

Albania

“We would like to return, but I think we can help my family more from Greece”

Elvira (30 years old) and her husband Arsim (39 years old) have lived together since 2001 with their three children between the ages of 10-14 in the city of Thessaloniki near the Albanian border. They arrived from the village of Voskop, in the valley of the Korçë region. Most of the families had left due to the decline of the local economy, but were then replaced by others from farther villages. Elvira is now working in domestic service with a work schedule of 6-7 hours per day, 6 days a week and her husband works in construction.

Between 1992-1997 Elvira's husband was an irregular migrant in Greece, until he obtained a visa through a neighbour. It was only after 8 years of marriage that Elvira was able to follow him there. The years of separation were difficult: remittances were barely enough to cover the costs of food and basic necessities. Her parents always asked her not to cross the border illegally with her children because of the risks and the high costs. Elvira was in charge of taking care of her mother-in-law, who has been paralyzed since 1994, despite the fact that she lived with her eldest son and his wife. Only when her son got married was Elvira able to leave her mother-in-law under the care of her sister-in-law. Her husband intended to return to Albania but was unable to find a job and after one year they decided to all leave, which they were able to do in 2001. Elvira's mother-in-law came to Greece to live with them after her husband died in 2002. Elvira's brother-in-law and his wife also came to Greece and now rent their own home.

Elvira has 7 brothers and sisters, 4 of whom also live in Greece. Her younger brother is a student in Albania and her sister works sewing clothes in a factory. They have a small piece of land in Albania (100 square meters) that they inherited from her husband's family and now rent out. "There is no hope in the village. In my opinion the villages have died... from what we are able to see and hear, I don't think it will improve. The village was a nice place to live, it was beautiful. When we returned to Albania we visited it and it was in ruins." The lack of water and electricity make daily life difficult. "In Albania we had three children without resources. We were not even able to buy a cup of orange juice for the children because we did not have electricity. We did not have a refrigerator to keep the juice in. Although we would have been able to buy it, we didn't have a place to store it."

Elvira always returns to Albania for New Year's, the summer and for Holy Week to bring money and medicine for her parents. Also, if one of her relatives goes there, she is able to send money with them or through a taxi or bus, which costs 10 euros. She sends around 200 euros. "If they don't have this money that we send, they will not be able to go to the doctor or buy food." Her family obtained some land during the time of land distribution and they cultivated tobacco and grapes. "My father is retired and is ill. It's hypertension. We have to rent out the land so that my father doesn't need to worry about it. We worry more about his health while he worries about the land. My father is tired of the hard life that he has had, he worked very hard in order to raise 8 children. It wasn't easy, especially with 7 daughters. Both my parents had difficult lives and are exhausted from life in the village".

Elvira considers that what she sends is little, as it is only 10% of what they spend in Greece. She and her husband want to return to Albania, with the hope that their savings will permit them to buy a house in Korçë. But for Elvira, her dreams depend on her children. "My children will continue to go to school here, it's probable that they will marry Greeks or Russians, I don't know. Therefore I can't say where life will take us. If my children marry Greeks then I will be obligated to stay here with my children to help them, raise my grandchildren, to look after them after school. I can have beautiful dreams, but it all depends on my children." For Elvira, it doesn't make sense to pay rent in Greece when she can purchase a house for the same amount in Albania, but she wants her children to have a good education and the schools in Greece tend to be better than those in Albania. While Elvira and her husband remain pessimistic about the future of their village, they still think it can improve. "My husband has always thought of something like this, because when we go to the village and see the old damaged road, we feel bad. He has always thought that when he returns to the village he will discuss it with the young people living there. If all the people contributed 20 euros, it would really benefit the villages."

Albania is the most dramatic example of post-communist migration. It is estimated that one-fourth of the total Albanian population is abroad. According to World Bank figures, in 2006 remittances to Albania totaled US \$1.36 billion or 14.9% of the country's GDP. Greece is the primary destination for Albanian migrants. Albanian women represented 41% of the total Albanian population there in 2001. The majority arrive through family reunification and have found work primarily in domestic service, in response to the growing demand in this sector. *

This Life Story was published in March 2010 and pertains to the project: "Gender and Remittances: Constructing Gender Sensitive Development" produced by UN-INSTRAW and UNDP, with funding from Japan WID.

*Source: Vullnetari, Julie and King, Russel (2010), Migration Remittances and Gender-responsive Local Development: The Case of Albania, Santo Domingo.

