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‘That’s so Sexist!’ How Highly Skilled Female Return Migrants Try to Shape Gender Norms in Kosovo

Janine Isabelle Pinkow-Läpple* 

Kosovo is a country profoundly shaped by migration. A growing body of literature pays tribute to this. However, up to now, it has barely focused on the implications of return. Female returnees – and especially highly skilled female returnees – are even less likely to be in the focus of research. Against this background, this paper investigates how highly skilled female Kosovars experience migration to North America or Western Europe and their subsequent return to Kosovo. Within this setup, the focus is on the impact of migration on the participants’ gender norms and their attempts to shape those in Kosovo upon return. The results show that all participants experienced their sojourn abroad as empowering. The majority made use of this empowerment and actively fought for gender equality after return. However, resistance by the local population and reintegration issues impeded their engagement, prompting every second participant amongst those interviewed for this study to consider re-emigration. Despite this, two-thirds of the participants stayed and continued their engagement for gender equality but usually in an adapted manner. The paper concludes that highly skilled female return migrants have great – although fragile – potential to promote gender equality in Kosovo.

Keywords: Kosovo, return migration, gender, highly skilled migrants, social remittances, intangible remittances

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Introduction

For decades, Kosovo has been a country of mass emigration. In 2018, an estimated 854,198 Kosovar citizens lived abroad – around half of its resident population (Balkans Policy Research Group 2020). Hence, it is no exaggeration to say that the country is shaped by migration (Gollopeni 2016). This is reflected in a growing body of literature that exhibits blind spots, however, when it comes to return migration and, in particular, female return migration. As King and Lulle (2022) demonstrate in a very recent overview, this is part of a broader research gap that overlooks the stage of return migration when it comes to the research field of gender and migration. The sub-group of highly skilled female returnees is even less often the focus of the literature (Wong 2014).

Addressing these gaps, this paper deals with the question of how highly skilled female Kosovars experience migration to North America or Western Europe and their subsequent return to Kosovo. In particular, it investigates the impact of migration on the participants' self-perception and gender norms and – based on this – their attempts to reconfigure gender norms in Kosovo upon return. To the best of my knowledge, this is the first paper that sheds light on this specific topic in the Kosovar context.

Drawing on detailed insights gained from 19 qualitative in-depth interviews, the findings illustrate that all participants experienced their stay abroad as empowering. Most of them were eager to fight conservative gender norms upon their return to Kosovo. They actively pushed for gender equality in their families and circles of friends, at work and through voluntary work. However, this enthusiasm was soon dampened by the local population's resistance and the interviewees' severe reintegration problems. As a consequence, every second participant considered re-emigration and around one third actually did so. The others continued their engagement for gender equality but usually in an adapted and slightly scaled back manner. Nonetheless it must be emphasised that the majority of the participants (at the time of writing this paper) had decided to stay and keep on promoting gender equality. The paper therefore concludes that highly skilled female return migrants in Kosovo have a distinct potential to be agents of gender equality, however fragile.

Theoretical background

In recent decades, gender has found its way into the mainstream academic migration debate. A critical outcome was acknowledging the mutual relationship between migration and gender: not only can gender inhibit or motivate migration but migration can profoundly change the gender norms of migrants and origin countries (Hugo 2000; King and Lulle 2022). In line with the focus of this paper, the second part of this relationship – the impact of migration on gender norms – will be at the centre of the following literature overview.

For the individual female migrant, migration can be an empowering experience.¹ The different ways through which migration may lead to empowerment can be subsumed under two channels: (1) the migration-induced experience of independence and (2) the acquisition of (potential) intangible remittances. With regards to the first channel, the mere experience of leaving the family household and living alone in a foreign country can open up a pathway to increased confidence for female migrants. Migration in this context gives women the chance to shape their lives according to their preferences instead of being oppressed by partners or restricted by family pressure for marriage, household or care work (Amazan 2013; Hugo 2000; UN DESA 2006). This may be accelerated by the experience of earning financial resources that can be invested in the women's education or income-generating activities (King and Lulle 2022; McKay 2007; UN DESA 2006). If the economic activities during their sojourn allow female migrants to contribute financially to the household income, this might also improve their position within the household, increase their participation in decision-making processes or gradually release them from family obligations (Boyd and Grieco 2003; McKay 2007; Zentgraf

2002). The experiences assigned to this channel of empowerment happen as a consequence of migration but are in principle unrelated to the destination country. They can happen anywhere – in Saudi Arabia or in Sweden – independent of the gender norms prevalent in the destination country.

The acquisition of (potential) intangible remittances – the second channel of empowerment – in contrast, is closely tied to the destination country. Adapted from Levitt's (1998) concept of social remittances, Pinkow-Läpple and Möllers (2022: 21) define intangible remittances as 'the knowledge, normative structures and practices migrants acquire at the migration destination and transfer to their migration origin. Intangible remittances reflect the (perceived) differences between the core characteristics of the migration destination and the migration origin or any of their segments'. These intangible remittances 'can carry economic, environmental, political, or socio-cultural content' (*ibidem*). In short, the acquisition of (potential) intangible remittances embraces the acquisition of intangible assets, such as norms, which are characteristic of the destination country. In the context of gender, female migrants might be empowered by the adoption of the more progressive gender norms prevalent in their destination country (Hugo 2000; UN DESA 2006).²

However, migration is not always an empowering experience. If migration is undocumented and happens in the context of exploitation and abuse, empowerment is, of course, highly unlikely (Hugo 2000; Kuschminder 2013). The same is true if migration goes along with downward socio-economic mobility, as Zentgraf (2002) shows. Empowerment through intangible remittance acquisition can, moreover, only unfold if female migrants get in touch with the gender norms of the destination society. If they stay within ethnic enclaves, remain trapped within patriarchal families or only stay abroad for a very short time, empowerment is therefore also unlikely (Hugo 2000; King and Lulle 2022). If the diaspora they are part of is more conservative than the origin society, even disempowerment is possible (King and Lulle 2022).

Summarising, Hugo (2000) concludes that migration is most probably an empowering experience if women migrate legally and alone to urban areas – where more progressive gender norms are usually prevalent – engage in formal employment and stay abroad for an extended time. If empowerment did occur, this influences the next stage of the migration cycle, a possible return. However, the literature on female returnees is scarce. Studies show that women, in general, are more reluctant to return as they fear losing the freedom newly gained from living in their destination countries (Sondhi and King 2017; Vlase 2013a). If they return, their potential to make use of their empowerment is often limited as, typically, a gradual re-adjustment to the more patriarchal gender norms of the origin society takes place (King and Lulle 2022; Vlase 2013a). Studies that find female return migrants making use of their empowerment show that these are often subtle attempts that only concern the inner family circle. Vlase (2013b), for example, describes changes in the household organisation in families of return migrants relating to, for instance, female returnees' obligations towards their in-laws. Vlase (2013a) and Dahinden (2010) illustrate female returnees' efforts to empower their daughters.

Dannecker (2009), in contrast, observes the active attempts of female returnees on a wider scale to push the gender norms of their origin communities towards a more liberal end. She describes how Bangladeshi female returnees, empowered by their stay abroad, actively challenged the highly conservative gender norms in their home country by wearing 'Western' clothes, criticising their husbands and families or giving loans to other women to enable them to migrate as well. Descriptions of such active engagement of female returnees for gender equality in their origin communities are, however, rare. This is most probably due to the expectation of negative consequences. Dannecker (2009), for instance, reports that her participants' engagement was branded with the negative image of pursuing an untraditional lifestyle that was met not only with resistance but with acute hostility by the local population. Eventually, the women were punished by social exclusion. Referring to this kind of conflict, King and Lulle (2022) speak of a 'battle' that unfolds between the more liberal gender norms of female return migrants and the more conservative views that prevail in the countries of origin. Hence, even if female returnees try to shift gender roles in their countries of origin, this seems to be very difficult.

Literature that explicitly compares the migration and return experiences of different groups of women, such as highly skilled versus lower skilled or repatriated women versus women who returned voluntarily is unfortunately very scarce. The study of Kuschminder (2013) on female return migration to Ethiopia however indicates that highly educated women have a higher probability to experience their sojourn as empowering and in turn to engage as agents of change upon return.³

Methods and data

The study applies a qualitative approach that embraces in-depth interviews, participatory observation and qualitative text analysis. Focusing on a specific case and taking an explanatory approach is particularly relevant in answering the why and how questions at the core of this paper (Yin 2014). Kosovo was selected as a case study as it is a country that has a long-standing migration culture in which patriarchal structures persist. The female labour participation rate is one of the lowest in Europe, standing at a mere 20.8 per cent, compared to 56 per cent for men (KAS 2021), women continue to be subjected to stereotypes regarding family life, are widely disadvantaged concerning inheritance and gender-based violence is still widespread (Kosovo Women's Network 2018; LuxDev 2021; OSCE 2019). Against this background, the continuous migration to Western Europe and North America, where more progressive gender norms are prevalent, bears the potential to shift female migrants' gender norms. The qualitative approach, focusing on the participants' individual experiences, sheds light on how female Kosovar migrants experience their sojourn and return. It investigates women's changed self-perceptions and gender norms and their engagement with gender equality after return.

As female return migrants in Kosovo are a highly diverse group and heterogeneity can be a profound problem in small samples, the study focuses on one specific sub-group: highly educated women who migrated on their own for studies or work. This choice is based on the insights of the existing literature (Hugo 2000; Kuschminder 2013), which points out that this is the group for which migration is the most probably empowering. Through snowball sampling, 19 semi-structured interviews were conducted with 16 highly educated female returnees.⁴ The interviews took place during the period 2018–2021 and are part of a larger ongoing study that focuses on intangible remittance transfer through female return migrants in Kosovo and Romania. Key topics of the interviews included the interviewees' pre-migration life, their migration and return experiences, the changes they underwent during their sojourn as well as their engagement for gender equality in Kosovo upon return.

A wide array of different organisations who either work with the target group or where members of the target group were expected to be employed, were contacted. In this way, multiple different entry points to the target group were established in order to diversify the sample. The contacted organisations included universities, development aid agencies, NGOs working with returnees, West European and North American embassies as well as political foundations. Additionally, Facebook groups were used as platforms to recruit first contacts. To further minimise the risk of creating a biased sample, no more than two persons provided by one contact were included in the sample. In addition to the interviews, a participatory observation element was conducted. This included attending relevant events that were either led by the interviewees themselves or deemed important for their engagement in gender equality.

All interviews followed standard ethical procedures. Prior to the interviews, all participants were briefed about the purpose of the study and signed informed consents, providing detailed information about the interview process, the participant's role, and the envisaged usage of the data. It included an explanation of confidentiality and voluntariness and informed the participants that they could stop the interviews and withdraw their participation at any time. Before starting the record, all participants were asked if they had any questions regarding the interview process. Furthermore, all transcripts were fully anonymised.

The participants were aged between 23 and 37, childless and held a university degree at the time of the interview. Most participants came from comparatively progressive and average to high-income families. All but one lived in Kosovo's capital, Prishtina, before and after migration. All of them went abroad for the purpose of education, most of them to pursue a master's degree. Hence, at least initially, all participants conceived their sojourn as temporary. Most participants migrated to the USA and went abroad for a relatively short period (median duration: 24 months). All of them linked their overseas stay with very positive impressions and deemed the migration experience successful. Table 1 presents an overview of the participants' demographic and socio-economic backgrounds.⁵ To guarantee anonymity, pseudonyms are used.

Table 1. Participants' demographic and socio-economic characteristics

Name	Age	Migration motivation	Migration destination	Year of departure	Year of return	Education	Marital status	Children
Linda	26	Education	USA	2015	2016	Tertiary	Single	–
Arjeta	31	Education	USA	2010	2012	Tertiary	Single	–
Rozafa	26	Education	Sweden	2014	2016	Tertiary	Single	–
Emina	29	Education	USA	2006	2007	Tertiary	Single	–
				2011	2013			
Vera	25	Education	USA	2009	2010	Tertiary	Married	–
				2015	2017			
Ardita	33	Education	Netherlands	2009	2010	Tertiary	Single	–
Rita	34	Education	USA	1999	2000	Tertiary	Married	–
		Education	USA	2006	2008			
Lindita	24	Education	USA	2016	2017	Tertiary	Single	–
Jehona	27	Education	USA	2009	2014	Tertiary	Single	–
				2018	2020			
Florentina	28	Education	Sweden	2012	2013	Tertiary	Single	–
Agnesa	26	Education	USA	2015	2017	Tertiary	Single	–
Anita	27	Education	USA	2014	2016	Tertiary	Married	–
Loreta	37	Education	USA	2006	2009	Tertiary	Married	–
Majlinda	29	Education	USA	2016	2017	Tertiary	Married	–
Nora	25	Education	USA	2012	2013	Tertiary	Single	–
Vjosa	23	Education	USA	2014	2014	Tertiary	Single	–
				2016	2020			

Source: Author's compilation.

The stay abroad: an empowering experience

When asked how their life abroad differed from life in Kosovo, all participants acknowledged that it was very different. Nora, for instance, said it was 'insanely different' and Linda even explained that she 'cannot compare American society to Kosovar society or any society of the Balkans' because it would be 'like comparing salt to sugar'. For several respondents, these differences were so substantial that they reported having experienced a culture shock after arrival or perceived certain aspects of life in the migration country as shocking. In line

with the strength of these perceived differences, all participants indicated that the migration experience had influenced them, although to varying degrees. The changes were relatively subtle for three participants, whereas they were medium to strong for the others. Jehona, for instance, called her time abroad ‘a turning point’; for Nora, it was ‘the most transformative experience’ of her life and Majlinda said ‘it shattered all [her] beliefs and built them up again from the beginning’. This goes against the widespread assumption that migrants do not gain valuable experiences during short migration periods – i.e. less than two years (see, for example, Hugo 2000; King 1986). However, it is entirely in line with Kuschminder (2013) and Gëdeshi and King (2022), who find that even short periods of migration can be transformative within certain groups of migrants.

When asked *how* they had changed, the most frequently reported migration-induced change was empowerment, reflected in a general feeling of strengthened self-confidence and changed gender norms.⁶ When it comes to the causes of these changes, two main processes were identified that are in accordance with the literature summarised in the literature review section: (1) the migration-induced experience of independence and (2) the acquisition of (potential) intangible remittances.

The primary channel for the participants’ empowerment was the migration-induced experience of independence – i.e. the experience of living and managing their lives alone while abroad. When asked how their lives abroad differed from their lives in Kosovo, the most frequent answer by a clear margin was ‘more freedom’. Many participants would agree with Agnesa, who said ‘one of the biggest changes was that it was a time only for me’. This is, of course, related to the participants’ life stage. The experience of living outside the parental household for the first time is key to everyone’s transition to adulthood. At the same time, the emphasis on personal freedom has to be understood in the context of Kosovar culture. The participants described the society of their home country as very collective, emphasising family ties. In the words of Majlinda: ‘In Kosovar families, it’s pretty normal that you are 23, 25 and still your family has a say in what you do’. Usually, it is expected that young people stay in the family household until they get married. Accordingly, almost all participants still lived with their families before migrating, regardless of their age. Although many stressed that their families gave them enough room for personal development and that they valued the close bonds with their families, these were to some extent also perceived as confining. Living alone and far away from their families and the related obligations was, therefore, an empowering experience. The participants enjoyed focusing on themselves and organising their time and activities according to their personal preferences, as Majlinda described:

It was the first time for me living alone without my family. It was very, very exciting. I can tell you that the first moment, the first morning in the US, so I had a very large room with big windows and just one inflatable bed and when I woke up the first morning there, because I arrived at night, it was the most beautiful morning of my life, till this day. I just felt free. (...) I could manage, arrange my schedule, my life and everything.

However, living alone also came with challenges. Many initially struggled with the unknown situation of being entirely on their own. They not only had to adapt to a completely new environment but were confronted with tasks they had never faced before, like finding an apartment or taking care of their bills. Often, they were also exposed to a high level of pressure at university, for which they felt unprepared by the Kosovar education system. The absence of their traditional ‘support system’ at first caused stress, as Emina recounted:

You’re on your own, and you have to figure things out, whatever that is. Because here we are very collective. We have family and friends for everything. Even for the basics (...) like if I can’t make dinner, I know that

somebody else will. Or if I can't do the laundry, I know that somebody else will. And like that sudden realisation that if you don't make dinner, you won't eat. As basic as that.

Overcoming these initial struggles empowered the participants. Arjeta, for example, described how, before migrating, she could never have imagined living alone, let alone in a foreign country. Nevertheless, after she realised during her migration experience that she was able to manage her life independently, she felt confident enough to even live abroad on a long-term basis. Taken together, the experience of independence and self-responsibility empowered the participants.

The second channel of empowerment was the acquisition of (potential) intangible remittances. This was mainly embodied by the acquisition of aspects of Western individualism which the participants experienced in their destination countries. Although many participants reflected quite critically upon individualism, as they, in principle, very much valued the close ties to their families and society, they positively acknowledged the greater emphasis on self-fulfilment and individual freedom in their destination countries. As Emina put it, in Kosovo, there exists a 'pre-set template of where you are supposed to be in your life'. The adherence to this 'template' is closely monitored by society: 'In Kosovo, they jump on you with questions (...). Your business is everybody's business' (Emina). In the destination countries, in contrast, the participants observed a much more diverse set of life concepts, that went hand in hand with a more pronounced sense of privacy. As a consequence, the participants felt less regulated. The perception of being freer abroad was hence also linked to experiencing a culture that puts more emphasis on the individual, something which also required the participants to openly communicate their needs, as Nora explained:

I was coming from a culture where it's not socially acceptable to say 'Yes' the first time a person asks if you want food or whatever they're offering. So, I was saying 'No' and then I was going to sleep hungry because I was not speaking up. Because nobody would offer me food again. Just as basic as this, I learned that I need to share and speak up about my needs, wants and whatever it is.

Greater freedom was also manifest in the destination countries' gender norms. These were experienced by many participants as much more liberal compared to those in Kosovo, where they felt a pressure from society to get married and have children, as Vjosa explained:

They want women to be educated in Kosovo, and they push them, you know, 'Go finish college!' But then once they finish college, they're like: 'OK, now it's time to marry'. It's like they have this trajectory ready for them, and they just have to follow it.

This stood in contrast to the experiences which the participants had in their destination countries, where women were less exposed to stereotyped role models in the different areas of life. This was experienced differently by the participants. For Nora, such simple things as sports were 'eye-opening': 'I remember, until I went to the US, I did not know that there could exist a women's soccer team. (...) I did not know that so many sports can be played by female teams as well as male teams'.

For others, such as Vjosa, the experience of seeing a whole range of 'untraditional' family models in the US, ranging from homosexual couples and unmarried couples to single parents or couples without children, was very influential: 'Women can just do what they want to do. They may not even get married at all and it's not that big a deal or get married and have no children'. This changed the participants' perspectives on family life, as Ardita and Vjosa respectively described it:

I gained a lot of confidence because we in Kosovo are raised (...) with the idea that you need a man in your life. (...) The Netherlands played a big role in forming this opinion that I can be an independent woman. I don't need a man in my life.

I never thought of someone [women] choosing not to have a family or choosing to be with someone for 30 years and never get married! (...) When I went there, I saw that you know, there is life without a child, there is life without marriage. And you can do with just a partner, (...) without marriage or marriage with no kids. All these different options changed my perspective.

Closely related to this was the aspect of sexual morals. Rozafa, for instance, mentioned how surprised she was that women and men were sharing apartments in her student dormitory in Sweden. According to her, this would have been unthinkable in Kosovo, where not only apartments but complete buildings were separated between women and men. She also described how women in Sweden were freer regarding their love life. They were not judged if, for instance, they frequently changed partners or enjoyed nightlife. In Kosovo, she said, such behaviour would inevitably lead to gossip. Jehona experienced this as follows:

My host sister was very free to do whatever. A lot more independent. Like here, for example, girls that age are not really allowed to stay out late. Especially (...) my mom was quite conservative in this regard. You know, like going out or sleepovers and stuff like that. Or like having a boyfriend at that age would be very unacceptable for Kosovo. And then I was, like, three years or four years older than my host sister and she already had a boyfriend.

These experiences influenced the respective participants' understanding of relationships. Jehona, who, however, came from an exceptionally traditional family background, explained that she had a very conservative understanding of relationships before migration and was convinced that women had to ask their partners if they wanted to do something or go somewhere. Since being abroad, her understanding of power dynamics had changed 'enormously'. She now felt much more independent and left partners no room to wield power over her.

Closely related to this, it was mainly the field of work which influenced the participants. Experiencing women in prestigious and influential positions but also in usually male-dominated areas was an eye-opener for many participants. Similarly, the different institutions established in the destination countries to support women's careers were positively recognised. Rozafa, for instance, had never heard of paternity leave before going to Sweden and was amazed to see a letter on her male professor's door stating that he was temporarily out of office to take care of his children. Other instances in this field were described as follows:

I saw that female is really equal to male. It's something you see even if you don't check the statistics or something like that. It's just in the way they work, in the way they talk – you could see confidence. They are never, like, less of a man (Ardita).

My first shock was women bus drivers. Because I had never seen a woman be a driver of a bigger vehicle (Nora).

The way that they respect women, the way that management positions are filled by women – it's empirical data or it's just evident because you see it. You have professors that are female, even the director of the school itself was a female. Very highly respected women! (Rozafa).

These experiences inspired the participants concerning their own career trajectories. Vjosa, for instance, said: ‘Seeing women there being independent kind of really inspired me to want to be like them’. Rozafa explained: ‘it has (...) increased my self-confidence that I can one day, or even now, I can do whatever a male colleague can do’. Nora similarly said ‘It really did shift my perspective of what can be done by a female in Kosovo or wherever, when I saw females in all of these different [professions]’.

Altogether, these experiences made many participants more critical of the situation of women in Kosovo and the world. Rozafa accordingly said that Sweden ‘was the country that told [her] what feminism is about’. Nonetheless, it should be noted that, whereas the more progressive gender roles profoundly influenced many participants, the impact was more subtle for others. In the latter case, they were raised in progressive families and took their own comparatively privileged situation for granted. Only when gender equality was debated more broadly and publicly during their time abroad did they become aware of the topic’s importance and experience how gender issues were handled in another country, as Linda said:

I come from a modern family where, as a woman, I was not discriminated against. (...) But we don’t talk about these things here [in Kosovo] much in terms of women’s rights. Going to America and hearing these things of equal pay and discrimination, sexual harassment and violence towards women makes you wonder if you’re living too comfortably in the surrounding of your family. After I came back, I started noticing how our society is discriminating towards women.

Besides the acquisition of gender norms, the acquisition of skills, knowledge and job perspectives (i.e. seeing what level you can reach within a particular profession) at prestigious universities was highly empowering for most participants. This included not only factual knowledge but also, for example, the basics of scientific working such as critical thinking, data analysis and working independently as compared to learning by heart. The acquisition of these skills, know-how and degrees gave the participants confidence and made them feel much better prepared for their future careers.

Return: trying to promote gender equality in Kosovo

In contrast to the general assumption that women are less eager to return to their countries of origin (Sondhi and King 2017; Vlase 2013a), the participants in this study predominantly returned voluntarily and even enthusiastically. Besides wanting to re-unite with their family and friends, the wish to engage in the bettering of Kosovo was among the main reasons that motivated their return.

Among the broad spectrum of topics in which the participants engaged after return, gender equality was central. Except for three participants, all actively and intensively advocated for more progressive gender roles in various ways but mainly in everyday discussions, through their work and through voluntary engagement. In everyday life, they pointed out sexist traditions, tried to raise awareness for gender equality or supported female friends. Jehona, for example, described a situation where her family was invited to a feast organised for the new-born son of a relative. The same relative already had a daughter for whom she had not prepared such festivities. This, according to Jehona, goes back to a Kosovar tradition of organising feasts only for new-born boys but not for girls. Jehona acknowledged that, before her stay abroad, she did not question this kind of tradition. However, after her migration experience, she realised their patriarchal nature and confronted her family by saying: ‘I said I’m not going. That’s so sexist! I’m not going to go. Why / How / ?! You know, I was arguing with my mum and my family’. In a similar vein, many participants reported that they successfully influenced their families to be more supportive of female family members. Rozafa, for instance, who got to know the concept of parental leave during her time in Sweden, convinced her brother-in-law to take some time

off to support his wife after she gave birth. Nora persuaded her uncle to let his daughter study abroad and, in general, to give his daughters more freedom – e.g. allowing them to go out at night. She also engaged with a male family member who wanted to study textiles and design by discussing it with his father, who fiercely opposed his son's wish as he thought it was a female-only profession.

Within the circle of friends and colleagues, engagement for gender equality was less pronounced, either because it was not necessary – as the participants' friends were very progressive themselves – or, on the contrary, because participants' engagement was actively discouraged, as I explain in more detail in the next section. Nonetheless, the participants got involved in this sphere as well. Ardita, for instance, described it as follows:

I'm still in touch with friends from childhood or from before. And I think I have influenced them a lot to change. I'm always talking about this open-mindedness and gender equality and little things like that. I think they have changed because of me.

Florentina, furthermore, reported supporting female friends with their career plans. Having struggled, herself, to overcome prejudices in her social environment for pursuing a career in the male-dominated field of technology and then becoming empowered by her migration experience, she now encouraged her female friends to consider taking up jobs in traditionally non-female professions. Finally, another example is that of Vjosa, who explained that she fought sexist stereotypes every day at work – for example when colleagues tried to convince her to put makeup on because, as a woman, she was supposed to do so or when they gossiped about how other colleagues were dressed.

Furthermore, the participants used their professions to influence gender norms after return. Many were employed in development cooperation projects, at ministries or NGOs that promoted gender equality. Rozafa, for instance, who had convinced her brother-in-law to go on private paternal leave, advised the government on gender-balanced adjustments to the law on parental leave as part of her job at an NGO. Loreta after return established an alternative feminist research institute. Others used their influence on projects or people under their direction to support women. This ranged from the targeted support of female students over the introduction of gender mainstreaming in projects they designed, to the constellation of their teams which they tried to set up as gender-balanced.

A final way in which the participants engaged in gender equality was voluntary work. Many participants were active in NGOs. Jehona, for instance, managed a Facebook group – with thousands of followers – which deals with feminism in the Western Balkans. Arjeta developed a project during which successful Kosovar businesswomen would go to schools and speak of their career trajectories to demonstrate to young women what they could achieve but also to sensitise boys to the fact that women 'have the right to opportunities'. Nora and Vjosa, furthermore, used their voluntary activities for school projects that introduced pupils to 'non-traditional' jobs for women and men to give them an impression of the different professions they could work in. Nora, for instance, described how she introduced 'shock factors' to the pupils, such as women working in science or neurology.

Exit or voice? Dealing with reintegration challenges and resistance

The participants' eagerness to change gender norms in Kosovo, as described in the last section, is, however, only one side of the coin. Reintegration problems and resistance often overshadowed the participants' engagement for gender equality. In fact, the return to Kosovo was initially highly challenging for most participants. Only three reported an easy and thoroughly positive return experience. The others, to varying

degrees, went through a reverse culture shock (Gaw 2000). These results support the findings of earlier studies which show that reintegration is often a highly challenging process involving the renegotiation of belonging and reference frames (Adeniyi and Onyeukwu 2021; Bree *et al.* 2010; Fakiolas and King 1996; Ruben *et al.* 2009). The reverse culture shock was aggravated by the fact that most participants did not expect such an experience. In contrast, they were looking forward to returning, as they assumed they were going back ‘home’ – i.e. to a familiar place and beloved people. However, due to their experiences and the changes they had gone through, ‘home’ and the ‘beloved people’, in many cases, no longer felt familiar. The participants had left their lives in Kosovo and went to places where their personal lives differed profoundly. They quickly became accustomed to these lives and changed, often without being aware of it. Having gone through such a transformative period, many, such as Nora, described the confrontation with their ‘old’ lives after return as an outright shock:

I experienced a reverse culture shock when I moved back, which was a huge shock to me because I don't think I was prepared. Like I was prepared to have a shock when I went to the US, but then when the programme was over, I was, like, 'Oh, yeah, I'm going home'.

In turn, the respective participants found it very hard to re-adapt. After their stay abroad, many reported that they had become much more critical of Kosovo. Minor annoyances – such as missing bus schedules or dysfunctional pavements to significant issues such as the discrimination of women or limited job opportunities in Kosovo – were felt much more strongly. In particular, the conservative Kosovar values and traditions clashed with the widely progressive ones which the participants now held dear. Many participants felt as if a time capsule had taken them back. Several participants, such as Rita, reported that ‘everything was bothering’ them. For many, this feeling was so strong that they could barely recognise their country of birth anymore:

When I came back, I was shocked by all the things that I had been living with but never noticed (Nora).

When I came back (...) the only question that was going through my mind was 'Was I part of the system before that I couldn't notice this kind of behaviour we have as a society, or did I change?' Did the people change after I came back? (Linda).

They were constantly comparing Kosovo to their migration country and often had a strong desire to share what they had experienced abroad compared to what they now noticed in Kosovo, as Nora explained: ‘I was constantly saying ‘But in the US, they do it like this. Why do we do it like this?’ However, she was met with rejection, as were many other participants: ‘Any time I would try to share with them, what I had experienced in the US, they were like, “Oh, here she goes again. The US, the US blah, blah, blah”. They were kind of annoyed about me talking about my experience all the time’. In turn, many participants found it hard to re-connect to their families and to friends they had known their entire lives. Emina, for example, explained that she remembers ‘not being able to understand my family anymore because I wasn't part of that mindset anymore’. Jehona described it as follows:

I changed so much, and they [friends from before migration] kind of stayed the same. I mean, at first, I met them, (...) [but] I realised that it's not going to work out because they have totally different concerns and lifestyles. You know most of them, for example, especially my girlfriends and now even guys are either married or have kids and they want to talk about these things and (...) you know, like, I'm more, like, concerned about social issues, my career.

Where participants not only wanted to share their experiences abroad but also to push for change, they were often met with resistance which, in many cases, turned into conflicts or the ‘battle of values’ (King and Lulle 2022). Nora, for instance, called her attempts to transfer what she had learned abroad ‘a never-ending battle’ and reported that she had ‘countless fights’ with her parents. Jehona similarly explained that she was ‘constantly clashing’ with her family about ‘anything you can think of [because] it’s too opposite for most things’.

In many cases, the participants’ social circles were not only refusing to adopt the participants’ ideas but were actively trying to demotivate them. Nora was told that ‘you are now in Kosovo, come to your senses!’ and Rozafa that she should ‘come back to earth, you’ve returned here. You have to, you know, start a life here, it’s not Sweden. It’s never going to be!’ Others similarly described how they were confronted with comments such as ‘You think that you are better than us’ (Emina) or ‘You’ve been abroad, now you’re smarter, you’re more civilised than us’ (Majlinda). These disputes evolved around a whole range of different topics such as political or environmental issues. Many, however, resulted from the women’s re-confrontation with traditional Kosovar gender norms, as the following participants illustrated:

Now I’m a big feminist and that doesn’t go down well in Kosovo (Jehona).

So, generally from everyday life, just chores around the house not being distributed evenly between me and my brother and me always fighting for myself in a sense, saying, ‘Why do I have to do this? Why can he not do this? He just ate a plate of pasta. He should be able to wash his own dish because it was the food he ate for himself. And my mom always being like, ‘Oh, but he’s a boy, you should help him out’ (Nora).

When we had conversations (...) about, let’s say, (...) the gender spectrum, and I would say that there’s more than two genders, they would look at me in such a weird way and be like: ‘You’re crazy. You’re joking, right? Hahaha’. And I’m, like, ‘Nope’. So, then there would be this weird ‘no one talking period’. No one knows what to say anymore. And then some other day, in some other conversation, if they started talking about someone or judging something and if I don’t say anything, then they remember what I had said earlier and would be like: ‘Yeah, let’s not talk about this in front of [Vjosa] because she has some strong opinions of her own that are against us’ (Vjosa).

The participants’ changed gender norms finally also led to a key conflict which almost all of them experienced: the re-entry into the family household. In fact, most participants moved back there after return, as was expected of them. However, as they had become used to living alone and managing their lives independently abroad, this was challenging for many. They had to readjust to having less personal space, which was experienced as a substantial loss of freedom. Vjosa explained the arguments with her family as follows: ‘Because Kosovo is more of a (...) collectivistic culture, in that sense, there’s more like us, us, us, and I got so used to me, me, me that there is, like, always culture clashes’. The participants struggled between the wish to lead a self-determined, independent life and their perceived obligations towards their families, as Linda stated:

You live with your family and you kind of understand them and don’t want to disobey, not disobey, but in terms of not being responsible towards your family but then also you are this modern woman who went to America, studied and came back, so you don’t quite fit with the family.

These different experiences generated a feeling of not fitting into society anymore. The participants felt isolated and misunderstood. For some, this feeling became so intense during the initial phase of return that

they seemed to go through an identity crisis, which caused them considerable hardship. As Emina explained, they were not able to point out where they belonged anymore: ‘I get that feeling of what’s wrong with me? What’s happening? I’m from here, how come I don’t fit anymore? I should fit here. This is my place. This is home, and if I can’t belong home (...)’. Participants reported feeling ‘alien’ (Emina) or like a ‘weirdo’ (Loreta).

Moreover, many developed a sense of frustration about their engagement. After coming back full of enthusiasm, the participants expected that they would be welcomed with open arms for the contributions they wanted to make. However, in most cases, this expectation received a blow after they realised that the changes they wanted to initiate were not always wanted, as Emina and Vjosa respectively explained:

I came back very high on ideals. I had all these ideas of things that I wanted to do and what bugged me most was when I would tell people, and they would (...) tell me how that wouldn’t work, and they went on, like, ‘Now you want to make Kosovo America’ and told me all the reasons why that won’t work.

I want to apply the best of America and Kosovo but I feel like I would be in such a middle that I would fall in the ocean because the ocean is in the middle of them [Kosovo and the USA].

The participants chose different ways to deal with these negative experiences. Linda summarised the participants’ options as follows: ‘You have to think (...) if you want to adapt yourself to the whole society and just be a Kosovar, if you want to fight against the system and just be a martyr or if you want to focus on your professional and personal development and just move on’. What she described closely resembles the three options which citizens, discontent with a political system, have according to the famous theory of Hirschman (2004): exit (‘focus on yourself’), voice (‘be a martyr’) and loyalty (‘adapt back’). Although this simple categorisation has been criticised in recent years, it works as a good way to broadly describe the participants’ strategies for dealing with their return experiences.

The option of loyalty, i.e. a complete re-adaptation, was not chosen by any of the participants. On the contrary, the option of exit was very prominent. Every second participant thought about re-emigration at one point of the return experience. For some, this seemed to be the only way to achieve an independent life. Lindita, for instance, developed the strong wish to move out of the parental home and rent her own apartment in Prishtina after her return. Her parents, however, fiercely rejected this. Reflecting on this, she concluded: ‘I don’t want to make them [her family] sad (...). And that’s bad because the only way out is going and living abroad again’. By April 2022, 5 out of 16 participants lived outside Kosovo again and hence had chosen to ‘exit’. A variant of this option was chosen by Linda: she decided to stay in Kosovo but concentrated on her own life and career instead of ‘fighting against the system’.

The remaining participants opted for ‘voice’ or, as Linda called it, ‘being a martyr’ and found ways to overcome their reverse culture shock. For a minority of participants, this meant continuing to fight for their aims against all the odds. Emigrating again on a long-term basis was not an option for them because contributing to Kosovo was their most important priority. As Jehona phrased it:

I know that if I would stay in the US, I would be successful and maybe I would be like way richer. But that’s not my mission in life. I cannot live peacefully there and make money and focus on myself, when I see how things are here and not doing my part to help.

The majority of those who stayed, however, chose a middle ground: they re-adapted to a certain degree, like Rozafa, who explained that ‘a part of me that I had come to know while I was in Sweden, I had to leave in Sweden because there was practically no room for it here’ and began to choose ‘their battles’ more selectively

as they realised that ‘you can’t fight the majority’ (Emina). Hence, around two-thirds of the participants decided to stay and continue their campaign for gender equality (and other issues). This highlights that the *potential* for highly skilled female return migrants to influence gender norms in Kosovo is, in principle, very high. However, as this section has shown, it is fragile and comes with a high price for the women concerned. What helped them to deal with the hardships they were facing was, besides work, a re-orientation towards new friends or towards those friends who had also been abroad. Jehona, for instance, changed her entire circle of friends after her return. For many, alumni networks also played an essential role as they gave the participants an outlet to share their experiences and emotions and to find companions in their engagement.

Conclusion

This paper has analysed how highly skilled women from Kosovo experienced their sojourn in North America or Western Europe and their subsequent return to Kosovo. Within this context, the particular focus was on the impact of migration on the participants’ self-perception and gender norms and their involvement with gender equality after their return to Kosovo. With this unique focus, the paper interlinked three barely researched topics: return migration to Kosovo, female return migration and the return migration of highly skilled women.

The study showed that all participants experienced their stay abroad as empowering. For some of them, the experience was so influential that they referred to it as a turning point in life. This could be traced back to two main reasons: the migration-induced experience of independence, i.e. living outside the family household for the first time, and the acquisition of (potential) intangible remittances. The participants felt less regulated abroad and enjoyed the freedoms that life outside the traditional family household offered them. In combination with the need to organise their lives independently, this was perceived as highly empowering. This process was supported by the contact with more liberal gender norms. Seeing women holding influential positions or taking up usually male-dominated professions encouraged many participants to lead more independent lives themselves. Upon return, most of them actively promoted gender equality, for instance in everyday discussions, at work or through voluntary work. They pointed out sexist traditions in discussions with families, friends and colleagues, supported female friends and engaged in voluntary projects to raise awareness on the discrimination of women. However, almost all of them experienced a reverse culture shock upon return. Resistance by the local population and reintegration problems impeded their advocacy for gender equality. The clashes between conservative Kosovar values and traditions and the progressive ones of the participants initially alienated many from society. Besides this, especially the re-entry into the family household was challenging as it was perceived as highly confining. In turn, every second participant thought about re-emigration. Around one third left Kosovo again. Nonetheless, it must be emphasised that two-thirds of them stayed in Kosovo and continued to fight for gender equality. Highly skilled female return migrants, therefore, in principle, have a very high potential to act as agents of gender equality in Kosovo. However, the many challenges which they face on their return effectively lower their possibilities to initiate changes in practice. Whether or not they are eventually successful is subject to further investigation.

These results have very practical implications. Besides showing that the target group has a very high potential to promote gender equality in Kosovo, the study illustrated the many struggles which they faced after return. Support measures for this group could mitigate these hardships. Such measures are, however, rare as they are usually customised to deportees. The results show that unpreparedness for return and the feeling of isolation after return are key problems facing highly skilled female returnees. Targeted support measures for this group of return migrants could include, for instance, pre-return counselling and strengthened returnee networks. Against the background of their vast potential, more research on the unique needs of this group of returnees would offer essential insights into the development of future support measures.


Notes

1. Note that this section, in line with the focus of the paper, concentrates on migration from somewhat patriarchal origin countries to destination countries with more liberal gender norms. For other constellations, the outcomes may deviate from those described here (see, e.g., Kuschminder 2013).
2. Both channels are, of course, closely interlinked and often happen in parallel. Nonetheless, I argue that they should be separated analytically as they follow different patterns and are determined by different factors. Whereas the acquisition of (potential) intangible remittances depends somewhat heavily on the degree of interaction with the destination society, this is irrelevant for the experience of independence through earning one's own financial resources.
3. Note however, that Kuschminder (2013) does not specifically investigate female return migrants' engagement in gender equality but in the transfer of new ideas and practices in general.
4. Three participants were interviewed twice.
5. Note that only migration experiences that conform to the criteria of this study are included. Some participants also had other migration experiences – mainly war-related ones during early childhood – which are not of substantial interest to this paper.
6. Other changes included, for example, a strengthened awareness of civic rights and responsibilities, environmental issues or changed work ethics.

Conflict of interest statement

No conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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