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Empowerment or a double burden? Work, family, and agency among Albanian migrant women in Greece

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ABSTRACT

Traditional gender roles are redefined during the migration process as some women gain more economic independence and can challenge the power hierarchies within the domestic sphere. Drawing on 36 biographical interviews with Albanian migrants in Greece, the analysis highlights the importance of gender, work, and agency in the migration process. By taking on the main breadwinner role, in response to high levels of male unemployment, Albanian women in Greece have challenged the traditional gender roles and division of labour within the domestic domain. Thus, women's empowerment has come at the cost of having to bear the double burden of working both within and outside of the household. The notion of 'reflexive agency' provides us with an in-depth understanding of the complex ways Albanian women are negotiating change, and of the power dynamics that have emerged as a result of shifts in gender role configurations.

1. Introduction: life course, agency, and empowerment in migration

Migration, combined with the new socio-economic and cultural contexts of the host society, play key roles in the reconfiguration of gender relations, and in the transformation of the division of labour and power dynamics within the household domain (Boeschoten 2015; Batnitzky, McDowell, and Dyer 2009). The linked migration of wives can challenge the established norms of patriarchy (King and Vullnetari 2012; Danaj 2019), but it can also reinforce traditional gender norms (i.e., women as homemakers and men as breadwinners) that migrants carry with them to the host society (Batnitzky,

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McDowell, and Dyer 2009). Over time, there have been major shifts in gender and migration scholarship. Earlier mainstream migration studies were based predominantly on men, while the role of women was neglected. Migration was primarily constructed as a 'male project' or as a 'male-led phenomenon', whereas the women were often portrayed as unproductive followers (Morokvasic 1983; King and Zontini 2000). While the literature on migration was focused exclusively on men, migrant women were typically referred to as 'trailing wives' or 'tied movers' (Mincer 1978; Cooke 2001). However, the centrality of men in the migration scholarship has been called into question by feminist scholars of migration who have sought to correct the 'male bias' by portraying women as active migrants (Castles and Miller 2009; Morokvasic 1983), and by acknowledging the centrality of gender in the migration process (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1992; Kofman 1999; Pessar and Mahler 2003).

Conceptualising migration as a gendered process is crucial for understanding how migration affects men and women differently (Morokvasic 2014). An immense body of literature has provided detailed accounts of the impact of family migration on the labour force participation, earnings, and employment of couples engaged in migration (Cooke 2001; Boeschoten 2015; Heyse 2011). As the contributions of migrant women to the household income increase, gender roles within the household are gradually transformed (Heyse 2011). However, migration does not completely erode patriarchal relations or spur social transformations (Gamburd 2000). Migrant women often find themselves employed in precarious job sectors, which can, in turn, produce new inequalities (Estévez-Abe and Hobson 2015; Lutz 2016). Therefore, migrant life courses are linked to the changing economic, social, and cultural structures of society (Findlay et al. 2015; Morokvasic 2014; Gardner 2009). Examining the interplay between structures and agency is essential for understanding the migratory process and its effects on the life courses of migrants (Kofman 1999).

We adopt the life course approach in order to gain a deeper understanding of how major life events and transitions in the life courses of Albanian migrants shape their ideas of gender and work over time. The life course approach examines the life events, life under and the fall of communism or Greek financial crisis, for instance, or transitions individuals in different life domains undergo, with a particular focus on the various ways these events or experiences alter the life trajectories of migrants. This approach attempts to show how certain factors determine and shape the individual's life course: namely, human agency, linked lives (social relations), the historical and geographical contexts, and the timing of life events (Giele 1998). The concept of 'agency' refers to the ways in which individuals take active roles in shaping their life course trajectory, generally by making choices about their life, given

the constraints and options they face within their largely fixed social context (Elder 1994; Dannefer, Kelley-More, and Huang 2016). However, in this paper we explore the ways economic crisis served as a major social force shaping and directing changes in migrant's life course.

While agency is understood as 'the capacity for autonomous action in the face of often overwhelming cultural sanctions and structural inequalities' (McNay 2000, 10), empowerment is viewed as the expansion of agency, power, or freedom of choice to shape one's life for the better (Narayan 2005). Moreover, Dwyer and Minnegal (2010) have offered important insights into the relationship between agency and empowerment, and into how agency triggers empowerment. Their approach has highlighted the importance of the social and cultural context in which choices are made. Thus, they have argued that when individuals act autonomously (exercise agency) in a social context, the choices they make do not always result in the intended outcomes or empowerment (Dwyer and Minnegal 2007). While structural changes might create the necessary conditions for the alteration of social/gender practices, they may not be sufficient to catalyse transformative change (McNay 2000, 155). Thus, in order to develop a fuller perspective on the notions of agency and empowerment, we rely on McNay's (2000) concept of the creative and generative dimension of human agency. According to this approach, power relations are not exclusively embedded in institutions or shaped by traditions, but they are examined also from the point of view of those subject to power and through self-interpretation (McNay 2000). Thus, when confronted with difference, individuals are endowed with the capacities for independent reflection and action, and their unanticipated responses might hinder, reinforce, or catalyse social change. It is also crucial to consider how social and cultural contexts, gender structures, and social forces, such as the economic crisis can inform migrants' lived experiences in the work and the family domains.

Moreover, Butler's (2006) 'doing gender' perspective can help us to interpret the performance of gender in the division of household labour, as she posits that men and women display gender-appropriate behaviours in order to reaffirm their gender(ed) identities. Several studies suggest that even in situations in which men and women deviate from traditional gender expectations, they tend to engage in actions that reinforce their feminine or masculine gender identities (Greenstein 2000; Brines 1994). For example, an unemployed husband who is economically dependent on his wife may do fewer household chores, while a wife in full-time employment may do even more domestic labour (Greenstein 2000; Brines 1994). Although traditional, normative gender ideologies tend to define work performed in the family domain as 'feminine', non-routine domestic tasks – such as home maintenance, shopping, and outside work – are defined as masculine (Kan, Sullivan, and Gershuny 2011, 238). Thus, the routine performance of housework and

the sharp segregation by gender of unpaid household tasks might be considered 'performative acts' of gender (Butler 2006).

The main purpose of our analysis is to gain a better understanding of how the Greek economic crisis has affected the situations of Albanian migrant women in the labour market and within the household domain. The article addresses two research questions: First, how did Albanian migrant women in Greece renegotiate the dynamics of gender roles and power relations following the Greek economic crisis? Second, how did the Greek economic crisis shape migrant women's narratives of agency and empowerment?

2. Contextualising gender and migration in Albania and Greece

2.1. Gender regimes and migration patterns in Albanian society

The communist era: During the communist era in Albania, women's emancipation was considered to be an important value of communist ideology (Vullnetari 2012). Despite the egalitarian pretence of the 'gender equality' policies proclaimed during the socialist era, and the potentially 'empowering narratives' of post-socialist migration, Albanian women still shouldered most of the caring and domestic responsibilities (Danaj 2018; King and Vullnetari 2012). It is interesting to note that although during the communist era, large numbers of women were entering the labour market, men were less likely to perform domestic and care work, while women often experienced a 'double burden' of work (Ekonomi et al. 2001; Vullnetari and King 2016).

The post-communist period: The collapse of the communist system in Albania during the 1990s was accompanied by a drastic decline in women's labour force participation (INSTAT (Albanian Institute of Statistics) 2006). The post-communist transformations of the socio-economic and political spheres in Albania – which are widely known as the 'transition crisis' – thus led to large numbers of women withdrawing from economic, political, and public life (Danaj 2018). This period also witnessed new patterns of migration that further affected gender roles within and outside of the family (Çaro, Bailey, and Van Wissen 2012). The gender norms of Albanian migrants are characterised by a strong patriarchal mindset (Young 2001; Vullnetari 2012; Çaro, Bailey, and Van Wissen 2012), which tends to be expressed in the most extreme form in northern Albania (Ekonomi et al. 2001). Albania ranks 68th out of 189 countries in the Gender Development Index (GDI) for 2017, and has a value of 0.238 points in the Gender Inequality Index (GII) (UNDP 2018). The GDI measures gender gaps in human development achievements by accounting for disparities between women and men in health, knowledge, and living standards, whereas GII measures inequalities in achievement between women and men in reproductive health, empowerment, and the labour market.

Mass migration to Greece: Migration can be seen as the most dynamic feature of post-communist Albanian society (Vullnetari 2012). Since the 1990s, Albania has been experiencing large-scale emigration, with more than one million Albanians moving abroad (INSTAT 2015). The two main destinations for Albanian migrants have been Italy (47%) and Greece (43%) (INSTAT 2014). Although there is extensive research on Albanian migration (see King and Vullnetari 2011; Vaiou and Stratigaki 2008; Çaro 2016), most of these studies have focused mainly on internal migration (Çaro, Bailey, and Van Wissen 2012; Vullnetari 2012), with a few examining gendered migration in Greece (Danaj 2019; Charalampopoulu 2012; Vullnetari and King 2016; Boeschoten 2015; Vullnetari 2012). The sense of agency of Albanian migrant women and the transformation of their gender roles in the context of international family migration – and particularly in the wake of the Greek economic crisis and the imposition of austerity measures – remain underexplored topics. This paper is one of the first to address these issues.

2.2. Gender regimes and Albanian migration patterns in Greece

Albanian migrants are by far the biggest migrant group in Greece (480,800) (INSTAT 2015, 23). The early waves of Albanian migration to Greece were male-dominated, but Albanian migration later became a family-based phenomenon, with women migrating to join their husbands (Çaro 2016; Boeschoten 2015). In the first phase of Albanian migration to Greece, the predominant pattern of gender roles within the household domain was that of women being responsible for taking care of and cooking for the male members of the family, and of men serving as the breadwinners while working primarily in very physically demanding jobs (Çaro 2016).

As women gradually started entering the paid labour force, they gained more individual autonomy and independence. To a certain extent, exposure to the Greek gender regime affected gender relations among Albanian migrants (King and Vullnetari 2012). Gender roles and relations in Greek society vary depending on the context in which they are established (Paxson 2004; Halkias 2004; Loizos and Papataxiarchis 1991). While within the domestic context, gender norms are more traditional, outside the domestic context they are more liberal (Loizos and Papataxiarchis 1991). Women's advances in educational and career development have led to the emergence of more egalitarian gender role attitudes and behaviours. However, Greek men are still perceived as being the primary breadwinners (Oláh, Richter, and Kotowska 2017; Marcos and Bahr 2001). Even before the crisis hit, Greece had the highest unemployment rate for women and the largest gender gap in labour market participation among the EU countries (Kambouri 2013;

Eurostat 2018). Greece has a score of 0.238 points in the GII and ranks 31st out of 189 countries in the GDI for 2017 (UNDP 2018).

Moreover, the Greek labour market is highly segregated in terms of gender and ethnicity, with male migrants being mainly employed in the construction, agriculture, and manufacturing sectors; and women migrants being primarily employed in the domestic and care sectors (Xhaho and Çaro 2016). Albanian migrants are often active in the underground economy, and thus have fewer opportunities for upward mobility than the native-born population (Çaro and Lillie 2016).

The economic crises: The global financial crisis, which had very strong negative effects on the Greek economy, and on the wider economic, social, and cultural conditions in the country (Gemi 2014), challenged and destabilised Greek employment regimes (Xhaho and Çaro 2016). The economic crisis significantly affected labour sectors that were overwhelmingly comprised of immigrant men (Xhaho and Çaro 2016).

3. Methods

We adopted a qualitative approach in order to obtain detailed accounts of the experiences of Albanian migrant workers from the micro perspective. Our analysis is based on 36 biographical interviews (19 women and 17 men) conducted between March 2014 and November 2016. Biographical interviews can enable researchers to collect detailed accounts of the life courses of migrants, and to capture changes in migrants' identities and gender roles (Çaro, Xhaho, and Dushi 2017). All of the interviews were conducted in the Albanian language, and were tape-recorded following prior consent.

In our analysis, we employed a purposive selection of participants that applied two selection criteria: first, that the participants had at least some prior experience of working in the host country. Second, that the participants had been living in Greece before the onset of the Greek economic crisis. While, the majority of the women in our study had been working in the informal labour market, such as in the domestic or service sectors, men were mostly unemployed or were working in less regular positions (Table 1). Our intention was not to select women as breadwinners or to compare the earning potential of the partners, but rather to consider the gendered impact of the economic crisis on Albanian migrants. As most of the women in our study were either the main income provider in the family or part of a dual-earning couple, they were earning more or were working under more regular conditions than their partners.

The majority of the participants were from southern Albania, and only three out of 36 were living in a rural area before they migrated. The vast majority of migrants migrated between $1991 - 1993$ and $1995 - 1999$. In

Table 1. Migrants' profiles.

No.	Name	Job	Age	Gender	Migration year
1	Ardo	Unemployed	58	M	1991
2	Marjola	Domestic Worker (DW)	54	F	1993
3	Hasan	Unemployed	56	M	1991
4	Enki	DW	58	F	1991
5	Tina	DW	52	F	1992
6	Fati	Hairdresser/DW	36	F	1993
7	Aldi	Unemployed	40	M	1992
8	Geni	Entrepreneur	48	M	1992
9	Stavri	Unemployed	47	M	1991
10	Anisa	Hairdresser/DW	32	F	2002
11	Ilir	Entrepreneur	37	M	1996
12	Besa	DW	47	F	1997
13	Glauk	Unemployed	49	M	1991
14	Shqipe	DW	65	F	1997
15	Zani	Unemployed	22	M	1991
16	Alma	DW	50	F	1993
17	Nandi	Unemployed	51	M	1993
18	Fredi	Unemployed	33	M	1997
19	Naim	Deliveryman	35	M	1996
20	Mira	DW/cook	42	F	1995
21	Landi	Barber	31	M	1997
22	Lajda	DW	26	F	1997
23	Klodi	DW/office cleaner	35	F	2001
24	Ejona	Seller	36	F	1997
25	Bardha	DW	52	F	2004
26	Vjola	DW	36	F	1997
27	Eno	Graphic designer	29	M	1998
28	Gimi	Specialist	59	M	1993
29	Orjana	Agriculture/DW	35	F	1998
30	Besi	Construction	29	M	2004
31	Entela	Cleaner/DW	41	F	1999
32	Tatjana	Waiter/DW	22	F	2003
33	Vladi	Unemployed	55	M	1997
34	Kastriot	Welder	54	M	1992
35	Luljeta	DW	54	F	1997
36	Lola	DW/seller	38	F	1997

terms of spatiality, the project is situated in neighbourhoods of Athens. One distinct feature of Albanian immigrants in Greece is that their patterns of settlement are rather dispersed throughout the country, as they seldom live in ethnic enclaves (Kokkali 2015). This is also the case for our participants. The starting point for the recruitment of participants was conferring with several personal contacts, and then using a snowball sampling technique and social media (contacting potential participants via Albanian groups in Greece). Each interview lasted between one and four hours, and took place at the migrant's home, the migrant's office or workplace, or a bar.

The interviews were tape-recorded with the oral consent of all of the participants. The research was approved by the ethical committee of the mentoring institute of the project. All personal information of the participants was coded separately, and pseudonyms were used to maintain the anonymity of the participants. Participants were offered the opportunity to see the transcripts of the interview. In analysing the data, the authors selected the most typical cases from the interviews in order to ensure a diversity of

Table 2. Main themes.

Theme	Codes
Gender roles and challenges	Traditional gender roles in Albania; division of labour; resistance to challenging gender norms; reinforcing gender norms
Greek economic crisis and gender	Unemployed men; precarious labour; women's work; new breadwinners; masculinity; Division of labour within the household
Migration, crisis, and empowerment	independence, economic and psychological freedom; agency and resilience; 'trailing wives'
The second shift	the second shift; the superwomen and the communist past; psychological pressure

Source: Data from researcher.

representation in terms of their time of arrival, age, education, occupation, and gender. The interviews were transcribed while preserving the original language, and were coded using the qualitative program MAXQDA 12. version. The coding and analysis process were based on the inductive approach. First, a free coding process was performed throughout the text. Next, the main codes and the code families were formed. Finally, the themes were identified (see Table 2).

4. Results

4.1. Impact of the Greek economic crisis on women's empowerment

The participants suggested that certain events, such as migration was a major life event, and that the particular turning points in their migration trajectories opened up a new space for negotiating the roles they were performing in the family and work domains. Indeed, the onset of the Greek economic downturn and the subsequent imposition of austerity measures led to considerable changes in the situations of the Albanian migrant families, resulting in high levels of unemployment among men in particular. The impact of these changes was also reflected in the family domain, as the destabilisation of the labour market altered gender roles within the household domain. Anisa, a 32-year-old hairdresser who had recently divorced her unemployed husband, described the sense of (economic and psychological) liberation many women experienced when they decided to migrate:

> I support the idea of being an independent woman. I feel better now that I am not dependent. If your partner has control over the money you earned you are not free and you have no power. Nevertheless, it is not all about economic independence. Everyone has the right to be emotionally and psychologically free. I feel better now that I have more freedom, opportunities, and a better life.

While this experience was characterised as empowering by Anisa, it needs to be contextually situated in the prevalent traditional gender roles and cultural norms shaping perceptions of marriage, divorce, and women's autonomy. Anisa had been raised in a rather patriarchal society in which women

had little freedom and autonomy to act independently, divorce was associated with social stigma, and women's mobility was highly restricted by men in the family. While trying to analyse narratives of empowerment, we should understand how such lived experiences are intertwined with the historical memories of the communist period. Thus, we should not underplay the ongoing influence of social norms, values, gender and kinship relations during the communist and post-communist periods in Albania.

Albanian women experienced migration and labour market changes as life events that altered patriarchal gender relations, while the same time transforming the division of household tasks.

> This situation [unemployment of men] worked out well for women. Before, we did not have any help from our husbands at home. I had to employ a babysitter for my children; now he is helping out (Fati, 36, female, hairdresser).

Men also started to embrace a more egalitarian sharing of household tasks.

> Lola: For a long time, my husband's attitudes were those of a typical Albanian man.
>
> Interviewer: What does this mean?
>
> Lola: Having a clear view of the wife's and the husband's roles inside the home, men earning a livelihood and women washing and taking care of kids. It used to be like this in Albania; after some years in Greece (influenced by Greek families), this mindset changed (Lola, female, 38, domestic worker).

In her narrative, Lola emphasised that gender roles were gradually shifting from more traditional to more liberal (i.e., that men and women should participate equally in both paid work outside the home and unpaid household labour and care responsibilities). Looking back in her life, she observed, however, that these changes were rather at a slow pace and were not visible until the crisis appeared. In her words, the crisis served as a 'tipping point' that made the shift more evident. The extent to which these experiences might be considered empowering for migrants depends upon the prevailing gender regimes in both the host and the home country.

It is interesting to note how the 'doing gender' approach, which serves to reinforce masculine and feminine identities among migrant couples, is mediated across time and place. In Greece, the Albanian migrants were exposed to gender regimes that were more liberal than those of their own country (Boeschoten 2015). The participants indicated that they perceive Greek women as being more independent and more in control of their actions than Albanian women. They pointed out that in Greece, the wife is sometimes the main household decision-maker, and is often in charge of the family's financial resources. Landi compared the gender relations in his home country with those in his host country:

> The Greek wives are the head of households here. They are the main decision-makers in their families and have control over financial resources. However, the situation is different for Albanian wives in Greece, although the Greek crisis impacted their lives, too. Now, they [Albanian wives] are more independent, but not to the extent of exerting power over their husbands. Nevertheless, this is better than it is for wives in Albania, who are still the submissive servants of their partners and in-laws (Landi, 31, male, barber).

This comment demonstrates how migration can serve as a process that transforms gender roles and identities, and how traditional practices brought from the country of origin interact and merge with the host country's norms and practices. Thus, it suggests that ideas and understanding of gender roles are constantly constructed through dynamic interplay of past collective memories and present experiences. The Albanian migrant women in Greece reported experiencing a sense of liberation from traditional norms when moving from a more traditional society to an environment with more liberal gender role ideologies. By contrast, some of the men attributed the gender role changes mainly to the economic crisis:

> This situation [crisis] has changed women's traditional role in the family, that of the housewife. In Greece, the Albanian woman has changed a lot … she has forgotten her primary role of housewife (Aldi, 40, male, unemployed).

Using the idea of the 'crisis' as a major turning point in the life courses of migrants can provide us with new insights into how migrants perceive and construct gender relations at the nexus of time and space (the recent Greek economic crises and the earlier post-communist period). This approach enables us to deepen our understanding of how the reconstruction of gender roles has been mediated though lived and non-lived memories and experiences during past and present period. For example, Hasan, a 56-year-old unemployed man, explained the struggles Albanian families in Greece have been facing while dealing with the effects of the crisis:

> The Greek crisis had a huge impact on the roles the partners have within their families. When both partners work, they have almost the same power, authority, and rights; but now that women are the only wage earners, this power shifted toward them. They are now blaming their husbands for failing to a find a job (Hasan, 56, male, unemployed).

Even though the Greek economic crisis provided Albanian women with more economic independence, the extent to which women's employment outside of the home enabled them to take on more liberal gender roles remains unclear.

The following example shows how the crisis sometimes reinforced traditional gender roles:

> The wife: Now he is replacing me (my role) at home. His friends are teasing him because he is taking care of the kids (Ejona, female, 36, seller).

> The husband: I am not taking on the role of the wife and nobody has dared to tease me. I am, I have been, I will be a real man. I have never changed baby diapers, never cleaned the house. I have never done housework. This is women's stuff (Glauk, male, 49, unemployed).

This narrative illustrates that in a situation in which the husband had lost his job, he gradually increased his contributions to the household by taking on certain domestic tasks. However, the husband was 'doing gender' by expressing his reluctance to take on strongly feminine-associated tasks, such as changing diapers or cleaning, and was thus reclaiming his masculine identity as 'a real man'. These experiences may therefore indicate how the home country's models of gender relations, roles, and hierarchies are brought to the host country, and are then challenged or strengthened.

Even though it appears that the status of the Albanian women in Greece has changed, these shifts did not change the women's primary roles as caregiver and housekeeper, or erode existing notions of men as patriarchs. The majority of the men in our study reported that they have observed gender role shifts, and indicated that they perceive these changes as threatening the traditional patriarchal norms that prevail in Albanian society. Thus, the men were constantly reinforcing in the interviews the idea that the traditional division of labour within the household domain should be preserved. This attitude appears to be in line with the gender role expectations of the communist era and should be interpreted in connection to the past reality.

The Greek economic crisis led to dynamic processes of renegotiating hierarchies of power and gaining independence and freedom from social patriarchal constraints; but also, to processes of reversing and reinforcing traditional roles. Our observations indicate, however, that these changes did not happen in a social vacuum, but were facilitated by the impoverished socio-economic situations of the migrant families at the time of crisis. This pattern illustrates how the life courses of the migrants were embedded in the wider socio-economic context.

4.2. The agency of migrant women and the cost of empowerment

The concept of 'agency' helps us frame the analysis, and examine the issue of empowerment more closely. Entela, a 41-year-old woman, talked about the increased awareness among migrant women, and of their right to equality at home:

> So, why is that a woman should have fewer rights than a man? Men keep telling me that women should be in an inferior position, while men forget all the things women do in the home. They would rather say, 'You are just cooking, doing the laundry, and cleaning … nothing'. Years ago, I was not very sensitive to such issues, but now I give it back to him. 'I have the same rights as you – why we should be different?' (Entela, 41, woman, cleaner).

This narrative points to the increased level of self-consciousness among migrant women, as it shows that they are now able to assert their right to be equal to their partners. Thus, they were gradually undermining the oppressive norms of patriarchy, which demand that women remain in positions that are inferior to those of men. The very fact that they were working and earning their own money was perceived by the women participants as empowering. Tina's narrative (52, woman, domestic worker) exemplifies how the women gained agency and resilience in dealing with the crisis. However, Tina articulated her empowerment not in terms of her economic independence, but in terms of the sacrifices she made to ensure that her family did not lose their economic position.

> With the crisis I had to change my beliefs; I took control of our life. I was anxious about our future. We could not rely economically on my husband, so I was constantly repeating to myself: 'I should take our life into my own hands' – and I did it. My objectives were to buy a house, to work, and earn money. Women don't surrender, even in times of crisis. You know how many times I have fallen down and I stood up repeating to myself: 'No, I can't stay home doing nothing; I need to work'?

Attitudes toward work and sacrifice among Albanians today are not that different from those experienced during communism. These kinds of accounts reflect the normative double expectations women faced during the communist era, in which women were under pressure to be perfect housewives, caring mothers, and good workers (Ekonomi et al. 2001). The women's narratives of 'sacrifice for the sake of the family' points to how women's paid work is perceived and legitimised, and suggests that a 'new moral economy' is being constructed (Parreñas 2005; Keough 2006; Papataxiarchis, Pinelopi, and Athanasopoulou 2009). This comment also sheds light on how ideals about work have been shaped and informed by collective memories of the communist past (Athanasopoulou 2013). Women's active participation in the labour force during the communist era influenced gendered perceptions about work when the crisis hit. When the immigrant men wanted to return to Albania, some of the women refused to accompany their husbands because they did not want to give up their newfound independence. Challenging the 'tied mover' or 'trailing wife' models (Cooke 2001), these women exhibited autonomous agency in a rather creative fashion (McNay 2000), undermining the Albanian long-standing patriarchal traditions embedded in social institutions. Thus, the idea of autonomous agency is crucial to understanding empowerment narratives, and the reasons why some Albanian migrant women were able to adapt and respond in an active and flexible fashion to the sudden effects of the crises.

It should be noted, however, that Albanian migrant women in Greece developed their narratives under a strong assumption that women's

autonomy is acquired through paid labour, and by constantly 'negotiating their identities' (Goffman 1959, 1961), given the constraints and the opportunities they face; an assumption they also inherited from communist Albania. The double burden of work increased women's vulnerability and pushed them further into precarious work situations. Shqipe (65), a domestic worker, reported that while working as a cleaner, she was leaving home before four in the morning and was not returning until 10 at night:

> I was constantly worried that my husband would lose his job [because of the crisis]. I could not rely on him anymore, and I had to take care of the family to pay the rent.

A similar set of concerns were voiced by Marjola, 54, a domestic worker: 'If I lost my job? This is my biggest fear. I could not afford to pay the rent. I feel anxious every day.'

The migrant women reported that they needed to find employment because their financial contributions were essential to the family in times of economic hardship. These accounts suggest that the decision to look for a job was adaptive; i.e., that it was an agentic response triggered by external pressures (the crisis and family economic insecurities). Breaking the myth of the housewife by participating in paid work can be considered a milestone in a woman's progression towards autonomy. However, these women still had to adhere to the traditional housewives' roles, and do gender by taking on a greater share of the domestic tasks in the home. For example, Naim (35), a pizza deliveryman, reported that even though his wife was now contributing to the family income, he expected her to remain in her traditional housewife role. Yet, managing these dual roles in migration has been a constant source of pressure:

> It is difficult for a woman to accept that her husband doesn't work. It also took a while for him (husband) to accept the fact that I was financially supporting him. He feels he doesn't have any authority any more. This is the reason many couples are now separating. So far, I am the primary wage earner, but at the end of the day, it is me who does all the housework (Besa, 47, women's, domestic worker).

Thus, it appears that any deviation from the traditional gendered order was associated with an increased risk of divorce. The opportunity to take on paid work even in times of crisis made it easier for these women to opt out of abusive relationships. For these women, gaining their economic independence came at the cost of taking on additional burdens, and of dealing with a range of emotional conflicts. Mira (42) described how she experienced this situation:

> I felt bad when my husband lost his job. If he doesn't work he is worthless as a family man. It is different if the wife doesn't work. She can take care of household chores, cooking, looking after the kids. But it is impossible for a man to find a way to fill his day. If he is no longer the breadwinner, he does not have authority over

you as a wife, nor does he feel comfortable hugging you. His manliness is threatened (Mira, 42, women, domestic worker).

The narrative above shows that the women tended to underestimate the value of unpaid work at home, claiming that it did not count as work. This 'invisible work' was therefore seen as a 'naturally' belonging to women and can be traced back to the communist era, when women's double burden was a legitimised practice. It appears that the women were struggling to compensate for having taken on more masculine-defined roles by constantly reinforcing and naturalising their nurturing and domestic responsibilities, and were thus conforming to feminine identities that seem to stem from the communist discourses that essentialised the role of women. This behaviour resonates with Butler's notion of performativity, as ideas of masculinity and femininity were formed, played out, and reinforced through normative expectations of housework. Thus, although now women were the main breadwinners, they continued to 'do gender' by emphasising their primary domestic roles. This again points to the women's capacities to act autonomously and to negotiate changes in gender roles, which had become more fluid, and which gave them the space and the flexibility to choose their pathways (such as Entela, 41; and Anisa, 32). Along these lines, Vladi, a 55-year-old recently unemployed man, explained how the crisis altered the power dynamics in the home:

> Men who lost their jobs because of the crisis could not get over the fact that their wives are the new breadwinners. Now that I have lost my job, I am no longer the breadwinner. I can't sleep because of the insecurity of tomorrow (Vladi, 55, male, unemployed).

When we look at the narratives of our participants, it becomes evident that the crisis had different effects on the life courses of migrants. While most of the men remained unemployed, women were 'upgraded' to breadwinner status and endowed with more power. Yet, they also had to take on additional burdens. According to Dalgard and Thapa (2007), people can experience psychological distress when their traditional roles are challenged. This helps to explain why the women tried to overcompensate for and to minimise the degree of gender deviance when the men failed to satisfy the breadwinner norm.

According to the Albanian migrants' accounts, the men were less likely than the women to accept gender role changes within the household domain. This indicates that the majority of the men were reluctant to do the bulk of the routine housework, even though their willingness to take on masculine-defined, non-routine domestic tasks (such as shopping and looking after children) increased to some extent. Regardless of the changes in the context, the reinforcement of the gendered allocation of tasks and responsibilities in the household described by the participants suggests that these men and women were continuing to do gender through the performance of domestic work.

Discussion and conclusions

In our analysis, the application of the life course approach sheds light on the complex and dynamic interplay between structures and agency over the life course of each of these migrants (Kofman 1999). The biographical narratives showed that migration has played an important role in reshaping intra-household gender and power relations among these migrants by providing new opportunities for the women to improve their lives (Boeschoten 2015). The new gender norms and values they encountered in the host society altered gradually the prevailing gender roles, relations, and expectations within the household domain. Access to paid labour has provided these women not only with economic independence, but with emotional and psychological autonomy.

Significant lived and non-lived events and turning points in the life courses of these Albanian migrants have been highlighted in our analysis to show how they have shaped the migrants' conceptualisation of gender roles. It is also important to consider how the interplay of past and present contexts (the communist and post-communist periods), migration settlement patterns, and economic crises have reshaped the migrants' perceptions of work and gender. Migrant's collective and personal memories of the past reconstruct present's experiences.

While these women were working during the communist era, and thus became 'superwomen' facing a double shift; during the post-communist era, Albanian women again became largely confined to the domestic space. In trying to understand these migrant women's empowerment narratives, it is important to consider how past experiences of the double burden during the communist era resurfaced as they experienced economic crises in Greece. Both, lived and non-lived memories during the communist legacy played out under different social and cultural conditions (Dannefer 2003, 656), thereby shaping conceptions of empowerment among Albanian migrants. Yet, for these migrant women, gaining autonomy came at a cost, as their burdens increased when they took on breadwinning responsibilities.

Although migration itself played a crucial role in reconfiguring gender relations among these Albanian migrants, the shifts in their gender roles became more apparent after the onset of the economic crises. On the one hand, entering paid employment and becoming the family's main breadwinner served as a major pathway to independence for these women. However, on the other hand, mass unemployment among male migrants produced a crisis of masculinity, which the migrants attempted to compensate by reinforcing their traditional gender roles.

Our research has revealed that although these women were working outside of the home in order to contribute to the family income, the gendered division of labour and the gender hierarchies within the household often remained the same. In situations that do not align with normal gender

expectations, it is not necessarily the case that breadwinning wives feel the need to do more housework, or that unemployed husbands minimise their contributions to the housework (Greenstein 2000; Brines 1994). Our study found that some of the men who became unemployed, and who thus lost their normative status as a breadwinner, started contributing to the household chores – albeit mainly by taking on tasks that are considered less feminine, or by maintaining a sharp gendered division of the household tasks. Our findings also indicated that despite working full time (inside and outside the household), the breadwinning wives tended to naturalise the double burden of productive and unproductive labour. It appears that this effect was mediated by the communist ideology of the 'superwoman'. This study contributes to the 'doing gender' scholarship by showing that the gendered division of household chores persisted over time in the majority of the couples we studied, regardless ongoing changes in the social context.

Structural changes might create the necessary conditions for altering social/gender practices, but they may not be sufficient to catalyse transformative change (McNay 2000). While we should not underestimate the role of structural changes in either challenging or reinforcing gender relations, such changes offer only a partial account of women's sense of agency, as they can neither fully explain the complexities of women's experiences and actions, nor sufficiently elucidate the flexible ways in which women and men negotiate changes in gender relations. By using the lens of the life course, gender role changes can be viewed not only in response to labour market changes triggered by economic crises, but in relation to other major turning points in the lives of migrants, and to the migrants' own sense of agency.

Hence, in this study we went beyond the structural perspective to foreground a more active and nuanced dimension of women's agency. This form of agency could contribute to our understanding of the complexity and the diversity of women choices beyond the influence of oppressive patriarchal norms and customs. Our analysis generated new insights into why some migrant women have challenged traditional gender ideologies by breaking the cycle of 'tied movers' (Anisa, 32); whereas other women have continued to maintain and reinforce these ideologies, while reviving the double burden of the communist past (Mira, 42). The process of gender role reconfiguration in the lives of men and women is rather complex and ambiguous (McNay 2000). Thus, while the detraditionalisation effect of this process does not strengthen the old forms of gender inequalities in a straightforward manner, it also cannot be regarded as explicitly emancipatory.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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