

Doing Gender in Informal Social Protection: Migration, Return and Family Relations in the Western Balkans

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Abstract

This article examines links between gender and informal social protection in return migration contexts in Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia. It situates informal social protection, as provided by families and transnational networks, within post-socialist welfare retrenchment, socio-economic insecurities and migration. Adopting a ‘doing gender’ approach, the article contends that informal social protection is actively negotiated and evaluated through diversified gendered norms and relations of dependency. Drawing on 321 qualitative interviews with returned migrants conducted between 2019 and 2025 it identifies the patterns of protection, adverse inclusion, and exclusion within informal social protection systems. By linking these with “doing gender”, the article deepens the understanding how social relations enact and produce gender while providing or withholding social protection.

Keywords: Gender, informal social protection, adverse inclusion, Balkans

Introduction

In the so-called Western Balkans² region, the transition from communism to market-based economies accompanied by its welfare cuts and social policy reforms, has made informal³ social protection increasingly relevant, with families acting as its primary providers. Migration and transnational networks play a key role in this process. Peoples’ ability to capitalize on migration is structured by the growing socio-economic inequalities and the acceptability of migration is both gendered and classed. Those who succeed in their migration endeavors are often expected

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² “Western Balkans” does not have any endemic or historical meaning in and for the region; it was coined in the process of EU association of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia.

³ Informal refers to ways and means other than the ones sanctioned by the state. It does not imply that these transfers are not rule-based.

to support family members in their country of origin. For those who must return, it is once more the family and personal networks which provide support more reliably than formal institutions, depending, however, on their differential capacity. Comparative research on informal social protection has identified three types of relations: protection, adverse inclusion, and exclusion. Meanwhile, the ability to negotiate benefits through social relations depends on an individual's positionality (Aiken/Hage 1966; Calder/Tanhchareun 2014).

As informal social protection is provided through social relations (Calder/Tanhchareun 2014), understanding the nature of these social relations, networks and structures is crucial. This article aims to contribute to that by suggesting that 'doing gender' (West/Zimmerman 1987) is a crucial element of these relations and strongly shapes outcomes, though in varied ways. It will highlight the impacts of social and structural changes of the past three decades on gendered relations and on the relevance of informal social protection. These are in particular the end of communism in the region, the coinciding social policy reforms leading to increased reliance on informal social protection as well as significant migration, both as a component or expansion of informal social protection and as exit strategy for those left without protection. These changes, as will be argued, have led to two paradoxical developments: a repatriarchalization of relations in societies as well as many families, partly in response to the need to shoulder more risks on the one hand; and a diversification of prevailing gender norms and role expectations, providing families with a broader repertoire for the distribution of roles and responsibilities of mutual relations of care and protection on the other.

The article connects a social-constructivist perspective on gender with research on informal social protection by highlighting the iterative relationship between norms and agency in relation to access to resources and power. Families, and their members, position themselves differently vis-à-vis the co-existing gender norms and negotiate their internal arrangements accordingly, reflecting, however, unequal positions among their members. Gender operates as an omnipresent mechanism for evaluating social behavior (West/Zimmerman 1987) and therefore inevitably plays into the assessments of eligibility for, and constructions of the duty to provide informal care and social protection, shaping and legitimizing the types of inclusion and exclusion that women experience within systems of informal social protection. The key assumption resulting from this is that behavior that does not comply with or openly challenges the normative framework applied in specific situations bears a risk of exclusion or adverse consequences, when acting and assessing person share relations of dependency.

The analysis draws on 321 qualitative interviews with migrants who returned to Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia at different times and after diverse migration trajectories. These countries are the economically poorest in the region (Euronews Albania 2023) and have the lowest levels of public spending on social protection (Danaj 2014). The interviews were conducted by the author and by several local researchers as part of two subsequent research projects on return and reintegration between 2019-2025. While the empirical data for this article relates to return and informal social protection mechanisms intersect with migration and return in relevant ways, the gendered provision of informal social protection is not a return-specific phenomenon per se.

The article will proceed by first elaborating the context of formal and informal social protection in the three countries as well as the role of migration and return migration. After

introducing the analytical approach that combines a ‘doing gender’ perspective with informal social protection and introducing the methodology and its limitations, it will thereafter present the findings in the final section.

Transitions’ differential impact on men and women

Before the transitions, communism in Albania as well as in Yugoslav Kosovo and Macedonia, explicitly promoted women’s active participation in work and politics. Consequently, women and men were included relatively equitable into public education and the labor markets, as well as political and administrative state institutions, while religious institutions had little influence or were banned. This did not necessarily translate into equitable divisions of labor and power within the reproductive sphere and the household (Danaj 2020; Stecklov/Carletto/Azzarri/Davis 2010). Also, not all parts of the population were equally integrated into the institutions. There were, for example, obstacles for Albanians and other communities in Kosovo and Macedonia, and in rural or poor families it was more common to take girls out of school early. But combined with the availability of jobs, public services and institutions providing social protection and care (childcare, healthcare), the conditions were significantly more supportive of gender equity than they are today. The end of communism led to a “momentous repatriarchization” (Kraske 2020) with women identified as the main losers of the transition (Brunnbauer 2000). While men were once more placed into the role of providers, women continue to carry out the bulk of informal care work, which is the main reason for their high labor market inactivity (Danaj 2014). Health care became less accessible (with long waiting times, lack of specialized or high quality treatments) and Kosovo still lacks any public health insurance system. The monetization of services exacerbates this, as women’s time spent on care work is not financially reimbursed, creating financial and time poverty (Calder/Tanhchareun 2014). Simultaneously, nationalist and religious discourses grew stronger, idealizing women’s confinement to the household or projecting women as needing (male) protection from external threats such as the immigrant or ethnic ‘other’ (Blagojević/Stosic 2020). Episodes such as women’s role in armed partisan units fighting fascists during World War II seem to have been forgotten (Kraske 2020).

In consequence, despite of equitable inclusion in education including higher education (with the exception of certain minorities), women are disadvantaged in terms of access to formal employment, equal pay, high-ranking positions in the economy and politics, and property ownership, including inheritance (Browne 2017). A recent survey of over 15,000 women in South-Eastern Europe (the Western Balkans, plus Moldova and Ukraine) conducted by the OSCE, found a high prevalence of violence against women and very low reporting rates (OSCE 2019). Reasons are found to be weak legal and institutional protection (Browne 2017), shame, economic dependency and lack of trust in public institutions (Kraske 2020), as well as the prevalence of patriarchal norms (Browne 2017). Indeed, norms that normalize violence against women in heterosexual relationships and that attribute women a subservient role receive widespread acceptance (OSCE 2019). A significant minority of women endorse norms that limit their own autonomy (e.g. that married women should not choose friends with whom

their husbands disagree), and one quarter of surveyed women holds victim blaming attitudes towards sexual and intimate partner violence (OSCE 2019). In Albania, North Macedonia and Kosovo, the statement that domestic violence is a private matter received the highest support among the surveyed Western Balkan countries (OSCE 2019). In many families, women are taught to see men as the head of the household, and that their own acceptability depends on the display of certain skills and behaviors. Meanwhile, men learn that they are entitled to “beat or kill a woman” if she does not live up to their expectations (Danaj 2020). Such norms are strongly and increasingly contested, but in the context of high societal polarization around gender, different sets of norms and behaviors tend to become promoted and reinforced among different sets of people.

Formal and informal social protection in “transition countries”

Post-socialist social policy reforms in the Western Balkans were implemented under the auspices of external organizations such as the EU, the IMF and the World Bank. Based on market orientation and fiscal tightening, these reforms resulted in reduced public spending and the loss of work-based benefits (Bartlett/Uvalić 2022). Support for the poorest members of society has thereby become underfunded with little or no redistributive effect (Bartlett/Uvalić 2022; Gotcheva/Sundaram 2013). Following the 2008/09 recession, austerity measures intensified further, combining with clientelist pressures to generate growing support for non-poor voters (with variations between the countries) (Obradović/Filic 2019). In fact, they are characterized by high levels of poverty, inequality, unemployment, as well as large informal sectors (Bartlett/Uvalić 2022). As the 2011 Regional Human Development Report states: “Transition has brought freedoms and choices to many, but deprived many others of the ability to live long, healthy and productive lives” (UNDP 2011). The case study countries Albania, Kosovo and (North) Macedonia have even lower public expenditure on social protection and welfare than neighboring Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro (Danaj 2014). The maximum public support provided to citizens with no income is far below the subsistence level, while access is often complicated by opaque regulations, bureaucratic hurdles and a lack of digital literacy.

Systems transition has thus strengthened the relevance of informal social protection mechanisms (Danaj 2014; Latifi 2012). The family’s reputation as the primary social institution is largely due to its central role in providing social protection and care (Danaj 2014; Latifi 2012; Leutloff-Grandits 2023). Past research on the “Balkan family” has highlighted prototypical features, such as patrilinearity (kinship and property are passed on by the male head of the household) and patrilocality (cohabitation of a father with his sons and their families forming complex, multiple households) (Kaser 1996). Historically, families in the Balkans formed relatively autonomous units of production and consumption, with fixed structures that organized the divisions of labor, roles and responsibilities based on the sex and age of their members (Kaser 1996). During the Ottoman period, household organization was largely determined by customary law, which significantly restricted the roles and opportunities of women, particularly in rural and mountainous areas (Leutloff-Grandits 2023).

Meanwhile, family and kinship relations, as well as family structures, have been changing, since the end of the Ottoman Empire and even more rapidly since the end of communism and the Yugoslav wars (Latifi 2012). These changes are not occurring in linear ways: Processes of individualization versus kin-based solidarity and patriarchal versus diversified distributions of roles and responsibilities have been co-existing and contrasting with each other (Leutloff-Grandits 2023). The recent revival of patriarchal family structures may not so much be a return to “traditional”⁴ values per se, but rather a way for families to reorganize in response to limited economic opportunities and “the precariousness of the relationship between citizens and state” (Leutloff-Grandits 2023). The basis on which support can be provided, expected or withheld has generally become more diverse and flexible though. Even for the person providing support, it may be difficult to isolate the exact reasons or motivations, which may range from genuine concern for someone’s well-being, love, expectations of or owing reciprocity, strategic investments in promising contacts, enacting norms and role-related expectations such as that of housewife, or mother, threats or fear of consequences for non-compliance (Calder/Tanhchareun 2014).

In principle, formal and informal social protection are not mutually exclusive. Ideally, they complement each other. A robust formal social protection system can mitigate inequalities by addressing the gaps in informal support, preventing exclusion (at least of citizens / those formally eligible) and reducing dependency and vulnerability to exploitation by offering alternative sources of protection to individuals in precarious situations (Calder/Tanhchareun 2014). Access to formal assistance can also foster mutuality; for instance, when elderly people receive pensions, it enables them to reciprocate for support.

In the case study region, this ideal-typical distinction between formal and informal protection systems is less clear cut. Informal networks emerged not only in response to gaps in public services but also constitute a means of interacting with and accessing formal institutions and public services (Gordy/Efendic 2019). Informality, in institutions and everyday life, took root during the transition and break-up of Yugoslavia (the latter affecting Albania only indirectly), as well as through externally driven institution building (Efendic/Ledeneva 2020). Consequently, informal networks and distribution mechanisms may involve state actors and / or individuals employed in state institutions and public resources (Bojicic-Dzelilovic 2013). The combination of limited formal social protection and overlaps between formal and informal distribution mechanisms can grant certain individuals unchecked power, limiting accountability and trust in formal institutions (Bojicic-Dzelilovic 2013; UNDP 2011) and entrench inequalities.

Outbound and return migrations’ relation to social protection

Migration from the region is substantial and primarily related to the aforementioned structural drivers, particularly poor labor market performance and inadequate welfare systems (de Silva 2024), as well as weak governance and high levels of informality (Möllers/Arapi-

⁴ As Leutloff-Grandits (2023) and others have pointed out, notions such as traditional or modern do not have fixed meanings and are often used in normative ways.

Gjini/Herzfeld/Xhema 2017). The proportion of the population living abroad is around 44 per cent for Albania, 34 per cent for North Macedonia (de Silva 2024) and around one third for Kosovo (Ayerst 2025). Historically, migration from (North) Macedonia and Kosovo began earlier, already during the Yugoslav period and was partly facilitated by labor migration agreements with countries such as Germany. This made it a common strategy for many families, particularly those less integrated into the Yugoslav institutions (Latifi 2012; Schmidinger 2018). In Albania, migration only became legally possible after the fall of the communist regime but quickly surpassed that of all other post-communist countries in terms of scale (Danaj 2014). From a social protection perspective, the migration arises from the families' need to manage a wide range of socio-economic risks (Himmelstine/Gagnon/Hagen-Zanker 2023). These risks and needs relating to livelihoods and social protection are then "outsourced" to migrants (Bartlett/Uvalić 2022). Through financial remittances, investments and other types of transfers migrants often act as social and health insurance for their family members via geographically expanded informal systems of care (Leutloff-Grandits 2023).

Gender as organizing principle of social relations shares a two-way relationship with migration in the sense that gender impacts how migration and return are organized, while migration, transnational networks and return can influence gendered norms (Danaj 2019; King/Lulle 2022). Women have a higher inclination to migrate from contexts where they do not feel treated well, but chances to turn these intentions into actual mobility depends on "household income, network effects and family obligations" as well as gendered imbalances in economic and political opportunities (Ruyssen/Salomone 2018). Literature on migration as a household strategy tends to overlook the influence of "gendered norms and expectations" as well as "unequal power relations among family members" on intra-household migration decision-making (Hughes 2021). With variations depending on class and type of migration, women's migration from Albania was shown to be "solidly entrenched in other people's decision-making" (Stecklov/Carletto/Azzarri/Davis 2010: 21). The migration of daughters often depended on the (preferred) availability of a son, and household health shocks deterred women's migration (unlike that of men) (Stecklov/Carletto/Azzarri/Davis 2010).

Labor migration from the case study countries is therefore still predominantly gendered male, while women migrate individually for higher education or white-collar jobs as well as in (transnational) family settings. Asylum migration, which started around 2008/09 often involves entire families, but has become increasingly short-term due to accelerated rejection and return procedures in EU countries (Vollmer/Şahin-Mencütek 2026). While labor migration (circular and long-term) is a strategy to deal with income and social protection gaps, asylum seeking from this region is pursued by people without the resources for more formalized migration. Capabilities to engage in beneficial migration is a function of the accessibility of resources within one's network connections (Vollmer 2023a). Asylum seekers often lack the support of public institutions and of transnational or domestic networks, resulting in chronic precarity and serious untreated health conditions. Women asylum seekers migrating individually (with or without children) often left without the consent of their families to escape from abuse and domestic violence. In destination contexts, they are able to benefit temporarily from some extent of institutionalized social protection, but are often excluded from a regularization of their residence titles and labor market integration due to differential constructions of deservingness

(Ratzmann/Mantu/Borrelli 2024). From one of the primary destination countries, Germany, deportations of women and children to Albania have been implemented despite evidence of a history and a renewed risk of domestic violence and abuse, in violation of the Istanbul Convention (Monitor 2025). According to a German NGO specifically supporting women in distress, countries in the Western Balkans region have the highest number of women returning from Germany with their assistance (SOLWODI 2023).

Reintegration assistance, provided partly by origin countries and mainly by destination countries, largely leaves structural reasons for inequalities unaddressed (Paasche/Skilbrei 2017). Instead, it targets individuals and families, offering limited support with no proven long-term effects (Erler et al. 2025). Furthermore, women are less likely to receive income generation support and men are more likely to directly benefit from these programs (Sacchetti 2016). Consequently, informal networks and families remain the primary source of support for returned migrants (Şahin-Mencütek 2023). Poor families, who lacked support prior to their migration are thrown back into the same situation as before, sometimes with increased debts; for women, this may mean re-entering the same relations of dependency and abuse that they had hoped to escape from or remaining without any protection (SOLWODI 2023). The fact that returning women may be stigmatized or received reluctantly by their families due to the perception that they have experienced sexual violence while abroad or are returning as single parents (International Organization for Migration [IOM] 2023) does not affect their right to remain abroad. Additionally, gendered effects appear in the re-connecting process, with men found to more easily re-access old and forge new networks, while women tend to have less access to a secondary social environment after returning, relying more often on female relatives and transnational connections (Dahinden 2010).

Increased mobility and translocal family structures are also changing social and care relations within families, with women in particular taking on new roles (Leutloff-Grandits 2023). At the same time, continued dependency on remittances and the associated divisions of labor within families have been identified as the main causes of the “freezing of patriarchal family relations” and an obstacle to social change in Kosovo (ESI 2006; Reineck 1991). Household level data from Albania confirms that male migration abroad decreases the probability of female family members being engaged in paid employment and increases their unpaid work. However, it also shows that male-dominated labor migration can positively influence women’s employment or self-employment over time, particularly among the less educated (Mendola/Carletto 2009). To sum up, the relationship between gender and migration is mixed and influenced by individuals’ pre-migration circumstances as well as the opportunities provided or denied by migration regimes.

Informal social protection by ‘doing gender’: analytical approach

Informal social protection is provided through social relations, i.e. individual and collective arrangements different from state-citizen relations (Calder/Tanhchareun 2014). These social relations are not necessarily formed with social protection as their primary intention though and they are neither inherently good nor bad. Instead, they manifest in different ways and may

have beneficial, detrimental or ambivalent effects on individuals, with the latter ones - referred to as the “dark side of social capital” – less reflected upon in literature (Baycan/Öner 2023). One reason for their ambivalence is that social relations reflect broader social structures, thereby reproducing hierarchies, inequalities and specific obligations, while the social values and norms underlying informal exchange mechanisms can change. In consequence, individuals may receive support and protection through their networks, but they may also be excluded from protection, or included on unequal or adverse terms (Calder/Tanhchareun 2014).

Exclusion from informal social protection can result from having weak or ineffectual networks, as resources are distributed unequally between networks and groups and people tend to be connected to others with a similar socioeconomic status (Lin 2000). Those with the fewest resources are often the least able to rely on others for support (Calder/Tanhchareun 2014). Exclusion can also be deliberate and unrelated to the availability of resources. For example, it may be the result of a perceived violation of social norms on the part of the excluded person or of perceived undeservingness for other reasons. Adverse inclusion describes situations in which individuals are included in social networks that provide some types of support and protection, but on adverse or exploitative terms, for example withdrawing other much needed support, or providing it under certain conditions. Often, these situations are without alternatives or exit option and with detrimental effects on the recipient (Calder/Tanhchareun 2014).

The ability to shape social relationships to one’s own advantage varies from person to person and gender plays an important role in this. Drawing on a social-constructivist understanding of gender as doing, gender is understood here as “powerful ideological device that produces, reproduces, and legitimates the choices and constraints that are predicated on sex category” (West/Zimmerman 1987). However, unlike approaches that assume that informal social protection systems simply treat household members differently based on social category (e.g. under-protecting women, the elderly or children) (Danaj 2014; Verpoorten/Verschraegen 2010), this article highlights the iterative relationship between norms and agency as well as the contextual / situational differences in enacting gender as pivotal characteristics of the social relations that provide or withhold informal social protection. It also highlights the role of inequalities in doing gender and accessing social protection. People with fewer resources (financial, cultural, social) are “less able to resist their identity being defined by others” including the “negative or limiting consequences of imposition” (Lumby 2009) and belonging to or aspiring to the security of belonging to a certain social group is a strong shaper of identity (Bauman 2004; Lumby 2009). Thereby, exclusion and adverse inclusion constrain access not only to resources, information and well-being, but also to sociability, recognition, and identity. They erode self-respect and reduce the ability to achieve personal goals (Silver 2010) and thereby a person’s capability to even think about alternatives.

Members of social formations, such as families, thus set, reinforce, and negotiate internal rules or expectations guided by wider e.g. societal norms and individual preferences, as well as by members’ unequal relations and positionalities. The ‘doing gender’ approach highlights how normative conceptions, often reflecting broader social or institutional frameworks and defining the ‘appropriate’ behavior for each sex category are always present in situated behavior as well as in the assessment (by the self and others) thereof (West/Zimmerman 1987). This does not imply that behavior is always in line with the respective ‘gender ideal’ or normative conceptions

- it can well divert from or purposefully challenge it—but that behavior is likely to be assessed on this basis. Activities are assessed differently depending on who engages in them and depending on who assesses them as well as knowledge about the consequences of such assessments for future interactions (West/Fenstermaker 1995). Through this assessment—referred to as accountability—this approach links the interactional with the institutional context (Moloney/Fenstermaker 2002). Assessments of social action therefore draw on and contribute to the (re-)production of social structure (West/Fenstermaker 1995).

Drawing on research on categorization practices, ‘doing gender’ assumes that the behavioral commitment to a gender identity as well as the familiarization with the respective ideal or proper behavior is taught and encouraged during early childhood socialization, implying that respective norms can be internalized and that doing gender predominantly occurs as recurring and in fact routine accomplishment (West/Zimmerman 1987). Members of a society provide evidence of themselves being competent members of this society by accomplishing gender, be it in conformity or deviance with certain norms (Moloney/Fenstermaker 2002). However, it is mainly through the naturalization of gendered differences that competency is affirmed (West/Zimmerman 1987). Rather than expressing pre-existing binaries and differences, gender thus acts as a rationale for justifying fundamental divisions in societies, which have to appear as natural for the so-produced inequalities and subordination to be effective (West/Fenstermaker 1995).

In light of the socio-structural changes over the past three decades, which were discussed above, the analytical approach that combines social-relations based informal social protection with doing gender leads to two preliminary conclusions or hypothesis.

1) At an ideational level, the rules determining roles, responsibilities and conditionalities of providing / receiving informal social protection have become more flexible and diverse, partly reflecting broader societal and global transformations and partly resulting from the realities of geographically expanded care networks and migration. This provides families with a broader repertoire of care relations, which are also less fixated to gender binaries. This does not imply that gender has become less relevant for assessing behavior, but that the frameworks against which behavior can be assessed have become more diverse.

2) At the structural and material level, the reduction in public care and social protection and the shrunk job market have favored a “standard” response of strongly relying on naturalized differences between men and women, which places women into a position where their leverage on accomplishing gender is confined by material dependencies and the devaluation of their contributions to the informal care economies. Doing gender outside of the normative conceptions which apply in a given social or situational context bears costs and risks. Especially individuals who are seen as unable to reciprocate in kind may have to earn their eligibility for support by adhering to certain norms or by tacitly accepting adverse inclusion.

Methodological approach

The empirical basis of this article consists of a relatively large body of qualitative interviews conducted in the framework of two research projects⁵ on return and reintegration between 2019 and 2025. Data collection was conducted by the author and several researchers from the respective countries. Respondents were migrants returned to their countries of origin (Albania and Kosovo, in the 2nd project also North Macedonia), mainly from the EU and Switzerland, followed by countries within the region and the smallest section from more distant locations such as the US, Canada, or Saudi Arabia. They were selected through networks, mainly of the local researchers, snowballing and reintegration assistance providers, with the aim of covering a maximum diversity of experiences and trajectories. Hence, the sample includes varied migration motives, destinations, periods spent abroad, types and times of returns and post-return experiences. In the first project, 211 interviews with returned migrants were conducted using semi-structured interview guidelines and analyzed through thematic coding using MAXQDA (Vollmer 2023b). The interview guidelines explicitly covered reintegration assistance (accessibility, perceived usefulness), experiences in accessing formal institutions and public assistance and sources of support, both for migration and after return (who provided, what type, on which basis).

Gender relations, issues with gender equality, and difficulties faced specifically by women in family contexts (both as reason for emigration and after return) were brought up by respondents, mainly women. Women in situations of ‘adverse inclusion’ or without any support from well-resourced networks were represented among respondents from the very beginning in small numbers relative to the overall sample. Collaborations with organizations such as “Single Parent Association Kosovo” and Solwodi, Germany, as well as snowballing through local NGOs working specifically with women in distress proved key in identifying some of these respondents. Categories such as network-based assistance, social control, gender norms and informality were developed inductively during the coding, but these situations were too specific to be discussed in detail in previous publications. For this article, the relevant individual interviews were considered in their entirety, and the framework was developed in dialogue between the data and the literature.

The second project had a stronger focus on inter-ethnic and community relations in the context of return, but the interview guidelines covered the same dimensions (plus additional questions on said aspects). Data from 110 semi-structured interviews from the 2nd project conducted in Albania (Tirana and Korca), Kosovo (Plemetin and Mitrovica) and North Macedonia (Shuto Orizari and Struga) have been analyzed / visualized very basically by entering the responses into Kobo toolbox. For this article, those aspects most relevant to the discussion were selected, especially post-return access to formal social protection, reintegration assistance

⁵ The first one is “Trajectories of Reintegration” (2019-2023) and the 2nd one “Return and Belonging” (2024-2026), both projects were funded by the German Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development. In both projects, the semi-structured interview guideline covered reasons and means of migration, experiences during migration, reasons and types of return, experiences of re-establishing life after return across various dimensions (economic, social, political, legal) and future aspirations.

and own income, as well as whom respondents would ask for help and on which basis support is usually provided.

86 additional interviews were conducted by the author over the course of these two projects with stakeholder in all three countries and in Germany, specifically with reintegration assistance providers (state, non-state, international), charities, minority and women's rights organizations, but also experts and municipal employees, and in Germany mainly with return counselling organizations (state and non-state). With few exceptions, the interviews were not recorded. Responses were documented in writing during the interviews, completed and if necessary translated into English immediately afterwards. All interview scripts were anonymized and complemented with own observations by each researcher. Several meetings and exchanges between author and researchers served to cross-check information and findings.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this methodological approach, which deserve mention. One is the diversity of the respondents (in terms of migrations, timeframes, backgrounds, etc.), a strength on the one hand, but also complicating conclusions and requiring considerable care with the interpretation of findings. Another aspect is the diversity of enumerators, each of them bringing in his/her connections, a specific style of conducting the interviews and own priorities. From the formal design of the data collection, it is certainly a limitation that the gendered dimension of the topic of this analysis was not elicited systematically. Therefore, male perspectives on it are largely absent: few male respondents commented on gender relations during the interviews, which simultaneously constitutes an important field of further inquiry. In fact, not only male, but any perspective on situations of adverse inclusion other than that of the adversely affected person are missing from this data collection.

Also, female respondents rarely shared experiences of abuse with male enumerators, or only vaguely. Generally, the database does not allow any conclusions about the prevalence of the phenomena (of adverse in- and exclusion). There are reasons to believe that they are underrepresented in this data, as the sampling method (largely relying on organizations and networks) is likely to miss people who are disconnected from both and that—for reasons of shame, victim-blaming, or others) respondents may have chosen to not disclose certain painful experiences. One interview (conducted by the author with a female interpreter) was ended by the respondent for exactly this reason and is therefore excluded from the analysis

Empirical Findings

Findings from quantified interview analysis

The analysis of 110 semi-structured interviews (33 with female and 77 with male respondents) with a view to key aspects of the migration – informal social protection nexus confirms many of the findings from the literature review above.

Table 1: Migration, Return and Social Protection by Gender (N=110)⁶

Individual Migration	Unprepared Return	Own income	Reintegration assistance	Access to social welfare benefits
♀ 18%	♀ 63%	♀ 51.5%	♀ 27.3%	♀ 21.2 %
♂ 33.7%	♂ 54%	♂ 55.8%	♂ 20.7%	♂ 23.37%

Table 2: Informal Support Network by Gender (N = 110)

Whom do you turn to for help?		
Family members	Family, local NGOs, religious institutions	Family, friends, neighbors, colleagues
♀ 40%	♀ 18%	♀ 36.3%
♂ 41.5%	♂ 2.5%	♂ 35%

In terms of migration patterns, women were less likely to move on their own.⁷ Mostly, they migrated with family members (core family or extended family); men either migrated with their families, with friends or cousins and more often alone compared to women. Among the women, 63 per cent were unprepared⁸ for return, meaning they would have needed substantial support to re-establish themselves after return, compared to 54 per cent among the men. Regarding income generation (post-return), roughly half of each category generates their own income from work, with a much smaller proportion reporting a formal contract and some having only occasional and many low-skilled work. Reintegration assistance is mainly known to those returnees who had counselling prior to their return, unlike those who self-organized their return or were deported. Respondents received quite a range of re-integration assistance, mainly items such as furniture, clothes, food, or wood; few received tools, housing reconstruction and income generation support; others reported that they had been rejected, were still waiting or had given up applying. Regarding access to social welfare, delays and complications were reportedly even more pronounced and only a small proportion of respondents eventually gained (minimal) support, for example only child allowance for a widow returned to Albania. There is one group of returnees among the respondents, people displaced by the Kosovo war and returned from North Macedonia after 2015, who have most consistently received reintegration assistance and social welfare (however, none of them has a formal source of income); without these, the numbers would be even lower.

Regarding social connectedness, family members were mentioned first by all respondents, mainly parents and siblings. There is a correlation with people who have more accomplished

⁶ Percentages were calculated based on actual responses in relation to the total number of respondents for each sex category. Due to some missing responses and deviations from above given categories the total does not always add up to 100 per cent; details are provided in the text.

⁷ Data on return has limited validity in this regard: Individual migration of women from the region has increased substantially in the context of risen demand for care workers and medical professionals, for example, but they rarely return.

⁸ In Cassarino (2004) sense, where return preparedness combines the willingness and the readiness to return.

migration experiences and larger social circles (friends, colleagues playing a more important role). Thus, for requests for support, family members are mentioned primarily by almost all respondents, with women more likely to additionally consult with small NGOs or religious institutions, and men more likely to additionally rely on friends, colleagues or neighbors. Very few (male) respondents mentioned public institutions and the same number mentioned they would never turn to public institutions. Men were more likely to name themselves as providers of support and as having no one to turn to. The main reasons for high reliance on the family are lack of trust in alternatives. Types of support that can be expected are mainly emotional support, advise, shared care duties and sometimes help with paperwork or finances. There is a correlation between needing a lot of support and having mainly connections with people who can only provide emotional support. Even where social relations are protective and beneficial, they do not provide the type of support that enables people to move on in life (such as starting a joint business, or opening job opportunities).

Findings from qualitative analysis

Relations within the Family

Mirroring above findings, the majority of respondents to the more in-depth interviews emphasized the importance of social connections in a positive way, including with core, extended and transnational family and often friends and colleagues. Crucial to the differential enactments of gender within families is how normative assumptions are linked with social roles, such as that of the daughter, the bride, the housewife or the mother. Decisions whether, when and whom to marry, for example, can influence social acceptability. Women reported having to navigate quite a lot of interference from relatives in this regard; and a woman from Northern Albania reported that her parents cut all ties with her for 8 years after she chose her own husband (RA23).

In families practicing patrilocality, getting married means moving in with the husband's family. However, this is not only a traditional family structure, but also an economic necessity when young couples are unable to afford their own housing. Quite a number of respondents reported that their migration had been an escape from the overcrowdedness and the moral restrictions of the patriarchal households. As a young husband and father from Tirana explained:

"Me and my wife were very upset with my parents, too many rules in our culture. My wife was not able to go out, she had to be cleaning and serving my parents, and I was not allowed to stay outside after sunset. So, eventually, this was too much, we were young [...]. We wanted to have our own life and enjoy the time together." (ALB-RH-SI-05)

The interviews indicate that couples and young families do not move back in with the husband's family after return, or only temporarily, even if this increases the economic strain or forces them to split up with one spouse re-migrating to financially support the other. In that sense,

migration does have a transformative effect, even if it is mainly by means of avoiding conflicts within extended families over differential assessments of appropriate behavior.

The decisive role is often that of the husband, and how he positions himself between loyalty, and perhaps dependency, towards his original family and his wife. "I met my husband, I got married, and I immediately became his and his family's maid" (RK13) summarizes the experience of several women in the sample, who lacked a strong support from their husbands. Adverse inclusion, specifically into the husbands' family, according to their reports, included verbal and physical abuse from family members, food deprivation, and threats, no permission to leave the house, while having to work all day in and for the household. In one case, food deprivation was used to force the wife to visit her husband in jail against her will, where he was kept for murder. There, she became pregnant again and joins others in suspecting that "keeping me pregnant was their way of preventing me from speaking up". The refusal to abort a girl led one husband's family to decide that they would not cover the costs of any pregnancy-related medical examinations or treatments. In another instance, the family refused to pay for a c-section, even though it was urged for by doctors. Intimate partner violence was also reported, but the main feature of adverse inclusion – according to the interviews – is that several family members, often including the mother- and sisters in law, impose and reinforce exploitative rules through sanctions and threats. The same extends to migration contexts, where women without their own social network were exposed to verbal threats and insults by husband and in-laws, made to clean and take care of children in several households, made to work for money that went into the husbands account and left without any money when he left to visit the origin country.

A key characteristic of adverse inclusion is that the women are not allowed to leave and risk continued sanctions or threats if they do. Women shared that (ex-) husbands followed them abroad; NGOs implementing reintegration projects for women reported that they had to start hiring guards after security incidents or that – even though they found a job for a returned woman, she wasn't save on her way to work. One woman re-migrated after the end of her entry ban from deportation, even leaving her children behind, convinced that her ex-husband would never allow her to start a new life in her country of origin. The women themselves can be torn about their response: while some are determined to escape, others struggle to allow themselves to leave, indicating the internalization of specific norms and the need for belonging and support, even under adverse conditions. Lastly, relations of adverse inclusion are not consistently detrimental. In fact, these relationships often began on a positive note, and women sometimes chose the partners with whom they later ended up in relations of adverse inclusion. Also, both men and women, are not necessarily consistent in their preferred normative assessment frameworks and behaviors over time, partly feeding into the mix of protection and abuse that characterizes adverse inclusion and varied assessments of one's own situation over time. One respondent reflected explicitly about her mother (returned from Germany to Kosovo) that "somehow, she can't decide, one day she sees herself as this modern Western woman and the next day she once more over-burdens us with all with her expectations regarding our obligations as her children."

There are also situations that are best classified as exclusion of women. One interviewee lives with her four children near her husband's house. Neither does he give her money, nor does he

buy food for the children. She secretly receives food aid through an organization, fearing sanctions from him in case he finds out (RK13). “My husband comes only when he has his own needs, every time he comes, he creates a lot of problems to us. I even had physical violence from him.” Another woman had migrated to Germany to unite with her fiancé, who – after abusing her – dropped her at an asylum shelter, from where she was returned to Kosovo. In northern Albania, a husband’s migration to Germany left the wife and children homeless. She paid money for the permission to sleep in somebody’s car, and then decided to follow him to Germany, but was later returned.

Help can be provided by members of the woman’s own family, but some families do not consider their daughters their responsibility anymore after marriage. Regarding support from her original family after her involuntary return to Kosovo, a divorced woman said: “Not much. I was not welcomed by my family at all. They have this mentality that when the daughter goes away from home, she cannot come back” (RK3). She in fact re-married her ex-husband after a very difficult migration experience. Other women succeeded in activating own family members for support or expanded their networks, for example through migration. Brothers have been funding emigration or providing shelter (abroad) for their sisters, parents have covered health bills when the husband’s family refused to or helped with childcare. One woman found a new partner in Germany, who sent her money after her deportation to Albania which allowed her to cover everyday needs. Whereas previous research showed how women’s support systems are structured by specific kinship relations (Dahinden 2010), this data, specifically on women in adverse inclusion or exclusion, shows that women (as well as young couples) are most likely to seek support from relatives and acquaintances sharing or supporting the ways by which they prefer to enact gender.

However, in many situations, adverse inclusion or exclusion negatively affects women’s sense of agency. “My voice has not been heard either by my parents or the father of my children. In society? I don’t want to try” or “I do not enjoy my rights in my family, why should I seek them out. I do not have even basic human rights” are two statements by women that convey a sense of hopelessness regarding their capability to move themselves out of their current predicament. This is compounded by inaction or lack of consequences when trying to involve formal institutions. “I do not feel safe from my husband. He is violent. I called the police, but he continued again” (RK13). Women have also faced sanctions for taking legal action (a mother of five who reported her husband for child abuse was thrown out of the house by his family) and women’s attempt to receive support from public institutions was actively obstructed by husbands families through the use of connections or bribes.

To sum up, expectations and obligations associated with different roles within the family are strongly shaped through doing and doings of gender, however in diverse ways. In all its different enactments, gender has the key effect of normalizing and naturalizing specific behaviors and relations, including abusive ones, to some extent even to the affected individuals. Meanwhile, individuals are not necessarily consistent in their normative orientations over time, constituting one of the reasons why relations may be shifting between protective, adverse and excluded, making it harder to draw clear boundaries across situations. Adverse inclusion and even exclusion are not questions of resource availability per se. Couples and families living under precarious conditions may support each other’s well-being as much as conditions allow

them to. However, economic necessities maintain patrilocal family constellations perhaps as much as shared values or even more. And contestations of gender norms enacted within a specific family (through non-compliance or escape) bear differential risks and consequences and require unlocking additional resources, usually attempted through migration or reliance on supportive relatives. In that sense, a shared assessment framework for gendered behavior emerges as relevant vector in mediating support. The erosive effects of dependency on adverse relations and self-esteem and agency, failure to generate a viable escape route (for example migration resulting in deportation) and the need for protection and belonging coerce some women to (re-)submit themselves to relations of adverse inclusion.

Relations outside the Family

Interview data across the three countries confirms the key role of connections in accessing public services, work opportunities and unlocking information, indicating that formal and informal social protection mechanisms are not clearly separated. Accessing health care and other public services is often complicated and procedures untransparent. Women shared to have been turned away by institutions or requested to provide impossible documentation (e.g. written proof of not having any house on the name of the family). Lacking awareness of rights (and how to claim them) is another problem: “Well, I ask my children because they finished school” explains a widow in North Macedonia about her access to rights. “The only way to gain access here is to have connections—being linked to the right people who can help” (MKD-MS-SI-03). Formal social protection thus often fails women who are suffering adverse inclusion or exclusion from informal social protection, both due to problems accessing it and due to its limitations. Women feel compelled to remain in these situations knowing that there are almost no shelters for women at risk and even those only provide temporary solutions.

The generation of own income could provide an alternative source of independence and self-sufficiency. One reason keeping women out of the labor market is care duties (for children, sick and elderly), and over time, their lack of professional experience poses an additional obstacle for labor market inclusion. Their dissatisfaction and sometimes depression with these conditions are exacerbated by the lack of quality health and mental health care. Sometimes diagnoses, for example of children, were treated successfully abroad but health issues deteriorate or turn chronic after return without remedy. While in some family’s women’s autonomy is restricted based on the view that women should not go to work, a liberating effect of participating in the labor market is often a function of having had continuous support from the original families (funding higher education, possibly abroad, and helping with connections). But even women holding university degrees are often unable to find qualified employment outside the capital cities. Regarding access to the labor market, gender intersects not only with class, there is also racial exclusion reported by respondents, especially Roma: “Roma can only get cleaning jobs. I can cook very well, and I would love to work in restaurants, but they do not even let me cut vegetables, they say the job has been taken without an interview” said one returned migrant in Tirana (ALB-RH-SI-11). Another marker of difference applied only to women is whether they wear a headscarf. Women who do report facing additional obstacles when applying for jobs. One young migrant who left a difficult marriage in Germany and returned to Kosovo explains that “I see myself as a hardworking woman who is trying to build

a better future and become independent, but at times, others label me based on stereotypes or assumptions”.

Due to the massive emigration from Western Balkan countries, jobs are becoming more readily available (even though mainly in the service sector), but poor working conditions, lack of safety regulations and low salaries limit potential benefits, especially in the low-skilled sector. Interviewed women generated income in factories, call centers, housekeeping and cleaning. None of these are paid well enough to support even modest living conditions without family support. One deported woman in Tirana was working full-time in a call center, but her income did not allow her to pay rent. Thus, she moved into the one-room apartment with her widowed mother and was forced to leave her children with her ex-husband, who had been abusive towards her and jailed for beating his current partner in public. “It hurt a lot. I always did everything for my children and all of a sudden I was unable to afford having them with me” (RA4). She also reports that while the job gives her a welcome opportunity to continue speaking German, clients often swear at her and “use bad language”, as she must try and sell contracts or items which are uncalled for. Another woman (migrated together with her husband and children) had been working in a *façon* (tailoring factory, where cheap clothes are produced). She was diagnosed with cancer and had half of her stomach removed, presumably due to exposure to toxic chemicals in the factory; after that she was unable to bear the smell of the textiles and remained unemployed. The family migrated when a small public subsidy that she had been receiving from the government was cut without her health having improved, but was returned after few years.

To sum up, reasons that make adverse inclusion and exclusion seem intractable are that formal social protection is very limited in substance, accessing it can be challenging and may require connections. Economic independence of women is inhibited to some extent by patriarchal organization of family-related care duties. Meanwhile, the labor market itself constitutes another system of exploitation containing potential hazards for health and mental health due to weak regulation, especially in the low-skilled sector, while income from full-time work is insufficient to feed a family.

Conclusion

This article dived into the detrimental and ambivalent nature of social relations without denying the fundamental role they play in maintaining individuals’ well-being and providing social protection. In particular, it examined the gendered nature of informal social protection in the Western Balkans, situating changing family relations, migration, and return within broader post-socialist transformations. It starts from the observation that informal social protection—primarily organized through family and kinship networks—has re-emerged as the central mechanism through which individuals access care, resources, and opportunities. However, these informal social protection systems are neither neutral nor uniformly protective. Rather, they are structured by diversifying gendered norms, power relations, and differential access to resources. They also contain transnational dimensions: labor migrants and family members abroad are key providers of informal social protection, while families and individuals

have increasingly turned to asylum migration in response to exclusion or adverse inclusion to these systems. The empirical analysis draws on 321 qualitative interviews with returned migrants conducted in Albania, North Macedonia and Kosovo between 2019 and 2025, the three Western Balkan countries with the weakest economies and lowest public spending on social protection.

The article argues that recent changes relating to post-communist developments, externally driven social policy reforms and the outsourcing of social protection to migration have led to two paradoxical developments: a repatriarchalization of relations in societies as well as many families, partly in response to the need to shoulder more risks and dependency on male-dominated labor migration on the one hand; and a diversification of prevailing gender norms and role expectations, providing families with a broader (not necessarily more liberal) repertoire for the distribution of roles and responsibilities of mutual relations of care and protection on the other. The article connects a social-constructivist perspective of ‘doing gender’ with research on informal social protection. According to this, gender operates as an omnipresent mechanism for evaluating social behavior (West/Zimmerman 1987) and therefore inevitably plays into the assessments of eligibility for, and constructions of the duty to provide informal care and social protection, shaping and legitimizing the types of inclusion and exclusion that women experience within systems of informal social protection.

The main contribution that this article makes is through adding a dynamic, rather than categorical gender lens to research on informal social protection and on return and reintegration (Vollmer/Faik forthcoming), conceptualizing normative assessment frameworks on appropriate gendered behaviors as increasingly diverse and highlighting the iterative relationship between norms and agency in relation to access to resources and power. Families’ internal arrangements are negotiated reflecting collective and individual positionings vis-à-vis different co-existing gender norms and unequal positions of family members vis-à-vis each other. This approach links the interactional and behavioral with the structural level, arguing that an individual’s room for such a positioning is a function of their access to resources and support, and thereby not distributed equally.

Findings support the assumptions that expectations and obligations associated with different roles within the family are strongly shaped through doing and the doings of gender. Gender normalizes and naturalizes specific behaviors and relations, including abusive ones, to some extent even to the affected individuals. The analysis further reveals that individuals are not necessarily consistent in their normative orientations over time, constituting one of the reasons why relations may be shifting between protective, adverse and excluded, making it harder to draw clear boundaries between these across situations. While the research emphasizes that adverse inclusion and even exclusion are not questions of resource availability per se, patrilocal family constellations are often maintained by economic necessity and contestations of gender norms enacted within a specific family (through non-compliance or escape) bear differential risks and consequences and require unlocking additional resources. A shared assessment framework for gendered behavior thereby emerged as relevant vector in mediating support to women in adverse inclusion or exclusion, more than the specific kinship relation. Findings also confirm that adverse inclusion and exclusion constrain individuals’ self-esteem and capabilities to mobilize (mental and other) resources for self-help. In few instances, failure

to generate a viable escape route (for example migration resulting in deportation) and the need for protection and belonging coerced women to (re-)submit themselves to relations of adverse inclusion. At the same time, even when support is available, it often remains limited to emotional or subsistence-level assistance, rarely enabling long-term socio-economic mobility.

This finding speaks to the ambivalent effects of migration as a structuring force of informal social protection, showing how potentially beneficial effects of migration are shaped by individuals' pre-migration circumstances as well as the opportunities provided or denied by migration regimes. While transnational networks and remittances can enhance families' capacities to cope with economic risks, they also reproduce and, in some cases, reinforce gendered divisions of labor and dependency relations. Return migration further exposes the limitations of both formal and informal systems, particularly for women, who often re-enter the very social structures they had attempted to escape. Reintegration policies, largely individualized and insufficiently gender-sensitive, fail to address these structural constraints. An open question remains the transformative potential of return migration for gendered norms, which is sometimes assumed, but appears limited in its practical application (Pinkow-Läpple 2023).

To sum up, the findings highlight the ambivalent nature of social relations as sources of protection: they can provide essential support, but also reproduce inequality, constrain agency, and legitimize harmful practices. Importantly, the study underscores that individuals' ability to negotiate their position within these systems is uneven and closely tied to their social positionality, including gender, class, and access to transnational resources (Lumby 2009). Additional reasons making adverse inclusion and exclusion seem intractable are that formal social protection is very limited in substance, and that accessing it can be challenging and may require connections. Economic independence of women is inhibited to some extent by patriarchal organization of family-related care duties. Meanwhile, the labor market itself constitutes another system of exploitation containing potential hazards for health and mental health due to weak regulation, especially in the low-skilled sector, while income from full-time work is insufficient to feed a family.

In terms of implications, the article argues that strengthening formal social protection systems is crucial not only to alleviate material deprivation but also to provide alternatives to adverse inclusion and exclusion within informal networks. Future research and policy interventions should therefore pay closer attention to the interplay between gender, social relations, and mobility, and to the ways in which informal and formal systems of social protection can be transformed to promote more equitable outcomes. Additional research is also required on the perspectives of people who are actively conditioning social protection to pursue certain goals, such as compliance with perceived gender norms.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank all the respondents for their time and openness, and the enumerators for their commitment and support. Special thanks go to the Single Parents Association Kosovo, Different and Equal in Albania, Romalitico in North Macedonia and

Solwodi in Germany, who established crucial contacts and provided access to the topic. A special mention goes to Merit Pfefferkorn and Saskia Köhler for making the writing possible. Finally, thanks go to the reviewers for helping to substantially improve the argumentation and to the editors of socialpolicy.ch for their guidance, patience and enthusiasm.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The data collection that this article relies on was conducted in the framework of two projects funded by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development. The author has not received any additional funding for the writing of this article.

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