago, Department of Sociology. This philosophy created and expanded by Pierce and Dewey, highlighted doing what works, in lieu of sustaining to theoretical or philosophical principles (Locke, 2007; Strübing, 2007). "Pragmatism is a philosophical movement that ... claims that an ideology or proposition is true if it works satisfactorily, that the meaning of a proposition is to be found in the practical consequences of accepting it, and that unpractical ideas are to be rejected" (Obirek, 2016, p.146). Based on pragmatism, there is no surety, truth is provisional and reality changes based on multiple perspectives (Kaushik & Valsh, 2019). These elements will be discussed in harmony with the researcher's way of looking at reintegration of returned women because from the researcher's point of view there is no absolute true definition of reintegration. Instead, the meaning of a good reintegration, as influenced by circumstances, can be constructed between the researcher and the participants. Further important features of pragmatism include the researcher being seen as a subject who provides empirical material from experimental interventions, and presents hypotheses according to the consequences that her actions would have. Thus, research questions should aim to solve concrete problems.

Scientific and philosophical thought no longer aims to know metaphysical truths, but to generate the necessary tools so that we can use what surrounds us and adapt to it

according to what is considered appropriate. Pragmatism suggests that the primary task of philosophy and science should be to generate practical and useful knowledge (Bryant, 2017). These components of pragmatism adjust well to the researcher's aim to create a theory about reintegration being part of the 'practice'.

Constructivist epistemology

Epistemology delves into the relationship between knowledge and the researcher in a study examination. It, therefore, refers to how we reached the conclusion to know what we know. A person's ontological beliefs will dictate how objective the affiliation between the researcher and what can be known is.

The researcher's constructivist epistemological position provides for a qualitative study reinforced by the assumption that all individuals, including researchers, construct the realities around them (Charmaz et al., 2018). Constructivist approach "starts with the experience and asks how members construct it" (Charmaz, 2014, p.342). This type of research thus includes the researcher constructing understanding of the study's topics with respondents. Constructivism as a philosophical approach states that people build their meaning and knowledge of the world through experiencing things and reflecting on these experiences (Charmaz et al., 2018).

Relativism

Relativism is a philosophical perspective that asserts that all viewpoints are equally valid, as such, it denies the concept of absolute truth and considers reality as personal and relative depending on the perception of each individual (Hugly & Sayward, 1987; Taylor, 1978). Thus, how a good reintegration is defined by one woman may be

different compared to the understanding of a good reintegration for another. In addition, reintegration issue for one woman may be affected by the present circumstances with different concerns flowing in other moments of time for that woman. Additionally, the complex needs of women are multi-faceted and may involve a number of diverse conditions such as the woman's physiological and psychological condition, influence of culture, and past experiences at host country (Lietaert, 2021). The researcher has taken a relativist position to grab the chance of multiple perspectives for how women assume reintegration at their home country.

Symbolic Interactionism

Constructivism releases from symbolic interactionism, a philosophical stream which “focuses on dynamic relationships between meaning and actions, it addresses the active processes through which people create and mediate meanings” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 345). Having its source in symbolic interactionism, constructivism is a suitable epistemology to conduct both research questions in view of the spotlight on active processes and the understanding created from social interaction (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2013).

One of the main propositions of symbolic interactionism is that identity is constructed primarily through interaction, which is always symbolic, that is, always means something. In other words, individual identity is always in relation to the meanings that circulate in a social group; it depends on the situation and the places each individual occupies in that group (Serpe & Stryker, 2011). In symbolic interactionism, the nature of reality is dynamic, not static. The individual is constructed through the

meanings that circulate as they interact with other individuals. The “self” constantly changes as the individual interprets meanings through social interactions, takes actions, and evaluates the consequences (Oktay, 2012).

Grounded theory is rooted in symbolic interactionism, wherein the researcher attempts to determine what symbolic meanings, artifacts, clothing, gestures and words have for groups of people as they interact with one another. Symbolic interactionists affirm that participants construct their realities from the symbols around them through interaction; therefore respondents are active participants in producing meaning in a situation (Morse & Field, 1995). Grounded theory both describes and explains the system or behavior under study and consequently is a methodology for creating theory through systematic data collection and analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Therefore, grounded theorists search for social dynamics present in human interaction (Hutchinson, 1993). They aspire to reveal principles and methods how a group of people describe, through their social interactions, their reality (Cutcliffe, 2000).

To conclude, Chapter three introduced a methodological guide of the research, launching with the researcher’s philosophical viewpoint of a pragmatist ontology and constructivist epistemology and ongoing with a pursuit of the impacting roles of relativism and symbolic interactionism. Constructivist grounded theory was considered as the proper methodology to address the research questions. The following Chapter will describe in a specific way the methods, techniques, and tools applied for this study certifying that data creation and analysis remained in harmony with the research methodology during the study.

CHAPTER FOUR

METHODS

The overarching goal is to understand the reintegration of women return migrants from the West. More specific information is sought to understand how the migration and return migration experience affect the reintegration process through a qualitative approach to answer two questions: Upon return, what are the perceptions of women migrants' experiences before, during, and after migration? What are perceptions of how reintegration might be improved?

The qualitative method is widely used in social science research to explain the meaning of phenomena. The qualitative method is one of the most natural and functional approaches for researchers. Bryman (2008) emphasized that the way in which people study, understand, and interpret their social reality is one of the central motives of qualitative research. According to Berg (2001), qualitative research refers to meaning, concepts, symbols, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, and description of things. Accordingly, a qualitative approach will be used to collect and analyze the data in this study. Charmaz (2009) affirmed that the work undertaken by qualitative researchers has advantages over quantitative methods, since while gathering the data researchers can insert new information until later on, at the stage of analysis. Also in the same logical line, Mantzoukas (2004) recalled that the content of a qualitative research question should highlight an area or interest in a problem from the professional or personal experience of the researcher and where there is a lack of knowledge or contradictory and unexplored facts are observed. Finally, qualitative research in the field of migration and

return migration is necessary to enable the analysis of a dynamic that is always in motion and that is influenced by many factors.

This study used qualitative in-depth interviewing, which enabled the researcher to explain the relationships between various factors of the reintegration process, as well as returnees' own evaluation of their wellbeing. Additionally, the use of in-depth interviewing approach gives a better understanding of the topic by facilitating the researcher's data collection and analysis of how other factors such as context of return or gendered understanding have influenced returnees' experiences and wellbeing in the city of Shkodra.

In accordance with the purpose of the study, the two main research questions that guided this study are:

- (1) Upon return, what are the perceptions of women migrants of what they experienced before, during, and after migration?
- (2) What are the perceptions of how reintegration might be improved?

Field Work

The field work for this dissertation started in October of 2022 and extended to December 2022 in the city of Shkodra, an area of northwestern Albania. There exists considerable divergence in the socio-economic and cultural conditions of women in Albania based on their settings. Urban areas like Shkodra offer more chances for education and employment than rural areas, due to their socio-economic development. Accounting the high number of Albanian peasants leaving their villages to go and live in the Western countries, collecting data from outside Shkodra would have provided an

increased significance, but it was not possible based on the resources assigned to this research. Therefore, return migrants were located in Shkodra, even though three of the participants were from rural areas living in Shkodra. Furthermore, Shkodra is geographically located in the northern region of the country which has been less studied. Therefore, conducting research where few studies have been undertaken is an additional value of this study.

Sampling Strategy

For this study, face to face interview was considered as the most appropriate method. The research method used in the study was carefully selected in order to best serve the research questions of the study. The interview is one of the most resilient tools for data collection because it is used to present reality in the perceptions and attitudes of the participants (Barbour & Schostak, 2005). The interviews used in such research makes the study more flexible and dynamic. Related to in-depth interview, a research tool used in the present study, Gubrium and Holstein (2002) highlighted that, “unlike the structured interview, this kind of interviewing is an open situation through which a greater flexibility and freedom is offered to both sides (i.e. interviewers and interviewees), in terms of planning, implementing and organizing the interview content and questions” (p. 35).

Face-to-face meetings help the interviewers and interviewees understand the importance of the study by expressing their experience of the situation (Ryan et al., 2009). The interviewer manages to understand through his/her manner expressing the

interviewee even more clearly (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Face-to-face interviews were conducted to explore the importance of the context of events and problems.

The ‘recruitment’ of women returned migrants was challenging as they might be considered as a hard-to-reach population. As stated by Atkinson and Flint (2001) ‘hard to reach population’ is intended the population that is hard to find and has an atypical or stigmatized position. Even if not the case of stigmatization, return migrants do signify a particular part of the population that can be hard to locate as they may be scattered in various clusters within the overall population. Consequently, the easiest feasible technique for sampling was snowball sampling. Snowball sampling comprises one of the most prevalent methods of sampling in qualitative research (Parker et al., 2019). The researcher, in snowball sampling, is essentially introduced with a small number of initial contacts who are asked to become participants of the research. The available participants are then invited for referrals to find new members “to recruit”, who then in turn suggest other possible members, and so forth. “Researchers, therefore, use their social networks to establish initial links, with sampling momentum developing from these, capturing an increasing chain of participants” (Parker et al., 2019, p. 3). When the saturation point has been reached, sampling is usually per se closed. While every returnee’s life narrative shared with the researcher was unique, without doubt that when she completed the data collection she was at a point where similar issues were being raised by various participants.

An important drawback to the snowball sampling approach is that the “researcher relinquishes a considerable amount of control over the sampling phase to the informants”

(Noy, 2008, p. 332). For example, some referrals did not qualify—in one instance a second-generation returnee or returnees who had migrated in Latin America did not fit the sampling criteria. In addition, at times it was difficult to encourage the participants to refer more participants. A final note regarding snowball sampling is that those who are willing to share informants with the researcher are members in social networks (Noy, 2008). This is important to note for the analysis, wherein social networks are one of the elements of the reintegration strategy. Not all participants referred further participants for interviews, which could also be an indicator of their social networks, but was not included in the analysis as referrals were voluntary. However, being able to make referrals indicates that the respondent is involved in a social network inclusive of other returnees.

To broaden the researcher's knowledge on the issue, the researcher gathered informal data by participating in the returnees NGOs' activities (workshops and training programs), searching media sources on the relevant topic, and small talks with local members about their perspective of returnees.

Finding female returnees was not as easy as finding male returnees. The researcher was faced with two main challenges: (1) the women returnees were less in number in the community, and, (2) some of the recruiting women were skeptical about the interview, thus hesitating to participate in the research. Later, while conducting interviews, there was reluctance to participate in the study related to concerns of being identified as a 'failed returnee.' An indicator of success is the economic wealth that migrants were able to accumulate while in the West, so for those who were unable to

accumulate such wealth, they preferred to be unnoticed. Additionally, people who were deported also wanted to keep a low profile to avoid being exposed to public judgment. Lastly, the lack of acknowledgement of the relevance of the topic made people feel doubtful about the significance of the research and the importance of their participation in the study. However, to overcome these challenges, the first interviewees more easily introduced other returnees from their community. The constructive communication and building trust with the women met at the beginning helped to create a positive relationship with the returnees who participated in the interview.

The number of participants was not presumed before the data collection, still conducted by data saturation (Guest et al., 2006). After acquainting herself with the situation, the researcher began to recruit participants for the study. On the whole, 19 Albanian women returnees living in Shkodra participated in the qualitative research.

The researcher used the techniques previously mentioned to locate return migrants while aiming for diversity among them. The only requirement for women returnees' to be interviewed was to have lived in the West for more than one consecutive year and be back in Albania for at least one full year, and to have been at least 18 years old at the time of migration. By using purposive sampling methods, the researcher tried to capture a varied set of respondents in terms of age, marital status, year of emigration, length of stay abroad, year of return, type of return, and length of stay back in Albania.

Data Collection

The Clemson University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the study prior to recruitment. Upon IRB approval, a total of 19 return migrants were interviewed,

all in the city of Shkodra. Without any exception, all interviews were held in one session. The average time of the interview was 60 minutes, but ranged from 40 minutes to up to one and a half hours. Before interviewing participants, the researcher provided each member of the study with a copy of the Informed Consent Form and orally highlighted the parts concerning purpose of the study, their voluntary participation in the interview, risks and discomforts, and possible benefits (Appendix A). Also at the beginning of the interview, study participants accomplished basic demographic information. All in-depth interviews were voice recorded with the consent of the respondents, but notes were taken as well in a printed interview schedule for each case. An average interview with a returnee started with an introduction of the research study and its objectives that were transmitted by reading through the information sheet (see Appendix A), followed by an explanation and signature of the consent form (see Appendix A). The researcher has highlighted the importance of exploring temporal dimensions in migration research as it has an impact on migrants' settlement experience and return considerations (Erdal & Ezzati, 2015). Therefore, utilizing a timeline, the researcher asked each participant to share all of her international migration experiences with the researcher. This was followed by a sequence of dates and destinations of their subsequent migration movements, ending with the date of their return and destination(s). As the researcher allowed space for each participant to narrate freely, sometimes people gave calendar years, others preferred to refer to the age they were when they migrated and others used specific life events to prompt their memories. These life events would often be mentioned later in their narrations as important experiences in their life trajectories. Typical

references would be made prior to their arrival to host countries after the communist regime.

The places where the returnees' interviews were conducted varied from one location to another. The majority of the interviews were conducted after working hours in public spaces such as restaurants and bar cafés, and some others were conducted at interviewees' work places. Rather than seeking statistically based generalisability, this study aimed to extract a detailed understanding of migrants' experiences of return based on their functional and subjective experiences related to their (re)integration processes. The researcher is confident that through the methodology established she has been able to generate that understanding.

Data Analysis

Analysis was conducted according to Charmaz's (2006) grounded theory research methods. Constructivist Grounded Theory highlights the customizing system, by which data is coded and categorized, in such a way that themes and subthemes emerge through research's perspective. Furthermore, continual comparative method is evident, whereby formerly data collected and consequent data are compared and adjusted into the developing categories. To this extent, coding terminology in CGT refers to an initial stage of open coding involving line-by-line coding of the data, a focused coding using the most significant primary codes to classify, combine, and categorize broadly data, and finally theoretical coding which emphasizes the relationships between the main themes and sub-themes emerging from focused coding.

During the first phase of open coding, as prescribed by grounded theory, each episode of interview was coded using gerunds so that the researcher generates codes that prioritize the behaviors and actions of participants in attributing understanding to their words. This process of examining carefully and assigning the data with codes grant the researcher the possibility to know what the data consists of and starts to reflect for other suggestions. According to Charmaz (2012), “something kina esthetic occurs when we are coding; we are mentally and physically active in the process” (p. 52).

The large amounts of initial codes were then exported to Microsoft Word for the following procedure that was more concentrated and organized. Initial coding progressed into focused coding once categories began to emerge. After the first round of coding, this phase of focused coding identified similar and various layer of meaning, and to define relationships between themes, sub-themes, and the specific topic. This could drive to a reconsideration of the main theme, reclassifying of excerpts, or a redirection of the general approach.

In a following sequence, theoretical coding has leaded the data analysis so as to incorporate, conceptualize, and identify potential interconnections between the categories emerged in the initial stage of coding. Whiles “initial coding fractures data into separate pieces and distinct codes” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 60), theoretical codes tend to unify and “weave the fractured story back together again” (Glaser, 1978, p. 72). In other words, “theoretical codes implicitly conceptualize how the substantive codes will relate to each other as interrelated multivariate hypotheses in accounting for resolving the main concern” (Glaser, 1998, p. 163). This stage of coding allows the researcher to engage the

data into a logical and complete process with appropriateness and tangibility, tell an analytic experience, and shift the experience in a theoretical direction.

Also, the analysis process involved memos to increase the research outcomes and to foster robust categories. Memoing is a procedure often attributed to the qualitative methodologies, but which is mostly attributed to Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2006). Memo writing was successfully employed by the researcher as a technical and analytical approach throughout the research method. The function of memo-writing was to informally record systematic notes about episodes that appeared during the data collection. As such, data examination is increased, permanence of ideas and reflection is enabled, and intercourse is relieved by using memos. Theoretical saturation occurred at the point when no additional properties of the conceptual categories emerge, and all data issues have been identified.

Sampling started purposively with women returned from the West in the city of Shkodra, but theoretical sensitivity was established during data analysis. Theoretical sensitivity is the central part of grounded theory research and it refers to the knowledge of significance in the data, developing the meanings of data in conceptual terms and enhancing our understanding of the data's structure (Charmaz, 2014). When the researcher increased her understanding of the main conceptions developing during data analysis, it was clear that a diversity of women returned reintegration issues within their migration and return migration experiences. Sampling then shifted from purposive to theoretical being a constant and continual process of drawing from the analysis of prior data to conduct decisions for how to progress with more data generation.

Ethical Considerations

In planning and carrying out this study, the researcher followed the University of Clemson 'Code of Practice of Research' (2022) and she made an effort to implement the principles of the 'Research Ethics Guidebook' based on: i) integrity and quality; ii) fully inform participants; iii) confidentiality and anonymity; iv) voluntary participation, free from coercion; v) avoiding harm and; vi) independence and impartiality of the researchers. In the following section, the researcher briefly elaborates on how she managed three key ethical issues: voluntary participation, informed consent, and confidentiality. She then reflects on her personal approach and positionality in this research.

Voluntary Participation, Informed Consent, and Confidentiality

In addition to identifying potential participants, the information sheet also became a way of introducing her research. In the information sheet, the objective of the research, the type of interview to be conducted and, most importantly, confidentiality were explained. After providing the initial introduction, the researcher asked if the participant was interested in participating and, if so, she collected their contact details in order to call them at a later date and set up an appointment for the interview.

In relation to participants' consent, as the use of the written 'consent form' proved not to be problematic during the pilot interviews, it was utilized prior to every interview in both sites. As described earlier, after reviewing the information sheet the participant would have time to review and sign the consent form. This consent form explained that participants could withdraw from the study at any time and if so, all information provided

would be destroyed and removed from the project; that the information provided would only be used for the purpose of academic research and its dissemination products; that particulars and names mentioned by participants would be changed in those cases when it was requested. None of the participants requested the change of their names. By the end of the procedure, the participant retained a form that the researcher had signed which stated the agreements established, as well as her contact details in case there were further questions or concerns, and she maintained the signed consent form of the participant that was attached to each participant's interview schedule.

The participants were noticed for not getting any financial stimulus for joining in the study to save the integrity of data. Participants did not get any payment, other than for coffee or snacks.

During the interviews, some women became very emotional, even crying while telling their return migration experience and in other cases about their life at home country prior to migration. In all cases, continuing consent was asked and respondents were requested if either they wanted to continue with the interview or to pause or stop it. Surprisingly, for many of the women it was essential to share their stories on behalf of other migrants who are thinking to return to Albania. The respondents experienced a feeling of relief while telling their bad experiences in their country of origin. In fact, some told to the researcher that they did not mention these evocations even to their relatives and were content to share their stories to help in this study.

The transcription of audio-taped interviews was conducted by the researcher. The researcher also translated transcribed documents from Albanian to English. As a whole,

ethics standards for applying qualitative research were implemented as a way to protect the rights of participants and fulfill the purpose of the study.

CHAPTER FIVE

RESULTS

This chapter undertakes an in-depth analysis of women's stories prior, during, and after migration. First, demographic and socio-economic backgrounds of Albanian return migrant women are provided. Next, the results are broken down into three sections related to: (a) life prior to migration, (b) the experience of being in a new country (migration), and (c) the return migration experience. Within each section, major themes and sub-themes are identified with accompanying supportive quotations.

Demographics

From Shkodra, Albania, 19 women between the ages 20 to 63 years old were interviewed. Five women had migrated to Greece, four to the United States, three to Italy, three to Canada, and two each to Denmark and Germany (See Table 1.1).

Whereas the majority of participants migrated to only one country, there were three women who migrated to more than one Western country. For example Ardisa (27) stayed five years in Denmark and three years in Sweden, Nurije (63) spent four years in Germany and twenty years in Canada, and Valbona (54) experienced four years in Italy and more than twenty years in the United States.

The household composition of the 19 women included three married women with three children, ten married women with two children, three married women with one child, one married woman with no children, and two divorced women who had one and two children respectively. Among, those who were married, it was more common for

women to migrate with their husbands prior to having children or having only one child and later giving birth to other children.

Regarding the level of education prior to migration or gained abroad after migration, seven women held a Master's degree, seven others had a Bachelor degree, and five finished only high school. The vast majority of research participants had only very basic levels of English language upon their departure which was often needed.

Current employment included five women employed for wages in the public sector, four of them employed for wages in the private sector, seven others as homemakers (not working, out of work, unable to work), two were self-employed, one was a student taking a training course, and one of the women was employed for wages at the public sector but at the same time was self employed, having her own business.

Time spent abroad varied from more than one year to twenty-eight years. The time spent in Shkodra after return varied from one year to twenty years.

From 19 interviewees, only two experienced a forced return migration, all the others returned voluntarily. Another category of women are those who decided to return voluntarily, but considered the return as "forced" to return. For example Blerta (49) mentioned the health issues of her husband as the main reason of returning even though they were integrating well in the first year.

"The life was good but we never imagined that my husband would face a health issue because of the weather in Canada. We were sorry because everything was going good, our daughters were learning English. I was also accepted in the university and I got the academic level of the language. So we were "forced" to return voluntarily. The climate in Canada was not appropriate for his illness (allergy). We couldn't make a pact with the illness, so we

did not think twice but we bought the ticket for return.”
(2003-2022)

Table 1.1 *Socio-demographic Characteristics of Participants*

Name	Age	Household composition	Education	Employment status	Country of migration(s)	Years spent abroad	Years spent in Albania after migration	Type of return migration
Alma	45	Married (1 child)	Master	Employed for wages (public)	USA	2 years (2019-2021)	1 year (2021-2022)	Voluntary
Amila	48	Divorced (2 children)	Master	Employed for wages (public)	Italy	21 years (1995-2016)	6 years (2016-2022)	Voluntary
Ardisa	27	Married (2 children)	Bachelor	Employed for wages (public)	Denmark (5)/ Sweden (3)	8 years (2013-2021)	1 year (2021-2022)	Voluntary
Ardita	59	Married (2 children)	Bachelor	Homemaker	Germany	8 years (2013-2021)	1 year (2021-2022)	Voluntary
Blerta	49	Married (3 children)	Bachelor	Self-employed & Employed for wages (public)	Canada	1 year (2002-2003)	19 years (2003-2022)	Voluntary
Blerta S.	39	Married (2 children)	Master	Employed for wages (public)	Italy	2 years (2019-2021)	1 year (2021-2022)	Voluntary
Celstina	36	Married (2 children)	Master	Homemaker	USA	4 years (2016-2020)	2 years (2020-2022)	Voluntary
Ermira	42	Divorced (1 child)	High School	Employed for wages (private)	Greece	16 years (1998-2014)	8 years (2014-2022)	Voluntary
Estela	44	Married (2 children)	Master	Self employed	Greece	12 years (1998-2010)	12 years (2010-2022)	Voluntary
Fatjola	38	Married (3 children)	Bachelor	Employed for wages (private)	Greece	7 years (2005-2012)	10 years (2012-2022)	Voluntary
Linda	54	Married (2 children)	Bachelor	Out of work	Canada	7 years (2000-2007)	15 years (2007-2022)	Voluntary
Lindita	44	Married (3 children)	High School	Out of work	Germany	2 years (2013-2015)	7 years (2015-2022)	Forced

Mirjam	45	Married (2 children)	Bachelor	Employed for wages (public)	Greece	2 years (2000-2002)	20 years (2002-2022)	Forced
Nora	51	Married (1 child)	Bachelor	Employed for wages (private)	Italy	23 years (1990-2013)	9 years (2013-2022)	Voluntary
Norga	30	Married (1 child)	Master	Employed for wages (private)	Denmark	3 years (2017-2020)	2 years (2020-2022)	Voluntary
Nurije	63	Married (2 children)	High School	Unable to work	Germany (5)/ Canada (20)	25 years (1995-2020)	2 years (2020-2022)	Voluntary
Samela	20	Married	High School	Student	Greece	1 year (2020-2021)	1 year (2021-2022)	Voluntary
Silvana	38	Married (2 children)	Bachelor	Self-employed	USA	7 years (2009-2016)	6 years (2016-2022)	Voluntary
Valbona	54	Married (2 children)	Master	Not working	Italy (4) / USA (24)	28 years (1991-2019)	3 years (2019-2022)	Voluntary

Life Prior to Migration: Why leave?

This section describes life before migration and how the ultimate decision to migrate was made with some women more pushed to leave, while others were more pulled to leave.

Women were asked about their life prior to migration to understand if the difficulties of their life influenced their decision to migrate for a better life. The women's answers were categorized into two groups: those who were considered to have had a "normal" to a good life and migration happened for other reasons, and those who had a difficult life and migrated because of political instability and/or bad economic conditions.

Recollecting life prior to migration, a significant number of women interviewees (14) explicitly or implicitly affirmed a 'just normal' or a good life. The narratives of the interviewees in this category centered on memories of families and everyday's working.

Life in Albania was described as difficult, yet it was viewed very positively if they had a good economy and family and close friends. Working, in the broader sense, was depicted as both a survival necessity and a central source of happiness. Social life, meanwhile, was almost completely absent from these stories. When directly asked, interviewees implicated that the ‘social sphere’ was completely irrelevant for them, and then continued to present their daily routine.

“... we did not have a social life. I mean my life has been around work and family. It has been a demanding life without having the possibility to go out with friends, frequenting the theater or cinema, or even to take a walk for fun. After work I had to be at home to do housework, to take care of children, and sometimes to do private jobs to earn more money. When I laid down to sleep my whole body hurt. Now imagine what kind of social life could I have? But I was happy because I was working a lot and earning money and I didn’t care for a social life. I did not have time even to think about it” (Lindita, 44)

According to 11 out of 19 women, the most important factors to their living a good life included; jobs, housing, education, and feeling spiritually good through family, friends, and/or sentimental relationships. For almost half of the interviewees, having a good job would bring a good economy and consequently would lead to a better life. For six of the nineteen women who claimed that having a good job is related to a good and a quiet life, searching for a better job was not among the reasons to take the path of migration.

“My life prior to migration has been much quiet. My husband has worked, my sons have worked. We had our own house, reconstructing it in fact. It has been a normal life, of course not a luxury one but we were living a good life economically” (Ardita, 59)

Moreover, Amila (45) claimed that living with parents who held a good position in society, made her life easier and better.

“My life has been very good; I passed beautiful years in Shkodra because I was young as I left Albania 18 years old. I have been living with my parents and we had a good life because my parents were in a high position (socially and economically).”

The other interviewees also highlighted that migration did not happen for economic reason.

“In 1989 I finished university and in 1991 I received the appointment to work as a primary school teacher. At first I worked in remote villages for 6 months, later I started to work as a teacher in city schools. We had very good economy and I and my husband had very good position in our city, so migration didn't happen for economic reason.”
(Linda, 54)

“I have been living a normal life, I have finished university. Later I worked as an English teacher. I have been engaged and later I got married. We had a quiet life with a good economy. We didn't migrate for economic reason.”
(Silvana, 38)

Another side of the story includes the period of communism that despite difficulties, Valbona (54) remembers having a good life and passing a quiet childhood. Her parents and her first teacher were a great instrumental to hide all sufferings from her life and making her feels a happy child.

“I come from an intellectual family but a persecuted one from communism. I have been a happy kid because my family chose not to tell me about their sufferings during communist regime. I think this has been a right decision not to show their sufferings. My parents have been teachers and they started to instill me the books prior to entering the school... I remember my first grade teacher, called Violeta

Ashiku, a very adorable teacher. She made me think that the world is wonderful.”

The 19 participants in this study described the close-knit nature of the Albanian family as the most important thing in life and the main source of help and support for coping with various problems, including work issues. Participants frequently referred to ideas such as “close family ties,” “sacrifices for one another,” and “family obligations.” These family bonds and obligations were described as so strong that family members were reportedly willing to make sacrifices, such as deciding to give up from education in order to work for the sake of family.

“Many of my friends entered in the university but I couldn’t because my familial situation was not in my favor. My brother was getting married; I was the youngest child in the family so the economic conditions of my family were not very good. I was “forced” to work. I cannot consider forced in fact because it was my decision, to work to help my family. Therefore I entered in a job, in an office to print documents. Even though I was working, I have always been thinking to enter to the university. After a while, I applied to enter the competition but at the same time I got engaged, an arranged one. I was engaged 20 years old. My parents proposed me the guy that later became my husband and I approved their decision because I liked him. I didn’t take part in the competition because I was ashamed to tell my husband that I want to enter in the university. It happened because of the mentality that probably he would say that she wants to enter in the university now that she got engaged.” (Mirjam, 45)

Similarly, Blerta (39) pointed out that familial relationships and having a good economy were factors to consider a satisfied life.

“Thanks to God my life has been very good and very quiet. Our familial relationship has been quite good, economic conditions have been really good. Our daughters are grown up in harmony and in welfare.”

As some of the interviewed women mentioned education as a significant component for a good life, a high percentage of women interviewees had at least a university degree and according to these women, the education itself would lead to a good job that will create an entirely good life.

“I have been lucky because after I finished the university I entered directly to work in a charity. The job in the charity has opened me many doors, it has been a really good reference. I have worked with foreigners; I have moved a lot abroad and gave me another work culture. I have worked in this charity for about 10 years but also I have been working as a school psychologist, as an assistant professor and as a psychologist in the court. I really thank my parents for pushing me to get a good education that later helped me to find the good job I was working for.”
(Celstina, 36)

For those whose life has been difficult because of political instability and/or bad economic conditions, they expressed dissatisfaction with the life they had spent under communism, considering it a complicated life. Three of the interviewed women claimed that food intake was bad during communism and worsened after 1990. A significant number of respondents also felt that socio-economic conditions worsened during this period.

“To buy basic food, in communism you received a type of coupon called ‘tollon’. On a yellowed sheet, it was noted that x person, from the x neighborhood, could receive cheese, sausage or minced meat through this letter for a week. There were queues for milk; there was also a queue for kerosene. Situation was worse even after the fall of communism. In 1990s factories where we worked were closed. I didn’t know where to work and what to do.”
(Nora, 51)

Following this line of reasoning, as one of the interviewees belonged to a persecuted family, the section reflects on the repressive practices of the communist regime. The fact is that some of the interviewees were originally not negatively minded toward Albanian living, but dissociated themselves from it only after a specific moment or event.

“I want to tell a story from communism. I want to tell it because I have been a child and sometimes for children it might be traumatic. It wasn’t traumatic for me because I couldn’t understand anything but for other children it might have been. At the age of 6, I was deprived of the right to present the Children’s Festival in Shkoder. Nobody told me the truth that I was deprived because my family was non-communist but later, when I grew up I learnt the truth. Another story is when I was in the high school the children of the class chose me as class senator, but the secretary of the school party, who was also the father of one of my friends, said that I should not be chosen. There they made me think what is wrong with me. But later when Enver Hoxha died and the communism was diminished, people could talk freely and I could understand that my family was an anti-communist. I understood why we had been anti-communist because my father was part of the National Front who were undoubtedly the most educated people and of course I am proud for them.” (Valbona, 54)

In summary, most of the women were living acceptable lives when situations arose that would have the effect of pushing or pulling them to migrate.

Pushed to Migrate

Seven women interviewed in this study considered life in Albania as difficult, and the years 1990 and 1997 were the worst. The interviewees deplored both the political instability and great poverty, and their life stories suggest that they cultivated a strong

inner rejection of longing to live in their country of origin. The following analysis reviews the underlying causes behind this stance.

“I worked in knitting, my husband worked in a paper factory. During communism our life has been the same as others. In 1990 and 1991 the country passed a transition period, the fall of communism. It has been a difficult life as most of Albanian’s life. During communism we had a fixed salary; all the people had the same conditions, there was no competition between each other because we used to do the rate and to get the fixed salary. After 1990s the factories and our job was closed so we were not working and we couldn’t feed our children. We used to live in a house with only two rooms, one bedroom and the kitchen. My children didn’t have their own room to sleep. They were sleeping in the kitchen.” (Nurije, 63)

For some, life became more complex with the collapse of pyramid schemes in 1997 and the instability that followed.

“We are the generation that has gone through the big changes, a little from communism and a part from the transition of Albania. I was at an adult age and I could understand and saw everything. At 1990 I have been 12 years old so I remember the difficulties of that time. Even in 1997, Albania was in a political instability and we have experienced as all other Albanians the fear for future and having very limited educational opportunity. It was very risky to enter in the university, even in Tirana. But fortunately, Shkodra had a university and I had the possibility to study here. I think all Albanians were in fear for their life. The main reason we decided to migrate was only insecurity, not economic reasons because we were middle class, my husband has been working all the time. Albania was really in a crazy situation, we were afraid to go out. We were married but we couldn’t have a honeymoon. We heard that two married couples tried to go for honeymoon but the gangs robbed the bribes.” (Estela, 44)

“When we decided to leave the country, it was year 1998 when Shkodra was “burned” for the second time. At that

time I was married and I was a mother of two children. My daughters were one and two years old. The social changes that were happening in Albania were very scary, human rights were not being respected, and for a couple that was trying to work honestly and to build their life honestly was very difficult. That's why we chose to leave the country. The life in Albania was turbulent, 1997-1998. I had already finished the university and was employed as a part-time teacher. My husband had just starting to build his business. We were really scared when Shkodra was in a civil war for the second time from political unrest.” (Blerta, 49)

“My father passed away when I was 16 years old. My brother and his wife migrated in Greece. I was living only with my mother. During the transition years in Albania (1997-1998), my brother came back from Greece to pick me and my mother up to live together with him in Greece. I had already finished my high school in Albania and couldn't enter in the university because of the civil war in Albania during those years.” (Ermira, 42)

Pulled to Migrate

Like internal country factors pushing women to migrate, there were also external factors that pulled women to migrate. These included relationships, the desire to have a better life, health reasons or to get an education. Two women migrated as a result of winning the American lottery that dispensed Green Cards allowing Albanians entry to the United States.

Family relationships

Five women moved to host countries because of family-decision making. Three of the five women migrated (either legally or illegally) because they were married to Albanian men who were living abroad.

On the other hand, Ardita (59) claimed that her husband made the decision to leave.

“It was the decision of my husband for a better life and for our sons. It has been his dream to go to Germany. My husband has been in Germany when he was young. He stayed there a couple of years and then he returned because of illegal staying. He was impressed from the country and his dream during all the years in Albania has been to re-migrate again in Germany. He was always saying that Germany is the best country in Europe, a social state with adequate rules and laws. Even though at the beginning I didn’t agree, later I wanted to go too. My sons supported him in his idea and I followed them.” (2013-2021)

Valbona (54) migrated twice to two different countries. Her first migration occurred because of her fiancée. He initially wanted to migrate alone and later have Valbona joined him in Italy. She decided otherwise.

“After a year of engagement, my fiancée decided to migrate in Italy. He wanted to go alone and later to take me there. I said to him that I will come wherever you will be. In one day of the year 1991 my fiancé told me that he was prepared to leave Albania. My brain was blocked-out and that night I prepared my suitcase to leave to Italy. I didn’t notice anyone because I knew that if I would tell to my parents they won’t leave me to go.” (1990)

Better life

In total, four women mentioned seeking a “better life” as a factor in the decision to leave Albania with improved economics being significant.

For Valbona and her husband, they migrated for the second time from Italy to USA in search of a better life.

“We lived four years in Italy, from 1991-1995. The exit from communism had consequences for us because we were

completely ignorant of foreign cultures. We had a good education obtained in Albania and we were pretending to work as teachers or sport coach in Italy but on the contrary we were working only regular and unskilled jobs such as in factories or in construction. In Italy we were living in a village where few people had a diploma or working in good jobs. Therefore we decided to migrate to USA for a better life for us and our children.”

Health Issues

One woman mentioned better health care for her daughter as a deciding factor.

“The only reason we migrated has been because of my health conditions of my older daughter. My daughter had high temperature for some days and we sent her to a doctor here in Shkodra. He suggested us to do the blood analysis and according to the analysis she was diagnosed to have a blood infection. The doctors ... told us that within 2 or 3 weeks it will pass. But they had given a wrong diagnosis. I had a bad feeling and I sent my daughter to Italy initially only for 2-3 days. I wanted to take some better medicines for her and to return again to Shkodra. When the doctors in Italy visited my daughter, they diagnosed her with acute leukemia. My intention was to stay for 2 days but we stayed 2 years.” (Blerta S., 39, 2019-2021)

Education

Two of the respondents mentioned that the reason they migrated to the West was education.

“I have been an excellent student and my parents approved my decision to go and study in Italy. I have been studying in the University of Siena for Cultural Heritage. Firstly I wanted to study and then to return again to my country but later me and my fiancée (that later became my husband) decided to stay there. We got married and later our children were born. Therefore, in total I stayed in Italy (in Toscana region) for 21 years.” (Amila, 45, 1995-2016)

On the other hand, Celstina (36) received a fellowship that pulled her to stay longer in USA where she found a life partner. She narrated her migration life in a very detailed way.

“In 2014 I have been for the first time in USA. I received a fellowship from American State Department opened from the Embassy of USA in Albania... When I returned I said that I don’t want anything else just to go again in California.

...The second time I earned another program, again from the American State Department but this time it was for longer, for 18 months. By coincidence I was for the second time in California and not in another state. Even though there were two years in Albania after my first return, to go in California for the second time was easier... When I went for the second time in California I met my future husband... Based on his culture, he couldn’t accept for me to stay illegally there. Then, I changed my documents. It has been a challenge because I was in a program that after 18 months I was supposed to return to Albania and contribute for 2 years. But the American state gives also the legal space to apologize. I apologized through procedures so I was not obliged to come and live in Albania.” (2016-2020)

Other women affirmed also that they had temporary migration intentions but after a period of time they realized they wanted to stay longer.

“We didn’t intend to stay in Germany for a long time, just for temporary migration. We wanted to earn money and to come home and invest the money in Albania. But we spent five years in Germany and 20 more years in Canada” (Nuriye, 63, 1995-2020)

“When we moved to Greece we didn’t intend to live there permanently. We have been thinking that when the situation in Albania will improve, we will return soon. But we returned after 12 years we spent in Greece.” (Estela, 44, 1998-2010)

“Firstly I wanted to study and then to return again to my country but later me and my fiancée decided to stay there.

We created our family, our children were born. I could finish the university and later I was directly employed as a teacher of History of Arts.” (Amila, 45, 1995-2016)

American Lottery

The Green Card Lottery, known as the American Lottery, was introduced from President Reagan in the late 1980s (the official name is Diversity Visa Program). The only condition to win the American Lottery, apart from good luck, is having a high-school education level. Winners of the lottery are eligible for Green Card which gives them the right to live and work in USA and to grant all the rights of an American citizen. Furthermore after a specific period of time, the lucky winners can move toward US citizenship.

Two of the respondents stated that the American lottery was one of the reasons to consider migration even though that one of these respondents has not predicted she would win the lottery and was feeling confused about leaving Albania. As Alma (47) put it,

“(...) we applied for American lottery and we won it to go and live there. I have never thought we could win an American lottery. We applied for lottery only to have the possibility to give to our son a good education in USA. At first I was upset that we won the lottery, I was shocked. I didn't think about leaving so soon, considering that USA is very far from Albania. Also, I did not have relatives there. Anyway we decided to go because we thought that it is a gift from God. When I met friends and relatives, they were saying that God loves you because you win the lottery. Many people dream of America. We lived for so long with the American dream.” (2019-2021)

On the other hand, Silvana (38) was very enthusiastic.

“It has been my dream to go and live in USA, American dream. We won the American lottery and we decided to go.

Let's say that I was the initiator, my husband has not been very enthusiastic to leave the country.” (2009-2016)

The Experiences of Being in a New Country: Lived Migration

The lived experiences of women during migration varied considerably but could be described in part by their legal status (e.g., asylum-seekers, illegal migrants). All women reported on the difficulties of integrating with expected and unexpected obstacles.

Asylum-seekers

Three women migrated as asylum-seekers. A couple of stories illustrate the challenges of seeking asylum.

“We went as asylum-seekers. The traveling was quite comfortable, we were very happy. I felt like my life would change completely (for better) but things weren't like I thought in the beginning, the living was very difficult. We didn't have a job, we didn't have any documentation. We were living in an asylum with many other people, people from different countries, different cultures, with different behaviors. The living conditions weren't the same as we were used while we were in Albania. They were worse, all people together in the same apartment, a lot of noise, people who spoke loudly, we couldn't sleep. The government supported us with all the material things but again the beginning was very difficult to live all together in community.” (Ardita, 59, 2013-2021)

“We decided to go to Germany for a better life for our children because the economic conditions of our family were not good. The experience in the campus has been difficult because we were staying with lots of people from different countries. Most of the people were coming from Eritrea, from the war. Another difficulty was that we weren't allowed to work as we were asylum-seekers.” (Lindita, 44, 2013-2015)

Illegal Migration

Six of the nineteen women migrated in an illegal way or had irregular documents.

“When I went for the second time to Denmark, I stayed three months there. My husband was staying in an illegal way in Denmark, without documents. In fact to travel in Europe and to stay in a European country, you should stay three months abroad, three months in Albania, then again three months there. So you should not pass the period of three months. After I returned for the second time I did not stay three months in Albania, I stayed only two months passing the due date.” (Ardisa, 27, 2013-2021)

“We migrated illegally with fake passports. There were certain people who dealt with this kind of work. We paid a lot of money to take those false passports.” (Ermira, 42, 1998-2014)

“(…) I went in an illegal way because it was pandemic and to travel was prohibited. We paid someone to pass the border in an illegal way.” (Samela, 20, 2020-2021)

“(…) We migrated in an illegal way. We paid a car that served to send migrants in an illegal way. We spent three nights of roads. When we arrived there, we were sent in a campus.” (Lindita, 44, 2013-2015)

“It wasn’t easy but I found a way to receive my permanent residence. I applied in the Slovenian country as I was working there. By that card, I could stay in Denmark for longer. By this card I benefited to remove the restrictions of 3 months and stay in Denmark but I couldn’t work in a legal way or to have permanent residence.” (Ardisa, 27, 2013-2021)

Nurije (63) has migrated illegally in two host countries.

“Firstly I encouraged my husband to go to Germany and after 2 months I followed him in an illegal way. We arranged false passports and were registered as Kosovars because Kosovo was under the Serbian regime and they benefited from political asylum.” (Nurije, first country of migration, 1995-2000)

“(...) we together with my sister decided to migrate illegally in Canada. (...) We passed a stressful situation during our way to Canada. We arranged all the documents in Albania to go as Germans in Canada but we were afraid that they could distinguish us as non-Germans. We arranged all the documents by money. We spent all our savings to turn our Albanian passports into German, to make false passports.” (Nurije, second country of migration, 2000-2020)

Another issue that Nurije (63) faced while she was living in Canada was the issue of residence. For many years, she could not get the permanent residence. She and her family were risked to return to Albania from Canadian authorities because they were Muslims.

“After 10 years of stay there we could have Canadian passports. Canada state wanted to return all migrants especially after the events of September 11. They recognized who was Muslim and wanted to return all Muslims to their countries. We only benefited from the “sister” in a church. Also J. T (a political representative) helped us a lot. (...) We have been persecuted by the communist regime and J. T. has been part of the Democratic Party. She tried to help all the persecuted people from communist regime. The sister told us to write to J. T. and ask her about the situation in Albania. J. T. replied to us sending a letter where she explained everything about the bad situation of the country. The sister received the letter that J. T. sent to us and told the letter to the Canadian authorities. We were ‘saved’ through that letter.” (2000-2020)

Valbona’s (54) story is related to legal context while she and her family were staying in USA without documents.

“(...) we had also problems with some payments related to the house that we were living. Because of this problem, my husband was deported to Albania for more than one year. It was a trauma for my family. (...) We took our final

documents in 2017. We had the right to stay in USA but my final regular document (the passport) was taken almost after 20 years of staying there.” (1995-2019)

Adaption Challenges and Obstacles to Integrating

Language has been a difficult issue for many respondent women. They have discussed that not knowing the language of the host country was a great obstacle to study, work, and to adapt to the major society. For example, Estela (44, 1998-2010) is a woman whose life abroad was difficult at the beginning because she could not speak the Greek language. Also, two other women mentioned having difficulty because they did not speak or understand the host country’s language (Ardita, 59, 2013-2021; Lindita, 44, 2013-2015).

In addition to language barriers, experiences with work also influenced both assimilation ease and posed challenges.

“At the beginning, everything was ok. We went to Michigan; I started a job as a kindergarten teacher... I was feeling good in that job but I was working a lot from the morning till the late afternoon. I couldn’t pass enough time with my son. While in Shkodra, working hours were shorter and I had the possibility to stay longer with my family.” (Alma, 47, 2019-2021)

“There were days that I have cried because I was tired and I was homesick. There were moments when I was thinking that all my friends in Albania are studying in universities, while I am working all day.” (Mirjam, 45, 2000-2002)

Regardless of how they arrived in a new country, several women reported on the process of not integrating successfully because of isolation and cultural differences.

“I have not been integrated in the host country because I haven’t worked. I have stayed home all the time. The social circle was Albanian and we spoke all the time Albanian, so

I didn't know the language of the country where I was staying.” (Ardisa, 27, 2013-2021)

“My husband was working there while I didn't work, I stayed home. I didn't work because I didn't have a permanent residence, I didn't know the language and because I was young and my husband didn't want me to work. I was staying all day at home, being a homemaker.” (Samela, 20, 2020-2021)

“I went to Denmark through legal way because my husband was a resident there and we got married. I stayed for three years in that country. I have worked and started a language course to integrate faster. But to be sincere I have never been integrated in Denmark. We Albanians are used to tell our problems to our close people. We call our friends or relatives for a coffee and we tell our problems having them in front of us. It is not the same thing through the phone. Probably I was grown up with the idea that I don't want to live abroad and that's why I never liked that country.

(...) Life in Denmark is ...you press the “button” run. First thing was to drop my daughter off to the kindergarten, then work, then language course. I was running to find parking or to catch the train. A very demanding life, 5 days a week the same routine, Saturdays and Sundays were off.” (Norga, 30, 2017-2020)

Fatjola (38) hasn't been very enthusiastic to live abroad and the experience lived in Greece didn't leave her a good taste because of her high expectations:

“I never thought I would migrate because I had a good life in Albania. But after we got married I had to follow my husband. He was staying in Greece for many years with his parents and his sister. Later he fulfilled the documents for me to go in a legal way, by family reunion. Life is better than in Albania but not that much better as it seems. One person that lives there knows the life with its difficulty but for another person that doesn't live there life abroad is a dream. I have worked in Greece only during weekends in an advertising magazine. One day my mother in law told me that she had heard that a family was asking for a cleaner. I was feeling bad because I never thought to work

as a cleaner. I was a young, educated girl and I didn't expect that. However most of the Albanians were doing this kind of job, to clean or to wash dishes in restaurants. I said to her that I will think about the job because I didn't want to answer rude but inside me I was seething.” (2005-2012)

Alma (47) passed many difficulties in both host countries but her main concern was related to cultural differences.

“In Albania I knew with who was my son, I knew his friends, his teachers. On contrary, Michigan was a foreign country for us and we did not know many things. For example my son was harassed when he was at school. He was 15 years old and only after one year he told me about this incident. He went also to the director of the school, and they opened the cameras and they could see that the other guy tend to bother my son. Despite all these experiences, I realized that I could not cope with Michigan because it was too cold, there was not urban transport, and I didn't have my close relatives and friends.” (2019-2021)

Linda (54) told that despite difficulties of the beginning, she sacrificed staying home as a homemaker for the sake of her children.

“In 2000 we arrived in Toronto; my daughter was 6 years old and my son 2 years old. The beginning was not easy. We have started everything from A. We were among the first Albanian immigrants in that area, called as Western Road. My husband started to work as a technician, while I stayed home taking care of my children. I really wanted to dedicate myself to my family. I was a mother and my real aim of migration was for my children. I wanted to grow up my children integrated in a western society but also to maintain Albanian traditional values. That decision served to my children but not to me because I did not have the possibility to integrate well.” (2000-2007)

Silvana (38) also remembered difficult moments in her beginnings.

“When we left the country, I was pregnant. Probably this was the reason that I have experienced leaving very badly. Before leaving I was preparing myself and I was feeling

happy but the day that I separated from my family it was very hard. When we arrived in New York, I was feeling lonely; we didn't know anyone to help us or to support us. I was pregnant and I couldn't work, only my husband worked. Life was very difficult, full of challenges. There were not many Albanians in the area where we were living. We have met only a family from Albania but we haven't had any support from anyone. We were feeling lonely. At the beginning the conditions were not good, only to survive. In Albania we had a business that we have sold out. We could live in USA by using that money because only with one salary it was very difficult to cope with the American life” (2009-2016)

Slow Integration success

Many women mentioned to have passed a difficult experience especially at the beginning. But most of these women explained that after a relatively short period of time spent at host countries, they were well-integrated and they tried to enter to the flow of major society.

“After some years I started to like living there. We were not living anymore with other asylum-seekers but we had our own home. I started to integrate. In Albania I couldn't have the possibility to work but in Germany there were many options. Germany is a state that can offer many possibilities. I started to follow language courses... There were many opportunities to work.” (Ardita, 59, 2013-2021)

Mirjam (45) told that despite difficulties in a foreign country and working hard, she and her husband were feeling happy because they were earning money and they were far away from rumors of the past.

“We stayed in Crete for about 2 years. I have been very satisfied living there. I have been satisfied spiritually and economically because I was working and earning money. Even though I have been working 17 hours/day cleaning houses, doing two or three jobs a day, I was happy because my work has been paid. (...) We had a small house but very

kind one, my husband was very devoted to me. My life was quiet, away from rumors. Briefly, I was very happy living with my husband a quiet life even though working all day. I missed the people in Albania but again I was enjoying my freedom without being commanded by anyone.” (2000-2002)

When being asked what she means by being commanded, she answered:

“When we were in Albania, the parents of my husband wanted to interfere in our life, wanted to lead our life by telling us what to do and not to do.”

Above all, Mirjam mentioned that working in good families made her feel happy despite working long hours.

(...) I have been working with good people, people that were well-educated. That’s why I went to work with pleasure. I was young and the owners treated me as their own daughter. I couldn’t speak Greek but I could speak Italian and I was promoting my country. The owners wanted to hear the story of my family and they wanted also to know more about Albania.”

While seven other women pointed out how they were integrated from the beginning even though the small difficulties of the beginning, there were many positive comments about the host culture’s education and freedom opportunities. Typical of the responses were the following:

“We had never migrated before, for us Canada and USA was a dream. We had grown up with that dream. We packed things and left. I knew very well English and French. I was also accepted in the university and I got the academic level of the language.” (Blerta, 49, 2002-2003)

(...) Above all it has been a good experience that I would recommend to every younger. Considering that in Shkodra we live in a small city, every young man and woman should go abroad to open his/her mind. Every challenge and difficulty I have passed at the beginning of my migration

now seems negligible, but they have made me stronger, wiser, and more skillful. Migration has been a school for me; every experience I got there served me well later. I have given this ideology to my daughter as well.” (Estela, 44, 1998-2010)

“(…) I think Canada is the best place in the world. Canada made us strong people, people have motivated us. My husband was involved in some courses as fire alarms and erector (...). After three years we could do family reunion. I took some courses to work as a kindergarten teacher.” (Linda, 54, 2000-2007)

“I was living a good life in Italy. I was living alone as I was not engaged or married. I chose to live my own life. I had friends and I wanted to enjoy my life. I was integrated very well. I still keep connections with my friends in Italy. I have worked a lot and I didn’t stay a day without working... To integrate it means to take the culture of the host country. I tried to take the best part of culture from Italy, maintaining also the best part of my own culture.” (Nora, 51, 1990-2013)

“Even thought that Albania is my country and I like it but I think if someone is intending to migrate, USA is the best place. It is a country full of opportunities. At the beginning is difficult but after you finish an education or gain trainings, life becomes easier. I started to manage the life there. (Silvana, 38, 2009-2016)

Perceptions of the Host Countries

Interviewed women have expressed their positive and negative opinion about the life at host countries. This section is divided into two sub-sections, reasons to like the host country and the reasons not to like the host countries.

Positive Reactions

There are many things that women could identify while living at host countries. Most of them are related to freedom, rules, cleanliness, and not being prejudiced.

Four out of five women who had migrated to Greece pointed out positive claims about the lifestyle and stance of state in Greece. For example Mirjam (45) highlighted not being prejudiced among the positive values of the country she migrated.

“I like Greece because I haven’t been prejudiced. If a young girl works as a cleaning woman in Shkodra, people will talk about her saying how it is possible to do such a job. But in Greece nobody prejudices what kind of job you are doing. People treat you well or probably I have been lucky to meet nice people and to work in good families. Also, nobody is prejudicing about where you are going, what you wore, at what time you came home. Greek people are open-minded and they know how to appreciate and to respect people.” (2000-2002)

She has also felt very good in the community of the host country where in her most difficult moments, she felt the Greeks’ hospitality.

“(…) When my husband has been arrested for the first time (because we were working illegally, without having documentation), all the neighbors supported me by giving emotional and economical support. He stayed one week at the police station and the neighbors brought me food to send to him. They came and asked me if I had enough money to live, they wanted also to give me money. I have been really treated very well from the community.”

Mirjam pointed out that being a woman in Greece has many advantages. According to her, Greeks treat a woman very well like in her story below.

“(…) I have been treated well even for the fact that I was a woman. The chief of police caught my husband and he had the right to keep me also at the police station but he didn’t do. On contrary, he gave me permission to see my husband every day.”

Estela (44) described the life in Greece as an autonomous life, feeling free, and being a country full of opportunities.

“Athens is a big city, very different from Shkodra. I liked the freedom because in Albania we had to be home when it was just starting to get dark. In Athens the city buzzed 24 hours a day. Imagine now for a 20 years old girl the impact this city had on her mentality. In Albania we have been very stressed because we had the fear of life, in Athens we were free. But at the same time I had the opportunity to meet many people who speak differently, who think differently, and who have a different culture. Also I liked Greece because the country offers you education and employment opportunities. For example in university there were a lot of branches to choose to study while Albanian universities offer you only general discipline like economics, law, etc.” (1998-2010)

The same as Mirjam(45) and Estela (44), Ermira (42) mentioned freedom and non-prejudice as the crucial factors to like the host country.

“In Greece I like freedom. No one prejudices you where you are going, what you are doing. Here in Shkodra, I have to be at home earlier because if you are getting late people will talk about you. Also, I have never been prejudiced because I was Albanian. Greeks have a ritual, that of changing migrant’s name. For example my brother changed his name to a Greek one. Now he is called Jorgo but no one forces you to do so. My name is Mira (for short) and I have always been called Mira in Greece. I didn’t change my name.” (1998-2014)

Ermira (42) was confused about a procedure that Greeks applied. Firstly, she was thinking that it is a good procedure since they don’t force but later after asking her in more details she started to think that somehow it affects negatively.

“People change their names because after 90’s, Greeks didn’t want Albanians. Therefore most of the Albanians changed their names not to look like Albanians. They think they would be prejudiced or discriminated in fact; this was the reason but not nowadays. It happened some years ago. Nowadays, it happens only in the form of a ritual. They are coming and asking to baptize our children. They came and asked me as well for my daughter but I didn’t accept.”

Fatjola (38) liked the education system in Greece and the health conditions, considering a system quite different from the education and health system in Albania.

“(...) I like the health conditions. If you go in the hospital you don’t need to pay to the doctors, there is no corruption. (...) I liked also food control. In Albania you may buy meat that is not in the standards to eat.” (2005-2012)

In an interview with four women who spent many years in USA, they were asked to reflect upon the things they liked while living there.

Celstina (36) highlighted as the best points in California, work system and being appreciated for what you do. According to Celstina, USA is a country full of opportunities. Not being prejudiced is another component that makes USA a country to be liked.

“In USA the work is well done. In the charity I have been working in Shkodra, I was multitasking. I have worked as a psychologist, as a driver, as a cook, as a babysitter. In USA, the work is well-determined, you do A to B and that’s all. It is the whole system that functions well and the work is coordinated good. The work is very easy and very clear because the system functions well. When we are here (in Albania) we don’t notice all the problems that Albania has but when we go abroad we see the difference. Above all, in California I have never been prejudiced because of my nationality. Nobody cares where you are from; it is very good for them if you are doing your job correctly. Also, it is the country of opportunities.” (2016-2020)

Valbona (54) shared the same opinion that USA is a country that offers many possibilities. Additionally, in USA, a person can feel free. Valbona explained what she meant to be a free person.

“America gives you opportunities, it opens the cards and you are the one who chooses. I am the kind of person who takes chances. It gives you the opportunity to buy a house, to be a teacher, to open a business. My husband worked hard and could open his own business. In USA you are a free person. There I understood what it means to be a free person. Why? Because USA is a state that protects her citizens. If someone would harass you, you call the police and they will come immediately.” (1995-2019)

Silvana (38) thought that in USA there is no discrimination or prejudice based on nationality. Alma (47) considered USA as the country of employment opportunities.

“(…) in USA there is no discrimination based on race or ethnicity. People work and they appreciate you for your work. They don’t care where you are coming from, there is equality.” (Silvana, 38, 2009-2016)

“In USA there are many opportunities, employment opportunities that are well paid. America is a fairytale. (...) USA is not ‘wild’ as we thought. If I would have been lucky to meet there good Albanian people, my life would be different.” (Alma, 47, 2019-2021)

In Canada, Blerta (49) mentioned freedom as one of the important aspect to like the country. She missed freedom in her country of origin.

“(…) freedom, you test yourself to your limits. Here in Albania you don’t have many opportunities and you don’t test yourself in every aspect of your life, but Canada offers you a lot.” (2002-2003)

Ardita (59) and Lindita (44) mentioned many elements to like Germany among which are the rules, cleanliness, employment opportunities, health care services, human rights, and not being prejudiced.

“Germany offers a lot of opportunities to work. Not only this but also the rules the country has, cleanliness, free and good healthcare services, no corruption, more individual rights. If one of your rights has been violated then you can

complain about it to the relevant authorities. At least you have a voice. Briefly, it is a welfare country.” (Ardita, 59, 2013-2021)

“(…) the country was really good. I liked the rules. The life was better than here. I liked many things, the discipline, life conditions, and the people. I don’t have any critique for the country or the Germans. Moreover, there was no prejudice toward us.” (Lindita, 44, 2013-2015)

Even though Nurije (63) experienced a variety of difficulties in both countries where she migrated, Germany had impressed her for better.

“Everyone works there, rich people and poor people, nobody prejudices you. In Germany there are also many job opportunities.” (1995-2000)

Regarding Italy, the only experience Blerta S. (39) has passed when she was in migration is the experience at the hospital where her daughter was taking medical care. Therefore, when she was asked about the reasons to like Italy, her answer was of no doubt, health service.

“The main thing I liked in Italy is the health care. I thank God and Italian doctors that saved my daughter. We know how it functions in Albania. We are used to give to doctors 500L to serve to the patient. In the hospitals in Italy there is no corruption and no bribe. There are very good conditions and qualitative services.” (2019-2021)

Norga (30) expressed her positive opinion what she liked in Denmark. She considered freedom, health care, and people’s attitudes to be very good components to like her host country.

“In Denmark I have felt quiet. You have your own home and your own life. Nobody interrupts in your life. Your own problems are your own problems, and not others. They have different mentality from ours and this is a good thing. In Albania we have a backyard mentality.” (2017-2020)

Ardisa (27) on the other hand considered Denmark as “the state of woman”, which means a woman have equaled rights to a man.

“I like Denmark because it is the state of woman. A woman is much appreciated there. When I heard my friends that were living abroad talking about women’s rights, it seems like a dream to me. I could have the possibility to see it by myself. In general, in Albania we ask the husband or the man for many things.”(2013-2018)

Negative Reactions

All the women were asked about the reasons they did not like the living at their host countries but it is evident that the reasons not to like the host countries depended on their experiences per se.

According to Ermira (42) and Samela (20), in Greece life is not as easy as it would be if you have the passport and residence permission of the host country.

“The most difficult part is living without permission of residence. Till the time you have all the necessary documents, it is very difficult to live. For example I was all the time living under the stress of documents. The time that I went to take the permission, there were a lot of bureaucracies... The time that you take the residence, it is easier to find a job, to have insurances. Life becomes easier.” (Ermira, 42, 1998-2014)

“(…) There were many disadvantages to live there. I didn’t have a permanent residence. I applied for permanent residence but I couldn’t benefit. I am sure that in other countries I can benefit the documents easier than in Greece.” (Samela, 20, 2020-2021)

Fatjola (38) mentioned the high spending and expensiveness as one of the factors that makes life difficult in Greece.

“Even thought in Greece you work and earn money but the same money is spent again, for taxes, for rent, etc. The

living standard in Greece is high. In Greece you work hard, that's all. The maximum you can save are 2000 euro that you spent again when you come for vacations in Albania. My husband could save in fact when the Greece was working with its own money (drachma), but this happened before Greece entered in the euro zone.” (2005-2012)

She continued to mention also racism, ethnocentrism, and Islam phobia as one of the features that Greeks possess.

“(…) I have felt the racism from Greeks. In the neighborhood, the neighbors came to me to taste Albanian foods but one day when a neighbor asked me what I cooked I told that it was baklava (a Turkish dessert that Albanians cook mostly for Eid), she didn't eat it, she left.”

Estela (44) is another woman who beyond the pleasures she got from the host country, she suffered also dissatisfaction in relation to entertainment.

“The only thing I didn't like in Greece is the fact that we could not have more fun. We were working a lot, we were young but we had very little fun. Our only entertainment was when we gathered with other Albanians. My family and my relatives have been all in Greece and every weekend we were gathering in someone's home.” (1998-2010)

Four of the interviewed women who have migrated and lived for many years in USA told about difficulties they experienced that led them to highlight negative things about the country.

Silvana (38) and Alma (47) pointed out that expensiveness was the most difficult factor to cope with in USA.

“Life is difficult especially when there are a lot of expenses. I couldn't cover even the rent of my house with my salary. If it wasn't for my husband that has worked a lot and earned relatively enough money, we couldn't live in USA.” (Silvana, 38, 2009-2016)

“The most difficult thing in New York is the fact that you miss your child. You have to work a lot to cover the expenses; I mean to do two or three jobs. Also the distances take long time. In New York I stayed in Brooklyn and to go to work and to return home it took me approximately 3 to 4 hours. Probably my age was not too young to face with a new life.” (Alma, 47, 2019-2021)

Valbona (54) and Celstina (36) mentioned two different aspects of difficulties in the host country. They experienced culture shock when they went for the first time in USA.

“It is difficult because it is quite a different culture. It is a culture shock.” (Valbona, 54, 1991-2019)

“Probably it was culture shock. I had friends in USA and when I called one of them to notice that I am coming to California, she replied ‘Oh, nice. We will meet at the second week of February’. I was like ‘Wow, do we need one month to plan to have a coffee?!’. They have priorities and plan their time. The work is easy in USA but you have to work for long hours. My husband is computer programmer and I have seen him one day staying 16 hours in computer, I have sent the food to eat there, near the computer.” (Celstina, 2016-2020)

One of the biggest difficulties of moving abroad is the language barrier and changing the job position. For many monolingual speakers the idea of learning a new language can seem an impossible mission – but living in a new country is the best way of learning a new language. Also many women did not have the possibility to work in good positions as they had before leaving their home country. This is the case of Linda (53) who migrated in Canada and whose most difficult period was to stay home and her husband was having a different job from his previous one.

“To change the job from one country to another was difficult, we were used to work in good jobs, good

positions. I was staying home and this has been the most difficult part. I was used to work when I was in Albania. But when my parents came, everything became easier. It was difficult at the beginning to learn the language because we both knew French; we should take many courses to have good jobs and to integrate fast.” (2000-2007)

Being without residence permission in a foreign country makes life not only difficult but also causes psychological pressure on individuals. Nurije (63) was staying in Canada illegally together with her family for almost 10 years but during all those years they were living under stress and paying twice, without having the possibility to get any benefit. Other factors such as economic and work conditions made life difficult in Canada.

“I have never been integrated in Canada. They wanted to return us and we have been all the time under a psychological pressure. We had to go to the court to verify we were Germans but my husband got worried and he was confused of what he was saying. They decided to return but through lawyers, spending lots of money, we could extend our residence permission. If you don’t have residence there, it is very difficult. For the children we have to pay twice the amount of money that Canadians paid. We had to work hard, doing three jobs to get over. (...) The most difficult part has been bad economy and not being integrated. Even though in Canada we worked a lot, the expenses were very high. In Canada I have worked three jobs. My daughter, at that time 17 years old, worked to distribute newspapers. She woke up at 4 o’clock because at 6 people wanted to buy and read newspapers. My son at the age of 15 worked together with me and my husband in agriculture. Often the owner said to my son to hide so that someone wouldn't sue him as he is taking minor children in hard work. My children were in school and after school they came to work with us. We experienced a lot of difficulty in that job. In cold days we worked inside Greenhouses but during summer it was terrible because the weather in Canada is wet and working under the sun in a wet weather was beyond our imagination.” (2000-2020)

The same issue, that of being without adequate documents happened almost in every country (in Germany as well) with different women.

“The primary difficulty was to stay in host country without documents or a permanent residence. At least I wanted my sons to have a permanent residence.” (Ardita, 59, 2013-2021)

Ardita (59) also mentioned the nostalgia for her country of origin that made her life difficult in her host country.

“I missed the days when I went out with my sisters, brothers, and friends. Many times I was feeling nostalgic and homesick.” (2013-2021)

Many migrants who left Albania for a better life are organized in villages instead of cities in their host countries. The case of Nurije (63) who migrated in Germany for a better life, she and her family found themselves living in a village having advantages and disadvantages. She told one of the disadvantages to live in a village in Germany.

“It is difficult to integrate very fast. After 2 years I can say that I have been integrated. In Germany there is also jealousy or probably because I was working with peasant woman and they had no intellect. I knew Italian songs, I dance very well and they were impressed and sometimes feeling jealous. They were some women that had never leaved the village to go and visit the city. But the standard of living was high even in the village. They had good houses and good living conditions. Beyond any difficulty, people were kind and treat others very good.” (1995-2000)

Amila (45) mentioned economic difficulties as the main barrier to live a quiet life in Italy.

“We had an average salary, so we were living a normal life. But sometimes even though how hard you work, you

cannot fulfill all your needs. I mean only economic difficulties, not social ones.” (1995-2016)

Ardisa (27) was faced with culture shock in Denmark as she considered the culture in host country to be very different from Albanian culture.

“There is one thing I don’t like in Denmark, the way how children are educated. Probably it is because I have been educated in a different way in Albania. We are used to respect older people while in Denmark the concept of family is not the same. We do not speak harshly to parents or to other people. Sometimes we don’t speak that way because we don’t want to hurt others. For example, we have learned to give up the seat to elderly on the bus.” (2013-2021)

Albanian Community in Host Countries

During the interview, respondent women were asked about the Albanian community in their host countries. Their answers were classified into two groups, those with positive attitudes and those with negative attitudes.

Blerta and Fatjola expressed positive attitudes for Albanian community living in their host countries.

“(…) there was a community of Albanians and I can say that there was a new Diaspora that was created in Canada. Most of Albanians were in search of themselves. They were eager to have the same status as they had when they left Albania. We Albanians in Canada were the first generation of legal migration and all of us were the intellectual part of Albania. Most of them were doctors, engineers, professors and to have the same profession in Canada for a short period of time wasn’t easy. These were all difficulties that we needed each other’s support.” (Blerta, 49, 2002-2003)

“We had support. When they noticed about a job, they told us and vice versa. The Albanians in Greece are related to

each other. It was important for us to have Albanians, so we could hear our language.” (Fatjola, 38, 2005-2012)

Five other women expressed negative attitudes related to their natives in host countries.

“If someone prejudices you more, those are Albanians. They talk against each other because they know each other. Even if Albanians go at the end of the world they will talk about others, they will do gossip, they don’t forget the old habit.” (Ardisa, 27, 2013-2021)

“(…) In fact the most difficult moments, the moments that I was feeling bad came as a result of Albanians living in Greece. We have stayed with some Albanians that were relatives of my husband. So, I haven’t been prejudiced from Greeks but from Albanians. They were saying to each other that ‘Look she came here now and she is working more than us, she has gathered more money than we did’. They tried even to catch my job, to make me lose the job because they were jealous. So, I have been more discriminated from my compatriots. But there were also Albanians who supported us. For example an Albanian friend of my husband, not from Shkodra (from Fier), supported us. He was also complaining about his towns’ man doing the same thing to him.” (Mirjam, 45, 2000-2002)

“(…) there was no support even though there were many Albanians that we kept strong ties. Well, Albanians were related to each other in Greece but not those from the same city. There were no Albanians from my city, but from other cities especially from Korca.” (Ermira, 42, 1998-2014)

“(…) in Germany we were staying as Kosovars but one Albanian translator from Macedonia sued us. He told to the authorities that we were from Albania and not from Kosovo. Albanians from Kosovo as well were saying us all the time why we were living there because we have our own state but their country was occupied by Serbs.” (Nurije, 63, 1995-2000)

“(…) if I had support from friends (Albanians) that called me and said come in New York because we will help you,

maybe things would be different. Nobody helped me. I waited for months because my Albanian friends in New York pretended to help me but nobody was interested about my situation. I don't want to benefit from others; I wanted only help for the procedures I didn't know how to do like to get the assistance and such stuff.” (Alma, 47, 2019-2021)

Social Status in Host Countries

Social status is the position of a person or social group in the social system. In other words, it is the position that an individual holds in a social hierarchy based upon honor and/or prestige. Respondent women were asked about their social status in their host countries and almost all of them responded to have experienced a high social status in their receiving countries. Some of them also mentioned how women are treated in the West and how migration influenced for better in increasing their status.

“In Germany if you are a hard-working person that respects the rules, they try to help you a lot, especially women. It is a country that promotes gender equality. They love people with courage and will and I think I am that kind of person. They help people who want to go ahead and contribute for their selves and for the country. So, yes I think migration has improved my social status and increased my self-esteem.” (Ardita, 59, 2013-2021)

“Migration makes you understand what you should value in yourself and in the people around you. This has been my motto when I came back: To give importance to many things.” (Blerta, 49, 2002-2003)

*“USA showed me that I can be whatever I want.”
(Valbona, 54, 1995-2019)*

The only one who realized that her social status did not increase was Estela (44).

“In fact in Greece I didn't understand what I wanted to realize because my opportunities were limited as I had small kids. Also our economic conditions were not very

good in Greece and I was obliged to work a lot to fulfill my family's conditions. If I would be a single girl probably my career would be different. But my priority was my family and to do career you should work more than 8 hours a day. I couldn't work more than 8 hours because my children were small and they needed me.” (1998-2010)

In Western countries men and women are working side by side at the same pace and both are contributing and playing their parts equally in the development processes.

According to participants, in some countries women are treated even better than men.

“My mother in law says that there is no gender equality, we are more than that and I like her philosophy. For example when she came to our home and watched me doing house works she said ‘Thank you’. I was saying ‘don’t say thank you, it’s my job’. Or when I was ironing my husband’s shirt she was again saying ‘Thank you sweetheart, that’s amazing’. It is quite different the way how a woman is treated in USA. For four years that I stayed in USA I didn't get out of the car without my husband opening the door for me. It was an offense for him if I would open the door by myself. He was saying ‘You want to escape? Let me be a gentleman’. He was grown up with such a culture. But USA is diverse and one family differs from another.” (Celstina, 36, 2016-2020)

“I am more open-minded and I don't care about the prejudices. I can show one case. In Albania, when a girl or a woman has menses she tells only to her mom or to her sister, or at most to other woman. We are not used to talk about this phenomenon in the presence of our fathers or to other men. In Denmark it is quite normal to say to a father or to a man that I'm in pain because I'm on my period. I was shocked when I heard women talking in the presence of other men. After migration I see things differently. I don't say anymore ‘I am not doing this because it's a shame or I am doing this because people will prejudice me.’” (Ardisa, 27, 2013-2021)

“A woman feels very well, much appreciated. There is no difference between man and woman. In Italy mentality is quite different from Albania. There is no patriarchalism.

Women feel themselves very relieved because they get help from their husbands. Also women have many other facilitations and support from state such as kindergartens that function till late, giving possibility to career-mothers.” (Amila, 45, 1995-2016)

“In Greece, daughters are considered closer to the family than sons. A daughter was more valued than a son in Greek families. When Greeks become old prefer to live with their daughters instead of their sons, contrary to what happens in Albania. Another thing that I learned from Greek families is the harmony in family. They had a ritual, they used to feed their children and then children were sent to their own rooms so the spouses could eat together and discuss daily issues. A woman and a man were equal. For example if the husband pays electricity bills, the wife would pay the water bill. Everything is divided equally. The people that I have been working with treated their wives as queens.” (Mirjam, 45, 2000-2002)

“I think that women are treated well based on the economy. In Greece a woman has her own economy, her own house, she is more independent. Then the state implements politics for gender equality. A woman in Albania supports her husband because she doesn't have where to go. Most of the parents are staying with their sons, so daughters don't have where to stay since they don't have their own houses and their independence on economy. This mentality is not based on culture but on economy. Most Albanian women cannot reach the independence because they create a family, have children to grow up and could not be economically independent. While in Greece, women have found everything ready. The low economic conditions make a woman feel inferior to her husband. For example nowadays women are working a lot and they have more economic independence.” (Fatjola, 38, 2005-2012)

Decision to Return

The women narrated why they decided to return. Most returns were voluntary. Two of the interviewed women experienced a forced return. All women reported

different reasons to come back to Albania. Five women had intentions to return temporarily to Albania, but still remain. Below are the reasons given to return.

Family issues

Three women cited family as the main reason to return to Albania. For example, Ardita (59) noted that her son was the initiator to return because he was living without a permanent residence in Germany.

“I returned because one of my sons had no opportunity to stay there legally as he was at the age of majority. He really became bored as he had no opportunity to work and in fact he didn’t like very much the living there... I was “forced” to return with him. The other son and my husband continue to stay there. The initiator to return was my son and I followed him.” (2021-2022)

Alma (47) mentioned that her return came as a result of her mother’s health conditions while she was alone in Albania struggling with sadness and solitude. She explained all her return ‘journey’ and the decision to stay permanently in Shkodra.

“(...) While I was waiting for the assistance, I applied for a good job, a job related to my profession. After I would get the money from assistance and I would wait for an answer from the job I applied, I would come to Albania for a short time just to see my mother. She was alone in Albania, pandemic time and my difficulties made her feel more alone and upset. She has never been used to stay alone. During all her life she has been waiting home her husband’s relatives and family. She loves having people around her. But I noticed from phone that she was not feeling well. My aunt often called me to say that my mom is not good, she cries all night. One day after she talked to me in the phone, she forgot to close her phone and I heard her voice crying with grief. The job I applied was refused and I could not get the assistance as well. I tried to talk to my son and explain the health situation of his grandmother. I gave the idea to return and my son approved. He said that he was grown up from his grandmother and he cannot cope with

the pain if something would happen to her. We didn't intend to have a permanent return; we just wanted to come back in Albania to see my mother. My son would attend homeschooling. When we were in Albania, I met my mom and I understood that I cannot leave her alone anymore. If I would leave her, I would not find her alive. In fact we applied for an American visa for my mom so I could go again to USA together with my mother. Unfortunately my mother's visa was refused. So, I decided to stay here.”
(2021-2022)

To some extent the same story is also for Celstina (36) whose return happened as a result of her father's illness.

“My family was living in Albania. The last years my father suffered from Alzheimer and he was very sick. We decided to return to stay near my family in those difficult moments for all of us. After 5 days that we returned, my dad passed away. My mother and my brother were very tired and upset for his loss. My husband said ‘Let's stay near them’. Later I became pregnant and I had some problems during my pregnancy so I couldn't travel. Now we are between Albania and USA.” (2020-2022)

Health issues also affected Blerta (49), whose husband's bout with the climate caused a return.

“(…) we were ‘forced’ to return voluntarily. My husband found a job but during his work he felt the symptoms of his illness. The climate in Canada was not appropriate for his illness. We couldn't make a pact with the illness, so we bought the ticket for return. The last month, we visited many places in Canada and we tried to enjoy our last month there. Later we returned.” (2003-2022)

Health of a family member also played a role in the life of Nora (51), whose first return visit ended up in a relationship that would later cause her return.

“For the first time when I came back in Albania, I stayed 6 months and the only reason of my return has been my mother. She was sick and I was trying to find someone to

stay with her. I couldn't stay for longer because my life was built in Italy. One of these days that I was staying in Albania I met the guy that I have been in a relationship during my high school years, my first love...After 6 months as I said I went to Italy and my boyfriend took care of my mother in Albania. We had a relationship in distance for 6 months. My mother passed away and I came back again in Albania for her funeral. Later I went to Italy and I waited for him to come there. He came and started a new life there. But he couldn't find a job in Italy because here in Albania he has worked all his life as a postman, so he didn't have another profession. While he was searching for a job, I noticed that I was pregnant. He couldn't find a job in Italy while in Albania he had a stable job. He said to me that he had in Shkodra and let's return. I followed and I returned only for him. I didn't want to have a second separation. The first time people separated us but I couldn't support another separation.” (2013-2022)

Belongingness

Six of the interviewed women answered that the main reason to return was related to a better life in Albania, especially because of economic challenges and a need for belonging and to reconnect after many years away.

“The life in Toronto was very good, especially after some years that we could get experience and have a job but the relationship with the family was getting weaker. Our priority was family and children, this has been the reason we had migrated. My husband received an offer to become a director of electricity in Albania and we decided to return. We also had our own house, we had a property. Economically we were stronger in Albania than in Canada. In Canada we had to pay the rent of house and other expenses. In Albania I started working as a teacher again and after one year I became vice director at the same school where I was teaching.” (Linda, 54, 2007-2022)

“It was very difficult to live abroad alone, without my husband. The last three years that my husband was in prison I suffered a lot. I couldn't find a stable house. Within a year I changed 5 houses. I couldn't make a

contract because I didn't have residency. The difficulties of life there made me decide to return. I thought that in Albania at least I have my own house and I will work to live, not to pay the rent or the car. I worked there only to pay and not to save.” (Ardisa, 27, 2021-2022)

“My husband had problems with the state of Denmark and I couldn't handle staying there alone. That's why I decided to return to my country. I was 100% sure to return but I wanted to get my husband's opinion as well. After we discussed it, I took my daughter and I returned to Shkodra.” (Norga, 30, 2020-2022)

“After I passed so many years in Canada, I understood that only work and earning money kept me there for many years. There was not a life for us in Canada... So, I returned only for nostalgia, I feel myself that I belong to this country, to Albania. In Canada I was working all the time and sometimes when we had long vacations we didn't want them because we didn't know what to do and where to go. It was the same pace of life, only work-home. My only pleasure was on Saturdays when we gathered with some other Albanians to go and drink a coffee in a Mall.” (Nurije, 63, 2020-2022)

“I was feeling homesick; I had strong ties with my family. Meanwhile Americans have another style of living. They work all the day, they don't go out for a coffee, and they don't meet each other after work... Both of us, me and my husband, decided to return. Our son also approved our decision. In fact he was very enthusiastic about the decision.” (Silvana, 38, 2016-2022)

“(...) My mother was getting old and could not obtain the documents anymore. In addition, she was feeling sick. Even though we sent her in many doctors, all the doctors prescribed that she was feeling homesick. She was feeling nostalgic about her country. Also my life was not going well, so I took the initiative to return.” (Ermira, 42, 2014-2022)

Economic Crises in Host Countries

For women who were abroad when the EU faced the Great Recession in 2008-2009 and even afterwards, for many immigrants the only solution was to return “home” for support.

“Greece was passing an economic crisis, that captured all the Europe in fact but Greece was the most affected. I quit my job in Fast Food and there were not many options where to work in the island where I was staying. I tried many other jobs but many businesses were failing during these years” (Ermira, 42, 2014-2022)

“We have planned very often our return but because of the economic crisis in Greece we made the final decision to return. One expression says ‘The heavy stone weights in its place’ (It is an Albanian expression which means that the sense of life is in the homeland). So, we decided to return and open our new business” (Fatjola, 38, 2012-2022)

“(…) we decided to return temporarily and then to migrate again in another better country. (…) work was in decline because Greece passed an economic crisis. Now Greece doesn’t differ a lot from Albania regarding economic conditions. Our relatives and friends were all in Albania, so we thought to return because it is better to live in your country than in Greece when it is the same thing.” (Samela, 20, 2021-2022)

“Italy passed an economic crisis; my husband was ‘forced’ to close his restaurant. We were in a very bad economic situation. Here in Albania we had some real estate, some properties. We returned only for a couple of months to sell our properties, to make money and to return again to Italy. I have my Italian citizenship, so I thought it is not a problem to return and then to go back. Here in Albania we couldn’t fix all the things and we decided to stay to see how we can manage with our properties.” (Amila, 45, 2016-2022)

Legal Issues

Mirjam (45) and Lindita (44) both experienced forced return migration. They did not have a permanent residence and were not in the target group that could benefit from asylum seeking.

“My husband was caught and sent to the police station for the second time. There was no more chance to stay there because we were staying in Greece illegally.” (Mirjam, 45, 2002)

“We didn’t decide to return but we were dispatched because Albania is considered a safe place and Albanians do not need to seek asylum anymore. We had also expulsion because we passed 90 days, the days allowed to stay in Europe. Priority was given to those migrants who were coming from the war.” (Lindita, 44, 2015)

Experiences upon Return

Only one woman said that she had no regrets for her return.

“ Now I feel good in Albania, we have our own business; we have a good economy, and I am near my family.” (Silvana, 38, 2016-2022)

All other women had negative experiences after return, even though some have a good life now. The primary theme of these negative accounts centers on prejudice because of their status as returning migrants. Mirjam (45), for example, was feeling emotional and crying while explaining return to Albania.

“During my trip to Albania I have been all the time crying. In Greece I have been the happiest woman. Our life has been quiet, I wanted that life. In Albania my life changed completely. We had a bad economic situation, we had pressure from people. (Crying, feeling emotional)” (2002-2022)

Ermira (42) explained that her return has been very difficult as she failed to “find” herself in the capital city of Albania where it is supposed to have more employment opportunities. Also she felt prejudiced in the city where she was born and she has lived for about 18 years, in Shkodra.

“(…) my return experience has been very bad. When we returned we decided to go to Tirana, to live there. Tirana offers more possibilities. I stayed in Tirana for three months but I couldn’t find a job. It was very difficult. Then I decided to come and live in Shkodra at my father’s home. My first job in Shkodra has been in a shoe factory. I have been prejudiced a lot while I was working in this kind of job.” (2014-2022)

When she has been asking for the reasons of prejudice, she answered:

“Because of my style of living, the way how I talk, how I behave; I was open-minded. For two or three months nobody approached me. They were saying that I am strange.”

Prejudice was also experienced by Norga (30) whose life in Albania after return became difficult because she could not find a job. The mistakes of her husband in host country have followed her in every job interview.

“The return was quite unpleasant because you think you are returning to your country but you are not welcomed. Endless prejudices. It doesn’t matter what type of education I have or the experience I have, I will always be prejudiced by a mistake my husband made, a stain will remain. I had also prejudices for my return but it was up to me to answer or not. I have been lucky to have the support of my family. The most difficult part has been to find a job because of prejudices. I have sent my CV to find a job and I did many interviews but the first question that was made to me was ‘are you married with x person?’ It is nonsense because I am sending my CV and I am searching for a job while they are asking me for my personal life. I cannot deny

that I am married with that person but I came here for an interview.” (2020-2022)

Another difficult experience of return migration is the story of Linda (54) that is related to the prejudice that her daughter was faced in a school in Shkodra. The daughter of Linda had difficulty in speaking Albanian language, thus she came across prejudices of teachers in the school.

“People in Albania are warm, I mean relatives and friends. My son was adapted immediately but the most difficult part was with my daughter. She had difficulty to speak Albanian fluently. Teachers also did not make her feel well; especially one teacher was very harsh to her because my daughter couldn’t speak very well Albanian. She wasn’t feeling well in Albania and in her school, so we decided to send her again in Canada where my brother was living.” (2007-2022)

Amila (45) has a good life in Shkodra thanks to her father’s connections. However, she considered the life in Albania to be stressful and difficult because of the mentality and because people failed to show empathy toward each other. The same issue is also for Nora (51) who found people to be superstitious and rude.

“The life in Albania is very difficult, I don’t know if I will ever get used to it. After some months with some connections that my father had here in Shkodra, I started a job. Even though I have a good job, working as the Head of Museum and the assistant professor at the Department of Tourism and at the Departments of Arts, again the life in Albania is very stressful. It is stressful because you don’t feel secure in the country. Sometimes even you don’t have people around you. They are there physically but they are not there to support you. After 6 years of return I can say that I feel myself lonely. I feel lonely because there are rare or no people that can understand me, my thoughts, my mentality. I have different mentality from people that live here in Shkodra. In Italy people are more “real” but here I cannot distinguish if people are real or not, if they are

telling the truth or not. I can consider many people here as “fake”, they say something different but they mean something completely different. I can’t behave in this way. This is my character; I have been educated in a completely different way.” (Amila, 45, 2016-2022)

“Albania is the same one I left even after 30 years. I have 9 years that I have returned in Albania and I still can’t understand how people think. I feel like an alien because people here don’t think the same way as I do. For example one day I was talking with my friend in the street about stomach pain. One woman stopped and interrupted by giving us advices. I said to her “sorry, do I know you?” I didn’t know her and I didn’t give her any confidence. Despite the way of thinking is the way of communication. I entered in a clothing store to buy something but the saleswoman replied directly by saying that I was fat and there was nothing for me. Or when I enter in bakeries you see gloomy people. They don’t say “good morning or welcome” firstly but immediately “what you want to buy?” The communication is zero. People also are not grateful.” (Nora, 51, 2013-2022)

Three women expressed some ambivalence upon their return.

“I came with pleasure. From the moment I arrived at the airport I felt liberated. After all I know the language, the tradition, how things function, I have my family in Albania. My family had been waiting for me for a long time. My greatest support has been from my family. But I faced also challenges because I was used with another life, I was used with rules, I was used without prejudices like everyone has its own life. After return, the prejudices and the questions like ‘where you are going, what are you doing?’ seemed strange to me. For the first 2 months I was lost in the city.” (Ardisa, 27, 2021-2022)

“I returned together with my husband and his family. For me it wasn’t as difficult as it was for my husband and his family. I did not stay for long there. It was just one year and some months. For them it was difficult to find a job and to get used with the life in Albania.” (Samela, 20, 2021-2022)

“At the beginning I was feeling like a foreigner here. I have left Albania when I was very young and 12 years abroad are not less. Many things embarrassed me at the beginning. I was used with the freedom I found in Greece because Athens was a metropolis and nobody knows you, while Shkodra is a small city and you know each-other, you should talk to everyone. In Athens it has been many times that I went out of home without combing my hair. In Shkodra I had to be well-dressed, to do make up. Once, I was without make up, some of my acquaintances stopped me in the street and say ‘why you didn’t wear makeup today?’ Also I didn’t know some basic things like how much bread costs, etc. But every concern related to mentality was soon over passed.” (Estela, 44, 2010-2022)

Advantages and Disadvantages of Life in Albania

Advantages

All the respondents were asked about the advantages and disadvantages of living back in Albania. The themes most common to advantages included the following (with a quote typical of responses).

Six women reported to like their country of origin because of their relatives and friends living in Shkoder, thus having strong familial and people relationships.

“I like the fact that I can meet everyday my relatives and my friends that I left here when I went to Germany. Of course, I was nostalgic about my city.” (Ardita, 59, 2021-2022)

Seven women had strong relations with Albania, thus, listing identification with the country and belongingness as an advantage to like it.

“Albania is my country where I have been born and lived my whole life. I know the streets, the language, I don’t feel a foreigner.” (Lindita, 44, 2015-2022)

Five respondents mentioned that having a good job in Shkodra, makes life in their home country easier, so, considering as an advantage to live in Albania.

“It is my country and I like it. It is an expression that says ‘my place is where my work is’ and for my family now here it is our place, my husband having a business and me working as a teacher.” (Blerta, 49, 2003-2022)

Two women considered Shkodra to have a beautiful nature and “warm” people.

“I like the beauty of Shkodra, nature... We like the nature and our close people that we stay all the time.” (Linda, 54, 2007-2022)

Nora (51) appraises old traditions that people in Shkodra still preserve.

“I have nostalgia for Albanian traditions. Shkodra has many cultural values such as songs, humor. People know how to entertain in Shkodra.” (Nora, 51, 2013-2022)

Disadvantages

The themes most common to disadvantages included the following (with a quote typical of responses).

Nine women considered economic conditions in Albania as a disadvantage to live in the home country because of high prices, low salaries, and no employment opportunities.

“I have been lucky to find a job after my return but people are not to blame for migrating because there is no job in Shkodra. The prices also are very high in comparison with the living standard of the country. For example my salary in New York was \$2200/month and I could buy a pair of sneakers Tommy Hilfiger for \$35. My salary in Shkodra is 50000 L and I wanted to buy a pair of sneakers that are of good quality and their cost was 20000 L.” (Alma, 47, 2021-2022)

“There are various difficulties to live in Albania. When I returned I was faced with very expensive prices. I was shocked because some prices were more expensive in Albania than in Germany.”(Ardita, 59, 2021-2022)

“The most difficult part in Albania is having fewer opportunities to develop myself. This is the most difficulty as well as unpaid work. The “brain” is not paid enough. Many social changes have taken place in Albania; I cannot say that there is still social instability. But it is worse from the economic opportunity.” (Blerta, 49, 2003-2022)

“Here, the wages are low, prices are high, and to find a job is difficult. Here is a fight for survival.” (Ardisa, 27, 2021-2022)

“It is difficult to live here because of unemployment. I have been lucky because prior to migration I have worked in a private school as an assistant teacher. Later I have worked in a public school as a teacher. When I was in Italy I interrupted my work, but after return I started again in the same private school I have been working before. But to enter in public schools is very difficult. I should enter again in an exam called ‘portal’. This is terrible because teachers with experience and with the appropriate education and certificates should skip this examination. It is nonsense, but if you don’t enter this exam you cannot be qualified for a job.” (Blerta S., 39, 2021-2022)

“The only problem is that there is no work force. I have been to Forestry School to search for students and to offer them a job in our business. Nobody accepted, even though they did not know the wage and the working conditions.” (Fatjola, 38, 2012-2022)

“Politics and bad governance are ruining this country. There is no possibility to find a job, in fact there is a lot of work to do but nobody offers you a job because you are not young enough. In every job announcement, they are looking for ages 18-35 years old.” (Lindita, 44, 2015-2022)

“In Albania you are not getting the deserved salary for what you are working. I was working a lot but being paid less.” (Mirjam, 45, 2002-2022)

“Insecurity for life and economic conditions are the most difficult part to live in Albania. I have a good economy but when I hear other people complaining every day for not being able to cover their expenses, I become afraid. This phenomenon is not touching my family but I am living here and there are people migrating every day; so indirectly soon or later this will affect our business as well.”
(Silvana, 38, 2016-2022)

Health care issue such as the bribes, hospital conditions, and not taking the appropriate medical care are listed as disadvantages to live in the home country.

“I think about the health care in Shkodra. I hope my children will never have health problems but in case they will have, where to send them, in which hospital. The conditions in the hospital of Shkodra are not good, the technology is backward. In Shkodra to take a good care you should ‘know’ someone. I don’t know anyone in Shkodra, so I am dependent on my parents. I hope they probably would know someone.” (Ardisa, 27, 2021-2022)

“I had also difficulty to access in healthcare. You need to have money and to have connection to go to the hospital. Otherwise there is neglect from doctors. The medicines and everything is very expensive” (Ardita, 59, 2021-2022)

Among many disadvantages, backward mentality is considered one of them. Some women mentioned that old-fashioned thinking makes life difficult in Albania.

“It is difficult to live in Shkodra particularly because of the mentality. People pretend to support you but on the other hand they only talk behind your back. For example when I returned I wanted to work the same job what I did in Greece. I was trying to work as a cleaner but everybody judged me, saying how you are going to work as cleaner, it is a shame. While in Greece I have never been judged about my work. But I think that every type of job if you feel well and are treated good, it is not a shame, it is a favor.”
(Mirjam, 45, 2002-2022)

Valbona (54) referred to the lack of social life and more specifically to women who are not involved in social life as a barrier for integrating well in Albanian society.

“In Shkodra there is a lack of social life, a lack of social services, and a lack of woman integration. Women should be at the same level as men intellectually, at work, in society, and at home. There are already some organizations to help women but I am skeptical if they function well or not, if they are fictive or not. I am skeptical with almost all organizations that operate in Albania.” (Valbona, 54, 2019-2022)

Based on Ardita’s statement, going through different institutions to get a document makes life more complicated in Albania, as such listing bureaucracy as a disadvantage of the country.

“(…) another difficulty is bureaucracy. For example I wanted to take a personal certificate; there were many unnecessary documents that I should submit, like ownership document and such stuff” (Ardita, 59, 2021-2022)

Two women declared to have experienced patriarchalism in their families. Although they have lived in the West, their family members seem to have embedded patriarchalism.

“I have been raised in a patriarchal family, where the authority of father and grandfather has been undisputed. Even though we have been a citizen family from Shkodra, our family has been very traditional. I faced patriarchalism more and more in husband’s family. They used to live with strong rules and norms. My husband has left Albania in a very young age but again he preserved the Albanian mentality.” (Amila, 45, 2016-2022)

“In Albania we ask the husband or the man in general for everything. The figure of the father and the brother has dominated. When my father was not at home, we daughters should ask our brother.” (Ardisa, 27, 2021-2022)

Support upon Return

It is supposed that individuals who had support after return migration feel better and re-integrate faster than those who did not have any support after return. Regarding this assumption, all the women were asked if they had any support after return or not. Ten respondents declared to have experienced support from family and/or community, two others declared of not having experienced any support.

“I was feeling good, my relatives and my friends have stayed very close to me, supporting me emotionally.”
(Ardita, 59, 2021-2022)

“I feel good because when I left I had many friends. During school years I have been a good student but at the same time I was a very social person. When I came back, I have met the same friends that I had when I left and I understood that there are some friendships that never get lost.”
(Amila, 45, 2016-2022)

“I had support from my mother; I could live thanks to her savings.” (Alma, 47, 2021-2022)

“My family supports me a lot. I sent my children at 7.30 in the kindergarten, and then at 8 I have to be at work. My father takes the children from kindergarten at 13.00 and at 16.00 after I leave my work I take my children from my parent’s home.” (Ardisa, 27, 2021-2022)

“People welcomed me; Albanians are very warm and loving. But there were also others who really dreamed of going in a legal way abroad and they were surprised how we returned. At that time people were going in an illegal way with boats, with truck, sleeping under the bridges. So they were more surprised for our return but not prejudicing because they learned the real reason of our return.”
(Blerta, 49, 2003-2022)

“Church lady helped me; she was Christian and gave me the contact of the church. The church suggested me not to

live at my father's house because it was destroyed but to take a house for rent. The church paid my rent for one year till I found a job and could cover the expenses myself.” (Ermira, 42, 2014-2022)

Some quotes typical of expressing that support was not sought or did not occur include the following.

“We had emotional support from all. Everybody told us ‘good that you returned, we will help you’ but we did not see any help, I mean financial support.” (Lindita, 44, 2015-2022)

“No, I didn't have any support from the state or from any organization. In fact, I didn't ask anyone for support but working in a public sector and being a divorced woman I expected to have support and it is necessary for returned woman, especially for those divorced woman.” (Amila, 45, 2016-2022)

State Assistance

All the interviewed women mentioned if they received any support from state or not after their return. Seventeen respondents stated that they did not receive any support or assistance from the state after their return.

“No, absolutely I did not get any support from state. I wanted to be supported to find a job and the time I was applying for job and asking at the work office saying that I returned from migration, their answer was: ‘You have to wait; we have to employ other applicants that have been here’. This has been the most difficult part that I needed support.” (Blerta, 49, 2003-2022)

“Absolutely no, we did not have any support. We heard that when a new business is opened, there are no taxes to pay for 3 years. In fact it was the opposite, the week that our business was opened; the state came to collect the taxes and social insurance. I have only received a grant from the

European Regional Development Fund to invest for tools and machinery.” (Fatjola, 38, 2012-2022)

“We have established a venture that deals with the growth of rattlesnakes but we bankrupted. It was too hot and all rattlesnakes died along. The state did not support us to recover and start again.” (Mirjam, 47, 2002-2022)

Among these seventeen women, three women declared to have not contacted the state and one of them stated that she had no information how it functions to search support from the state.

“No, I did not have any support but I think programs are sporadic and I don’t know how people benefit from reintegration programs.” (Celstina, 36, 2020-2022)

Whereas Amila (45) suggested the type of support that should be offered from the state or organizations with the aim to help return migrants, especially women return migrants who are divorced. This is a vulnerable group that needs more the assistance and protection from the state where they decided to live.

“It is need for support, particularly for women and not only for returned women but also for other women living here. The most support should be in the employment context, especially in Shkodra because Tirana has other advantages, a more developed city and more opportunities to work. Returnees are another target group that should be supported because they passed a lot of sacrifice; they left their homes to work and live abroad, to start their life from the beginning. At the same time, they leave again their country where they spend many years abroad to return to country that may not be considered anymore their home. I know that there is a project from GIZ working on the reintegration of return migrants but it is not specifically for women. I think that should be support and projects not only for returned women but also for other women living here, especially for divorced women as their life becomes very difficult after divorce. The reality in Albania is difficult, people who are sick and their medicines are not

reimbursed, people who don't have a job and the state doesn't provide assistance. In conclusion, there are many problems but fewer projects especially for the support of women, for the support of divorced women.” (2016-2022)

Another three women among the seventeen interviewed women expressed to have prepared their return, thus, not contacting for any support and not being in need for the support of state.

“No, I didn't because I have fixed all the things by myself before returning. But, I think all returnees need support. If I wouldn't have all these things, what I would have done? I think single mothers should have more support.” (Estela, 44, 2010-2022)

“We didn't search for any support because we have prepared our return. We had a job before coming.” (Linda, 54, 2007-2022)

Only Nora (51) and Lindita (44) phrased that a support from the Albanian state was offered to them, even though Nora refused it for her personal commitment.

“After my return, I have contacted the Work Office to find a job. They found me a job in a factory because I don't have a university degree so I could not work in good jobs. But I didn't accept that job because I gave birth to my daughter and I couldn't work that period of time” (Nora, 51, 2013-2022)

“I have already done a work practice, an opportunity that was given to me from the Work Office together with GIZ (a German organization operating in Albania). I have contacted the Work Office and I got this practice from this office.” (Lindita, 44, 2015-2022)

Perceptions of Successful Reintegration

A perception question was asked during the interview to assess how returning migrants perceived their situations, as well as to solicit their challenges. Perceptions help reveal how a person views their environment or makes sense of their situation, which becomes the basis for their behaviors and their decisions (such as whether they feel the need to migrate or not based on their economic situation). It is important to note that perceptions can differ vastly due to differences in life experiences, education, attitudes, motives, and interests. Given the diverse backgrounds of interviewed women return migrants, a perception question was useful in gauging each woman's sense of their own success or situation. Below are important factors women perceived as necessary for re-integration.

Jobs

Three women mentioned that having a good job and employment opportunities, help to reintegrate faster.

“A good reintegration means to have a job, a good job.”
(Ardita, 59, 2021-2022)

“There is a lot of competition but few opportunities. I think I would never be re-integrated if a vacant job would not be available for me. I am working in a private school but I would not find a job as a teacher in a public school because there are no places available.” (Alma, 47, 2021-2022)

“Job is a priority to reintegrate. A good job gives you a good economy, also a social status, and many other opportunities.” (Blerta, 49, 2003-2022)

Good Economy

In addition to employment opportunities, providing enough income and having a good economy would lead to a successful reintegration.

“It is very difficult to re-integrate immediately for a woman that comes from abroad, which is unemployed and without money.” (Amila, 45, 2016-2022)

“To have a good economy is a good path toward reintegration after return.” (Silvana, 38, 2016-2022)

Networks/Connections

Three women considered social networks that offer connections to find a job as the leading path toward reintegration.

“I think the factors that help someone to be reintegrated in Albania are connections and getting to know people that can facilitate someone’s return migration.” (Amila, 45, 2016-2022)

“It is difficult to be reintegrated. Firstly, I have lost the connections after so many years. A person feels like an alien after return, nobody knows you. It is very difficult till the time you start to create connections, networks.” (Ermira, 42, 2014-2022)

“To have connections, to know people to get a good job is important for a good reintegration. It functions like this in Albania, but not only in Albania, in Canada as well. You should have good references everywhere you are.” (Nurije, 63, 2020-2022)

Experience/Qualification

Human capital and trainings can “open” many doors that will facilitate reintegration.

“To have experience, to bring experience from abroad is very useful. If you want to be different from others in the

labor market you must bring something new. In Albania people don't have the culture of work. The worker comes in slippers and not shoes; he comes in jeans and not a sports suit, while he will work all day making furniture.” (Fatjola, 38, 2012-2022)

“To have a university level or a profession because it is easier to find a job.” (Nora, 51, 2013-2022)

Support for New Ideas/Being Open for New Ideas

Based on Valbona's and Estela's perceptions, it is necessary to be open to accept new ideas.

“It is very difficult to reintegrate because in Albania you don't have spaces. Many people that I know offered me a job and I say to them that I will enter a job if you will give the possibility to work and contribute for that job. If you won't give me the possibility to do my work, then I will not enter because I don't need to work for money. I don't need money but I need to contribute.” (Valbona, 54, 2019-2022)

“To be integrated or re-integrated, people should be open to accept new things, not to say ‘what is this job, I cannot do this, I cannot learn this’. I mean it is necessary to have courage to do new things, not to be prejudicial, and to adapt to the environment. I am open to new opportunities that life brings.” (Estela, 44, 2010-2022)

Feeling Reintegrated

After being asked about the women's perceptions of a good reintegration, the respondents were asked also if they were reintegrated after the years they passed in Albania. Four of the interviewed women declared to have been reintegrated fast as they did not have high expectations in their country of origin. At the moment they decided to return to Albania they expressed to have realistic expectations. Whereas, five of the

women responded to have not been reintegrated yet. For example Nora (51) mentioned that because of mentality she could not be reintegrated yet even though that nine years have passed. Linda (54) explained that she had been integrated faster in host country than been reintegrated in home country. While Ardita (59) stated that she was not re-integrated yet and she feels she does not care if she will re-integrate or not. Her only preoccupation is her family, which means if her husband and her sons work, then her life would be properly good.

“I am not reintegrated but it doesn’t matter if I don’t re-integrate at this age, I am 59 years old. If my husband and my sons work, that would be alright. But, later if I have the possibility to work somewhere and if I am in a good health I can work.” (Ardita, 59, 2021-2022)

Ten other women are not sure if they considered themselves reintegrated or not, expressing ambivalent opinions.

“I don’t know if I am re-integrated or not. I have not stayed for too long in Germany and when I returned I found like things did not change in Albania. On the other hand, I found myself unemployed and searching for a job in Shkodra is not easy. In these times I work some periodical jobs but I am not sure if I can consider myself re-integrated or not.” (Lindita, 44, 2015-2022)

Regret and Re-migration Intentions

One of the interview questions was if the returned women felt regret for their return and subsequently if they had intentions to re-migrate again. Eleven of nineteen women responded to have experienced regret about their return. Consequently, they were thinking to re-migrate again either to their previous host countries or in other Western countries.

“I go often in Denmark and when I go there, ‘I take breath’. I say ‘Oh God, why can’t I stay there?’ When I return to Albania I say ‘Oh God, where I am coming?’ I am thinking to re-migrate again. I would like to re-migrate; I would like to leave Albania.” (Ardisa, 27, 2021-2022)

“I want to re-migrate again but not in Italy. I would wish to go to the USA because it is the state that gives better opportunities for migrants. It is probably different from other countries; there is no prejudice or racism. Italy has a better health care than in Albania but finding a job is difficult. I think about USA because I think about my children’s future.” (Blerta S., 39, 2021-2022)

“I would re-migrate in Germany. I liked that country very much; it is somehow like Albania, the same climate. I started to integrate there, we were participating in many activities, and I started to learn the language.” (Lindita, 44, 2015-2022)

Eight other women declared of not having re-migration intentions because they are well re-integrated or because they do not have the possibilities to take the path of migration once again.

“I don’t intend to re-migrate again. I even refused the Canadian visa. Some of our relatives are in USA and Canada and they begged us to go and live there. But we didn’t accept. We invested too much in Albania. We complain for our social problems but these problems are in every country. Our relatives in USA work all day doing five jobs a day. Then they miss their children and their families. The children need the presence of their parents. Moreover, if you work 5 jobs in Albania as well, of course you will be rich.” (Fatjola, 38, 2012-2022)

“No, with a small kid is very difficult. I have started from zero in Albania and to restart from zero in another country is very difficult. My child could finally learn Albanian because in Denmark she was in the kindergarten and was always talking Danish. Imagine now to send her in another country to learn again a different language, so, I won’t do that.” (Norga, 30, 2020-2022)

Return migrants advise to migrants

Below are given some advices and suggestions that returned migrant women give to migrants if they should return or not.

Return!

The advice of four women is to return to Albania, to contribute for the country, for brain gain, and to bring human capital.

“I would advice only to come and contribute for Albania, to bring their human capital, to help Shkodra not to be “dead”. I would advice those Albanian people who have been living abroad for more than 20 years, who have 2 or 3 houses abroad, who have a very good economy, to come and give something for Albania. We don’t have skilled and professional people here. For example if I decide to migrate again and leave this job, I am sure that the director would say please suggest to us any good teacher. I don’t know which teacher to suggest, there are no more good teachers.” (Alma, 47, 2021-2022)

“It is a good idea if someone returns with human capital and tries to invest in Shkodra, maybe to open a business or to share their skills and mentality. I hope that Albania will change for better and it can change through remittances from migrants and from returnees that bring their human capital, skills, and new ideas and mentality. But the government and the institutions should support their ideas and contribution.” (Amila, 45, 2016-2022)

“If they have courage and are hard working, let them return.” (Estela, 44, 2010-2022)

“I would suggest returning because I want brain gain. When I hear that young people are leaving, I feel very sorry. Even for my children I want them back but if the state would not support returnees and if they bring a new experience but they are less paid, then ...probably nobody

will return. It is a pity to lose all Albanian intellectuals in the world. Well, Albania to be sincere doesn't offer much.”
(Linda, 54, 2015-2022)

Do not return!

Five women do not advise other migrants to return because the country has nothing to offer, no jobs, high prices, and backward mentality.

“If returnees come without capital (money) and find the country less developed economically, there is no reason to come. I have sent my daughter abroad to study, in Turkey. So how would I say to other people to come here?”
(Mirjam, 45, 2002-2022)

“To suggest others to return means to offer them an opportunity to return. The state cannot offer them anything. I don't advice my children to return because I cannot offer anything here. Life is work and where work is, your life is. If they cannot find a job, I don't suggest them to return.”
(Blerta, 49, 2003-2022)

“No, I don't suggest anyone to return and this is not only based on my experience. Whoever I stay with, I hear things like ‘there is no job, the wage is too low, and the prices are too high’. They all complain about this country. I work in a place where I can contact with people who migrate. There is a high number of people who migrate and I say to myself ‘why I am not one of these people?’ I definitely want it, I don't like this place.” (Ardisa, 30, 2021-2022)

“How to return, what to find here? State? Assistances? I have stayed in Greece for three or four months without working but I had assistance. In Albania there is a fictive assistance. The assistance is ridiculous, it is very low. You won't survive with that assistance. I took as assistance 600 euro/month in Greece. Here in Albania it is 5000L/month and imagine now. In Greece, prices are not so high for basic needs. To buy foods is not expensive but in Shkodra prices are very high for foods.” (Ermira, 42, 2014-2022)

“No, it is difficult to return. I have migrated two times because I went for the first time in Italy and stayed some years, later I came back in Albania and stayed 6 months and then again I went to Italy. But it wasn’t easy, to find a job, to find a house, to adapt with the life, etc.” (Nora, 51, 2013-2022)

It depends...

Five other women do not give an exact answer. They are stuck in the middle of giving suggestions to return or not. That depends on migrant’s conditions.

“It depends on the life they do. If a person will be in the conditions I was in and at the same time have a support in Albania, why not to return? Let them think about themselves, their lives and their children’s life. Let them come and feel good and not to be afraid of prejudices.” (Norga, 30, 2020-2022)

“It depends because other people might have been integrated very well in the host countries. Someone who had the chance to go legally and to have documents very fast, it is easy to integrate and find themselves in that country.” (Nurije, 63, 2020-2022)

“It depends where they have migrated. For example to come from Germany in Albania is not worthy. For us who were living in Greece is better in Albania than there. But if someone is in a better place and has better conditions or job opportunity, then it is not worthy to return to Albania.” (Samela, 20, 2021-2022)

“All migrants that I know want to return and live in Albania. But they don’t have the conditions and they are not sure if the situation in Albania will be better. I think everyone wants to live in their own country. But, I wouldn’t suggest someone that has a great life abroad to come and live in Albania with 30000 L/month.” (Silvana, 38, 2016-2022)

“Only if they have achieved the things they wanted, otherwise they should not come and lose themselves in

Albania. For example, I have achieved what I wanted. People who have something to give should come and not people who come for a living. They should come here to change others, to be an example for others. I think young people should migrate and after they got experiences abroad they should come back.” (Valbona, 54, 2019-2022)

CHAPTER SIX

DISCUSSION

Using a grounded theory approach, 19 women were interviewed to answer two main research questions: (1) Upon return, what are the perceptions of women migrants of what they experienced before, during, and after migration? and (2) What are the perceptions of how reintegration might be improved? As noted earlier, a primary reason for selecting grounded theory for this study was to build a substantive theory about reintegration of returned women in Northern Albania. The discussion section first presents an interpretation of the overall results of migration and reintegration experience. Next is a discussion of the implications of the results for various theoretical approaches to reintegration. Following is a discussion of policy implications, limitations, and conclusion.

Before Migration

Migration has historically been part of human development and is essentially the expression of the individual's desire and determination to overcome difficulties, hoping, and designing a better life for oneself and one's family.

Almost half of the returned women stated they had a good or a normal life prior to migration. Amongst these women the factors influencing a good life prior to migration were related to having a good job which would lead to a good economy and consequently to a good life. According to interviewers, a "normal" or a good life is considered when a person is settled in a job that provides good income. Acquiring reasonable housing,

adequate food and clothing, and supporting family were also important reasons for valuing their life.

However, explaining the interviewees' narrative of a normal life simply through the economic and familial motives would fall short. None of the women mentioned about their social life in Shkodra. Through such answers, it is evident that capitalism after communism was influential in Albania. Capitalism as an ideology places capital above everything else, i.e. wealth, or money are more important than anything else. According to this ideology, the profit motive is the one that brings well-being, because people trying to bring profit for themselves engage in trade and develop the economy. This seems to be related to the fact that Albanians were relatively poor and nobody cares about social life instead of providing basic needs. It appears that poverty developed from a weak economic base at the beginning of reform, worsened as the reforms continued, and, for some, accelerated during the 1997 financial crisis.

Some of the respondents also mentioned education as a crucial factor in having a good job. Education has a significant impact on economic development on an aggregate level (see, Lucas 1988) and on wellbeing at an individual level (Helliwell, 2003). There are two main channels that education affects subjective well-being. The first direct channel considers the positive effect on self-confidence and self-estimation and pleasure from acquiring knowledge. The second indirect channel takes into account that education promotes better employment, higher salary, and improved health.

Despite many living a satisfied life, Albanian women and their families decided to migrate for several reasons but three were prominent: family considerations, political

instability reducing economic opportunities, and improved education opportunity elsewhere.

Family Considerations

The term “familism” is generally conceptualized as a sense of obligation to family (Keefe et al., 1979; Sabogal et al., 1987), but it also means family support, family as referents, and sacrifice for the family members (Nolle et al., 2012; Schwartz, 2007). The value of familism was expressed by a woman “sacrificing her personal needs to meet those of family” when the woman’s parents found her a husband by arrangement regardless of whether she liked him or not. Because of family considerations she felt ashamed to apply to enter the university. Other cases included parents sacrificing for their children, as they often mentioned “moving for the children’s sake”. The overall well-being of the family was as strong consideration for many in their decision to leave.

Political Instability

Women stated that their life prior to migration was related to the memories of the past. They uttered dissatisfaction with the life they had spent under communism. There were often silences when women reflected upon their earlier lives, years lived before the country freed itself from communist oppression in 1991. The researcher had the feeling that the ‘dark years’ – essentially more than forty years – when Albania was governed by the dictator Enver Hoxha, were indescribably severe and a past part of the Albanian history, that’s why the respondent women did not express all the details from their everyday life under the communist regime. The aim of this study was not to focus on

everyday life of Albanians under the communist regime as, many other studies point out how harsh it was to live under a repressive regime ruled by a paranoid ruthlessness leader who ruling a country ranked the most closed of all the socialist societies of Eastern Europe (see, Idrizi, 2017; King & Vullnetari, 2016; Vickers, 1995).

In post communist period, Albanians were confronted with a different reality, quite opposite to the one they have lived in all their life. This situation was viewed as the first stage of economic reform for the country, which led to confusion and political instability (Muco, 1997). The transition from communism to pluralism has not been easy. One of the interviewees claimed that the period after communism (from 1990-1995) has been even worse than communism period. People were suffering the consequences of post-communism period such as human right violations, restrictions on freedom of expression, and manipulation of the legal system (Abrahams, 1996).

Possibly the most significant and real revolution after the fall of communism happened in human beings. Imagine a person who was born during communist period. The first thing to learn at school was about the Labor Party, which was considered as his/her second mother, and a little later he/she learnt the notion how good communism was and how bad were all the states under the capitalist and monarchy regime (Kume & Llaci, 2000). What an individual could hear from parents was to be careful and not to talk outside about the discussion he/she heard among households. A child was grown up with the ideology not to talk to people who had a bad biography.

Also, the transformation of an individual came as a result of work, passing from a controlled work to privatized work as the factories were closed or burned. People should

work hard to survive as capitalism was replacing communism through a market-oriented economy. The transition from communism to democracy had its own consequences in every sphere of life. After the collapse of communism, Albania experienced tremendous changes from individual alienation, family structure, to institutional changes with privatization.

After 1990s, many changes occurred in every level of society. The country's political elite had no democratic experience whatsoever. There was a shortage of qualified forces (Åslund & Sjöberg, 1992). Know-how was lacking in all sectors of administration, justice, the business world, technology, and media and had to be created from scratch. The collective agricultural production of the country was interrupted. Its place was taken by the exploitation of the land by families and small peasants, often with primitive tools. Due to the high unemployment rate, a mass migration started to Italy, Greece, and other countries of Western Europe, but also across the ocean. Albania in the first eight years of post-communism became the center of irregular commercial and construction activity. In this way, spaces were created that quickly provided people with income in a non-bureaucratic way. The other side of the coin was the illegal constructions, the depopulation of many mountain villages and the movement of the population in the country.

The creation of pyramidal schemes stands out as a special phenomenon of the post-communist society of Albania. Touted by the media and inexperienced politicians as the chance of capitalism, people were lied to and pocketed their hard-earned savings. By the spring of 1997 the number of equity investors grew steadily, lured by high rates

(Friedman et al., 2013). When the bubble burst it sparked an armed revolt. The country fell into a state of anarchy for several months. The insurgents in Vlora demanded their money back and called for the overthrow of the government. The land of eagles began to be called the “land of kalashnikov” (Kume & Llaci, 2000). Only the deployment of NATO’s military stabilization mission along with OSCE mediation efforts could create the framework for the restoration of state order and free elections, which Berisha (the man in power) subsequently lost. People, as also many respondents of this study stated, were afraid and insecure for their life and it took some years to return to normality after a considerable number of Albanians left the country. The country was also experiencing brain drain because of political instability.

Although women made the decision to leave during various periods of political instability, pessimism about the current and future conditions affected all of the decisions to migrate.

Education Opportunities

F

or many students, studying abroad is a good opportunity to improve professional knowledge and launch a career. Dissatisfied with the education system in Albania, many prefer to study abroad.

According to respondents, it is an increasing trend of Albanian youth to go and study abroad possibly because of scholarships and acknowledged university programs. Studies (Ribaj, 2020) observed that a high percentage of Albanian youth want to pursue a university degree outside of the country.

For some women, a pull factor to study abroad resulted from the lack of employment after getting a university degree. A university degree appears as a prerequisite in most job competitions in Albania, but participants in the interview expressed skepticism about the role of a degree in employment. For example, Valbona affirmed that nepotism, family ties, or being a member of a political party create opportunities for employment and not a diploma. The possibilities to find a job based on meritocracy in other countries seem utopian. Two other participants in this study confirmed that there is an obstacle in Albania to find the deserved job and the job you like. For them it was easier to stay abroad and find a job after finishing university rather than to return.

During Migration

The situation for women during migration varied based on personal factors and the conditions of the country where they migrated. The most important themes revolved around stories of a family's legal status, cultural issues, economic conditions of the host country, cultural differences, the status of women, and the nature of parenting when single.

Legal context

Three of the participants in this study were registered as asylum-seekers in Germany. Asylum seekers are individuals who seek to be accepted in another country as refugees and are awaiting a decision on their application for refugee status, according to the relevant instruments of the international law. Asylum seeker is defined as the

individual who crosses the international borders because of war, disasters, fear of persecution, etc. in his/her country of origin (UNHCR). The individual is designated as an asylum seeker for as long as he or she has not yet received an answer or a decision on his or her request. Until the request is processed, the asylum seeker has the right not to return to the country of origin. A large number of Albanians started to request refuge in Germany in 2015, when the flow of applications from areas of conflict leads to deceleration of asylum applications. The decision to request for asylum in Germany from Albanians is associated with “the influence of smugglers along refugee routes toward European countries, with asylum seekers grossly overestimating the chances of being granted a refugee status” (Guichard, 2020, p.1112). The stream of refugee migrants represents a crisis not only for their country of origin, about refugees and the difficulties they face during their journey until arrival at the destination, but also for host countries, and refugee migration policies of all countries.

For the women whose legal status was legally questionable, the integration was slower as they did not have the opportunity to work. They were also staying in an asylum with many other people from different nationalities, without having the possibility to meet frequently German people. Therefore, those women who migrated illegally and/or stayed illegally in host countries faced more challenges than those who migrated in a legal way and had the authorization to stay in migrating countries. Even though it is considered illegal for undocumented migrants to work without a permit, some women worked without a contract of employment. The phenomenon of illegal employment has

led to many difficulties for migrants such as being without social insurance, low payments, and the fear of being caught by authorities and returned to their home country.

Economic Condition in Host Country

Women left Albania for better economic conditions but sometimes found their host countries also experienced economic problems. Examples include when countries reduced investments and launched forced structural reforms to reduce their own expenses. Subsidies were cut everywhere: in education, in social support systems, unemployment, and especially among young people. Wages and pensions in most EU countries were cut during the times women were in their host countries and this caused uncertainty about the future across Europe. The financial crisis often turned into a social and political crisis.

One of the main findings based on the interviews was the fact that women migrants returned to Albania temporarily or permanently due to the lack of jobs or other economic problems. The return was voluntary and of course, the economic crisis (the Great Recession of 2008) of those countries was the primary reason. For example, a number of women reported that they returned after 2009, joining the largest return of migrants to Albania, mainly from Italy, Greece, and Germany.

Cultural and Language Barriers

Differences in culture, language, values, and norms convert into migration costs that increase the barriers and difficulties of migration. Culture is not an easy notion to determine. Broadly defined, culture is a term that refers to a broad and diverse set of the

most intangible aspects of social life. It consists primarily of the values, beliefs, language and communication systems, and practices that people share in common and that can be used to define them as a collective, as well as the material objects that are common to that group or society (Giddens et al., 2009).

When migrants leave their home countries, they often face with the difficulties of integration as they assess their original cultural characteristics and aim to preserve them while at the same time following the dominant society.

The process of integration, as defined by Berry et al. (2006) refers mainly to cultural practices. For a fast and successful integration, knowledge of the language is very important. Some women indicated that language was their first barrier when they were in migration. A category of women who could not achieve cultural adaptation occurred due to nostalgia or a strong connection with the country of origin. After the fall of communism in 1990s, poverty, financial instability, and unemployment forced Albanians to migrate, most to Greece and Italy where language barriers resulted in reports of prejudice and discrimination.

Different values and norms in host countries were also challenging as women were nostalgic for life and connections in Albania. There was a category of women and families who could not achieve cultural adaptation due to nostalgia or strong ties with the people from the country of origin. Nostalgia made these women feel like they lost something and consequently they could not feel comfortable in receiving countries. Nostalgia is the feeling that comes over an individual when one thinks about the past. In fact, the notion of nostalgia originates from ancient Greek and is built from the word

“nostos” which means ‘going back’ and “algos” meaning ‘pain’. Its etymology is very clear and straightforward. It seemed that periodic visits to Albania and social networks with compatriots influenced the deification they had for the country of origin (De Haas et al., 2015; Tsuda, 2003). In the case of migrants, the idea of “host state” mostly becomes a vague concept as migrants may experience uncertainty regarding the country to which they belong. Thus, they are searching their ‘home’ that gives them one strong sense of belonging and identification. Some women never felt like being “home” in their host country.

The emotional ties with a familiar place in the home country, where households and acquaintances dwell, is common (Ritchey, 1976). Duval (2004) notes that social attachments to the home country can surely predict return migration because of “a desire to remain a member of the ‘home’ community by maintaining relationships with family members or friends” (p.62). The attachment to the “homeland” was strong for almost all the women in this study and women who were emotionally attached to “homeland” were more likely to return. As a conclusion of the abovementioned discussion, it can be conceived that these women were strong and resilient in adapting to a new country, at the same time naïve for not having realistic expectations.

On the other hand, some of the women integrated very fast in their host countries, especially those who migrated in the United States. USA is a country built on immigration and even though the United States makes no declaration of multiculturalism, the Department of Justice’s Community Relations Service (CRS) act as a “‘peacemaker’

for community conflicts and tensions arising from differences of race, color, and national origin” (The United States Department of Justice, 2020).

Based on women’s narratives that were well-integrated in USA, it is expected an American host society to like better at integration and this is possibly the reason why migrants could adapt faster in that country.

Status of Women

Different scholars offer diverse definitions for social status. Referring to Giddens (2006), status is the position of a person in a particular group or society, which gives certain rights, privileges and responsibilities in relation to other members. In the same book of Giddens, status is classified into two types. The first one is status that is given at birth, defined as ‘ascribed status’, such as being a woman. The second one is ‘achieved status’ that comes from effort, self-esteem, and life decisions that have led the person to that classification. Most of the respondent women of this study declared that their status was raised while they were living and working in host countries.

Migration per se was considered to raise status. The enhancement of status resulted from the employment and respect in the host society.

Parenting

Migration scholars share their opinions that child care supervision in migration is very pressured and challenging for parents, since they must face with different solutions to manage work demand and child care responsibilities (Venta & Cuervo, 2022). Three of the respondents narrated how difficult was for them to be single mothers in a foreign

country. One of them was divorced and two others had their husbands in prison, so they raised their children alone. The psychological tension that single migrant mothers already felt is great, even greater when the weight of responsibility of raising children alone is added. Sometimes mothers were helped by parents and relatives, but there were others who relied only on their own strength. Being a mother and working at the same time is incredibly difficult. The most difficult period for them was while they had to work and the only strategy was to delegate their children to their families for care or to take children to work.

In summary, women reported experiences common to migration everywhere, though of particular note is that their wellbeing improved because of the status and opportunities afforded to them as women in host countries. Additionally, women after return reported more awareness of social life possibilities instead of focusing exclusively on economic matters as what constitutes a good life.

Upon Return from Migration

Return migrants may be defined as people who move “back to their home-lands to resettle” (Gmelch, 1980, p. 136). Some women returned after having fulfilled their goals to pass a quiet and/or better life. Other decisions related to various calculations “about both one’s own and the life quality of one’s family” (Saar & Saar, 2020, p.10). Based on this study, different life needs dominate specific times in one’s life that influence decisions (see e.g., Eimermann, 2017).

The present study found two types of return migrants: ‘typical returnees’ who return after having accumulated necessary human and financial capital to invest at ‘home’

and ‘washed-up returnees’ who returned not ‘recovered’ from migration. Factors other than women’s experience and skills also impacted their return experience. For example, return expectations and the opportunities in their sending and receiving countries also influenced perceptions of return (Gmelch, 1980; van Meeteren et al., 2014). While one group expressed positive experiences, others expressed negative feelings or had ambivalent perceptions regarding their return to the homeland.

The woman who reported positive return experiences returned because of nostalgia and business opportunities. Whether or not these migrants succeeded in their entrepreneurship, they typically were well-prepared for their return. Successful returnees are known to make appropriate arrangements before their return (van Meeteren et al., 2014). Successful returnees included Valbona (57) and Linda (57) who realized their objectives and returned to their previous ‘niche’ as lifestyle returnees. A second group of women who experienced less successful returns were those women whose return has been either voluntary (because of conditions at host countries) or involuntary (because they did not have the right to stay). Included in this second group are Mirjam (45) and Lindita (44).

Another final group of respondents were those women who had mixed or ambivalent (both positive and negative) feelings about their return. A detailed analysis reveals that such feeling generated from unwillingness to return from destination countries. Other women who experienced ambivalent feelings are those whose motive to return was a result of negative experiences in host countries such as unemployment or de-acculturation (not being adapted with the major society). Although most women who

returned due to negative push factors in the host countries expressed difficulties in the beginning of their return, those who returned long ago usually managed to pass the initial difficulties which have now vanished.

Economic Considerations in Albania upon Return

Responses to questions about life after return were likely influenced by the length of time back in Albania and present circumstances. Currently Albania is an upper-middle-income country (World Bank, 2022), ranking 67/191 on the human development index (UNDP, 2022). Despite its relatively high score and ranking, the country has a population that is stricken by continuous levels of poverty and human rights implications. Return migrants who returned in the last three years listed more disadvantages to live in Albania, coinciding with three difficult years when Albania was harshly affected by the economic shocks which followed both the 2019 earthquake and the COVID-19 pandemic. The impact is experienced differently in urban centers like the capital Tirana doing better than other cities and rural areas. Depending upon where they returned, migrants not only experience obvious economic differences between Western countries and Albania, but also other gaps in progress and opportunities within their country.

Moreover, based on participant's answers there is a decrease in the number of labor force in Albania because youth prefer to migrate instead of being paid little. Despite the high unemployment rate, businesses are finding it difficult to find new workers. On the doors and windows of businesses in Albania, announcements have become frequent, through which workers are wanted. Sellers, cashiers, tailors, cooks and waiters are the professions that are most in demand in recent months. Labor shortage has become a

major problem for all sectors. One of the respondents having her family business narrated that the lack of manpower has turned into a challenge for which solution is difficult.

Human Rights Considerations

The European Commission's Progress Report (2022) for Albania estimated that the country has made moderate progress in some areas of human rights, but some respondents in this study evaluate the situation after return even worse than when they left. Even though Albania has legal frameworks mainly according to European standards and has ratified most of the human rights conventions, the implementation of the mechanisms for the protection of these rights seems to be vague (Dhembo et al., 2019). Regarding perceptions of respondents, human rights in Albania look good on “paper”, but vulnerable groups and return migrants community failed to receive the necessary protection and assistance and often face discrimination.

The Council of Ministers and the Ministry of Education and Sports are each responsible for receiving of measures with a positive character to fight discrimination in regarding the right to education. One of the respondents suffered direct discrimination on behalf of her daughter in education system. Direct discrimination occurs when a student or a program or structure is treated less favorably than others. In the education sector, obstacles have been encountered among returned migrants due to the Albanian language they did not speak well. Furthermore, most children born in the host countries encounter difficulties in speaking the Albanian language, and the environment in kindergartens is another part of the puzzle that should be taken into account.

Healthcare Considerations

Another issue related to the difficulties after return is related to healthcare. The healthcare system in Albania is free and accessible to all, and yet the quality and the level of services are beyond being bad (Dogjani et al., 2022). Poor health care in Albania was one of the reasons women left their country. Albania is estimated to have the lowest hospital infrastructure capacity in the region, both in beds and in human resources. USAID (2018) reported that Albania has only 1.2 doctors per 1,000 inhabitants and 3.4 nurses per 1,000 inhabitants. According to the report, Albania has fewer human resources in medical staff than the Region and beyond.

According to Numbeo's (2020) (a global database for the quality of life) latest update for the period January-June 2020, Albania is the second-to-last in Europe for the Health Care Index. Numbeo has clarified that the Healthcare Index is an overall assessment of the quality of the healthcare system, healthcare professionals, equipment, staff, doctors, cost, etc. The Health Care Index has been measured in two different ways, by service ratings and by experts. In both ways, Albania came in the penultimate country and in the 10 countries with the weakest health system among the 100 countries included in the study.

Equitable access to health care access is an important political matter in Albania. Health care systems usually intend at guaranteeing a good health care based on the populations' needs, regardless of individual's social and economic position, gender, religion, and race or ethnicity. According to the Constitution of Albania, all citizens are entitled to healthcare on equal terms. Moreover, to get a health service in Albania you

have to pay not only legal taxes, but also to grease the palm. Thus, returnees are pessimistic about the healthcare system's efficiency. They faced difficulty to access in healthcare because of not having enough income and not having connections to access easier in the hospital structures. They were also faced with neglect from doctors and expensive prices for medicines.

Status of Women

Many women encountered prejudices upon return. The stigma and difficulties were mostly seen among two divorced women, but often explained by them because they lived in a small town with a backward mentality. For some respondent women, the return migration experience has not been easy because they were “falling the stairs” from up to down, that means they were used to live with rules, in big metropolis that offer many opportunities. The return to a relatively small city, offering nothing in their perspective has its own consequences. One consequence was re-experiencing strong patriarchy. Even though we live in modern times, patriarchy is still present and embedded, and this can be seen from the answers of the interviewees, where especially two of them have experienced this phenomenon from their fathers, brothers, and husbands. Patriarchy is more visible and widespread in rural areas and cities in northern Albania such as Shkodra than in other urban areas. Still, from some of the women's responses, lessons learned from this study are that education and empowerment of women can help to overcome the entrenched patriarchy in Albania (see also, Zhllima et al., 2022).

Reintegration Process

The International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2004) conceptualizes reintegration as a re-involvement process in which the return migrants are found in their countries of origin through economic, social, and cultural integration. This is an important process to be supported not only by governmental institutions but also from family, friends, and community, and yet it is a difficult process that usually takes time to readjust and to feel at 'home' in every aspect. The category of return migration, indeed, constitutes a population that may be considered as a vulnerable group for difficulties they face during migration and after migration. The findings from this study show most women faced challenges in access and quality of receiving necessary reintegration services.

Women migrants who returned to their home country well-prepared, their reintegration process is somehow easy, expressing even positive view or few complaints about their return. Moreover, for women who returned with human and financial capital, employment becomes easier. While for women whose return has been compelled, often could not have opportunity to assume how their lives would be in Albania due to the emotional fight rooted by the conditions of their return. For most of the researcher's sample that mentioned having, in one way or another, perceptions of their after return experience, the belief to integrate well was usually mentioned. The researcher tried to explain what constituted to 'reintegrate well' for the respondents of this study. Almost all of their perceptions to be re-integrated successfully were related to the need to have an *economic stability* to enable them to 'grant' a good life for themselves and their families.

Hence, the major expectation found was that women return migrants have been looking forward to find a job or establish a venture with the gained money from abroad. The government was not seen as supportive. The respondents argued that it was difficult to settle in the reintegration system and to receive adequate services because of the system not working properly. They were not aware how the system functioned, and it was difficult where to find the necessary services. In conclusion, policies implemented by local and central government are crucial for a successful reintegration.

Other common perceptions of a good reintegration were related with their *social wellbeing* such as having emotional support from friends and relatives, thus not feeling loneliness. Return migration experience becomes difficult especially when migrants return to their country of origin without remembering the way of living after spending many years abroad and having no social networks. These difficulties can lead to feelings of embarrassment, distress, and fear, causing worry and pressure in returning migrants.

The ability to contribute to the economy of households during migration increased women's self-esteem and pushed them to participate equally with men in family decision-making. Some women adopted Western culture maintaining equal gender behavior upon return, but many others still preserve elements of traditional culture. That means, despite their experiences in developed countries, after their return women dealt with the norms related to being a 'good wife and mother.' There are many difficulties also in managing family and work life in Albania after return. Some women expressed having support from family members but many others find it very hard to work and to keep children. In

Albania families work hard because they prioritize private kindergartens and schools since public system of education do not offer the adequate conditions and safety.

In summary, women left in search of a better life, adapted with difficulty in their host countries, yet returned to Albania. They found “home” to have changed. They found a different country, and that people, their families, and their relatives changed. Overall, communities and social networks were not as supportive and “warm” as they were when they left. One thing did not change, the mentality present in Albania. There was still a patriarchy, still prejudices and a nosiness (curiosity) about others’ lives—where they are going, what they are wearing, what they are doing etc.

Simultaneously, women found themselves to have changed. Migrant women tried to adapt a Western culture and apply it to Albania but they faced challenges as they experienced prejudice for their own opinions, way of lifestyle, and behavior. Generally, most women consider themselves as “without citizenship” in terms of adaptation. They did not consider themselves as belonging either to Albania or their previous host country because they were not integrated in their host countries nor reintegrated in their home country after return.

W-curve Model

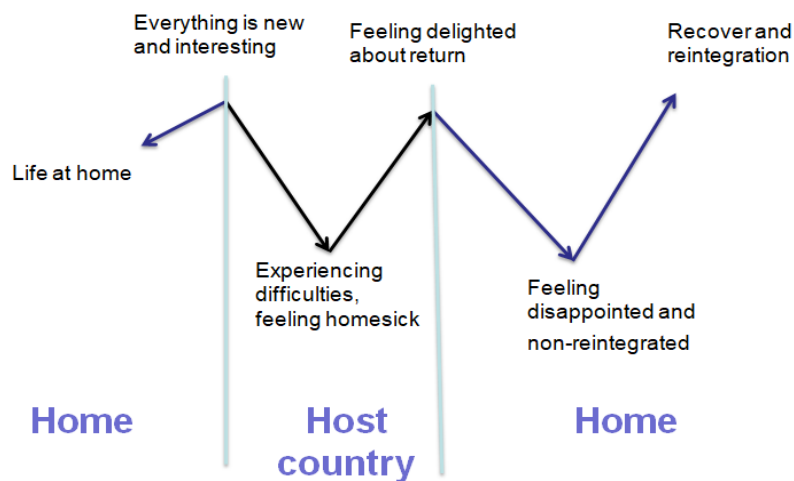
The study’s findings can be arranged using W-curve model introduced by Gullahorn and Gullahorn in 1963. The model that presents integration and re-integration process is used as a comprehensive framework for examining the participant’s experiences and exploring their feelings after return migration. The model is applied to position the return migrant in relation to diverse stages of migration and return migration

processes. Since return does not occur in emptiness but in certain conditions, the W-curve model enables the researcher to examine the conditions of return together with the experience of the returnee.

In the present study, participants mentioned the ups and downs of their migration and after-return migration experiences. Through applying a W-curve model of reintegration, the researcher could analyze three aspects of return and reintegration process – the economic, social, and cultural fields. In each field, participants mentioned ups and downs of their after-return lives. In this study, the W-curve model of reintegration describes the process of how migrants were faced with challenges (or not) of reintegration in these three fields.

The researchers evidenced that difficulties of return and later of reintegration are mainly in three dimensions – the social, the economic, and the cultural– that influence negatively in a sustainable and successful adaptation (Marino & Lietaert, 2022).

Figure 1.2 W- curve model



Economic Difficulties

In the reflection of responses of the interviewed women in this study, economic difficulties prior to migration such as poverty, political instability that bankrupted businesses compelled many women and their families to migrate in Western countries. At the beginning, their expectations were high as they could find a job easily and have trainings to qualify more but later difficulties emerged. One member of the family could work and the other (usually mothers) stayed at home to raise children. It was very difficult to pay the rent and to cover other expenses through the salary of only one family member. Then, they prepared their return because of individual economic difficulties or host countries' economic crises. Some of them returned with financial and human capital but were soon disappointed. Those migrant women who returned with human and financial capital to invest in their home country did not find any support from state (through high taxes) or community (through prejudice or indifference to connect them within the labor market). Returnees sometimes felt hopeless for being incapable to meet their initial expectations. Sometimes, in addition to the failed expectations returnees encounter, they needed to provide basic needs such as food, housing, and access to healthcare and education for themselves and their loved ones. All these basic needs usually have to be assured through low incomes per month in public or private sector. However, after years passed some of them are recovered and started to reintegrate economically.

Economic reintegration in the context of return migration is the process through which the migrant is included in the economic system of his/her country of origin and

earns his own living (Arowolo, 2000). From an economic point of view the economic variables that accompany return are, human capital accumulated abroad through education, training and job skills, as well as financial capital (King, 2000). The country of origin can benefit from a skilled labor force and also from the remittances of migrants and especially from the savings that are used for investments. In addition to this situation, circumstances may also not allow returnees to put to use the skills developed during migration or to maintain social ties, thus influencing the decision to re-migrate and “undermining” the return scheme. On a positive note, return migration can be a real stimulus in the development of local communities where returnees settle.

According to participants of this study, a way to fulfill all the benefits that a successful reintegration may bring is the role of social networks. The research on the role of social networks in economic reintegration found that solid connections unite return migrants and communities in the country of origin, thus facilitating their reintegration (Majidi, 2021). These networks are important as they afford contact for employment and financial support. Connections through social networks are crucial to economic reintegration especially in developing countries such as Albania where central and local government has poor functioning. It happens through references, sometimes pushing migrants to take the decision to return.

Social Difficulties in Reintegration after Return

Some women experienced difficult life before migration such as sacrificing for family members (parents, brother, children). They have considered migration as a rescue from their problems and as a long-term solution. But life abroad was not as they had

presumed, particularly for those women who had to raise children alone (as their husbands were in prison). Another concern issued during migration is the phenomenon of illegal migration or asylum seeking. Therefore, return was considered again as a solution of these problems. After return, migrants were faced with the problem of not having information for reintegration services and not having support from community or state, thus not being reintegrated for a long time.

IOM's (2004) definition for social reintegration in the context of return migration is the re-inclusion of a migrant into the social structures of his/her country of origin. This includes on the one hand creation of a personal network (friends, relatives, neighbors) and on the other hand the development of structures of civil society (associations and other organizations).

Every so often, return migrants find difficult to fit to their society of origin since there is an unfilled space between them and their social networks in home country. Above statement leads to understanding that social exclusion is an increased distress for the psycho-social and emotional well-being of returnees, as it is related to negative psychological outcome as well as may negatively influence in their living and in a sustainable reintegration.

Moreover, return migrants usually face with a changed structure in their community of origin. Social networks usually change after long periods while a migrant is abroad. Sometimes they may also lose their sense of belonging, accordingly hindering adaptation. Furthermore, the participants of this study pointed out that they and their children confronted with particular problems after return to home country after years of

living abroad. The particular problems consisted with language, not being familiar with the culture, and having no or broken social networks. Another significant issue is the way return migrants are usually expected after return. Returnees, particularly those returned voluntarily, experienced prejudice after their return.

Cultural Difficulties in Reintegration after Return

Cultural difficulties before migration consisted mainly on education system and backward mentality. The poor quality of the education system, corruption, and not having the opportunity to be employed after the studies makes life difficult in Albania. For many students, studying abroad is a good opportunity to improve professional knowledge but also a launch for their career.

Upon arrival in host countries, participants faced with integration challenges. Culture shock and language barriers were the main factors to take the decision to return. In addition, feeling homesick about their home country makes life difficult in migration. But after return, other difficulties were encountered such as not feeling adapted with the norms and values of their home country, making reintegration more difficult.

Cultural reintegration in the context of return migration is readjustment of the return migrants with the values, the way of lifestyle, language, moral principles, ideology, and traditions of society of the country of origin. Re-assimilation occurs when an outside group such as returnees becomes part of a 'new' community. Cultural re-assimilation is the adaptive process the returnees must go through to guarantee an optimal cohabitation with their 'new' environment.

Literature on cultural reintegration of return migrants usually covers the assumption to re-assimilate (White, 2022). In one way, reintegration seems to apply synonymous with re-assimilation. The present study suggests that the longer returnees stay at 'home', the more they become reintegrated in society of origin, the less intention they had to re-migrate, and the more they are inclined to settle permanently. This was true for some, but many respondents said they wished to maintain cultural links of their host country where they lived earlier. In this sense they could have an 'open door.' In this case, reintegration or re-assimilation becomes difficult as returnees revolt against the normative expectations of Albania and strive to keep strong connections with previous values and norms of their previous country.

In summary, understanding the experiences of women as a process along a W-curve instead of a set of factors involved in decision making gives a more holistic account of how women experience migration and reintegration. The rich stories provided by the women reveal how they changed over time as a result of the experience and provide insights as to what others may experience.

Theoretical Implications

The findings from this study can also be related to the various theoretical frameworks used to describe migration and reintegration. However, the best approach is to use a W curve to place the findings in a process of migration and reintegration.

Neoclassical Economics and the New Economics of Labor Migration

Previous research identified neoclassical economics as an approach that perceives migration as an attempt by migrants to increase their income and that of their families in the receiving country (Cassarino, 2004). In this context, migrants expect to have higher wages and earnings in their host countries than in their country of origin. From this perspective, return is perceived as a failure, either through miscalculation of costs or by failing to retain the benefits of migration. Contrary to Neoclassical Economics that defines return migrants as individuals who wish to maximize expected income but at the same time as desperate people who could not meet their expectations, the New Economics of Labor Migration perceives return migration as a well-calculated strategy and also as a successful achievement of intended migration (Cassarino, 2004). Unlike Neoclassical Economics which assumes that migration is permanent in nature in order to maximize profit, New Labor Migration Economics assumes that people move temporarily in an effort to maximize income.

Although both economic perspectives provide valuable insight why people migrate and return home, these frameworks focus only on the financial and economic factors of return migration, thus not touching the impact of social, cultural, and institutional factors. The findings from this study go beyond economics and focus on the social, cultural, and institutional factors that impact on return migration and reintegration.

The Structural Approach to Return Migration

According to this approach, the phenomenon of migration is studied through the social impact. This approach does not consider only the individual experience of migrants

but the entire society. The structural approach emphasizes the importance of financial and economic resources brought to the country of origin after the migrants decided to return home. Nevertheless, the structural approach does not consider return as merely a personal experience of the migrant, but emphasizes that return migration should also be analyzed with reference to the social and institutional context in the country of origin (Cassarino, 2004).

Based on the structural approach, return was reasonably significant, proposing that return could no longer occur, and be seen as a phenomenon disconnected from contextual factors in both sending and receiving countries. However, focusing mainly on impact of return migration on countries of origin, the structural approach leaves many unanswered questions about the internal dynamics of return migration that are well-answered in this study. The structural approach does not provide detailed information about how migrants interact with the environments and contexts of the host country and their home country, and the psycho-social processes they go through as it analyses the whole society and not the individual perception.

Transnationalism

Migrants, according to transnational approach, develop and maintain multiple ties, such as family, institutional, religious, economic, and political ties both with the country of origin and with host countries (Cassarino, 2004). Transnationalism ensures a conceptual framework that does not certainly consider return migration as an end point. It describes how migrants develop multiple identities not only through enduring social and economic ties in countries of origin and host countries, but also through different ways

that migrants are attached to each other through ethnic origin, community, and group solidarity. However, this approach has some limitations that are filled in this dissertation thesis. It focuses more on identity results than on identity formation. That means that it is necessary in research to capture emotional feelings and expressions. The existing study gave importance to emotions, expressions, and symbols to better understand the feelings and experience of migrants, whether in the host country or in their country of origin.

Social Network Theory

Cassarino (2004) explains that social network theorists see returnees as migrants who maintain long-term contacts with the countries where they settled before returning, but who do not necessarily depend on the existence of social networks. According to them, social structures promote the existence of resources and information ensuring successful returnee initiatives, but however membership in networks is selective, and as such should not be taken for granted only because of specific attributes (such as religious affiliation or ethnic identity), because it is more influenced from common interests. Moreover, according to this theory, regardless of the typology of migrants (with or without skills, returned voluntarily or by force), returnees should be seen as social actors who can find their way back to their country and participate in the dynamics of cross-border networks, which respond to the economic, social and political context in the country of origin and destination.

This study highlighted the significance of social networks for migrants after return to their home country. Even though, in the present study there were migrants who

did not keep any strong connection with social networks, still, after return they felt the need to be close to the people they belonged prior to migration.

Practical Implications

This section will provide recommendations for policy and practice. It is important for all actors such as community, governmental, and non-governmental organizations to invest for a sustainable reintegration. Sustainability in reintegration does occur when return migrants have managed to fulfill economic independence, social stability in their society of origin, and psychological comfort that may let them to re-adapt successfully after return. Being able to reach sustainable reintegration means to have attained a prevailing strategy since returnees would decide to migrate because migration would be their own choice and not a necessity. Considering the challenges presented for a sustainable reintegration of returnees, it is observed from this study that the institutional effort, to provide practical solutions and relief for returnees, has been reduced. Returnees must have a clear “address” where they can go to handle their requests and needs.

One of the barriers faced by return migrants remains the lack of information regarding the institutions where they can be directed for their needs. Thus, there is a need to strengthen the functions and capacities of the Migration Offices, as well as the wide promotion of their role. To facilitate obtaining information on the benefit of specific services, each sector should prepare a package with summary information of the services it offers and this information must be spread into the main points of contact that returnees have with institutions such as schools, health centers, municipality, and border crossing points. The institutional position towards return has a direct impact on the level of

reintegration of returnees. The access to public or private services and the quality they offer are determining indicators of the success of returnees' reintegration in their country of origin. All this investment for return migrants serves to the state (and not only) to urge development and to uphold a democratic society.

The education sector faces several difficulties that need to be addressed, such as lack of instructions or trainings in order to apply efficiently for a learning plan for returnees, lack of additional staff to put into practice the implementation of this plan, and insufficient psycho-social services. It is necessary to engage social workers and psychologists to continuously follow returned families and their children so that to facilitate their adaptation after returning to the home country. It is also necessary to have a training staff and cooperation with parents and student government to create a positive emotional environment in order to reintegrate this category. Even the implementation of additional hours on weekends or during holidays with a particular plan based on the needs of returned children, can be more efficient.

The profiles of the returnees analyzed in this study indicate that return migration to Shkodra has been motivated mainly by economic factors, where the return from Greece and Italy was due to the economic crisis in these countries. Consequently, economic factors are those which determine the needs for reintegration, including the need for employment of returnees and securing income for themselves and their families. These factors are also significant in the reintegration of other categories of returnees, such as those returned by force or voluntary. However, the aspects of social and cultural

reintegration have also a significant impact on the process of a successful reintegration of returnees.

The health sector currently functions as a point of contact with the category of return migrants. The recognition of this fact should be accompanied by the awareness/instruction of the health personnel in the identification of returned families by informing them about the continuation of the benefits of health services.

The reintegration strategies require further testing, questioning, and refining. There are many caveats to be explored in understanding reintegration. In essence, this study has sought to demonstrate that reintegration can be just as complex as migration, and that it is not only the role of the returnee to ensure their reintegration, it is the role of the entire society of return. Countries of return are increasingly seeking to attract their migrants to return for knowledge, skills and capacity development. They must recognize and understand the role that they themselves and the local population play in reintegration. Promoting a culture of welcomeness to their returnees will assist in the reintegration process and in general lead to tolerant societies open to cultural diversity and change.

In conclusion, migration scholars and governments tend to feel that return migration is beneficial for sending countries. While migration often entails 'brain drain', return means 'brain circulation', as migrants return enriched with new ideas and skills. In addition, they may invest money earned abroad in their country of origin. Therefore, the cooperation of all state and non-state actors would facilitate the reintegration process and would ensure the fulfillment of specific needs for return migrants. Promotion of positive

practices that help finding an inter-institutional way of cooperation would be a very positive step, which can be continued further by being translated into a legal basis.

Limitations of the Study and Suggestions for Future Research

Several limitations need to be mentioned when considering the present study. In order to achieve an in-depth understanding of the reintegration of the women return migrants in Albania, the researcher embraced Grounded Theory methodology that draws on a subjective research model which may have affected the findings of this study. Moreover, the researcher is a novice grounded theorist. When becoming involved in this study, she was simultaneously acquiring knowledge for grounded theory approach.

Another major challenge was recruiting research participants and the researcher relied on snowball sampling. Although the sample size was sufficient for an in-depth qualitative study, it would be wider if the researcher would co-operate with international organizations that work on reintegration of return migrants.

The study was restricted only in the city of Shkodra. Herein, a larger sample that could include other locations from Albania could have generated other findings. Moreover, a larger sample size would have allowed the findings to have wider applicability, but the researcher's time and resources restrictions did not allow her to do so.

This study included only women and first generation of migrants but on critical reflection, including both genders and first and second generation of return migrants would fill a much needed gap of migration and return migration experiences of a diverse range of participants.

A limitation of this study is that the women who were recruited were those who returned after the 1990s up until a year ago. If a range of years would be specified for return, then it would possibly be a clearer picture and more accurate results. This is probably because the reality in Albania has changed between 15 years ago and the last few years. In order to find a sufficient number of women who returned to only one city, it was reasonable not to limit the time span.

Another potential limitation, common to studies on the reintegration of return migrants, is the absence of a typical estimation of successful reintegration of migrants (Koser & Kuschminder, 2015). The capacity of migrants to produce earnings through employment or entrepreneurship was considered an indicator to assess the economic reintegration of the returnees. Also, being able to re-adapt the norms and culture of home country and to be involved in the social life of the country or to maintain ties with social networks were the indicators for cultural and social reintegration. Still, such operationalization may generalize economic, social, and cultural reintegration leading to a limitation of the study.

Future Research

Future research might be focused on using the W curve as a framework that relates how experiences before, during and after migration relate to one another. Additional theoretical research might emphasize social and cultural factors in reintegration that are often ignored in favor of economic considerations.

Based on limitations of this study, some suggestions for further research include suggestions for extended research questions related to public services afforded to return

migrants such as: What public services are offered in function of reintegration for return migrants to Albania? What impact do these services have on a successful reintegration for returnees?

Based on the narratives of women of the existing study who experienced divorce and were single mothers, another suggestion for further research question may be: What do the institutions offer for single mothers and/or divorced women?

Another suggestion for a research question can be related to the perceptions of women in rural areas in the north of Albania such as: What are the experiences of returned women living in rural areas of Albania? How do they perceive a good reintegration after return?

The last suggestion is related to methodology. Research can be extended by applying quantitative methods or mixed methods which would bring an important and informative study.

Conclusion

The final section will provide final remarks of the study. The present study has explored a little researched subject of migration: that of return migration and reintegration. This research was guided by two main research questions that aimed to contribute to deepening the understanding of the phenomenon of return migration and reintegration of Albanian women returnees by providing insight on the reasons they first left their country of origin, followed by their migration experiences, and the challenges they faced after return migration in their communities and Albanian society, especially in a socio-economic and cultural reintegration level.

Research evidence based on Constructivist Grounded Theory shows that the economic, social, and political development of Albania was an important driving factor to leave the country. Returning was related to difficulties in host countries, family consideration, and nostalgia for the home country. Difficulties before, during, and after migration are encountered in three spheres: economic, social, and cultural.

In order to provide a more complete picture of migration, return migration, and reintegration, the findings of this study are analyzed and considered not as separate dimensions of 'migration' or 'return', but in a broader framework of common connections between factors and experiences. Therefore, the creation of effective strategies for a successful re-integration of returnees constitutes a real challenge for policy-makers and many other actors.

APPENDICES

Appendix A

Information about the Research Study

Coming Home: Challenges of Reintegration for Returned Migrant Women in Northern Albania

KEY INFORMATION ABOUT THE RESEARCH STUDY

Dr. Mark Small and MarsidaTafilica are inviting you to volunteer for a research study.

MarsidaTafilica is a PhD candidate in the International Family & Community Studies program at Clemson University. Dr. Small is a professor in the Department of

Psychology and the Institute on Family & Neighborhood Life at Clemson University.

Study Purpose: The purpose of this research is to learn about migration and return migration experiences of returned women in Northern Albania. We are interested in the meaning of a successful reintegration and Albanian women perceptions if they are well reintegrated upon return. The stories from this study will be used to improve reintegration services.

Voluntary Consent: Participation is voluntary, and you have the option to not participate. You will not be penalized in any way if you decide not to participate or to withdraw from this study.

Activities and Procedures: Your participation will involve completing an in-person interview that will be audio-recorded. If you would like to share additional stories and/or pictures about your migration experience, we will ask you to provide those. This information may be included in following presentations of the research findings.

Participation Time: It will take you from 45 minutes to 1½ hour to be in this study.

Risks and Discomforts: There are no known risks associated with this research. If a particular subject is uncomfortable for you, you are free to end the interview at any time.

Possible Benefits: This research will help us to better understand the impact of migration and return migration on your reintegration perceptions and those factors that lead to successful reintegration efforts. The community and the government may also benefit how to improve reintegration services of return migrants in Albania.

PROTECTION OF PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

The results of this study may be published in scientific journals, professional publications, or educational presentations. We will do everything we can to protect your confidentiality. The interview form contains identifiable information (name, email and phone number) on the first page of the questionnaire. This will be used to contact you about another potential interview. Once we receive the questionnaire, we will assign the questionnaire a code number. We will keep a list of names/contact information and code numbers separate from your questionnaire, and we will delete the identifiable information from the questionnaire. The questionnaire and the list of code numbers will be kept on a password-protected computer that can be accessed only by the researchers. The audio recordings of the interviews will be destroyed after the research is completed. Identifiable information collected during the study will be removed and the de-identified information could be used for future research studies or distributed to another investigator for future research studies without additional informed consent from the participants or legally authorized representative.

CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have any questions or concerns about your rights in this research study, please contact the Clemson University Office of Research Compliance (ORC) at 864-656-0636 or irb@clemson.edu. The Clemson IRB will not be able to answer some study-specific questions. However, you may contact the Clemson IRB if the research staff cannot be reached or if you wish to speak with someone other than the research staff.

If you have any study related questions or if any problems arise, please contact MarsidaTafilica at +355 69 44 04 299 or mtafili@g.clemson.edu.

CONSENT

By participating in the study, you indicate that you have read the information written above, been allowed to ask any questions, and you are voluntarily choosing to take part in this research. You do not give up any legal rights by taking part in this research study.

Appendix B

In-depth Interviews

Demographic questions

Name:

Age:

Household composition:

Level of education:

Employment status:

Country of migration(s):

Time spent abroad:

Time spent in the country of origin:

Type of return migration:

Life prior to migration

1. Please tell me about your life prior to your migration
2. Women migrants have different reasons for going to the West. What was your motivation or reason to migrate to the X country?

Migration experiences

1. Could you please tell me about your migration experience?
 - What do you like about living in the West?
 - What makes it difficult to live in the West?
2. Could you give me an example of major obstacles you encountered?
 - How did you feel about it?

- How did you cope with it?

3. Some returnees regret going abroad and others like it very much and want to go back.

When you think about your migration experience, how do you feel about it? Do you think it improved your social status or not?

4. If at all, how has your stay in the West changed you?

Return migration experiences

1. What is the reason you (and your family) decided to settle in Albania?

2. Who was the most decisive person or specific factor/situation affecting the decision?

3. Could you please tell me about your experiences after your return?

-What do you like about living here in Albania?

-What makes it difficult to live in Albania?

4. How did you feel in the community, family, or neighborhood after your return?

5. How did the 'return' migration affect you personally and your family? Did you have any expectations? (What? Have they been met?)

6. What is your status now? What do you do?

7. How do you perceive to be a good reintegration? What does successful reintegration look like?

8. Have you been part of any initiative or re-integration program after your return?

9. How do you manage your time? How do you experience and negotiate your gender role in respect of work and care ('formal' paid work vs. 'informal' familial care work)?

Based on the research question: *What are the perceptions of how reintegration might be improved?*

1. Thinking of your return experience do you think returnees need some kind of support from government or NGO's to successfully re-integrate into their home country? What then do they need exactly?

2. Have you experienced any prejudice or discrimination after your return? If yes, in what ways did you handle the situation? Did you report it? If yes, where and how did the referred institution react? If no, why didn't you report it?

Additional questions:

1. Would you advice other people who are abroad to return?

2. Is there anything else you would like to share with me that we have not already discussed?

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