

‘I don’t want them to end up like me’ – the women who return to Albania after seeking asylum in the EU

The vast majority of Albanians who seek asylum in the EU have their claims rejected and must return home. But that doesn’t mean they give up on their dreams of a better life.

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Return migration is when a migrant goes back to their country of origin, or to a place where they formerly lived or stayed temporarily.

There are different kinds of return migration: it can be undertaken voluntarily, it can be forced, or it can fall somewhere in between. Return migration can be permanent or temporary. For those migrants who do not freely choose to return, the process can be very challenging. This is often the case for asylum-seekers whose applications are rejected, who may be compelled to return even though they strongly wish to remain in the country of migration.

Albanians sought asylum in EU countries in high numbers between 2014 and 2016, largely due to economic pressures that had been aggravated by the 2008 global financial crisis. In 2015, Albanians were one of the largest asylum-seeking groups in Germany, second only to the number of first-time applications submitted by **Syrians**¹.

Albanian asylum-seeking has been characterised as a "**family project**":² Albanians have tended to migrate with their families, hoping to find a better life together. But because their reasons for migrating typically do not meet the **EU criteria**,³ very few Albanian asylum-seekers are offered international protection – **just 3% in 2015 and 2016**.⁴

Asylum seekers whose applications are rejected are usually obliged to leave the EU and return to their country of origin. Very high numbers of rejected Albanian asylum-seekers have therefore had to return.

This case study explores women asylum-seekers' experiences of having to return to Albania, leaving their migration aspirations unfulfilled. It is based on interviews with 45 families who sought asylum in France and Germany, and who subsequently returned. The interviews were carried out in Albania in January 2020.

Both the women and men interviewed for this study discussed their responsibilities and priorities as parents as being central to their migration projects. This was particularly evident in the case of the women who migrated without their husbands, or who initiated the decision to migrate as a family.

'I want them to grow'

Most of the Albanian families we interviewed hoped to stay in the EU indefinitely. They had multiple reasons for wanting to migrate, based on economic, education, and healthcare factors.

Specifically, these parents wanted to give their children a better quality of life, better education, and, in the case of some mothers with sick children or difficult pregnancies, access to better healthcare.

As one mother reflected: 'I don't want them to end up like me. I want them to grow, to have something, to go to school. To have money for everything they need.' In a few cases, family tensions or conflict motivated migration. Another woman, Fatmira, said she could no longer tolerate living with her in-laws who strongly disliked her because of her Egyptian ethnicity. Another fled an abusive ex-husband.

In contrast to **previous research**⁵, which has emphasised the male-led nature of migration flows from Albania, what is striking about this more recent pattern of Albanian asylum-seeking is that many of the women had clearly taken a lead role in their family's decision to migrate.



'I told my husband that I was not scared and that I would leave.'

For ten of the 45 families whose experiences were captured in this study, it was the wife or mother who had initiated the decision to migrate. In nine cases, women migrated without their husbands or ex-husbands – most travelled with young children, but a few were supported by adult or older children.

Albana was determined to migrate to Germany to seek treatment for her autistic son. Her husband was reluctant to join her, so she left him behind with her older daughter. 'I told my husband: "You either take our son and go, or I will take our son

and go,'" she said. 'He did not think he could take care of the son on his own so he told me to go if I was not scared. I told my husband that I was not scared and that I would leave.'

Returning to Albania

The families we interviewed did not return to Albania because they wanted to. The majority returned because their asylum applications were rejected, and most preferred to accept official assistance to return to Albania (known as 'assisted voluntary return') rather than stay longer and risk being forcibly deported by the police.

In a few cases, interviewees returned to Albania before receiving a decision on their asylum claim. Mostly, this was due to family ties and obligations. Fatmira and her family had to return to Albania when her mother-in-law died. They had spent six months in France, where they sought asylum after being rejected by Germany.

Albana said she would have preferred to stay longer in Germany to allow her son to continue benefitting from specialist support. But she felt compelled to return to Albania after 16 months to relieve her older daughter of the domestic duties she had assumed in Albana's absence, which were preventing her from pursuing her own studies. In this case, Albana and her son's premature return (and the end of his medical treatment) was determined by patriarchal gender norms which meant that Albana's husband didn't take on the housework himself.

Whether they came back via deportation or assisted voluntary return, the women I interviewed described their return to Albania as highly distressing. Fatmira described the frustration she felt when her children had to adjust to a much lower quality of life:

'When we came back here, the first days were so difficult because the children had adapted to the [way of] life there,' she said. 'We did not have a toilet where the children could go, and the first child said, "Mum, where can I go to the toilet?"'

Returned families described the challenges they faced in making ends meet,

accessing healthcare services, and supporting their children's reintegration into the Albanian school system. Finding a decent job was often considered the biggest problem, and mothers found it particularly difficult to work because of a lack of childcare services.



‘We did not have a toilet where the children could go, and the first child said, “Mum, where can I go to the toilet?”’

Despite their acute disappointment and frustration that they had not been able to give their children a better future in the EU, some women demonstrated considerable efforts to improve their children's quality of life and prospects back in Albania.

Fatmira explained that she had started work in a factory despite the extremely low pay and poor working conditions, because she was determined to 'do something for my children' rather than stay at home with 'nothing'.

Another interviewee, Emina, moved with her children from her hometown in northern Albania to the capital city of Tirana after returning from Germany to allow her daughter to pursue a degree – leaving her husband behind.

These women had to trust in their own capacities to create a better future for their families, despite the challenges. But their aspirations for future migration remained high. Even where they were doing their best to create a better life in Albania, the majority continued to hope for an opportunity to migrate again.

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Suggested further reading

Dubow, T & Kuschminder, K. (2021). **EU Exit regimes in practice: Sustainable return and reintegration**⁶ (ADMIGOV deliverable 2.4), Maastricht: Maastricht University.

Dubow, T, Tan, Sze Eng, & Kuschminder, K. (2021). **EU Exit regimes in practice: Sustainable return and reintegration in Albania**⁷ (ADMIGOV Interim Report on Albania, Deliverable 2.4). Maastricht: Maastricht University.

Kuschminder, K. (2017). **Taking stock of assisted voluntary return from Europe: Decision making, reintegration and sustainable return**⁸ (Working Paper No. 2017-31). Florence: Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, European University Institute

Schuster, L. & Majidi, N. (2013). **What happens post-deportation? The experience of deported Afghans.**⁹ *Migration Studies* 1(2), 221-240.

Links

1. https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwilu6nz-_7yAhVknFwKHVuZDCsQFnoECAIQAAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fec.europa.eu%2Feur-ostat%2Fdocuments%2F2995521%2F7203832%2F3-04032016-AP-EN.pdf%2F790eba01-381c-4163-bcd2-a54959b99ed6&usg=AOvVaw2Cjl2Of-Q2iP9pr2487sVM
2. <https://research.edgehill.ac.uk/en/publications/children-amp-migration-in-albania-2>
3. https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/policies/migration-and-asylum/common-european-asylum-system/who-qualifies-international-protection_en
4. https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=migr_asydcfsta&lang=en
5. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11113-016-9404-2?url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwjVIKHemsfzAhWL6aQKHVKCAc0QFnoECAIQAAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Flink.springer.com%2Farticle%2F10.1007%2Fs11113-016-9404-2&usg=AOvVaw2kj7H9Jkh9lfQ6tLikoiq5>
6. http://admigov.eu/upload/Deliverable_24_Return_and_Reintegration_Dubow_Kuschminder.pdf
7. http://admigov.eu/upload/Dubow_Tan_Kuschminder_2021_Return_Albania.pdf
8. <https://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/47064>
9. <https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/4717/>

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