

Women's social remittances and their implications at household level: A case study of Romanian migration to Italy

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Abstract

Remittances have become an important topic of research in the growing literature on the nexus between gender, migration and socio-economic development. From this point of view, Romania constitutes an important case, revealing transformations wrought by social and economic remittances not only at national and regional levels, but also at the household level. This article focuses on women migrant returnees and the effect of their social remittances on family relations. Women are often categorised under the return of conservatism group because migrants who are influenced by family in their decisions to return are less likely to become returnees of innovation. Although women return as a result of their husbands' decisions, findings suggest that these women have begun challenging the rules that govern traditional relations between family members. This paper highlights the influence of social remittances on those left behind and raises questions about the manner by which social remittances transform households.

Keywords: Gender, social remittances, return, household, Romania.

Introduction

The past thirty years have seen a growing amount of literature about the relation between migration and development. The focus has been especially on the tremendous increase in the volume of international migrant remittances and what factors determine the flows of remittances from developed to developing countries (Adams 2009, Lucas and Stark 1985, Sørensen *et al.* 2002). However, mixed empirical evidence worldwide has fuelled a debate over the positive versus the negative effects of remittances on development in remittance-receiving countries (de Haas 2009, Grigorian and Melkonyan 2011, Guarnizo 2003). In addition to this ongoing controversy, some authors (Bartram 2010, Raghuram 2009) warn against the underlying normative assumptions that researchers, policy makers or other stakeholders may embrace when addressing development issues linked to migration. The issue of gender is only a recent introduction into this debate, with emphasis on the social underpinnings of remittances (King *et al.* 2011) and the potential effect that they have on 'gendered social realities within which remittances are embedded' (Kunz 2008: 1400). Bearing this in mind, I focus on the case of Romanian migration in Italy with the aim of understanding the interplay between household organisation, women's social remittances and the resulting changes in gender and intergenerational relations at the household level. My theoretical framework draws heavily on literature about migration and social change (Lutz 2010,

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Portes 2010, Schuerkens 2005), which is a broader topic than that of migration-development settings and is more appropriate for dealing with various migration-driven changes: those that are social, economic and cultural.

Migration to Italy is the largest contemporary Romanian migration stream. According to ISTAT (2011), the number of Romanians in Italy is at an estimated 1 million, with the proportion of women slightly exceeding that of men. Financial remittances to Romania have witnessed a sharp increase up to 2008, at which they were estimated at US\$9.3 billion¹ (approximately 5.5 per cent of the Romanian gross domestic product and 60 per cent of its foreign direct investment). As León-Ledesma and Piracha (2004) show, remittances play a major role in alleviating poverty in Central and Eastern European countries, including Romania. Narrowing the focus to Romania only, de Sousa and Duval (2010) tested the influence of geographic distance on remittances sent by Romanians abroad. The authors found that remote migration and remittances are positively correlated. Italy appears, indeed, to be the remittance-sending country from which Romania receives the largest amount of money, compared to nearer countries, like Austria or Greece. Although these results are useful for assessing the importance of the Romania–Italy case study, there is a lack of knowledge about the interaction between household organisation (gender and intergenerational relations within this organisation) and remittances. Available literature presents difficulties in assessing women's contribution to broader social change. I therefore aim to expand upon existent literature by investigating long-distance family interactions, as well as social remittances and their effect on household transformation (i.e. gender norms and relations between family members). Social remittances (Levitt 1998) refer to values, ideas, behaviours and practices that individual migrants and migrant associations exchange through proximity contacts (when they come to visit or settle back in their home countries or when non-migrants come to visit their relatives and friends in the destination country) or long-distance interactions (i.e. phone, internet). Unlike economic remittances, social remittances are less observable and quantifiable (Goldring 2004). However, as shown by others (Haidinger 2008, Rahman 2009, Suksomboon 2008), these remittances are equally important for capturing broader social changes brought about by migrants in their community of origin.

The Romanian household in the context of female migration

The organisation of the Romanian household has played an important role in structuring emigration since the collapse of the communist regime in 1989. Gender and age dimensions intersect and create different cleavages of authority and power over various matters within the household. Men generally have more authority than women in almost all domains of activity and decision making, with older men having more power over younger men (Gal and

¹ According to the *Migration and Remittances Factbook 2011* of the World Bank, available online at <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTLAC/Resources/Factbook2011-Ebook.pdf>.

Kligman 2000, Stahl 1986). Inequality between members with regard to symbolic and material resources is illustrated by the situation in which a woman joins her husband's household. She is compelled to submit to her husband's will and live up to her in-laws' expectations. Romanian households are also characterised by diffuse solidarity within 'kinship networks with no clear boundaries and the redistribution of resources as main function' (Stănculescu and Pop 2009: 197).

This patriarchal form of household organisation prompted me to ponder over its role in the migration process. As in the case of Albania (King et al. 2011), Romanian emigration has been male driven because of this form of family organisation, and because of the gender stereotypes and beliefs (i.e. immoral behaviour of migrant women, strong motherhood ideology) specific to Central and Eastern European societies (Lutz 2010, Morokvasic 2004). We can nevertheless expect migration itself to influence household structure, power dynamics within the family, and the gender beliefs shared by household members in the place of origin. Drawing on Giddens' (1998) influential account of the democratization of family relations in modern societies, Pantea (2011) addresses the issues of the increased autonomy of migrants' children and their mitigated bargaining power at the family level in the context of long-term parental migration from Romania. Piperno (2011) also stresses the impact of female migration on families left in Romania, with a special concern on children and the individual/community strategies to cope with care shortages.

The present paper focuses on women's narratives and shows that, through social remittances in particular, migration may be an opportunity for women to transform traditional ideas by securing employment in Italy, sending children to school, and exposing children to the model of a working mother, which is identified as a mechanism of promoting more egalitarian gender attitudes within families (Voicu and Tufiş 2012). The growing demand of Italian families for domestic workers, the numerous opportunities for finding jobs in the informal labour market, the cultural proximity between Romanians and Italians with respect to language and religion, and the rapid development of migrant networks all explain the steady increase in Romanian migration flow toward Italy and the feminisation of this flow.

The role of women's social remittances in intra-household relationships

Gender plays a crucial role in migration and remittances (Broughton 2008, Wong 2006). Research on migration and development provide evidence for the influence of gender on migration and, through remittances, on development (King et al. 2006, Sana and Massey 2005). However, little is known about the manner by which migrant women transfer social remittances (i.e. social capital, ideas, beliefs) and the challenges posed by their migration experience to the gender rules that govern traditional relations between family members. To examine these issues, I followed individuals from a Romanian village living

and working in Italy. I conducted 52 in-depth interviews² with migrant men and women. In what follows, I focused on interviews with migrant returnees because return migrants are generally said to be illustrative from the point of view of the impact of migration and remittances on development and on broader social changes in the origin country. In a study on migrants from Ghana, Tiemoko (2004) highlights the importance of family in assessing the effect of return. He contends that in contrast to common convictions, returnees whose decisions are influenced by their families may equally be considered *returnees of innovation* (Cerese 1974), especially given the social transformations that they bring (i.e. gender norms, family relations, work ethics). Building on this argument, I seek to address how Romanian migrant women, who often return because of their husbands' decisions (Vlase, forthcoming), may bring changes in family relations through their social remittances.

When women joined their husbands in Italy, they could easily find employment as domestic workers within Italian families. For migrant men, having their wives working for Italian families might challenge their masculine identity, as shown by Ester Gallo (2006) in her research on Malayali migrants in Italy. Romanian women in Italy enjoyed more independence at the family level and improved their social status and language skills through close contact with Italian families belonging to the upper-middle class:

When you go in Italy to find work, you will generally work for a better-off person, because, you know, there are also all kinds of people, there are the poor, maybe poorer than Romanians here. They [Italians] are of three categories [social classes] while we have only two: the rich and the poor. (Dora³)

Working for these wealthier families provided women with the potential to achieve a higher social status than that ascribed by the combination of their origin, gender and class. I draw here on Julie Bettie's definition of social class seen as *performance*, which refers to '...agency and a conscious attempt at passing. Applied to class this might mean consciously imitating middle-class expressions of cultural capital in an attempt at mobility' (Bettie 2003, 52). Indeed, there is substantial evidence of such attempts in migrant women's narratives and in their ways of dressing, walking and talking: 'I get developed as a person, I mean not necessarily in terms of having more diplomas, but I have

² The research was carried out between 2000 and 2010, being based on in-depth interviews and participant observation both in the place of origin (a village from south-eastern Romania) and at the destination (Lazio, the region which surrounds Rome). The migrant returnees interviewed in 2010 include twenty people (twelve women and eight men) aged between 33 and 60 years (mean ages for women and men in the sample were 37 and 42 years, respectively). Women returnees stayed in Italy between four and eleven years (the average of time spent in Italy was eight years), while men returnees stayed in Italy between nine and sixteen years (the average of time spent in Italy was eleven years).

³ Woman returnee, 34 years old, returned to the village in 2006, mother of two children.

improved my ways of relating to others, with clients of a high level...,' said Elena⁴. Similarly, Mioara⁵ acknowledged,

[Migration] changed my living standard a lot. I will not forget where I started, but this does not mean that I have to belittle myself now. I know how to lead a conversation at any level and I intend to finish my high-school and to follow some private courses on sales.

Women are usually reluctant to return home but they may be persuaded by their husbands to do so for the sake of their children. Upon return, most women become isolated within their households and have limited access to local opportunity structures that reaffirm their economic role and independence. Nevertheless, they seek to use the socio-cultural capital acquired abroad to negotiate their position within the hierarchical family relations in their place of origin.

Mioara's story briefly illustrates the ways by which women may challenge gender norms and traditional relations. She joined her husband in Italy five years later to secure employment and help him earn the money needed to build their own house. They were both unemployed prior to migration and they have two daughters, who were three and seven years old when Mioara left. Her parents first disapproved of her decision, saying that mothers should not leave their children. They later agreed with her decision. Whilst abroad, Mioara's children had to live 'either three months with my mother, or six months with my mother-in-law; it depends on how I *managed*'. This statement provides insights into the migration-driven renegotiation of the extended family's norms of solidarity. Childrearing is women's most important responsibility. As they live abroad, they need to rely on kinship networks (i.e. mothers, mothers-in-law, or sisters) and they are aware that this reliance morally compels them to provide (emotional and financial) support to these relatives when needed. Mioara therefore resolutely endeavoured to *manage* in order to avoid having to bear too many obligations: 'I came to the conclusion that relatives should be kept at arm's length, do the small talk and move on; otherwise they want to control how much you work or earn'. Therefore, women seek different care arrangements. For example, when a daughter is deemed sufficiently responsible, a mother may temporarily leave her in the trusted care of household help. When possible, women also bring children to Italy. In 2005, Mioara and her husband returned home but because of the local shortage of available jobs, Mioara migrated again a few months later. Her husband took care of their children during her absence. His new role was perceived as crossing traditional gender norms. As Mioara stated "there was not a single day when we didn't speak on the phone. He used to ask me how to cook dinner, how to prepare this or that. Once, he said to me over the phone: *I'll not let you go again*

⁴ Woman returnee, 40 years old, returned to the village in 2006, mother of two children.

⁵ Woman returnee, 37 years old, returned to the village in 2007, mother of two children.

*[in Italy] because I can now see how valuable woman's [domestic] work is!*⁶ Mioara has not migrated since 2007 because she believes in how crucial it is being near her daughters, who are about to enter high school and college; they need her guidance and support during this period:

The most important thing for my daughters is to build their own professional careers, because no one would give them anything.... Me, I help them now because they are mine, but I want them to study in order to have a steady job, and to be independent, not to rely on husbands or anybody else.

Voicu and Tufiş (2012) show in their study dealing with the mechanisms of changes in Romanian gender beliefs that children's exposure to the model of working mother and to mother's ideas about gender and social mobility is a way of achieving more egalitarian attitudes. Mothers who migrate not only change their economic status through migration, but also likely change their ideas about gender relations. Mioara states:

I know from my own experience that when we first went to Italy, my husband and I were both old fashioned. Once we arrived there, we saw how others lived and tried somewhat to adjust. Before that, my husband used to think that he could just make a mess, throwing towels or other things around the house, because it was my duty to clean.

Transformative trends in household organisation

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These ethnographic data on Romanian women's social remittances are consistent with other findings, which confirm that "migration and remittances *did* lead to a partial reconfiguring of gender and generational relations" (King *et al.* 2011: 414). Depending on household composition prior to migration, a family's migration history and a migrant's personal goals, we may disentangle different outcomes in gender and intergenerational relations within households. On the basis of long-term participant observations⁶ and interviews with migrants, I traced the evolution in household organisation. The most common situation⁷ is that of young married women with children cohabiting with their husbands' parents prior to migration, and then moving into their own house upon return. First, there is a greater variation in the household structure: traditional households of three generations (parents, the youngest son and his wife with their children) still exist, but we can also notice older parents living without their sons or daughters nearby. We also find a growing number of nuclear

⁶ My being a member of this village and currently living there constituted a valuable opportunity to carry out long-term participant observations and delve into their implications given a shared socio-cultural background with the migrants.

⁷ Other situations that are not discussed here because of space limitations are those of single men living with parents and brothers before migrating and who choose either to stay with their parents upon return or move into their own houses; some single men also marry during migration and build their own houses where they can move in with their wives and children upon return. Single women who migrate are exceptional cases and thus far, I have not encountered single women returnees.

families or families with only one older parent (widowed mother or father). Second, as my fieldwork suggests, migration provides young men and women with greater control over their choices regarding partner selection and residency after marriage. In addition, women returnees may also refuse to live with parents-in-law, and they are likely to draw boundaries⁸ to the diffuse solidarity that characterises household kinship networks.

Third, not only the principles of patrilocality but also those of lineage (the inheritance of the house by the youngest son) are challenged today by young migrants who have the means to build their own homes. Paralleling recent findings drawn from accounts of Romanian migrants' children/young persons (Pantea 2011), my interviews with women returnees also indicate that the distribution of roles within these transnational families is an avenue of negotiation, sometimes fraught with tension. Even when women continue to do most of the domestic chores, their work is less perceived as natural or taken for granted by family members. Men, however, can perform domestic work and have this act viewed as an exceptional or temporary situation.

Too authoritarian family relations are also challenged in the long run if we take into account women's desire to push their daughters to study and build professional careers, sometimes in traditionally male-dominated professions. The women returnees I interviewed seem to challenge, in different ways, the traditional representation of Romanian women as passive and obedient to men (Chytikova 2011). First, they invest in teaching their daughters to become more independent and self-reliant. Second, encouraging daughters to choose a highly skilled profession could be seen as an indication of these women's attempts to improve their social status and earn social recognition in the community of origin via their children's achievements. Professions such as medicine, law or law enforcement are less common among women but are highly valued in Romania, not primarily in terms of skills but for the high social status and power attached to them. Furthermore, the professions that returnee women encourage their children to pursue may reflect the transfer of ideas about class and gender identities, to which I pointed in the previous section.

Concluding remarks

This paper illustrated the implications of Romanian women's remittances at household level. It is argued that these may result in further redefinitions of power relationships between family members across gender and generations. This research provides insights into the role played by the social remittances of women returnees in the transformation of family relations in their countries of origin. Previous studies in Bangladesh (Rahman 2009) have illustrated the migration–development nexus by focusing on the role of men's remit-

⁸ Following Gerson and Peiss (1985), I refer to the concept of 'boundaries' as permeable complex structures—physical, social, ideological, and psychological—which mark the social territories of intra-household relations, signaling who ought to be admitted or excluded (p. 319), and therefore further influencing gender relations.

tances in reshaping the social relationships between family members left behind (i.e. upward social mobility, reduced control over partner's selection and remittances, changes in intergenerational relations). My findings suggest that women temporary migrants can contribute just as substantially to social transformation. Although Romanian out-migration and return are both male-driven, women are not necessarily *returnees of conservatism*. They remain important actors in the field of social remittances, contributing to local changes by transmitting new ideas about gender equality and independence to their daughters. Although there is limited evidence of women's empowerment within the family upon their return, social remittances lead to some changes in the organisation of family life. The outlined results of this research indicate shrinking of the local traditional household and demonstrate challenges to diffuse solidarity, gender roles within family, lineage and patrilocal rules about choosing residency after marriage.

These findings help us better understand the contribution of migrants to the transformation of their societies of origin as well as recognise women's struggles to highlight their underestimated efforts. Levitt's (1998) concept sheds light on the role played by migrant women from societies characterised by patriarchal forms of family organisation, where men's (economic) remittances may be over-emphasised at the expense of women's agency. Whether women send as much money as do men migrants remains an issue of scientific controversy because this economic behaviour is embedded in social realities that do not allow for the full acknowledgement of women's economic role.

While women's social remittances may be more difficult to calculate, and though more time is needed before we can assess their impact, such remittances certainly indicate transformative trends. For instance, raising children's (especially daughters') awareness in regard to the importance of their own independence may lead, in the long run, to more balanced gender relations. The diversification of household structures also signals the emergence of new patterns of family relations. The most important achievement in this realm is a woman's greater freedom within the nuclear family due to her no longer needing to meet in-laws' expectations regarding everyday activities.

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