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Article:

The impact of rural emptiness on gender relations in postsocialist Albania

Sally Brooks[1]

Merita H. Meçe[2]

Abstract

This paper explores impacts of dramatic levels of outmigration from Puka, a remote region of northern Albania. Since 1991 depopulation, economic decline and state withdrawal have created conditions of what Dzenovska calls rural emptiness. Drawing on focus group discussions with women from eight villages, it explores how conditions of rural emptiness have led to a transformation of gender contracts, with women taking on additional responsibilities. However, these changes have been accommodated within a re-traditionalised patriarchal system through the devaluation of tasks assigned to women, their increased surveillance by male relatives, and erosion of women's social life outside the household.

Keywords:

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[1] School for Business and Society, University of York, UK

[2] College of Behavioral, Social and Health Sciences, Clemson University, Clemson, South Carolina, USA

Corresponding Author: Sally Brooks, University of York, York, YO10 5DD. United Kingdom. Email: sally.brooks@york.ac.uk

Introduction

While migration has been 'a dominant feature' of most Central and Eastern European (CEE) societies since 1989, Albania is an 'extreme case' (Vullnetari and King 2016, p. 207). In the first postsocialist decade, following 45 years of isolation, Albania saw 700,000 of its citizens emigrate, mainly to Italy and Greece (Institute of Statistics [INSTAT] 2012; Meçe 2015). Between 1989 and 2011 the population decreased from 3,182,417 to 2,800,138 (Central Directory of Statistics 1991; INSTAT 2014). This wave of emigration was accompanied by unprecedented levels of rural to urban migration within a country that in 1991 was the only predominantly rural country in Europe due to strict policies that had prevented urbanisation throughout the communist era (Meçe 2015).

The most significant reductions in population were recorded in landlocked, remote, mountainous rural areas in the North and Northeast of the country. The mass depopulation of these regions with exit of much of the young workforce led to the abandonment of farmland and of the older generation (UNDP, 2002; King and Vullnetari 2006). A major driver was 'the drastic decline in the conditions for agriculture' (Sikor, Müller, and Stahl 2009, p. 1412), along with closure of state-run mining industries (de Waal 2004, Ciaian et al. 2018). By 2016 these areas recorded the highest level of poverty, least urbanisation, lowest population density, poorest infrastructure, thinnest coverage of health and social services, and lowest proportion of foreign direct investment in the country (UNDP, 2016).

Contemporary migration has amplified pre-existing asymmetries between North and South Albania (La Cava and Nanetti, 2000). Southern Albania is mainly lowland and close to trade-oriented Greek cities, while northern regions are mountainous and less accessible. During the five decades-long socialist era, new industries concentrated in the South. This North-South asymmetry deepened during the transition to a market economy.[1] As the

economic shock therapy prescribed by international financial institutions (IFIs) began to bite, and trust in state institutions declined, lawlessness spread throughout the country. In the North these transformations triggered the resurgence of blood feud: a practice deeply rooted in the *Kanun* (customary law) that had been 'suppressed during the communist era' (Meçe 2017, p. 34). Economic hardship together with fear of violence accelerated outmigration from these areas, which underwent rapid depopulation (King and Vullnetari, 2006).

The contribution of this paper is threefold. The first is its focus on Albania where studies on social impacts of migration have been limited to date (Meçe, 2020). Specifically, we focus on the under researched, remote northern part of the country most affected by rural depopulation, economic decline and state neglect. Secondly, we employ Dzenovska's (2020) 'emptiness' metaphor as a lens to explore experiences and perceptions of citizens whose daily lives are shaped by these conditions. Thirdly, we contribute to the emerging body of literature on rural emptiness in CEE countries (also referred to as postsocialist emptiness) by examining its underexplored gendered impacts. Gender inequality in Albania is high compared with other CEE countries.[2] We explore how conditions of emptiness are transforming gender contracts (Duncan 1995) as experienced by women from eight villages in Puka, a remote rural region of northern Albania that has seen dramatic levels of depopulation since 1991.

This paper is structured in five parts. The next section sets out our conceptual approach to understanding gendered impacts of rural emptiness in Puka; using the concepts of patriarchy (Walby 1990) gender contract (Duncan 1995), and emptiness (Dzenovska 2020). We focus on informal care (Carbó and Garcia-Orellán 2020) as a dimension of local gender contracts (Forsberg 2010) that highlights the unequal distribution of the additional burdens that conditions of rural emptiness place on families between women and men. The third section sets out the empirical study on which this paper is based including a profile of

the study area – the Puka region – and research methodology. It is followed in the fourth section by presentation and discussion of the research findings.

The final section draws conclusions about the transformation of gender contracts that is currently underway. Women's productive and reproductive roles have changed significantly in order to sustain the family in conditions of rural emptiness, but within a patriarchal gender system that resists adjustment to gender hierarchies. The dismantling of state-administered (partial) gender equality that existed under state socialism, combined with conditions of rural emptiness, have allowed a system of private patriarchy (Walby 1990) to re-emerge in Puka. In this case, changes to gender contracts have been accommodated within a re-asserted patriarchal system through the devaluation of tasks assigned to women (including those that were previously categorised as 'men's work'), their increased surveillance by male relatives, and the erosion of women's social life outside the household.

Conceptual approach: gender relations in conditions of postsocialist emptiness

Postsocialism and the re-assertion of patriarchy

Early literature on gender relations during the postsocialist transition broadly addressed two questions: 'where have all the women gone?' (Einhorn 1991) and 'why is there no feminism after communism?' (Goldfarb 1997). This literature observed women's retreat from the public sphere: in the workplace, where women were more affected than men by unemployment (Petkova and Griffin 1998); and in politics as women's participation in democratic movements and political organisation was increasingly discouraged and suppressed. These developments pointed to a re-assertion of patriarchy (Walby 1989), "a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit

women" (Walby 1990, p. 20). This was to the dismay of western feminists who hoped democratisation would bring further emancipation of women (Watson 1993, Danaj 2018).

In theorising differentiated patriarchy Walby (1990) acknowledges the existence of national variation in patriarchal systems. She identifies "six patriarchal structures thought which men dominate and exploit women… the patriarchal mode of production (in households), patriarchal relations in paid work, the patriarchal state, male violence, patriarchal relations in sexuality and patriarchal relations in cultural institutions" (Duncan 1995, p.269). These patriarchal structures develop differently (singly and in relation to each other) in different societies, in interaction with pre-existing social structures and conditions. Patriarchal systems vary in "form" and "degree": that is, in the "relationship between the different elements of patriarchy" (form), and the intensity of subordination (degree) (Duncan 1995, p.270). Patriarchy in Britain, for example, is understood to have undergone a transition, between the mid nineteenth and twentieth centuries, from the form of "private patriarchy", where women were excluded from the public sphere and under the direct domination of men in the household, to "public patriarchy", where women were no longer excluded from the public sphere, and had more freedom in their private lives, but remained "institutionally disadvantaged and publicly oppressed". Sweden, on the other hand, shares the *form* of public patriarchy with Britain but, as evidenced by its lower gender wage gap, diverges in its *degree* of patriarchy (Duncan 1995, p.270).

The apparent "neotraditionalist trend" (Stukuls 1999, p.540) in post-transition CEE countries confounds the expectation, based on research in Western European countries, that societies tend towards unidirectional transition from private to public patriarchy, and from a higher to lower degree of patriarchy. This trend reflects terms of state-society relations under state socialism and how these were transformed in the transition to liberal democracies. Under state socialism women's emancipation had been a prescribed form of 'administrative'

emancipation by a paternalist party-state (Watson 1993, p. 473; see also Crompton 1997). In the absence of a civil society (Watson 1997) this state-administered equality in the public sphere coexisted (but did not interfere) with relations in the private family sphere that 'remained stubbornly male dominated' (Watson 1993, p. 473). In other words, women's admission into the public sphere under state socialist regimes was not matched by a corresponding expansion of freedoms in the private sphere of the kind associated with a full transition from private to public patriarchy, as had occurred in Britain and Sweden.

In practical terms this limited form of emancipation resulted in women carrying a double burden of often long hours of paid work (alongside men) and domestic responsibilities that remained theirs alone. It was in this context that women's aspirations for the democratic transition were for a return to 'normality' in which traditional gender roles would be 'regained', liberating them from overwork (Watson 1993, p. 473; see also Danaj 2018; Watson 2000; Stukuls 1999; Grapard 1997). In other words, their 'retreat into domesticity' was 'a backlash against the "worker" identity imposed on women' by a paternalist party-state (Vullnetari and King 2016, p. 201); and a rejection of 'left wing thinking and feminism' more broadly (Danaj 2018). In effect, socialist regimes had acted as a 'life support system for traditional identity' (Watson 1993, p. 482) and with it the potential for a return to a form and degree of patriarchy associated with the pre-communist years. This reactivation of traditional gender roles cohered with the installation of western-style democracies insofar as this involved the creation of a masculine public sphere (Danaj 2018, Crompton 1997, Watson 1993). Women's exclusion was thus 'part and parcel of the construction of the entitlement of men to democratic participation' (Yuval-Davis 1991, p. 63 quoted in Watson 1993, p. 477). The withdrawal of state social services such as childcare – a consequence of rapid economic liberalisation (Pollert 2003) – and the normalisation of discriminatory employment practices further entrenched women's exclusion from public life (Metcalfe & Afanessieva 2005).

Gender contracts

Despite their subordinate position within the patriarchal system women nevertheless exercise agency through their role in the negotiation of the 'gender contracts' that govern their daily lives. The concept of gender contract developed in Scandinavian societies where "substantial change in women's roles" coexisted, paradoxically, with "the maintenance of gender divisions" (Duncan 1995, p.271). Hirdmann (1990 a, b) draws a distinction between the gender system, which sets rules 'for virtually all areas of life… into male and female categories' according to a hierarchy in which 'the male is the norm, the female is ascribed lower value'; and the gender contract 'which *operationalises* the gender system in specific circumstances' (Duncan 1995, p.271, emphasis added). As such, the concept of gender contract allows a more nuanced analysis at the sub-national level (in contrast to patriarchal systems which are categorised at nation-state level) of the interplay between the rigidities of gender systems and women's exercise of agency as they find room for manoeuvre in particular settings.

Gender contracts are "social arrangements on what men and women are, what they think and expect, and what they do" (Duncan 1995, p. 265). They are dynamic: the result of constant negotiation and renegotiation in ways that vary across space and time. Gender contracts are constructed and internalized at different levels of the gender system: at the metaphysical level (perceptions of the proper relationship between two genders and expectations of their behaviour), institutional level (institutionalised forms of gender-based power differences in division of labour which shape the gap between men and women), and individual level (ongoing power negotiations between individual men and women in everyday arrangements) (Forsberg 2010).

Women's agency emerges in the processes of (re)negotiation and modification of gender contracts that shape their relations with men on different levels (Haandrikman et al. 2019). Gender contracts are not universal although they can be understood as 'variations of similar kind of unequal power relations' that are formed within specific contexts (Forsberg 2010, p. 161). Forsberg emphasises this local specificity in the definition of local gender contracts as sensitive to localities, and embedded in local practices and cultural resources. Local gender contracts guide gendered relations that are locally generated, negotiated, and reproduced in the everyday practices of people who live in a certain area (Haandrikman et al. 2021; Forsberg and Stenbacka 2013; Forsberg 2010). These processes affect how the prevailing gender system is manifested at the local level as the result of dynamic interplay between the ongoing negotiation of local gender contracts and the structure of gender relations prescribed by the form and degree of the patriarchal gender system (Haandrikman et al. 2019).

Rural emptiness

An emerging body of work led by Dace Dzenovska (2020, 2018, 2011), reinterprets the postsocialist condition in remote rural areas that have seen dramatic levels of depopulation and disinvestment (Czibere et al. 2021, Máliková, 2013). Eschewing the future-oriented 'transition' terminology, these scholars observe a sense of entrapment in a seemingly never-ending present characterised by decay and decline. The name given to this condition of 'enforced presentism' (Dzenovska 2020, p.17) is 'emptiness', a term drawn from the discourses of inhabitants encountered during Dzenovska's ethnographic fieldwork, in Latvia, in spaces transformed - emptied - by the erosion of institutions and infrastructure that had structured economic, social and civic life. The term conveys 'a complex social formation - at

once an observable reality, a way of life, and a term that people use to describe their lives.' (Dzenovska 2020, p.12). Emptiness thus serves as a metaphor for lived experiences of depopulation, infrastructural decay, and the erosion of social security and solidarity.

As Müller (2019) has argued, the terminology of 'postsocialist transition' has suffered from a 'narrowing of geographical vision' to the study of CEE countries' trajectories towards to EU membership. This has served to 'orientalise' the region, while restricting analysis within a transitological frame that ignores the embeddedness of CEE economies in global circuits of capital (Müller 2019, p.542). As Li (2017, p. 1250) has observed: 'In the global North and South alike, the transition narrative continues to do powerful ideological and material work, as massive harms are justified in transition terms.' This ignores the reality that postsocialist emptiness is a manifestation of dynamics of the global economy that widen inequalities between areas of high and low profit in predictable ways (Smith 2010).

In other words, 'emptied' regions like Puka are no less integrated into the global economy than hyperconnected 'global cities' – just on very different terms. However, while the global drivers are predictable, their effects are not uniform: they unfold in diverse and locally specific ways as the 'slow ruins' of what was there before (Dorondel & Serban 2020). Emptiness studies examine specificities of 'slow ruins' in particular places, while remaining cognisant of their embeddedness in global economic structures (Dzenovska 2020). This paper focuses on the gendered impacts of postsocialist emptiness. It explores the locally specific ways in which gender relations are being transformed by conditions of rural emptiness in eight villages in Puka, northern Albania: specifically, how changes to gender contracts are being accommodated within the prevailing patriarchal gender system.

Informal care

That women in rural Albania carry a disproportionate share of agricultural, domestic and seasonal labour is well known (FAO, 2016; OECD, 2019) even though they self-report as economically subordinate to men (INSTAT, IPH, and ICF, 2018). A less visible dimension of gender inequality is a societal expectation that women quietly absorb sole responsibility for family-based informal care provision to sick, elderly and disabled household members, a role that has become more burdensome with the withdrawal of state social services (Mece 2015).

The term informal care refers to 'the type of unpaid care of people with different grades of dependency, normally, but not always provided by family members' (Carbó and Garcia-Orellán 2020, p. 9). The allocation of informal care responsibilities to women within the household is on the increase globally (Carbó and Garcia-Orellán 2020; Grigoryeva 2017). Demographic changes throughout Europe in recent decades such as population aging, verticalization of the family, and decreasing family size and horizontal ties have led to a growing demand-supply gap for family-based care (Luppi and Nazio 2019). These responsibilities tend to be allocated to a single person, invariably a woman (Verbakel 2018). In this context, local gender contracts interact with demographic trends to prevent informal care responsibilities from cascading down to male family members and younger generations (Luppi and Nazio 2019; Grigoryeva 2017). This lack of family support affects female caregivers both physically and psychologically, destablising family solidarity and weakening social relationships outside the home (Vieira et al, 2011, Canga et al. 2011).

The uneven distribution of informal care responsibilities between genders and across generations is a significant factor in the transformation of gender contracts in 'emptied' regions like Puka. In Albania today, the state social care provision is limited, while intra-

family support mechanisms of the kind that can still be relied upon in more affluent Southern European countries have broken down, leaving caregivers isolated (Meçe 2015). The experiences of women in Puka as caregivers, combined with the multiplication of other responsibilities, is a revealing lens on the impact of rural emptiness on gender relations.

The study

Profile of the study area – the Puka region

The Puka region is located in the central part of northern Albania. It comprises two small towns (Puka and Fushë-Arrëz) and 76 villages. Its total area of 1,045.96 km^2 is populated by 28,487 persons with a population density of 27.24 inhabitants/km^2 (Marku et al., 2016). Its harsh geographical terrain is dominated by mountains that reach 1991m above the sea level while land area per capita is small (about 450m^2) (Gender Alliance Centre for Development [GADC], 2016). The climate is cold compared to that of the other parts of the country with long snowbound winters that can last until April, and cool summers with an average temperature of 10 degrees Celsius (Marku et al., 2016). Even though it is the 'largest' copper mining area producing more than 320,000 tons per year of copper ore at full capacity (Egerer et al., 2010, p. 52), the region is underdeveloped, poor and marginalised. Unemployment is more than 20% while employment in the informal economy is estimated to be more than 50%. Almost two thirds of the population is classified as poor and more than 45% rely on social safety nets (Marku et al., 2016).

The socio-economic status of Puka region deteriorated sharply after 1991. The closure of state copper mines and processing plants reduced industrial output significantly while the collapse of agricultural cooperatives and woodcutting enterprises cut economic benefits to

rural families causing serious material deprivation. The lack of local employment opportunities led to high levels of domestic and international migration causing mass depopulation. Data from the 1989 Census (the last census conducted under the socialist system) show that the population of Puka region was double that of today. At that time there were 48,969 inhabitants with a population density around 46 persons/km^2. The majority (about 43,078 persons) lived in rural areas of whom 23,484 were industrial workers and 14,424 worked in agricultural cooperatives (Central Directory of Statistics, 1991). Rural workers were mainly employed in copper mines, copper processing plants, wood cutting enterprises and timber processing plants. The sudden closure of the industrial sector from the beginning of 1991 and subsequent concessions to foreign companies negatively affected employment prospects and standards of living. At the time of writing, some of these mines and factories are operating at a limited capacity, employing very few people.

Agriculture remains an important economic activity in the region. Almost 70% of rural households sustain their livelihoods with agricultural items produced on small farms. About 80% of their production is used for household consumption while 20% is sold at the local market (GADC, 2016). Poor land quality, low productivity, small farm size, and isolation due to poor infrastructure, limit access to markets. Livestock productivity is low even though it represents 60% of rural production. There are 60 animal husbandry farms with more than 50 animals and about 11 farms with more than 100 animals that produce for the market (GADC, 2016). Beekeeping, agri-business and tourism are underdeveloped while wild medicinal plant collection and processing are not well organised (Marku et al., 2016).

Methodology

The aim of this study was to gather experiences, perspectives and insights of rural women resident in the Puka region. As such, our approach is interpretive as, following Dzenovska (2011), it explored gendered dimensions of rural emptiness as experienced by rural women themselves. Recruitment of participants followed a two-step, purposive sampling technique (Morgan, 1997). Data collection was carried out during the period August-October 2018. The aim of the first step was to understand the local context. This involved observation in eight villages that had been negatively affected by the postsocialist structural transformation and out-migration and collection of background information about the socio-economic status of women residents and their engagement in various livelihood activities. The research team then contacted a community organisation active in the area whose staff served as entry point and key informants to guide the process of recruiting study participants.

Eight groups were established, one group per village. Group size varied from four to eight persons in a manner proportional to the total number of remaining inhabitants in selected villages. Preliminary information collected by the community organisation informed focus group composition so that participants would feel comfortable and able to discuss their daily activities and interactions openly with fellow group members (Morgan, 1997). This information included family background (which participants knew or were related to each other), socio-economic profile and migration impact (for instance, if their family members had migrated).

A total of 55 women from across eight villages participated in the focus group discussions. While spread across the age range of 20-70, the majority were in the 31-40 (18 women) and 41-50 (27 women) age groups. Educational level also varied across the group, with 27 women having completed up to eight years and 14 women up to 12 years in school. Eight participants had completed less than four years of schooling while seven self-reported

to have a university degree. In terms of marital status, 44 participants reported to be married, seven widowed and four single. Almost half of the participants reported to benefit from economic aid in cash delivered by the local government while ten women were employed in the public sector (mainly in education) and nine received pensions from prior employment in agricultural cooperatives. Almost half of the participants lived in extended families. Despite the support provided by a community organization a with good reputation in the area, difficulty in securing the permission of some male relatives was also a factor in selection. Not all the women invited were permitted to participate. Given the significant decrease of the population size in some of the villages included in the study, this was an influential factor in eventual group composition which limited the diversity of experiences captured by this research.

Each focus group lasted one to two hours and was facilitated by a moderator while the researcher observed and took notes. Funnel-based interviews were applied where participants started a free discussion based on less-structured questions then their discussion was structured around specific research questions (Morgan, 1997). The moderator ensured active participation in discussions allowing free-flowing conversations. Questions broadly focused on women's views about poverty and migration, their perceptions on the change of gender roles inside and outside the home, and how this change had impacted their life. Notes taken from each focus group were question-based structured and loaded to conduct content-based qualitative analysis using Atlas.ti (Rambaree, 2013) version 6.

This methodology has limitations. First, as mentioned earlier, the intended diversity of the sample was not achieved due to some male relatives withholding their permission. Second, this fieldwork was carried out over three months so findings represent a "snapshot" of life in the villages at a particular time. Finally, the empirical material is presented in the form of direct quotes made by individuals during group discussions that were often lively and

animated. Given the reliance on note taking (discussions were not recorded), and the researchers' reluctance to interrupt the flow of conversation, it was not always possible to attribute comments to the individuals who made them. Where possible, however, quotes have been attributed to individuals categorised by age, marital status, education and employment.

Findings and discussion

Rural emptiness and gender roles

Across the eight villages involved in this study, participants drew attention to the declining population as the younger generation, and sometimes whole families, had departed. With the loss of younger people who have more energy the capacity of the remaining population to do the work on the farm and maintain the household was being stretched to the limit; and participants tended to view the village workload through an ageing lens. In the words of an elderly respondent (aged 60-70 years), their villages are 'dying':

My village is 'dying' slowly and silently. Formerly there were 60 houses inhabited by extended and nuclear families. But nowadays only 16 of them are populated.

The village is not a good place to live when you get old. It has a lot of work [sic]. The village wants young people in their 20s because they are strong and can work hard. But they are moving out for a better life. They do not intend to come back and invest their savings here because nothing can attract them.

Incoming remittances have become a lifeline for many. Indeed, this was the critical factor that determined the food (in)security of households. But as one 65-year-old respondent remarked, remittances were of limited use when 'money has no value' as there's nowhere to spend it, following the closure of local businesses that previously supplied products and services to support household reproduction. This has led to an increase in domestic labour, which in all cases had been borne by women of the household:

> But money has no value when there are no shops in the village. They shut down because people are moving out while the purchasing power of the remaining village population is low. Therefore, I have to ask my neighbours to buy something for me when they travel to the city. But, most of the time, I work in the field and consume what I produce from the land.

While in many countries closure of local retail outlets in underpopulated rural areas forces inhabitants to travel further to purchase provisions (Abramsson and Hagberg, 2018); this is not possible in Puka given the distances involved and the lack of public transport services. Instead, households have been forced to become self-sufficient in areas like food processing. In all cases responsibility for this had been absorbed into women's workload:

> Our tasks expanded after 1991. For instance, we make bread at home because there is no bakery in the village while before it was purchased there.

In some cases, women have been able to use remittances to buy labour-saving devices, but these are often damaged due to the frequent power failures; while the technical

skills to repair them are no longer available locally. The experience of a 50-year-old respondent below shows how this erosion of local skills eats into their modest income:

> I do have a double oven electric cooker home but it does not work. It was damaged because of frequent electricity failure. We do not have qualified technicians in the village to fix it while technicians from the city are reluctant to travel to my remote village. If they come, they charge us more because they say that they spend almost the whole day travelling.

The loss of local public services has created particular difficulties for women, especially the closure of basic family services. These include the maternity home (pregnant women have had to travel to the city to give birth), childcare services and kindergartens (children spent most of the time playing with their pets or staying with their mothers when they worked in the fields) and several schools (children walk long distances to study in the primary schools in neighbouring villages).

Meanwhile women have experienced a loss of autonomy with the lack of utilities such as telecommunications (there was nowhere to purchase mobile phone SIM cards and internet was unreliable) and banking (local branches have closed). With the loss of local public transport, many women cannot travel further afield, or if they do, they are expected to be accompanied by their husband or another male relative. This was remarked upon by schoolteachers in the group who now had to travel to the city to withdraw their monthly salary – always accompanied by their husbands.

Formal institutions of community support and solidarity have also collapsed. There were no community-based civil society organisations operated in the villages, and no suitable meetings place where women discuss issues of mutual concern. There was only one example

of such an organisation, based in a northern city, which had organised training in skills such as dressmaking, forest fruit processing, beekeeping, cheese production, meat processing, and so on. In other words, training provision was confined to skills that fall within women's traditional role in the household. Moreover, the organisation of the women into a bloodline-based groups meant they were less likely to question this role and explore alternatives.

Informal solidarity between women nevertheless remained an important source of mutual support. Women continue to share food, cooperate in medicinal plant collection, share workload by altering days when they go to the mountains with their animals, share knowledge and skills in forest fruit juice and jam processing, and help each other to sell homemade products. Nevertheless, a sense of slow disintegration of community sociality and solidarity was discernible. In this context, the annual village celebration is treasured as a remnant of a once vibrant communal life, as this 50-year-old participant explained:

Migration inversely affected traditional sociability in my village. The number of weddings has decreased and the 'marrying time' [time of year when weddings are organised] is disappearing. People are poor and their discomfort is growing making their leisure time non-existent. Only once a year we organise a big celebration in my village. The former inhabitants of the village who have moved [away] also come to celebrate together. We all contribute to organise it and serve our local products.

The withdrawal of the once all-powerful paternal state from an area where it once provided mass employment along with social services to support household reproduction has left the Puka region in a condition of rural emptiness (Dzenovska 2020). The region attracts very little foreign investment, which gravitates, predictably, to more profitable, well-connected locations (Smith 2010). Instead, the area has reverted to small-scale agricultural

production which in the absence of government extension services and reliable communication and transportation remains underdeveloped. High levels of outmigration have further contracted the economy, which can no longer support even the small business enterprises that once provided everyday products and services to local households.

Women's accounts presented here show how the contraction of local economic activity creates wore work for households which is automatically allocated to women. This expanded workload binds women more closely to the home, while the erosion of sources of support and solidarity outside the family cements their isolation. Meanwhile women's autonomy is curtailed by underemployed spouses (or other male relatives) who expect to accompany them whenever they travel to urban centres for services no longer available locally. In the next section we consider how these changes are transforming gender contracts.

Gender contract negotiation under preserved patriarchy

The expectation that women's roles in postsocialist Albania would return to "normal" – understood as a retreat to a less stressful life in the domestic sphere (Watson 1993) – has been cruelly turned on its head in the villages of Puka. An outline of the typical working day is illustrative. It starts at 5 am and ends at 10 pm and includes the following: cow milking, land ploughing, bread preparation, cooking, dish washing, house cleaning, yard cleaning, firewood collecting, fruit collection, child caring, and caring for sick, disabled and/or elderly family members (and perhaps also elderly neighbours if there is no family present to care for them). This phenomenon goes beyond feminisation of agriculture, therefore, as rural women absorb a range of new tasks to diversify family income (along with their heavier domestic workload) as this 40-year-old participant explained:

Formerly women were mostly involved in agricultural sector, while nowadays they are also involved in medicinal plants collection. They go to the mountains, collect them and sell to the wholesale traders who come to the village. Women are also involved in forest fruits processing and beekeeping which were not very much practiced in the past.

As women's responsibilities have expanded, men's have contracted. The closure of state industries that once employed them has generated high levels of unemployment among rural men. This has not led to a reallocation of tasks on the family farm or in the household, however, as men refuse to carry out what they regard as "women's work". As one 50-year-old participant said:

Before 1991, men worked in the state sector only and brought money home. After 1991 they do not work anymore because state enterprises and mines closed down. They spend most of the time drinking alcohol, playing cards, discussing politics or visiting each other.

Conversely, women's workload has expanded to include tasks previously understood as 'men's work'. In areas like construction, what had once been paid, skilled work performed by men has been transformed into unpaid work performed by women. Women are expected to carry out this work without complaint, regardless of their health, disability, or physical condition, and often in high-risk situations. Despite a significant rearrangement of gender contracts to incorporate what was formerly considered 'men's work', therefore, patriarchal hierarchies have been sustained through the devaluation of those tasks as unskilled 'women's work'. As one 45-year-old respondent explained:

Formerly, construction work was male-tailored job, while nowadays women serve as unskilled family workers or non-paid helpers to carry construction materials, prepare concrete, repair the house, paint the house or build animal houses.

The patriarchal system has proved similarly resilient in restricting women's freedom of movement outside of the home. As noted in the previous section, women's social networks have contracted, with connections and interactions outside their kinship groups increasingly curtailed (in part an outcome of their increased workload); and they enjoy fewer social benefits than men. For example, they are prevented from walking alone to visit female friends (although travelling to the mountains with livestock attracts no such censure). Full-time housewives are expected to ask husbands' permission to visit their parents; permission that is only granted during the low season and/or when all farm-related tasks have been completed. In instances where a transformation in gender roles has occurred out of economic necessity this has been begrudgingly accepted by men, who have clawed back control by instating increased surveillance of their wives' activities. For example, female respondents working in state sector jobs experienced a degree of independence, but this was tightly prescribed by family members who monitored their working hours closely. Being controlled in this way means that rural women did not enjoy benefits associated with their employment status, such as participating in non-work-related activities outside of working hours.

This is not to say men had not exercised authority over women in the household during the socialist era where, as Watson (1993) observed, patriarchal hierarchies had remained firmly in place. In both, rural and urban areas, the subordinate status of women in the private sphere was reflected "in the expectation to wash men's feet when the latter returned home after a hard day's work" (Vullnetari and King 2016, p.208). Nevertheless,

under state socialism the patriarchal system had undergone a partial transition to public patriarchy, in which women enjoyed new freedoms in the public sphere despite the continuation of direct male dominance in the household. In the postsocialist era this transition appeared to have been reversed. Even in cases where women have taken on new roles outside of the home (whether in employment or self-employment), this rearrangement of gender contracts has not challenged patriarchal hierarchies. Rather, these new responsibilities have been incorporated into a gender system that more closely resembles private patriarchy, where women are under direct domination of male relatives both inside *and* outside the home.

In this way, so-called 'defeated' men have been able to compensate for their loss of 'breadwinner' status, in terms of direct economic power, by increasing their control over women in the household, economic activities now assigned to them, and any income generated from those activities. This male dominance is further reinforced through intergenerational pressure applied via senior female family members, particularly mothers-in-law who have internalised patriarchal expectations and act as 'male patriarchs' to enforce them (Habiba et al. 2016). The following account by a 45-year-old woman illustrates the changing nature of gender contracts as a fraught process of reluctant accommodation in the context of preserved patriarchal control:

> I never worked before because my husband did not allow me. I have only eight years of schooling because my father did not let me go to the high school. My husband did not allow me too. He also has eight years of schooling and did not want his wife be more educated than he was .... When the mine closed down, my husband lost his job and was not able to find a new one. I asked him if I could start working as dressmaker.... Initially he refused and told me that it was his responsibility to bring money home. Later on he told me that nobody would trust me because I had never

worked as dressmaker. When our economic situation worsened, he accepted and accompanied me to attend a one-month free course .. in the city. I arranged a small old room in the yard of our house and worked as dressmaker mostly to fix or repair second hand clothes of the villagers. I do not earn that much but at least I bring some money home. I hand the money to my husband who manages it. He is satisfied with my work, but I know that he watches me.

Women who have become the main household provider thus carry an additional emotional burden of men's resentment. Participants reported that their husbands suffered from stress and alcoholism and were sometimes violent. While those women with state sector jobs reported some improvement in their status within the family, all participants, without exception, voiced frustration that there was no way for them to express *their* needs, wishes and dreams. As one 35 years old participant explained:

It is a big sacrifice and compromise at the same time because I work hard for my family to fulfil its needs but I forget myself. I had to get rid of many pleasant things that life offers to people. I would love to enjoy them but I do not have time. My husband is happy when everything is ready. But nobody asks me how I feel and what I need.

These women's stories are consistent with findings in other CEE countries where patriarchal norms had been preserved (rather than challenged) under state socialism (Watson 1993). For women in Puka the postsocialist transition has reproduced and exacerbated gendered workload inequalities while removing access to public and community institutions where they might have drawn on solidary relations with other women beyond the household.

The accounts presented here reveal that women's roles and responsibilities have transformed significantly, yet this has not translated into increased status or autonomy, far from it. Rather, changes to gender contracts have been accommodated within a preserved patriarchal system through the devaluation of their tasks and their increased surveillance by men.

From lone carer to orphan pensioner

Women's workload has increased inside as well as outside the home. With the withdrawal of state social services along with the ageing of the local population there is increasing demand for informal, family-based care of elderly, sick and disabled household members. Caregivers participating in this study bore sole responsibility for care provision. Previously this work might have been shared with their adolescent daughters, but they now attend boarding schools far from home. Pulled in all directions by their competing responsibilities, these lone caregivers carry an emotional burden of guilt because they cannot devote more time to relatives in need of care. The following account by a 45-year-old respondent conveys a sense of the daily struggle and exhaustion:

> I think two hands and one mind are insufficient for me to meet caring needs of my husband and my blind father-in-law. They want me around all the time, but I am also the sole person who manages the house. It is hard for me to accommodate all these activities at the same time. When I go to bed late in the evening, I think that next day I might not wake up because I am very tired… but next morning comes, I wake up and the struggle continues.

Women with disabled children face additional challenges. In the past, limited specialised services for disabled children were state provided but these have been closed down. Mothers of disabled children included in this study were not only their primary caregivers but also the target of stigma. As this 35-year-old participant explained:

I have two mentally ill children aged 12 and 14 years. I have to look after them because they are not able to care for themselves. Unfortunately, there are no specialised services for them in the village… [.]… But my husband does not help me. He always says that I failed to give birth to healthy children that is why I must look after them.

Increasingly time-poor, and in the absence of state services and supportive community networks, female carers find themselves isolated and alone. One 60-year-old respondent whose adult children all live abroad had resorted to sedating her mentally ill husband so she could leave the house for essential supplies:

My mentally ill husband wants me stay with him all the time. He becomes nervous and shouts when he does not see me at home. When I want to travel to the city to buy food, clothes or medicines for him, I always give him a sleeping pill. I go out after I make sure that he is in a deep sleep. Since nobody can look after him because my four sons are abroad, I lock the door. Thus, he cannot go out alone and be dangerous to people.

Meanwhile women who provide care can no longer look forward to a secure old age in which they are cared for by relatives. Extended families and communities used to living in

close proximity have been wrenched apart by migration as a survival strategy. The resulting verticalisation of families (Luppi and Nazio 2019) means that the lone caregiver faces a future as an 'orphan pensioner' who, in contradiction of societal norms, face approaching old age alone. With no family members available to care for them, (King and Vullnetari 2006, p. 19) they have no choice but to continue working, regardless of their physical condition.

> I am 65 years old and retired. I benefit a very modest monthly pension from the state which is insufficient to meet family needs. I have three sons who migrated abroad almost 20 years ago and are settled there. I am the sole person who works in the field because my 72-year-old husband is semi-paralysed and does not get out of bed. My sons send money home from time to time…"

These accounts demonstrate that alongside the expansion of their productive and reproductive responsibilities, the lack of social services has left women with sole responsibility for family-based care provision. Demand for informal care is high given the disproportionate number of remaining inhabitants who are elderly, disabled or infirm, following waves of outmigration. The dispersal of once close-knit extended family groups has generated the phenomenon of the lone (woman) carer who labours without wider family support. Carers participating in this research frequently referred to their state of exhaustion and isolation. This was compounded by the emotional burden of guilt (at not doing enough for family members in their care), shame (the result of social stigma surrounding disability) and fear for the future (who will care for them when they are elderly?). Informal care provision highlights, perhaps more starkly than any other area of 'women's work', how dynamics of rural emptiness produce gendered effects that multiply throughout the life course, until carers face the prospect of ageing themselves without family support.

Conclusion

This paper has explored gendered impacts of dramatic levels of outmigration from a remote, rural region of Albania since 1991 that have produced conditions of 'emptiness' (Dzenovska 2020). Findings from focus group discussions with women aged between 20 and 70 years, carried out in eight remote villages in the Puka region of northern Albania during August-October 2018, revealed that the struggle to sustain livelihoods in conditions of rural emptiness is a sharply gendered experience. Large-scale exodus has caused the 'rupture and fragmentation of previously compact families built on solidarity and geographical proximity' (Vullnetari and King 2016, p. 207) and increased burdens on women in multiple ways. In the absence of state, business and civil society structures; it is women's labour – from the performance of productive work, including tasks previously viewed as "men's work", to domestic duties (which have increased with the closure of small businesses that used to support local social reproduction), to the provision of informal care to elderly and disabled household members – that is the glue that somehow holds family and community together. These multiple burdens leave women exhausted and isolated, unable foster networks of support to sustain them, even as they approach old age themselves.

These findings show that gender relations in Puka are undergoing significant transformation. Under state socialism the gender system in Albania underwent a partial transition to public patriarchy – partial in the sense that gender expectations in the family private sphere continued to be governed by traditional norms despite a major transformation in the public sphere. With the dismantling of structures of state socialism, including the industries that once provided mass employment and social services that freed women up to

join the workforce, this state-administered gender system is giving way to a re-emergence of a system of private patriarchy. While this would seem to be at odds with the expansion of women's responsibilities *vis a vis* that of men – many of whom were now unemployed – this demonstrates the resilience of traditional patriarchal norms at the household level which were preserved throughout the socialist era. Where women have taken on "men's work", for example, the response has been to devalue those tasks as unskilled. Women who start a small business must be 'supervised' by an unemployed male relative. In this way, significant changes to gender contracts are absorbed into a preserved patriarchal system in which direct male dominance has intensified within the household and extended beyond it.

Emptiness is a powerful metaphor for capturing the sense of abandonment and decline experienced by residents of Puka's 'dying villages.' This study has shown how conditions of rural emptiness amplify tensions inherent in the renegotiation of gender contracts in conditions of preserved patriarchy. Abandoned by state, capital, and much of the population, depleted households have been pushed into conditions of enforced self-sufficiency. Patriarchal norms that had governed family life under state socialism have found a broader territory to dominate in remote rural areas devoid of visible state authority or public institutions. Thus far women have proved more adept at adapting to these new realities than men; and gender contracts are changing as a result, in so far as women's responsibilities have expanded. The cost of these changes, however, is borne by women alone, in terms of physical and emotional exhaustion, due to the rigidity of a re-traditionalised patriarchal system.

Data availability statement

Due to the nature of this research, participants of this study did not agree for their data to be shared publicly, so supporting data is not available.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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[1] Regional figures for Gross Domestic Product (GDP) highlight this asymmetry: By 2018, northern regions recorded GDP per capita between USD 3,000 and USD 3,800, in contrast to southern and central districts, where it varied from USD 3,800 to USD 7,000 (OECD 2021).

[2] Data from the 2020 Human Development Report show that in 2019, the Human Development Index (HDI)[2] value for Albania was 0.780 for females compared to 0.807 for males. This is lower than that of neighbouring countries, for instance Montenegro (0.814 for females versus 0.843 for males), countries in the Western Balkan region, for instance Serbia (0.797 for females versus 0.815 for males), and post-socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe, such as Romania (0.924 for females versus 0.831 for males) (UNDP 2020, p. 356-357).

The Human Development Index represents a summary measure that assesses long-term progress made in three main dimensions of human development respectively, a healthy and long life (measured by life expectancy at birth), access to knowledge (measured by mean years of schooling for both, adult population and children), and a decent standard of living (measured by Gross National Income per capita) (UNDP, 2020).