Understanding Albanian Culture of Migration: The role of the family in precarious journeys and human trafficking

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Abstract

This article explores families' roles in precarious journeys and human trafficking from Albania. It demonstrates that familial pressure is a primary driver of migration for many Albanians and sets the family at the centre of the Albanian culture of migration rather than as one of many other factors that can lead to precarious migration and trafficking. The decision to migrate is rarely an individual one; rather, it is often a collective decision where parents, siblings, and extended family members play a crucial role. This is particularly evident in cases where migration is seen as a means to escape poverty or improve social standing, with family members reinforcing the belief that success abroad is the only viable option. The article concludes with recommendations to enhance cultural competence among practitioners and integrate family-oriented considerations in migration policies and interventions, particularly in the United Kingdom.

Keywords: family, precarious migration, human trafficking, prevention, socio-cultural norms, decision-making, cultural competence, Albania

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Introduction

Questions of who makes decisions about migration, if and how family are involved, and the reasons for, and consequences of, migration are critical in the context of growing international migration flows as well as the links between migration and human trafficking. Recent migration studies highlight the influence of the family on migrants' decision-making.[1] This is also the case in Albania, as we discuss in this article. Both our desk and empirical research on the role of the family in precarious migration decision-making linked to human trafficking of Albanian nationals demonstrate that migration is shaped by tangible and intangible factors. Understanding these complexities is crucial to address human trafficking and its intersections with migration,[2] family cultural factors, and the current landscape of securitarian migration policies and governance which hinder safe and legal pathways, and criminalise movement rather than addressing its structural causes and protecting migrants' human rights.[3]

Empirical research on migratory journeys across various national, cultural, and socioeconomic contexts provides valuable insights into the family's role in decision-making processes, including in relation to international migration from Albania.[4] These studies highlight the role that families, as well as the needs of family members,[5] play in the process of migration, and family influence on the individual's decision-making.[6] Crucially, they frame the family not just as another variable in the decision-making process, but as 'the context in which the decision

1 R Castaneda and A Triandafyllidou, *Migration, Decision Making and Young Families: A Literature Review*, *Working Paper 2022/12*, Toronto Metropolitan Centre for Immigration and Settlement (TMCIS) and the CERC in Migration and Integration, Toronto, 2022.

2 M Kaye and Anti-Slavery International, *The Migration-Trafficking Nexus: Combating Trafficking through the Protection of Migrants' Human Rights*, Anti-Slavery International, London, 2003.

3 B Anderson, U Khadka and M Ruhs, 'Demand for Migrant Workers: Institutional System Effects beyond National Borders', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, vol. 50, issue 5, 2024, pp. 1202–1225, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2023.2279741; M Lloyd, 'Embodying Resistance: Politics and the Mobilization of Vulnerability', *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 41, issue 1, 2024, pp. 111–126, https://doi.org/10.1177/02632764231178478.

4 C Murphy *et al.*, *Cultural Influences and Cultural Competency in the Prevention and Protection of Survivors of Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking: Insights from the UK and Albania*, MSPEC, London, 2024.

5 *Ibid.*

6 *Ibid.*

to migrate is taken by and for individuals',[7] highlighting the *centrality* of the family's role. For example, studies in diverse contexts, from South Asia to Africa,[8] identified that decisions in developing countries are made by 'the head of the family for the individual involved'.[9] These processes are frequently gendered, where a sense of obligation by eldest sons to support their families through remittances is often a key push factor in migration.[10] In other words, the family is recognised as the main institution for social control in which an 'intrafamilial implicit contract'—based on an unwritten agreement about the obligations and benefits involved in the migration journey—is established.[11]

Multiple factors contribute to the decision-making process. Decisions are taken by families and households in order to 'maximize the expected income and minimize risks',[12] balancing these against the security of staying: this is a critical element in irregular and mixed migration.[13] Several studies have demonstrated that the perceived risk of exploitation needs to be understood in the context of the living conditions in the country of origin. In vulnerable contexts, the risk of embarking on a precarious journey, coordinated by smugglers or traffickers, must be counterbalanced with the risk of staying, which may be equally high. These risks require understanding within the context of complex factors that influence migration decisions, including in some cases a 'culture of migration',[14] which has become pervasive due to protracted conditions of poverty, lack of job opportunities, famine, conflict, and violence.

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7 M Nisa, *The Role of the Family in Migration Decision-Making in Bangladesh*, Master's Thesis, The Australian National University, 1986.

8 *Ibid.*.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 22.

10 *Ibid.*

11 A Fleischer, 'Family, Obligations, and Migration: The Role of Kinship in Cameroon', *Demographic Research*, vol. 16, 2006, pp. 413–440, https://doi.org/10.4054/DemRes.2007.16.13.

12 *Ibid.*

13 M Belloni, 'Risk in Context: Decision-Making in Irregular and Mixed Migration', Mixed Migration Centre, 6 December 2022, retrieved 1 July 2024, https://mixedmigration.org/risk-in-context-decision-making-in-irregular-and-mixed-migration.

14 W Kandel and DS Massey, 'The Culture of Mexican Migration: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis', *Social Forces*, vol. 80, issue 3, 2002, pp. 981–1004, https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1353/sof.2002.0009.

It is crucial, even in contexts of structural vulnerability, to avoid viewing migrants solely as passive victims, yet it is equally important to acknowledge situations where self-determination is restricted due to external pressures.[15] For some marginalised individuals, migration presents an opportunity to forge a new identity or improve social status.[16] Moreover, imagination, i.e. the ability to envision alternative futures and possibilities, can be a particularly potent component in these contexts, as it is influenced by socio-economic conditions, culturally shared ideas, and personal experiences of mobility or immobility.[17] It allows individuals to picture new opportunities, a different way of life, or an escape from economic hardships or conflicts in their country of origin.

The complexity of migration decisions related to human trafficking shows that dominant Western views of slavery and exploitation are not universally applicable. The role of the family is interconnected with specific cultural norms which may be different from Western frameworks, and which play a significant role in pre-migration and migration decision-making. Individuals who do not migrate may be perceived as lazy or failures, experiencing shame and embarrassment.[18] Men are particularly affected by cultural shame, as migration is frequently associated with masculinity in certain countries and in relation to certain migration corridors.[19] Gender aspects in migration decisions expose individuals to human trafficking through pressure to conform to gender roles and identities, power imbalances in the control of marital resources, and dependencies that prevent partners, mainly women, from leaving exploitative or abusive relationships.

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15 M Czaika and C Reinprecht, *Drivers of Migration: A Synthesis of Knowledge*, IMI Working Paper Series, paper 163, 2020.

16 *Ibid.*

17 J Hagen-Zanker, G Hennessey, and C Mazzilli, 'Subjective and Intangible Factors in Migration Decision-Making: A Review of Side-Lined Literature', *Migration Studies*, vol. 11, issue 2, 2023, pp. 349–359, https://doi.org/10.1093/migration/mnad003.

18 M Bylander, 'Contested Mobilities: Gendered Migration Pressures among Cambodian Youth', *Gender, Place & Culture*, vol. 22, issue 8, 2015, pp. 1124–1140, https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2014.939154; L Heering, R van der Erf, and L van Wissen, 'The Role of Family Networks and Migration Culture in the Continuation of Moroccan Emigration: A Gender Perspective', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, vol. 30, issue 2, 2004, pp. 323–337, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183042000200722; Kandel and Massey; Czaika and Reinprecht.

19 M Maroufof and H Kouki, 'Migrating from Pakistan to Greece: Re-Visiting Agency in Times of Crisis', *European Journal of Migration and Law*, vol. 19, issue 1, 2017, pp. 77–100, https://doi.org/10.1163/15718166-12342116.

Other studies have highlighted that emotions,[20] such as entrapment, jealousy, and frustration,[21] combined with societal expectations and the culture of migration, motivate individuals to migrate to avoid 'social death' or prevent them from returning before achieving success abroad.[22] For survivors of trafficking, the fear of returning home and the resulting dishonour due to unmet family obligations significantly influences their decisions and their willingness to return to their home countries, and is prevalent in many geographical contexts.[23] Families often invest in their migrating members, expecting repayment, even in cases of initially consensual smuggling. The fear of returning 'empty-handed' can lead to survivors being ostracised by their families or communities. Consequently, the guilt associated with 'failed' migration can compel individuals either to migrate again or to stay in the destination country rather than returning home. This can hamper reintegration and increase vulnerability to re-trafficking and exploitation.

Migration, smuggling, and trafficking are separate phenomena with intricate connections, widely explored in the literature. Migration, and in particular precarious migration, carries risks that can lead to human trafficking recruitment. This necessitates a better understanding of the complex factors influencing migration decisions. In this article, we conceive precarious migration journeys as those affected by high insecurity and uncertainty in different realms—from employment and financial resources to accommodation and family and social networks—and in the different stages of the journey, including departure, transit, and arrival. Precarious journeys can expose migrants to higher risks of rights violations.[24]

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20 P Boccagni and L Baldassar, 'Emotions on the Move: Mapping the Emergent Field of Emotion and Migration', *Emotion, Space and Society*, vol. 16, 2015, pp. 73–80, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2015.06.009.

21 B Kalir, 'The Development of a Migratory Disposition: Explaining a "New Emigration"', *International Migration*, vol. 43, issue 4, 2005, pp. 167–196, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2435.2005.00337.x; Belloni.

22 S Bredeloup 'The Migratory Adventure as a Moral Experience', in N Kleist and D Thorsen (eds.), *Hope and Uncertainty in Contemporary African Migration*, Routledge, London, 2017, pp. 134–153; Hagen-Zanker, Hennessey, and Mazzilli.

23 R Lazzarino, 'Between Shame and Lack of Responsibility: The Articulation of Emotions among Female Returnees of Human Trafficking in Northern Vietnam', *Antropologia*, vol. 1, issue 1, 2014, pp. 155–167, https://doi.org/10.14672/ada2014260%25p.

24 D Beadle and L Davison, *Precarious Journeys: Mapping Vulnerabilities of Victims of Trafficking from Vietnam to Europe*, Anti-Slavery International, ECPAT UK, and Pacific Links Foundation, 2022.

This article is based on a larger, seven-month project exploring cultural competence in trafficking prevention in the UK.[25] It addresses the need for updated research on the critical role of family and socio-cultural norms in precarious journeys and human trafficking within Albania's unique culture of migration. We argue that household and family networks are central to this culture, which we examine in the context of the recent rise in Albanian arrivals to the UK, including cases of asylum-seeking, modern slavery, and human trafficking.

Building on prior research,[26] we explore these dynamics and emphasise the need for cultural competence within the UK's anti-trafficking system to acknowledge and effectively address the familial norms and values contributing to precarious journeys that may lead to trafficking, whilst aiming to contribute to more effective prevention of human trafficking and exploitation.

We first present an overview of migration from Albania, followed by the methodology of the study. Next, we present key findings from our research, focusing on the broader themes of the culture of migration, i.e. collective decision-making, the role of extended networks, and the impact of stigma and traditional family roles. We conclude with recommendations for practice and policy, centring on prevention of human trafficking and the potential for earlier intervention strategies revolving around enhanced cultural competence of the anti-trafficking sector in the UK.

Migration from Albania

Based on 1989 and 2001 censuses, it was calculated that 600,000 Albanians were living abroad, predominantly in Greece and Italy, and that a similar number considered migrating, with half trying but failing.[27] In 2022, the Albanian Institute of Statistics reported a 10.5% increase in the number of people leaving the country, totalling 46,460 individuals.[28] These data capture a persistent pattern over the past three decades, where mass international migration has been perceived as a

25 Murphy *et al.*

26 R Van Dyke and A Brachou, *What Looks Promising for Tackling Modern Slavery: A Review of Practice-Based Research*, Bakhita Centre for Research on Slavery, Exploitation and Abuse, 2021; A Brachou, *Human Trafficking from Albania to the UK: Interrogating the efficacy of the 4Ps Paradigm of Prevention, Protection, Prosecution and Partnerships*, PhD Thesis, University of Hull, April 2022.

27 C Carletto *et al.*, 'A Country on the Move: International Migration in Post-Communist Albania', *The International Migration Review*, vol. 40, issue 4, 2006, pp. 767–785, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-7379.2006.00043.x.

28 Institute of Statistics (INSTAT), *Population of Albania*, 2023.

lifeline, particularly for those in economically disadvantaged regions like northern Albania.[29] The key migration waves in 1991 (immediately after the fall of the communist regime), 1997 (in the aftermath of the civil war), and 2000 (following the state's post-pyramid schemes collapse) were driven by factors such as political instability, poverty, and high unemployment rates, especially in rural areas.[30]

Several scholars highlight the uniqueness of Albanian emigration,[31] not only within post-communist Europe but also on a broader scale, due to its rapid intensity and specific characteristics—which include the pivotal role of the family.[32] Carletto and colleagues, for example, designated it as a 'country on the move', underlining how leaving the country became part of household-level strategies to cope with the economic hardship of transition.[33] Yet, those in extreme poverty are often unable to migrate.[34] As a result, immobility, whether due to lack of resources, networks, or legal opportunities, becomes linked to economic hardship, as those who stay behind can be excluded from the benefits of remittances and better job prospects abroad. But for those who do migrate, remittances to their families and communities are a crucial component of the Albanian economy,[35] making migration a key pathway to financial stability and reinforcing a 'culture of migration' where mobility is essential for economic success.

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29 Carletto *et al.*; I Gedeshi and E Jorgoni, *Social Impact of Emigration and Rural-Urban Migration in Central and Eastern Europe: Final Country Report, Albania*, European Commission, 2012.

30 These events were components of a massive Ponzi scheme, leading Albania into financial collapse. K Barjaba and R King, 'Introducing and Theorising Albanian Migration', in *New Albanian Migration*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, 2013, pp. 1–28; Carletto *et al.*; J Vullnetari, 'Albanian Migration and Development', in *Albania on the Move*: *Links between Internal and International Migration*, Amsterdam University Press, 2012, pp. 59–106.

31 R King, E Uruçi and J Vullnetari, 'Albanian Migration and Its Effects in Comparative Perspective', *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, vol. 13, issue 3, 2011, pp. 269–286, https://doi.org/10.1080/19448953.2011.593335.

32 Vullnetari, 'Albanian Migration and Development'.

33 Carletto *et al.*

34 *Ibid.*

35 M Stampini *et al.*, 'International Migration from Albania: The Role of Family Networks and Previous Experience', *Eastern European Economics*, vol. 46, issue 2, 2008, pp. 50–87, https://doi.org/10.2753/EEE0012-8775460203; J Vullnetari, 'Family, Migration and Socio-Economic Change', in *Albania on the Move*: *Links between Internal and International Migration*, Amsterdam University Press, 2012, pp. 165–194.

Within the triple approach proposed by Vullnetari to frame Albanian emigration, along with transnationalism and the neo-classical push–pull factors model, 'the role of social networks, family and kinship—as theorised by the new economics of migration—has been crucial in sustaining much of this migration'.[36] The family has remained one of the most enduring aspects of Albanian culture and society over the decades. Its significance grew even further following the collapse of state support systems that were in place during the communist era.[37] Despite this, there is a dearth of analysis of the 'micro-level determinants' of such distinctive and predominant migration phenomenon.[38]

Despite these fixed factors, international emigration from Albania over the last three decades has been a dynamic phenomenon.[39] Notable changes are related to the gender and household dimensions. In the early 1990s, young men were most likely to emigrate; subsequently, the whole family and also women started leaving the country.[40] A specific group of women frequently discussed in literature consists of those involved in the sex industry[41] and in trafficking for sexual exploitation, where they have often been stereotyped, victimised, and infantilised.[42]

In research on human trafficking, the role of the family has been emphasised, spanning from direct involvement and family risk factors[43] to more indirect cultural family norms and pressures, such as expectations around remittances.

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36 Vullnetari, 'Albanian Migration and Development', p. 79.

37 *Ibid.*

38 Stampini *et al.*

39 Barjaba and King; King, Uruçi and Vullnetari.

40 Vullnetari, 'Albanian Migration and Development'.

41 *Ibid.*

42 R Andrijasevic and N Mai, 'Editorial: Trafficking (in) Representations: Understanding the Recurring Appeal of Victimhood and Slavery in Neoliberal Times', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 7, 2016, pp. 1–10, https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.20121771; J Campbell, 'Shaping the Victim: Borders, Security, and Human Trafficking in Albania', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 2, 2013, pp. 81–96, https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.20121325.

43 A J Nichols *et al.*, 'Practitioners' Perspectives on Working with Families of Minors Experiencing Sex Trafficking: Family Risk Factors and Implications for Family Based Interventions', *Child Abuse & Neglect*, vol. 158, 2024, pp. 107–132, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2024.107132; L Puigvert *et al.*, 'A Systematic Review of Family and Social Relationships: Implications for Sex Trafficking Recruitment and Victimization', *Families, Relationship, and Societies*, vol. 11, issue 4, 2022, pp. 534–550, https://doi.org/10.1332/204674321X16358719475186.

However, this latter role of household cultural norms has been less investigated and, in relation to Albania, little attention has been paid to the role of the family in precarious migration that may lead to human trafficking.[44]

Existing studies highlight both macro-level factors such as poverty, unemployment, limited education, weak legislation, and corruption, and micro-level factors such as domestic violence and patriarchal family structures, which increase vulnerabilities.[45] Gender-discriminatory norms continue to play a key role, as deeply entrenched patriarchal values limit women's autonomy and increase their exposure to violence and exploitation. In rural areas, where women face societal pressure to marry young, traffickers and smugglers exploit these norms by deceiving them with false promises of marriage or work abroad.[46]

Our study revisits some of these themes offering updated insights into how cultural, familial, and societal norms shape vulnerabilities to human trafficking. In Albania, persistent economic challenges and political instability continue to drive emigration, including irregular migration, which is reflected in asylum trends. In 2015, Albanians were the second-largest group seeking asylum in Germany.[47] Similarly in 2022, approximately 16,000 Albanians applied for asylum in the UK, accounting for 16% of all asylum applications.[48]

In the UK, Albanians have been among the highest numbers of referrals into the National Referral Mechanism (NRM)[49] since 2018. In 2022, referrals increased

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44 E Farruku and S Özcan, 'Factors Contributing to Child Trafficking in Albania: Push Factors', *Eurolimes*, vol. 29, 2020, pp. 31–48.

45 V Bekteshi, E Gjermeni, and M Van Hook, 'Modern Day Slavery: Sex Trafficking in Albania', *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, vol. 32, issue 7/8, 2012, pp. 480–494, https://doi.org/10.1108/01443331211249093.

46 K Kempadoo, J Sanghera and B Pattanaik, *Trafficking and Prostitution Reconsidered: New Perspectives on Migration, Sex Work, and Human Rights*, Paradigm Publishers, Boulder, 2005.

47 M Ristik 'Albania, Kosovo Top German 2015 Asylum List', *Balkan Insight*, 7 January 2016, https://balkaninsight.com/2016/01/07/albania-kosovo-top-german-2015-asylum-list.

48 P W Walsh and K Oriishi, 'Albanian Asylum Seekers in the UK and EU: A Look at Recent Data', Migration Observatory, 2023, https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/commentaries/albanian-asylum-seekers-in-the-uk-and-eu-a-look-at-recent-data.

49 The National Referral Mechanism is the UK framework for identifying and referring potential victims of modern slavery and ensuring they receive the appropriate support.

by 84%, reaching 4,613.[50] This rise was largely driven by a significant increase in reports of labour exploitation of Albanian men, who accounted for 1,631 referrals. The number of referrals of adult Albanians grew by 79% to 3,661, while that of Albanian children increased by 130% to 559.[51] This increase, coupled with recent media narratives about Albanians[52] and a political decision to increase the bilateral cooperation to curb smuggling and illegal migration,[53] emphasised the need for further research. The situation called for evidence-based guidelines and interventions to address these issues effectively and to develop preventive measures in collaboration with Albania.

Methodology

The data presented in this article was collected as part of a larger seven-month project looking at cultural competence in trafficking prevention in the UK, with a focus on Albanian potential victims of trafficking. This work was carried out in close partnership with Mary Ward Loreto (MWL), a service provider in the UK and Albania. The project involved a range of methods. MWL in Albania had monitored migration patterns, and the role played by family, over a long-term period through engagement with service users and during the research study they conducted on migration.[54] The MWL study had a sample of 1,105 individuals with an equal gender distribution and different ages. The data from this study were instrumental in co-designing our research topic guide and shaping our study's focus.

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50 'Modern Slavery National Referral Mechanism and Duty to Notify Statistics UK End of Year Summary 2022', GOV.UK, 2 March 2023, https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/modern-slavery-national-referral-mechanism-and-duty-to-notify-statistics-uk-end-of-year-summary-2022/modern-slavery-national-referral-mechanism-and-duty-to-notify-statistics-uk-end-of-year-summary-2022.

51 *Ibid.*

52 A R Boakes, 'How British tabloids' framing of Albanian migrants fuels anti-immigrant sentiments', European Western Balkans, 10 October 2023, https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2023/10/10/how-british-tabloids-framing-of-albanian-migrants-fuels-anti-immigrant-sentiments.

53 'Statement of cooperation on Home Affairs between Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Albania and the Home Office of the United Kingdom', GOV.UK, 29 November 2023, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-albania-joint-statement-on-home-affairs/statement-of-cooperation-on-home-affairs-between-ministry-of-interior-of-the-republic-of-albania-and-the-home-office-of-the-united-kingdom.

54 Mary Ward Loreto, *Beyond Borders: Analytical Research Report*, 2023, https://marywardloreto.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/BEYOND_BORDERS_Analytical_Research_Repor.pdf.

We also collected data through an online stakeholder survey in the UK (n=40), consultations with stakeholders and people with lived experience in the UK and Albania (n=15), two focus groups (n=23), and a Shared Learning Event (SLE) in Albania (n=33).

In this article, we only report on and discuss the findings from the focus groups and the SLE, due to their specific focus on examining the role of the family in Albania in the migration decision-making process, and its links to human trafficking. The SLE took place in Tirana, Albania, in October 2023 and was co-led by the research team and MWL. The event involved 33 participants who included representatives from law enforcement, teachers, social workers, municipal workers, members of the United Response Against Trafficking (URAT) network, and representatives from the Coalition of Shelters. The research team presented initial findings from the study to the audience in English, with simultaneous translation into Albanian to help facilitate discussion. Additionally, two focus groups were conducted in Albania, in Albanian and translated into English by an Albanian member of the research team. The focus groups included 13 parents (11 mothers and 2 fathers) and 10 young people, four men and six women, aged 18 to 25, from the northern regions of the country who were recruited by MWL.[55]

We adopted a non-intrusive, participant-centred approach, allowing discussions to be guided by participants and ensuring they only shared what they felt comfortable disclosing, without pressure to delve into sensitive topics. Thus, as the focus was on family decision-making, information about experiences of trafficking, or destination countries were not disclosed and were not included in the consultation and focus group topic guides.

The data from the focus groups and the SLE were analysed by the research team using thematic analysis.[56] Codes were developed that were representative of predetermined themes originating from concepts evident in the literature, as well as themes based on concepts that were prevalent within and across all or most consultations—in this case, key themes such as familial influence, the role of extended networks, and the broader socio-economic context.[57]

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[55] The selected areas were specifically chosen due to their high cases of individuals embarking on precarious journeys to the UK.

[56] V Braun and V Clarke, 'Using thematic analysis in psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, vol. 3, issue 2, 2006, pp. 77–101, p. 16, https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa.

[57] A Farrell and R Pfeffer, 'Policing Human Trafficking: Cultural Blinders and Organizational Barriers', *ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 653, issue 1, 2014, pp. 46–64, https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716213515835.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Ethics Committee at St Mary's University. A risk assessment was conducted for the chosen research sites in Albania, and safe, confidential locations were identified for holding the focus groups and the SLE. This approach was further strengthened by involving MWL, which works directly with the participants and stakeholders and has substantial experience in the area. Particularly for the focus groups, the involvement of MWL ensured that additional support to participants could be provided if needed.

Limitations

The use of focus group discussions with young people to explore migration experiences may have influenced participants' responses. Individual interviews were considered; however, focus groups were deemed the culturally safest way to gather data on this topic. This approach, reflecting the MWL team's emphasis on group work—creating a safe space, fostering solidarity, and encouraging shared discussions around collective experiences like migration—provided a more culturally sensitive and supportive environment for participants. Similarly, discussions with parents about their role and motivations in migration decision-making might have been shaped by a tendency to prioritise their children's well-being over personal interests, especially in a group context. The study does not address the impact of self-selection bias, as only certain individuals chose to speak to researchers about their involvement in migration. However, this is something common to qualitative research adopting snowball, purposive sampling among vulnerable populations.

While this article refers to 'parents' broadly, it is important to note that the data primarily reflects the perspectives of mothers, as fathers were underrepresented in the study. This imbalance may reflect a tendency for women to be more engaged with services and more willing to participate in research rather than an indication of their leading role in family decision-making.

This limitation prevented a detailed exploration of gendered dynamics in parental roles and decision-making within the family. Furthermore, as the focus of this study was on trafficking prevention through the enhancement of cultural competence, we did not explore how various family members or close or extended family dynamics influence migration decisions. Likewise, there is limited discussion of how the family interacts with broader community and macro-level contexts, as this did not fit the aims of the research. Lastly, there are no claims to generalisability, especially given the small sample size, as is common in qualitative research.

Findings

Findings from our research suggest that Albania provides a compelling case study of family-influenced migration. The umbrella theme yielded by the analysis of the focus group data is that of the existence of an Albanian culture of migration, characterised by the pivotal role of the family modulated along the following subthemes: *a collective decision-making process*, *the role of extended networks*, and *stigma around migration and traditional family norms*. These subthemes highlight how deeply ingrained the culture of migration is within Albanian society, influencing not only individual choices but also collective family strategies and social perceptions surrounding migration.

A Culture of Migration

The culture of migration has become widespread due to the conditions of the country's structural vulnerability over the last decades, as mentioned above. A pervasive sense of hopelessness contributes significantly to this phenomenon; many people have internalised the belief that their circumstances will never improve. It is common for parents in Albanian households to view their country as offering few opportunities, which reinforces their belief that migration is the only viable option for a better future. One parent maintained:

> *I support my child to migrate and go to provide income for his life, but I want him to return to Albania and build family life here. But I see that they [children/young people] do not find their place here even when they return.*

Consequently, they often decide to migrate or send their children on migration journeys, despite the potential risks and the precarious routes available to them.[58] This sentiment is particularly strong among young people, many of whom see their future outside Albania.[59] One young person shared:

> *I study economics in Tirana, and after finishing my bachelor studies, my goal is to leave for Belgium and continue my master's there, as I also have relatives there. I like it because there is the best education, and I enjoy living abroad.*

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58 Murphy *et al.*

59 A Hoxhaj, *Albania's brain drain: Why so many young people are leaving and how to get them to stay*, UCL European Institute, 2023.

Another young person expressed more uncertainty:

> *After finishing my bachelor's and master's studies in law, I will see if I can find stable work here. If I can, I will stay, but if I do not, I will leave the country.*

For young people without higher education or stable jobs, migration often feels like the only viable path to better opportunities. They highlight challenges such as unemployment, low wages, and limited prospects as key reasons for leaving but also express a deep attachment to Albania, saying they would stay if conditions improved. However, the pull of opportunities abroad often outweighs these doubts. As one returnee shared:

> *I have been here for three years, and not a day goes by that I don't say, 'Oh God, if only I could go back to France again.'*

During the focus group, young people shared that while parents often do not want their children to migrate illegally, the lack of opportunities and the sense of hopelessness compel them to see precarious journeys as the only viable option. In nearly all cases, it is the parents who take on the financial burden, borrowing money to support their children's migration. This decision often involves significant risks, as many young people endure dangerous travel conditions, such as hiding in trucks, to reach the UK, or face precarious living situations abroad. Additionally, the study found that the absence of legal pathways sometimes leads people to rely on false asylum claims, guided by instructions they receive from smugglers upon arriving in the destination country. This situation leaves individuals and families highly vulnerable and exposed to significant hardship.[60]

A Collective Decision-Making Process

The culture of migration in Albania is driven by collective decision-making, where the interests of the family often outweigh individual preferences. Albanian families may finance their children's migration, but expect remittances in return, thus creating an implicit contract within the household. In such cases, migration is framed not as an individual choice but as a familial obligation that aligns with broader cultural expectations.[61]

Families often act as both a push and pull factor. Many families encourage and support their children to migrate to escape the country's economic hardship, viewing migration as the sole path to financial stability.

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60 *Ibid.*

61 *Ibid.*

> *Of course, I support him because I cannot meet the conditions in my home. I do not want him to go through the same suffering that I went through, and I want him to be comfortable for himself. When the child stays here and has no future… because abroad, I think, there is a future and employment opportunities. (Parents' Focus Group)*

However, under the current inhumane anti-migration policies in both the UK and Europe, migration often comes with deep personal sacrifices. Families may be separated for long periods, and children can face distressing conditions while seeking legal status. In some cases, families resort to extreme measures, such as placing their children in institutional care to improve their chances of obtaining residency documents. The emotional toll of these decisions can last well beyond the migration process itself. One young person explained that her family left Albania and travelled to France. Because she and her sister were minors and had no legal documents, they were placed in an orphanage while their asylum claims were being processed. She explained that, due to the absence of legal pathways, the children had to claim asylum while their parents remained in the country illegally, leading to their forced separation. She described the emotional toll of this experience:

> *We had to live apart from our parents for a year and a half, which was a great sacrifice. During that time, I only saw them once. Looking back, it was not the right decision because we were alone, without our parents, and it still hurts me today when I remember [it].*

This account highlights how families often balance economic necessity with emotional hardship. While migration is seen as a means to a better future, the process can be fraught with instability, loneliness, and long-lasting emotional scars, especially for young migrants who experience separation from their parents. This further aligns with previous studies[62] that have shown how migration decisions in developing countries are often made by family heads or elders who exert significant influence over individual members. At the same time, parents frequently support their children's decision to migrate, believing it will offer a better future.

> *My son was 17 years old when he decided to leave for Germany and asked us for LEK 30,000 [approx. USD 310]. At home, he suffered a lot and worked in the black market since he was a minor. (Parents' Focus Group)*

At the same time, the focus groups revealed that while families often play a key role in encouraging migration, this is not always the case. Some young people shared that their families initially resisted their decision to migrate, which added

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62 Nisa, 1986.

emotional strain to the process. Others noted that the impacts of unsuccessful migration, such as financial difficulties or returning home without achieving the expected success, can lead to feelings of shame and tension within families. These complexities highlight the mixed dynamics between familial encouragement, resistance, and the individual experiences of young people as they navigate decisions about their future. As one young person said:

> *My parents never agreed with my decision to go to England and I discussed it with them every night. I knew they were afraid for me, but I had realised that I had nothing to look forward to in Albania and I had to take risks. It took a lot of money that I would never be able to raise, not even through my friends, so my family remained my only hope. It took time to convince them and then they sacrificed for me taking huge debts for me to go there. Debts which have not yet been fully repaid because I was caught there after six months and ended up in prison for another six months and then returned to Albania. It was very difficult at the beginning here.*

The Role of Extended Networks

The study also underlined the role of extended networks in shaping migration decisions. Many Albanian migrants are influenced by relatives or acquaintances who have already migrated and established themselves abroad. This creates a chain effect, where the success of one family member in a destination country encourages others to follow. As noted in the literature, networks can influence cultural and social attitudes toward migration, as each migration event reshapes the socioeconomic context of individuals, households, and communities, thereby influencing future migration decisions. Over time, migration flows may become more heavily driven by network dynamics than by the original factors that initiated migration.[63] This phenomenon is evident in Albania, where nearly half of Albanian households have experienced some form of international migration since 1990, a phenomenon of 'almost exodus proportions'.[64] The involvement of the family and the broader community is thus multifaceted: they provide financial support for the journey, exert pressure to conform to cultural expectations, and serve as a support network once the individual reaches the destination country.

> *My son was a minor, only 14 years old, when he emigrated to my sister in Belgium. He suffered a lot, but it was worth it. He went to school there; he is 21 years old today. (Parents' Focus Group)*

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63 D S Massey *et al.*, 'Theories of International Migration: A Review and Appraisal', *Population and Development Review*, vol. 19, issue 3, 1993, pp. 431–466, https://doi.org/10.2307/2938462.

64 Carletto *et al.*

> *The precarious journeys occur as a result of attempts at family reunification, or because they have relatives there and want to go to stay with their relatives. (Stakeholder SLE)*

> *The entire family becomes involved in finding financial resources for the journey, gathering information, identifying if they have relatives or acquaintances in the destination country, and finding intermediaries. (Stakeholder SLE)*

As evidenced by these quotes, the chain migration is reinforced by the existing ties in the destination country, which offer not only practical support, like accommodation, financial assistance, or guidance, but also emotional and psychological support. Family reunification has in fact been very prominent in Albanian emigration, with male members of the household leaving first, followed by female members.[65]

These networks can provide critical information and resources that help reduce the uncertainties and risks associated with migration. For instance, family members who have already settled abroad may offer valuable insights into job opportunities and local customs, enabling newcomers to navigate their new environments more effectively. However, this flow of information is not always comprehensive or accurate. In many cases, the information shared is limited or skewed, creating 'illusions of success' that can distort the perceptions of potential migrants. A lack of awareness in Albania about the actual conditions in destination countries often leads individuals to migrate with unrealistic expectations.

> *In Albania, people are not informed about the reality of Albanians in the UK; they are unaware of the difficulties. Therefore, Albanians who leave thinking that life there is very easy become disappointed when they face reality… (Stakeholder SLE)*

When faced with harsh realities, these migrants may experience profound disappointment or, in some cases, exploitation. Yet, due to the shame, stigma, and intense societal pressure to portray migration as a success, many are reluctant to return or to share honest accounts of their struggles and hardships abroad. This reluctance further perpetuates misinformation and sustains the cycle of precarious migration. Consequently, family members may fail to recognise the underlying issues.

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65 *Ibid.*

Traditional Family Norms and Stigma around Migration

Finally, our findings show that cultural norms of the family significantly influence pre-migration, migration decision-making, and return. For instance, those who are unable to settle in their intended destination country and are subsequently sent back to their country of origin are often labelled as 'failed migrants'. As mentioned earlier, this stigma is particularly evident among men, as migration is frequently associated with masculinity in Albania. In this sense, our study expands on the more recent, growing literature on masculinity in migration,[66] by exploring how masculinity is constructed and enacted within the family in forced migration.[67] Family-level pressures and stigma linked to migration serve to better understand the fact that many returned Albanians from the UK, under the two countries' joint communiqué of late 2022, have attempted to re-emigrate.[68]

> *Emigrants choose not to return even when things are not going well, because once they have left, they feel they must stay there. (Stakeholder SLE)*

Moreover, gender dynamics in migration decisions critically increase individuals' vulnerability to human trafficking. For instance, sons often face immense pressure to migrate in order to send remittances and support their families, significantly increasing their risk of exploitation.

> *Gender expectations should also be considered. The family is okay with the son being involved in illegal work as long as he makes money and is a provider. (Stakeholder SLE)*

Conversely, women may migrate to join their spouses in an attempt to reduce their dependence on their parental households. However, this can further restrict their freedoms, if they find themselves in abusive or exploitative relationships. Due to men's precarious migration status, some enter marriages for legal purposes rather than genuine partnerships, which can leave women in vulnerable and uncertain positions.

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66 K Charsley and H Wray, 'Introduction: The Invisible (Migrant) Man', *Men and Masculinities*, vol. 18, issue 4, 2015, pp. 403–423, https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X15575109.

67 M Palillo, '"Now I Must Go": Uncovering the Relationship Between Masculinity and Structural Vulnerability in Young African Men's Stories of Forced Migration', *International Migration Review*, 2023, https://doi.org/10.1177/01979183231185124.

68 B Shala, 'Repatriated Albanians Find New Routes Back to Britain', *Balkan Insight*, 14 February 2024, https://balkaninsight.com/2024/02/14/repatriated-albanians-find-new-routes-back-to-britain.

> *Men create marriages in England for documentation purposes and establish two parallel families. This can create problems for the women, who are not aware of this situation. (Stakeholder SLE)*

Our findings resonate with both migration and trafficking studies on the role of emotions in mobility, and the figure of the 'failed migrant'. Family and community pre-migration pressures are mirrored in the shame and stigma that 'unsuccessful' returnees face in a vast array of contexts and also along gender lines.[69] In trafficking literature, return stigmatisation has been explored in relation to trafficking for sexual exploitation.[70] For example, a recent article exploring challenges faced by Albanian victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation and for forced begging upon their return to Albania found that family exclusion and stigmatisation are significant.[71] However, while victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation faced family rejection, victims of forced begging did not. Furthermore, returning to their families was not a positive solution for these victims because of parental neglect and the participation of family members in the trafficking network. Additionally, many migrants returned involuntarily.[72]

Recommendations

Despite the implementation of stricter migration policies and the threat of immediate deportation to unsafe countries, migration flows to the UK and the European Union have not decreased; rather, it has increased migrants' vulnerability to exploitation. In this context, it is crucial to understand and implement culturally competent, evidence-based interventions to support families and individuals both in their countries of origin and during the migration decision-making process. The role of the family in migration decision-making requires further investigation to inform more effective policies and practices aimed at mitigating the family's

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69 N Constable, 'Migrant Motherhood, "Failed Migration", and the Gendered Risks of Precarious Labour', *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia*, vol. 3, issue 1, 2015, pp. 135–151, https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2014.13; A M Fejerskov and M Zeleke, 'Return Migration, Masculinities and the Fallacy of Reintegration: Ethiopian Experiences', *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, vol. 17, issue 4, 2023, pp. 575–593, https://doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2023.2322195.

70 N Laurie and D Richardson, 'Geographies of Stigma: Post-Trafficking Experiences', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, vol. 46, issue 1, 2021, pp. 120–134, https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12402.

71 K Ramaj, 'The Aftermath of Human Trafficking: Exploring the Albanian Victims' Return, Rehabilitation, and Reintegration Challenges', *Journal of Human Trafficking*, vol. 9, issue 3, 2023, pp. 408–429, https://doi.org/10.1080/23322705.2021.1920823.

72 *Ibid.*

role as a facilitator of precarious migration. Prevention interventions, such as awareness-raising and education, are becoming increasingly critical, alongside culturally competent trafficking aftercare that focuses on trauma-informed approaches to prevent re-trafficking and further exploitation. These family-oriented and culturally competent interventions should be accompanied by larger systemic changes toward migration governance which supports more regular migration pathways, simplified asylum procedures, and easier family reunification processes for trafficking survivors. Changes to UK laws and regulations are needed which would take into account the fact that Albanians often migrate to the UK under pressure from the family.

Culturally Competent Service Provision

Given the family's central role in Albanian migration, service providers, especially in destination countries like the UK, need to develop culturally competent interventions that acknowledge familial obligations, cultural expectations, and the broader socio-economic context. Practitioners require training and increased awareness of the role of family and cultural norms in shaping migration decisions and the reintegration challenges faced by survivors in this context. Survivors of trafficking, and those labelled as 'failed migrants', frequently face stigma and shame upon returning to their home communities, where they may be ostracised or blamed for their circumstances. To address this, practitioners should actively engage families as a supportive influence in rebuilding survivors' individual and cultural identity.[73] Thus, acceptance by the family, and community (re)integration, can act as protective factors against the risk of re-trafficking.

For example, culturally competent interventions[74] may include engaging families and respected community figures to facilitate dialogues with communities affected by precarious migration and the risks posed by it. It may also include offering gender-sensitive counselling that acknowledges traditional gender roles, or developing reintegration programmes that provide alternative livelihoods aligned with local socio-economic realities. By incorporating culturally relevant practices, service providers can ensure that their support is not only effective but also meaningful within the migrants' cultural framework and reduces the risks of further exploitation.

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[73] K Marburger and S Pickover, 'A Comprehensive Perspective on Treating Victims of Human Trafficking', *The Professional Counselor*, vol. 10, issue 1, 2020, pp. 13–24, https://doi.org/10.15241/km.10.1.13.

[74] See Appendix A in Murphy *et al.*

Integrating Family-Oriented Interventions in Migration Policies

Policymakers should incorporate family-related considerations into migration policies. As highlighted above, the choice to migrate often follows a collective decision-making process, driven by familial obligations, cultural norms, and socio-economic pressures. By adopting culturally competent strategies, such as family-oriented reintegration programmes, and prioritising knowledge exchange between countries, stakeholders can design more effective interventions to prevent precarious migration that may lead to trafficking and exploitation. Additionally, the adoption of the perspective of harm on a continuum is advocated. This perspective encourages an understanding of risks and promotes culturally informed strategies in combating abuse and exploitation, especially within the context of vulnerable migration scenarios. By integrating these recommendations, stakeholders can create more effective, nuanced, and culturally competent frameworks for supporting Albanian migrants and other foreign survivors of trafficking and addressing the broader challenges of migration and exploitation.

Conclusion

Our study has responded to the need for more academic research in the field of precarious migration and human trafficking in Albania. Our findings expand on the existing literature on familial pressure and norms as primary drivers of migration for many Albanians and set the family as central, rather than as one of many other factors, that can lead to precarious migration and trafficking. However, further research would be necessary to explore the dynamics of gender roles and cultural norms in migration-related decisions and unpack patriarchal influences on family decision-making. Additionally, given the recent increase of irregular Albanian migrants in the UK, the article's recommendations focus on the need for enhanced cultural competence in the UK anti-modern slavery and human trafficking sector. This would help to encompass and address familial cultural norms within the unique case of the Albanian culture of migration and ensure that both the academic community and frontline practitioners are better equipped to support Albanian migrants and trafficking survivors in the UK with culturally responsive and effective interventions.

Crucially, our findings suggest that the precarious nature of these journeys is not an inevitability, but rather a direct consequence of the restrictive migration policies, the lack of safe and legal pathways, and the divisive narratives that criminalise movement rather than addressing its root causes and protecting migrants' human rights. These challenges are further exacerbated by the absence of a robust human rights framework in current migration governance, which fails to protect migrants and uphold their dignity. While cultural competency is essential in future service and policy design, it is equally important to recognise the diverging narratives surrounding Albanian migration, that highlight broader

systemic failures. Acknowledging these complexities allows for a more informed and constructive approach, rather than one that reinforces harmful policy responses that may further endanger migrants.

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