

Libertas

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# Social remittances as an engine of social change in Kosovo



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## — Introduction —

Since declaring its independence in 2008, the Republic of Kosovo has been undergoing a challenging transition. This is aggravated by dramatic unemployment, widespread corruption and, for women, persisting patriarchal structures. Indeed, the [employment rate of women in Kosovo is among the lowest in the world—a mere 18%](#). These diverse economic and social challenges have led to a steady flow of Kosovars leaving their homeland. — Yet there is also a countermovement of returnees, which has received much less attention. Scientific research shows that returnees have great potential to positively influence the development of their homelands, for example, by bringing back financial capital or innovative ideas that they may have acquired during their stay abroad. Various studies show that migrants, for instance, transfer democratic values, progressive gender roles and knowledge (PÉREZ-ARMENDÁRIZ and CROW 2010, DANNECKER 2009, MONTEFRIO et al. 2014). — These so-called [social remittances](#) (LEVITT

*‘[During my stay abroad] I gained a lot of self-confidence, because we [women] 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 [...]’* Ardita, 33<sup>1</sup>

1998) move beyond the concept of *remittances* as merely financial contributions. Whereas the latter are migration-induced monetary transfers, *social remittances* comprise the ideas, practices and knowledge that migrants acquire in the receiving country and transfer to their homelands.<sup>2</sup> Although the potential impact of *social remittances* on the countries of origin is no less significant, they continue to be overshadowed by financial remittances, which are easier to measure and analyse. In particular, the precise factors that influence the transfer process, i.e. the acquisition and transfer of *social remittances*, remain an enigma.

## — Research aim and methods —

The aim of the study presented here was to analyse how a sojourn in Western Europe or North America changed female Kosovar migrants

and to determine which ideas they transferred after their return. Within this context, the study took a closer look at how views on gender roles changed after a stay abroad. Based on this, the factors that influence the transfer process of *social remittances* were analysed. — The study used qualitative interviews, which were conducted in Pristina in February 2018 with highly skilled female returnees. Due to its focus on gender roles, exclusively women were interviewed. Furthermore, the participants had to have lived abroad on their own in Western Europe or North America for the purpose of working or studying for at least a year.

<sup>1</sup> All names have been changed. The quotes were subject to slight language editing.

<sup>2</sup> For reasons of simplicity, the term ‘ideas’ is used synonymously with *social remittances*. Practices and knowledge are explicitly excluded here.

## — Key results —

### (1) Did the participants acquire new ideas?

All study participants acquired new ideas during their stay abroad. For some, their experience was so influential that they described it as a *'turning point'* in their lives (Jehona, 27) or as *'enlightenment'* (Loreta, 37). The ideas that the participants acquired can be categorised into three subject areas:

- gender equality,
- open-mindedness and tolerance,
- civic rights and responsibilities.

All participants stated that they felt emancipated by their stay abroad. About half of the participants indicated that their perception of gender roles had changed. These participants had developed greater self-confidence and had started to distance themselves from traditional Kosovar role models. This was reflected in the fact that they preferred a professional career to starting a family, or believed that they were able to achieve the same



professional goals as men, as Rozafa (26) stated:

*'[My stay abroad] increased my confidence that one day...or maybe even now I will be able to achieve the same as a male colleague.'*

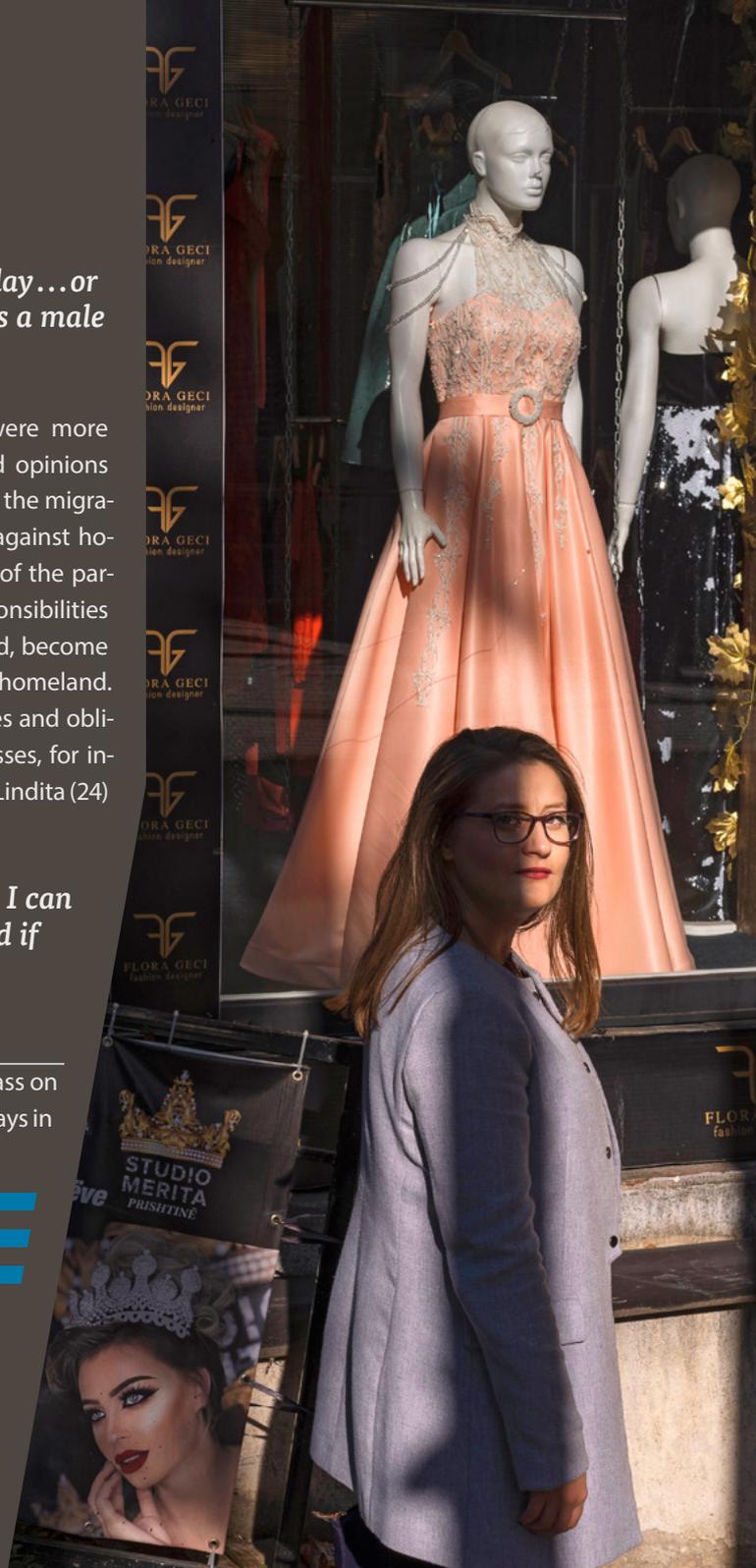
Two-thirds of the participants furthermore stated that they were more open-minded and tolerant towards other people's lifestyles and opinions since their stay abroad. Two participants specifically reported that the migration experience had helped them to overcome their prejudices against homosexuals, Serbs and people of colour. — Finally, two-thirds of the participants affirmed that their attitudes towards civic rights and responsibilities had changed during their stay abroad. They had, on the one hand, become much more critical of the political and economic situation in their homeland. On the other hand, they had become more aware of opportunities and obligations to actively contribute to political decision-making processes, for instance, through taking part in elections or voluntary engagement. Lindita (24) summarises this as follows:

*'[During my stay abroad, it became clear to me] what I can expect from a government and how I can get involved if I am unhappy with this government.'*

## **(2) Did the migrants transfer these ideas after their return?**

Some two-thirds of the study participants actively attempted to pass on the ideas that they had acquired abroad. This occurred in various ways in three areas of life:

- in everyday life;
- through their profession, and
- through voluntary work.





In everyday life, participants stated that they passed on *social remittances* mainly in discussions with friends and family members. For example, they would remind their siblings to vote, convince male family members to take parental leave, and encourage female friends to take on jobs in male-dominated sectors such as the IT industry or, like Jehona (27), to stand up to traditions that they considered to be discriminatory:

*'Here they have this tradition of organising parties when a boy is born [...]. Before [my stay abroad], I didn't question things like this [...]. Now like, for example, one case: we had a relative and she didn't through a party for her daughter, and then she said she is going to through one for her son, and I said: "I'm not going. That's so sexist! [...]. You know, I was arguing with my mum and my family.'*

Respondents also used their professional environments to transfer newly acquired ideas. For example, they took on tasks in the field of development cooperation or within non-governmental organisations (NGOs), managed projects where they filled at least half of the positions with women, or founded their own institutions such as a research institute or a magazine on relevant social and political topics. — Approximately half of the participants transferred the ideas that they had acquired through voluntary engagement, mostly by working in

NGOs. One participant furthermore voluntarily managed a Facebook page on feminist topics with several thousand followers and another founded an NGO in healthcare.

### **(3) Which factors influenced the transfer process?**

Determinants of the acquisition of new ideas were mostly factors at the individual level, such as personality traits and the circumstances of migration. All participants, for example, were extremely open to new ideas and several explicitly said that *'wanting to learn new things'* (Rita, 34) was the reason why they went abroad. Regarding the circumstances of migration, it was moreover of paramount importance that the participants migrated alone. Most interviewees lived on their own for the first time during their stay abroad, since young people in Kosovo traditionally live with their families until they get married. Many participants defined the unknown freedom that came with living alone as very emancipating. — A central determinant of the acquisition of new ideas was also regular interac-

tion with people from the host country as well as the international community at the university. Through these encounters they were able to first get in touch with new ideas. Two participants, for example, had never had contact with homosexuals or people of colour, which is why their views were dominated by prejudices. Only direct contact with members of these groups in the more heterogeneous societies of their host countries helped them conquer their prejudices, as Jehona (27) describes in the following:

*'And then there were things that shocked me; [...] that I was not exposed to before. For example, like African Americans. [...] Here you have all these negative prejudices towards these people. [...] You do not even know why! You just have this idea in your head and then you see the person and you are like "Wow!" [...] And then you talk to them and they are just normal, like yourself.'*

Finally, the subjective assessment of these experiences also played an important role. All participants assessed the culture of their host country and the experiences they had as positive. This contributed to the ac-

quisition of the new ideas to which they were exposed. — With regard to the transfer of acquired ideas, the structural environment in the participants' homeland also played a central role. For most participants, this environment was characterised by wide-reaching conflicts. Within the immediate family circle, most of these conflicts concerned the participants' wishes for more freedom, which they had developed during their stay abroad. Their newly found convictions also led to conflicts within their extended family circles as

well as in their circles of friends and neighbours. Several participants described confrontations in which they were accused of considering themselves superior due to their migration experience and wanting to im-

pose their lifestyle or to Americanise Kosovo. This was aggravated by the political, economic, and social situation in Kosovo. Partly because of this, the majority of the participants experienced a 'reverse culture shock' after they returned, due to which they no longer felt at home in Kosovo. Half of the participants even thought about re-migrating. — Personality traits and subjective perceptions finally distinguished those participants who, despite these adversities, actively fought for the transfer of acquired ideas from those who did not. Unlike those who chose not to engage, the participants who actively transferred *social remittances* despite the conflicts: 1. found a way to circumvent the conflicts they were confronted with (which the remaining participants were unable to do); 2. had a highly pro-social personality; and 3. displayed strong feelings of patriotism towards their homeland. These pro-active participants were highly motivated to help others and to contribute to the development of their country of origin. They even at times placed these goals ahead

of their own professional success. Those who did not transfer the newly acquired ideas, by contrast, focused more on themselves and their own careers and did not have as close a bond with their country of origin.

### — Conclusions —

The study confirms the results of the existing literature on *social remittances* by showing that female returnees have great potential to be driving forces of positive development in their countries of origin by transferring ideas. In a country that is suffering from an exodus of young and well-educated specialists, the active engagement of returnees for equality, tolerance and civic engagement can be an important catalyst for change. — However, the results also show that not every participant transferred *social remittances* and that the potential to initiate positive change through such a transfer is fragile. Conflicts and resistance, which returnees often face in their countries of origin, can quickly undermine the commitment of those returning. — Nevertheless, simple

actions can already provide great support to returnees in maintaining their commitment. Indeed, most participants indicated that 'a network' would have helped them during the difficult situation after their return. Those who have already had similar experiences could help new returnees to understand and overcome the conflicts that often go hand in hand with return. At the same time, these networks would enable returnees to work together towards common goals. — In order to develop targeted measures to support returnees in their commitment, an exact understanding of the complex transfer process of *social remittances* is needed which is, as this study shows, influenced by numerous factors at the individual and societal level. Identifying these factors is the task of continued research at IAMO on this important subject.

### — Media links —

- **Hampel, Lea (2020):** Die Rückkehrerinnen. Available online [↗](#) Leibniz Magazin [23.11.2020]
- ‘Plan W’ podcast: Weg und hin: Wie junge Rückkehrerinnen Kosovo verändern. Available online [↗](#) Süddeutsche Zeitung [23.11.2020]

### — Bibliography —

- **Dannecker, Petra (2009):** Migrant visions of development. A gendered approach. In: *Popul. Space Place* 15(2), 119–132.
- **Levitt, Peggy (1998):** Social remittances: Migration driven local-level forms of cultural diffusion. In: *Int Migration Rev* 32(4), 926–948.
- **Montefrio, Marvin Joseph F.; Ortiga, Yasmin; Josol, Rose (2014):** Inducing development: Social remittances and the expansion of oil palm. In: *Int Migration Rev* 48(1), 216–242.
- **Pérez-Armendáriz, Clarisa; Crow, David (2010):** Do Migrants Remit Democracy? International Migration, Political Beliefs, and Behavior in Mexico. In: *Comparative Political Studies* 43(1), 119–148.

### — Credits and acknowledgements —

p. 62–69 Images by © Mila Teshajeva, 2019. The photographer accompanied IAMO employee Janine Läßle during a research stay in Pristina, Kosovo. The photos were part of a report for the magazine of the Leibniz Association. Permission to use the photos was granted by the Leibniz Association.

**Note** The women pictured (p. 65 f.) took part in our interviews, but the quotes used in the text are not to be assigned to them.

