Gender, Mobility and Middle Class in Europe and Central Asia: Insights from Qualitative Research

Patti Petesch
Giorgia Demarchi
Gender, Mobility and Middle Class in Europe and Central Asia: Insights from Qualitative Research

Patti Petesch and Giorgia Demarchi

Abstract

New qualitative fieldwork in eight countries of Europe and Central Asia (ECA) indicates that the dramatic declines in poverty in much of the region over the last decade do not appear to be registering very favorably with men and women on the ground. They express deep concerns about deteriorating work opportunities, a disappearing middle class and rising inequality. This paper provides a gender analysis of findings from equal numbers of sex-specific focus groups with employed and jobless individuals. The methodology featured a standardized package of semi-structured data collection tools, which enabled systematic comparative analysis of the datasets from 37 urban and rural communities across eight countries in the region.

While lack of jobs and the rising cost of living are central concerns for both women and men across the sample, the qualitative data highlights important gender differences in how men and women are responding to these challenges that quantitative survey approaches appear to miss. Throughout the sample, women are widely reported to be doing everything they can to pull their households out of poverty or to maintain their families in the middle class, while men voice deep frustration with their weak economic opportunities and the need for additional household members to contribute economically. Yet despite the scarcity of good jobs and a widespread sense of a middle class losing ground, the fieldwork uncovered reports of extensive poverty reduction. Women’s increased economic participation in the face of men’s hardships with breadwinning—and the stress on gender roles and relations that this entails—are crucial for making sense of frustrations on the ground despite the region’s significant social and economic development.

The authors would like to express their great appreciation to María E. Dávalos and Indhira Santos for leading this project as part of their work as TTLs for the overall World Bank program on Economic Mobility, Gender and Labor Markets in Europe and Central Asia. The study was made possible with support from the Umbrella Funding for Gender Equality Trust Fund (TF010534). The qualitative comparative methodology was developed by Patti Petesch, Giorgia Demarchi, María Davalos and Indhira Santos. We also express our deep gratitude to the eight country study team leaders and their entire teams for their expert collection and documentation of the data and many analytic contributions (see Annex 2). The views and interpretations in this report are solely the authors’ and do not necessarily reflect those of the World Bank or other contributors to this study.
Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................................................................. 5

STUDY PURPOSE, CONTEXT AND DESIGN .................................................................................................. 7
  A Gender Lens on Mobility Processes ........................................................................................................ 7
  Country Contexts .......................................................................................................................................... 10
  Methodology .................................................................................................................................................. 13

PART I: GETTING AHEAD .................................................................................................................................. 16
  Mostly Up, Except Where It’s Not ............................................................................................................... 16
  What Counts Most? ...................................................................................................................................... 19
  The Gendered Playing Fields of Poverty Escapes ...................................................................................... 22

PART II: STUCK OR FALLING .......................................................................................................................... 33
  Strong Normative Pressures Accompany Descents ................................................................................. 35
  What Makes for Resilience? ....................................................................................................................... 40

PART III. THE MIDDLE CLASS: NOWHERE AND EVERYWHERE ........................................................................... 41

REFLECTIONS FOR POLICY AND RESEARCH ............................................................................................. 43

Case Study 1: Many Climbing, Some Stuck in a Kazakhstan Village ............................................................. 46
Case Study 2: Sliding down in Belgrade: losing jobs and hope ........................................................................ 50
Annex 1: Moving out of Poverty Index, by country .................................................................................... 54
Annex 2: Research Teams in the Study Countries ...................................................................................... 55

BIBLIOGRAPHY ................................................................................................................................................ 56
Tuğçe is a 41 year-old teacher who once aspired to be a governor or prosecutor. A generation ago, Tuğçe’s mother, a housewife, aspired to be a teacher. “When my mother won the teacher’s training school exam,” Tuğçe reports, “my grandmother tore up her documents. She said [to my mother], ‘My girl, don’t go away. Are you going to get into trouble? What is the purpose of all this?’” “So,” says Tuğçe, “I became a teacher with my mother’s encouragement.”

Tuğçe has “always lived off the fruits of [her] own labor,” contributing significantly to her household’s finances. Her husband is an electrician but cannot earn enough to make ends meet and pay the mortgage. In recent years electrical contracts have become harder and harder to get.

Alongside the financial pressures, the couple weathered periods of great stress and even divorce, although presently they are together again. “There are times I pay for everything for six months,” Tuğçe explains. When asked what would make it easier for her household to get ahead, she replies: “If my husband’s work gets better, if his business does better, my life will be much easier.” Still, thanks to her regular job, this 41 year old woman helps her household get ahead and keep the house they purchased a few years ago. About her relationship, however, Tuğçe is less certain, “We may get separated again in the future.”

Tuğçe and her husband reside in a central neighborhood of Istanbul, Turkey, an area that just a decade ago was a slum that largely housed migrants from the countryside. In the intervening years, poverty plummeted as residents found factory and constructions jobs and took advantage of the local real estate boom that had enabled residents to swap their land for nice new flats.

Amidst so many rapid changes, norms for women’s roles became more flexible as many local women began working for pay—like Tuğçe, helping their families to cope with the ever rising costs of city life in the face of many workers’ unreliable and limited income. The neighborhood’s many working women mostly squeeze their income earning activities around the edges of their household responsibilities. And, as is customary, they remain careful to defer to the wishes of their husbands, fathers, and fathers-in law. The mortgage Tuğçe is paying off with her salary is in her husband’s name. She has no title to the house and no voice in financial decisions going beyond the daily family needs. “I speak, tell my husband what to do and how, but he goes his own way in the end,” relates Tuğçe.
INTRODUCTION

“The number of businesswomen has increased over these 10 years. Men gave them opportunities to be engaged in business.” –A working woman from Osh City, Kyrgyz Republic

“If only one member of the family works, there is no salary that will be enough for the whole family. If every member of the family does not do something, it will be difficult to get into a middle class.” –Working woman, Tbilisi, Georgia

The Europe and Central Asia (ECA) region experienced a rapid and dramatic decline in poverty in the early 2000s, followed by a phase of much slower poverty reduction post-crisis. The region’s impressive gains on poverty became stymied by repercussions from the global financial and food crises that rocked the world in 2008 and 2009.

This background paper explores how men and women on the ground experienced these trends, presenting findings from a comparative qualitative field study on issues of gender and economic mobility. Field teams collected data in eight ECA countries in May and June of 2013 from equal numbers of men and women residing in 37 communities spanning FYR Macedonia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kosovo, Kyrgyz Republic, Serbia, Tajikistan and Turkey.

The fieldwork revealed perceptions of significant poverty reduction from a majority of communities in the sample, but there is strong variation among countries, resulting in a dataset showing quite extreme mobility patterns. The analysis identified a large set of six countries where the community sample features reports of high rates of poverty escapes; and another small set of two Western Balkan countries where mobility is downward – that is, numerous study participants report rising poverty in their communities over the last ten years.

Unexpectedly, the broad-based gains in material wellbeing reported at the community level do not seem to be registering very favorably with men and women on the ground, even in communities experiencing strong poverty reduction. Men especially display a high degree of discouragement, although both men and women voice great uncertainty and pessimism about their opportunities for reaching and maintaining middle class lifestyles. Both also widely perceive a trend of rising inequality in their communities.

A gender lens on mobility processes sheds light on important differences in how women and men are responding to their changing economy, revealing men’s frustrations with their inability to be adequate providers as gender norms prescribe for their role, while women are widely recognized as playing important economic roles in household resilience and mobility. Unexpectedly, women’s economic activities across the region were described as matters of fact and necessity. Indeed, not a single focus group of either sex raised questions when asked to discuss women’s as well as men’s roles in how local households from their communities have escaped poverty and moved into the middle class over the past decade. On the contrary, numerous study participants expressed surprise or openly disagreed with statistics that were shared indicating women’s entrepreneurship to be low in their countries.
Perhaps not surprising, having a job is overwhelmingly perceived as the crucial pathway for upward mobility. And job loss, also unsurprising, is the overwhelming trigger that sends households plunging down and out of the middle class. This is seen to be the case whether a man or woman, whether urban or rural, or whether individuals are in or out of the labor force. Having work— including entrepreneurship or migrating for jobs when that is necessary— matters most for everyone’s mobility.

Upward mobility is often described as a consequence of simply more household members working and contributing some income. This narrative unfolded in many different ways in the dataset, from perceptions of what it means to be middle class, to opinions of how households become more resilient to shocks, and above all in prevailing explanations about the types of households and types of activities that fuel upward mobility in their communities. The workers who landed a great job or started a profitable business are almost always reported to be the isolated success stories. Rather, the great bulk of workers helping their households are mainly indicated to have poorly paid and unreliable jobs, and so incomes must be pooled to meet daily expenses and get ahead, whenever this might be possible.

In community after community across this dataset there is a chorus of frustrations from focus groups of both sexes with how limited, unfair, and insecure their economic opportunities presently are. The need for connections and bribes to access jobs or open and run businesses is very widely reported. Men and women are also deeply insecure due to the small wages on offer as well as the prevalence of informal work arrangements and their wages being paid late, not in full, or not at all. Added to this is the high cost of living. Where poverty was perceived to be rising in the urban communities visited, men and women are vocal about the nexus of poor jobs, low purchasing power, businesses failures, and rising costs of living. But such testimonies are also prevalent where poverty had been reportedly shrinking quickly. People everywhere say they cope because they can patch together multiple sources of income, including perhaps remittances, pensions, social assistance benefits, or children who grow up and start giving back. It is also instructive that credit is barely mentioned as a vehicle for moving up but is among the leading triggers of descents in wellbeing. In the present environment, most warn that going into debt to start a business is too risky and tends to result in losing one’s house.

While there are few differences between men and women in their views of what triggers upward and downward mobility, there are strong gender differences in how upward and downward mobility is experienced on the ground. Women’s contributions to upward mobility are regularly described as significant, although it is evident from this dataset that gender norms slow down women’s initiatives in countless ways, with poor women facing the highest barriers. The gender disparities then soften but by no means disappear as households and communities prosper, become more educated, and benefit from more reliable and remunerative economic opportunities. Across the entire dataset, a particularly strong barrier to economic participation emerges once women begin their childbearing.

Numerous hurdles affect men as well. But the issues that emerge can be profoundly different. When faced with job loss or discouraged by poor job prospects, men tend to perceive additional pressures. Unable to fulfill societal and family expectations, men across the region voice strong frustrations. In almost every focus group for this study, both women and men report some—if not many—local men struggling with emotional distress and anti-social vices, while a few withdraw altogether from the labor force due to discouraging job prospects. Anthropological and sociological research conducted in the former Soviet Union in the late 1990s to early 2000s similarly identifies men as facing greater difficulties than women in coping with and adapting to that period of major economic upheaval, with the authors attributing this to men’s “social identity [being] more tightly bound to their role as worker and breadwinner.
Unemployment thus contributed to a deep sense of emasculation, which intensified already existing patterns of self-destructive behavior” (Dudwick and others 2003: 23).

Due to the influence of gender norms on processes of socio-economic mobility, this note concludes with reflections on targeted policy options that take into account important gender differences in preferences, opportunities, and barriers to economic inclusion on the ground. Policies and programs for improving the quality of women’s and men’s economic participation are in very high demand in the region. Measures are needed that not only catalyze more job creation on the ground, but also address more forcefully the significant and diverse barriers that women face in accessing and keeping jobs, and the strong social and emotional consequences of economic turbulence and job insecurity, especially on men.

STUDY PURPOSE, CONTEXT AND DESIGN

This note explores the factors and processes that are perceived by women and men to shape their economic mobility. In particular, it seeks to better understand how gender norms mediate economic mobility, with a focus on differences in men’s and women’s opportunities and barriers to accessing and advancing in employment and entrepreneurship because these are such critical determinants of mobility and wellbeing.

This section provides an overview of the study approach. Part I then presents findings on the generally favorable mobility patterns in this dataset, and examines important similarities and differences in perceptions about men’s and women’s roles in these trends. The focus then swings in the other direction in Part II and unpacks the more sharply gendered dynamics that surround the world of downward mobility and losing wellbeing. The analysis wraps up with a look at understandings of what it means to be middle class, and the great ambiguity and anxiety that surrounds this. The note closes with a few policy reflections.

A Gender Lens on Mobility Processes

“Here women don’t [migrate to] chase their career at the expense of their children.” –A 35 year old woman with a new baby in Prokuplje, Serbia, who is on leave from a print shop job, holds a university degree in economics, and is studying to be a lawyer.

“There was a period when women didn’t work, but they have to work now.” – A male entrepreneur, Khujand, Tajikistan

Investigations of the dynamics of economic mobility are essentially about the change in a population’s welfare over time; these studies however rarely look at the gender dimensions of mobility. Typically, mobility studies measure the probability that the position of individuals, households or perhaps occupational groups will move across a standardized monetary distribution. They often explore variables that drive upward and downward mobility between poverty and middle class status.

2 For thoughtful discussions of the developing and developed country panel literatures, please see Dercon and Shapiro (2007) and Nolan and Erikson (2007), respectively.
The analysis in this paper goes beyond the traditional survey work on mobility to allow for a more contextually-grounded inquiry of how men and women view opportunities for and barriers to men’s and women’s mobility in their communities. We draw on concepts in the feminist, gender, sociological, and anthropological literatures, especially notions of gender norms and opportunity structure and how they frequently interact to give rise to gender inequalities in economic opportunities on the ground.

Definitions of social norms point to the presence of beliefs and behaviors that are seen as “typical” and/or “appropriate” by a group of people (Paluck and Ball 2010). Christina Bicchieri (2006; with Mercia forthcoming; also see Mackie and Moneti 2012) has made valuable contributions to the understanding of why social norms persist even when they may no longer make sense or cause harm. Bicchieri’s theory engages three concepts: empirical expectations (what one thinks others do), normative expectations (what others think one should do), and reference groups, or individuals who hold strong influence over one another. Her theory argues that interactions between empirical and normative expectations—and the reference groups who uphold them—combine to give social norms their staying power even when they may run counter to one’s own beliefs and interests. For instance, a mother of small children may fervently wish to work outside the home to provide a better life for her family but she would risk ostracism from both family and community members in many contexts still around the world. Gender norms refer specifically to the expectations of how women and men ought to behave, expectations which may often privilege men (see, for instance, West and Zimmerman 1987 and Ridgeway 2011).

In much of the dataset, it appears that gender norms, although relaxing, still prescribe women’s main roles as mothers and household caregivers, and men’s as providers and the main household authorities. Such gender norms matter because they influence women’s and men’s aspirations, attitudes and behaviors, which in turn affect their mobility chances. The power of and resistance to change in gender norms were experienced strongly in ECA. Despite the advancement of women in economic life and the message of gender equality in the public domain supported during socialism, “society remained predominantly patriarchal and gender relations within the household continued to reflect a strong ‘male breadwinner’ model” (Paci 2002). The persistence of these traditional gender norms within the household even during the socialist years allowed for a reversal of women’s gains in the economic sphere during the transition years.

Nevertheless, in the large majority of the sample for this study, women’s economic roles are no longer on the margins of their communities. This includes even the small number of remote villages across the sample, where women mainly labor on family farms, have little education, marry young, and many restrictive gender norms remain in practice. Although these rural women work extensively on weeding and harvesting in the fields and raising livestock, and perhaps even in trading, this labor is often not perceived locally to be “jobs” or “work” but rather as extensions of their household responsibilities. For this study’s purpose, however, these activities are considered to be work. Moreover, at least a few women in these contexts are working for pay as teachers, nannies and nurses – jobs which are congruent with women’s gender roles.

The data shows, especially in Turkey but also quite a lot elsewhere, that many women must seek permission to work outside the home from their fathers or husbands. A working woman residing in a village near Tetovo, Macedonia, declared, “The education and the emancipation of the males is still needed, so females can get permission to work or seek for job.” “There are men who don’t let women work regardless of their education,” explains a nonworking woman in Pristina, Kosovo, “He may be suffering but still won’t let her work. And also in our community, they talk. I know of such cases.” Or, in the city of Kusatsi in Georgia, an entrepreneur explained that there are still some local men who do not
allow their wives to work, “Even if he earns enough for just bread and water, he will say, ‘Stay at home, because I must earn the money.’”

The testimonies indicate, however, that despite the persistence of constraining attitudes about women’s proper roles and responsibilities, the likelihood of getting permission to work is good for the large majority of women in the sample communities. For example, according to a working man from a small town near Batumi, Georgia, “We had a case when the family member did not let a woman work, but such cases are very rare.” But if men’s honor and status in their communities no longer seems threatened by women’s work outside the home, this study makes evident that men and women continue to embrace many other restrictive beliefs about differences between men and women. We did not inquire directly about changes in households norms in this study, but a man’s role in “a formerly socialist country … is linked to lower task sharing” than in a western country (Treas and Tai 2012).

In short, it is important to appreciate that normative change is slow and uneven, and old and new norms may often co-exist with ease in the same households and communities (Munoz Boudet and others 2013). This emerges strongly from the Turkey data. According to a working man from an Istanbul neighborhood, a woman, “should sit at home. I mean I will get tired anyway. Both of us should not get tired.” But another from this same focus group disagrees, “We are all hardly getting by. If a man does not let a woman work, she cannot advance and stays behind …” And we found this in the Western Balkans, Georgia and Central Asia. “Yes, husbands should support us and allow us our rights and advantages... When husbands don’t allow you to work you don’t work,” says a 42 year old working woman of Pristina, Kosovo.

This research applies a comparative case study approach, and takes the community as the basic unit of analysis. It explores how economic participation and movements into and out of poverty are shaped by, and in turn shape, local norms and other dimensions of the local opportunity structure. Structure refers to “the rules that shape social actions and the resources that furnish agents with the power that makes it possible (to varying extents) for them to act” (Lane 2001: 297; also see Giddens 1984; Kabeer 1999; Petesch, Walton and Smulovitz 2005; and Hudston and Leftwich 2014). This exchange from a focus group of working women living in the urban area of Sveti Nikole of Macedonia provides a remarkable window into how strongly gender norms and related status concerns color women’s preferences and choices — and also how interactions between agency and norms are strongly bounded by local contexts and the set of opportunities that they provide:

- Lot of girls from here don’t want to clean houses in the city, but when they go abroad they have no problem doing that. Here they are hiding and are ashamed, but it’s not their fault, the people are judgmental. I’ve cleaned houses and I’ll do it again if I need to, especially if I have children to raise and family to take care of.
- It’s not that the girls don’t want to work here. The point is that they will be better paid abroad for the same job.
- There are also women here who clean, they make nine euros for three hours. That’s not little money, it’s just that they don’t want to work here.
- Those two things are interdependent, the environment and the person.
- Women here are concerned how they are perceived by the other people, environment. But honestly, I don’t care; I’ll do anything to support my family.
- Everybody gossips here, I’m babysitting, taking care of a baby, and people here belittle me for the work I do. My work is very noble.

The analysis in this note assesses, from the “bottom-up”, the qualities of local opportunity structures that make them more open to the initiatives of disadvantaged groups like poor women and men. In particular,
this note looks at how gender norms and roles are evolving and interacting with other elements in the local opportunity structure— notably the types and desirability of jobs on offer— to encourage (or discourage) women and men’s economic mobility.

Country Contexts

The comparative field research design for this regional study builds directly on the global qualitative research programs conducted by the World Bank, which give primacy to people’s own voice across diverse contexts. Like Voices of the Poor, Moving Out of Poverty, and On Norms and Agency, this study strives to shine a spotlight on local people’s own understandings and interpretations of their lives. Also like the preceding studies, the main principle shaping the sampling design was to capture a diversity of experiences on the ground.3

The study countries fall roughly into three subgroups i) the three countries from the Western Balkans – FYR Macedonia, Kosovo, and Serbia; ii) the three Central Asian countries – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, and Tajikistan; and finally iii) the two countries of Georgia and Turkey, which do not clearly belong to any sub-region and present unique historical, political and social characteristics. These countries were selected based on a desire to have diversity from across the Europe and Central Asia (ECA) region, as well as on where there was interest among the World Bank country teams for engaging in the regional study, and where study budgets and research partners could be readily identified.

With the exception of Turkey, all countries in this study, however diverse, share a common socialist past and a recent history of economic and political transition. Georgia and the Central Asian countries included in this study gained their independence from the demise of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, while the sample countries in the Western Balkans were formerly part of Yugoslavia. As a result of this geopolitical reconfiguration, most countries in the region experienced violent conflicts in connection with disputed borders and the high degree of ethnic diversity within them. The Western Balkans were affected by well-known major conflicts throughout the 1990s (i.e. Bosnian and Kosovo wars) and up to the early 2000s (Macedonia). But the other regions of the sample were not immune from violent clashes among ethnic groups (Tajikistan and the Kyrgyz Republic) or over break-away territories (e.g. Georgia). The political turbulence affected these countries’ economies and social dynamics.

Despite such similarities, these countries experienced quite diverse growth and poverty paths over the last decade (see figures 1 and 2). Tajikistan and the Kyrgyz Republic, by far the poorest of the sample with per capita incomes in constant term around US$480 and US$620 in 2013,4 have experienced relatively large per capita GDP growth over the study decade; Serbia and FYR Macedonia experienced more modest increases, though starting at relatively higher levels in 2003; while at the other extreme, Turkey saw its GDP per capita (in constant dollar terms) increase by as much as 70 percent to nearly $9,000. The growth paths of the remaining four fall somewhere in between, and reflect struggles with growth after the 2008 financial and food crises and subsequent hardships facing Western Europe.

3 This sampling strategy was coined as “most different systems design” by Przeworski and Teune (1970). Guy Peters usefully explains the rationale of seeking diversity by asking whether the same findings appear in a large number of varied places as if from the same population group, making a case that if the findings hold across very diverse contexts, then researchers can have more confidence in the patterns uncovered, that variables which cannot be observed are exercising less of an influence, and that similar findings likely exist beyond the research sample (Peters 1998, 36-41; also see Miles, Huberman and Saldana 2014; and Patton 2002).

Figure 1: GDP per capita (2003 vs. 2013) in the study countries


Figure 2: Inequality (2003 vs. ca 2010) in the study countries


Figure 3: Poverty headcount in study countries (2012 or latest available)

Gender equality has been an explicit policy goal among governments of the region since the Soviet era, with important achievements especially in economic participation. Female labor force participation remains especially low in Kosovo and Turkey. It is just 30 percent in Turkey, but rises sharply from there to 51 percent in Macedonia, to about 60 percent in Georgia, Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan, and peaks at 74 percent in Kazakhstan. Nevertheless, women’s participation in the labor market remains well below men’s, and most ECA countries have experienced relatively limited progress and even some backsliding in gender inequalities over the last decade (Sattar 2012). Women everywhere are active in their economies, and make up half of all workers in their countries’ growing service sector; however, on average they earn nearly a third less than men, remain heavily segregated in public sector healthcare and teaching professions, and are still poorly represented in the more remunerative positions of private sector own-account, employee and management opportunities (Sattar 2012).

It is interesting that the two countries with the strongest growth, Kazakhstan and Turkey, display such different labor market outcomes for working women in the statistical data, and we explore this further in our qualitative data. Kazakhstan also enjoys by far the lowest poverty rate in the sample (figure 3), and the data clearly confirms that women along with men have been able to benefit from and contribute significantly to the country’s booming economy. Indeed, a major message from the World Development Report 2012 (World Bank 2011) is that rising gender equality has been a core feature of more rapid and widely shared economic development around the world.

At the same time, men’s unemployment and discouragement with work opportunities pose significant concerns for some countries of the region. Male unemployment has been on the rise over the last decade in countries such as Serbia or Georgia – contrary to or more so than trends in female unemployment; and male unemployment remains at very high levels throughout the Western Balkans (e.g. over 30 percent in Macedonia). Gender norms also strongly color men’s mobility processes, constraining the types of economic engagement that they will pursue and the responsibilities they carry in their households. Albeit in different ways from women, these same norms exact a high toll on men, with problems of aggression, emotional withdrawal, and alcoholism widely reported among men who are out of the labor force and cannot be good providers for their families. In four countries in the sample, in fact, men’s life spans average seven to ten years shorter than women’s.

---

5 All statistics in this paragraph are from the World Development Indicators, accessed in September 2013, and refer to Labor Force Participation among 15-64 year olds.
6 Data from World Development Indicators, accessed in October 2013.
7 These countries range from Turkey and Georgia (about 7 years of life expectancy gap between men and women) to the Kyrgyz Republic (8 years) and Kazakhstan (almost 10 years). Tajikistan follows with a life expectancy gap between men and women of about 6.6. Source: World Development Indicators 2013. Accessed in December 2013.
Figure 4: Unemployment by gender (2003 and 2013)

Source: World Development Indicators, accessed in June 2015. Note: National estimates. *For Kosovo, modelled ILO estimate was used (2012). **For Serbia, 2004 and 2013 data were used (2003 not available).

Methodology

The study takes the community as the basic unit of analysis, and covers 37 urban and rural cases – ranging from four to six communities in each study country (see table 1). A community is loosely conceived as a reasonably well defined neighborhood area where people generally know one another.\(^8\) The urban sample is larger to mirror more closely the geographic population distributions in the study countries. With diversity as an objective in the community sampling, the local research teams were guided to identify communities from both better off and poorer localities in order to capture a good range of experiences. It is important to note that the broad patterns in the macro environment are not necessarily reflected in the sample communities.

Table 1: Country sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Number of urban sites</th>
<th>Number of rural sites</th>
<th>Total number of sites</th>
<th>Number of employed FGDs</th>
<th>Number of jobless FGDs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kazakhstan</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kosovo</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kyrgyz</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^8\) The selection of communities required some care because focus group members are asked to use only their immediate community area as a reference for many of the questions they were asked. But in the ECA region, urban neighborhood areas with well recognized names and boundaries are less common than in many other regions of the world. And the country research teams sometimes constructed “neighborhoods” bounded by streets, rivers, or other physical elements that delimited the specific local urban space and population group for consideration by the focus groups. In rural areas, the entire village typically became the point of reference unless it was very large.
The community sampling reached across different ethnic, religious, linguistic and social groups within the eight countries, wherever its small size allowed. This level of analysis was not at the core of the investigation, but the research sought to ensure that conclusions on mobility in rural or urban, better off or worse off neighborhoods be relevant across a broad spectrum of the countries’ societies. So, to name a few examples, the research team in FYR of Macedonia sampled across ethnic Macedonian, ethnic Albanian and even Roma communities, and the Kyrgyz research team included an ethnic Uzbek community in the south of the country.

The full methodology features a standardized package of six semi-structured interviews and six focus groups conducted in each study community (see table 2); however, this note mainly draws from just the four sex-specific focus groups with employed men and (separately) women, as well as with jobless men and (separately) women who are either unemployed or inactive. The employed focus groups mainly included employers and employees, and less so own-account workers. Depending on the locality, they were more likely to be in the formal sector (if a better off community) or informal sector (if a poorer community), although this divide is blurry on the ground. The jobless focus groups were roughly a 50:50 mix of individuals on and off social assistance, with many volunteering that they sometimes engaged in casual work. The other data collection methods in the study include: interviews with local key informants to obtain a detailed profile of the community, life story interviews, interviews with major employers and public employment agency officials, and focus groups with youth.

As we discuss findings, we also present many of the questions that we posed to focus groups. The observation period for the study is 2003 to 2013 – or in other words, these are the years for which we ask people in the study to assess various local trends. On many questions of central concern to the study, we provide focus group members with the opportunity to “vote” in private from a list of options and then volunteer to discuss their responses. The private voting was designed to limit bias, which can be introduced by focus group dynamics. The voting also yielded quantitative information, which gives us a useful summary device for framing analysis and presenting findings of the very expansive and complex narrative data. Prior to many of the closed-ended question, however, focus groups often first reflected on the topic in an open-ended format so as not to constrain responses to preconceived notions embodied in a list of options. The different types of data that emerge from the open-ended and closed-ended questions receive further attention below. Focus groups also reflected on gender differences in a few labor force statistics, and this too proved very insightful.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Men-Employed</th>
<th>Men-Unemployed</th>
<th>Women-Employed</th>
<th>Women-Unemployed</th>
<th>Total-Men</th>
<th>Total-Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Macedonia</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serbia</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tajikistan</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>22</strong></td>
<td><strong>15</strong></td>
<td><strong>37</strong></td>
<td><strong>74</strong></td>
<td><strong>74</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

9 For instance, it was not uncommon for public sector workers with regular jobs to reside in poor communities. And in better off communities, we received reports of informal entrepreneurs and formal workers who receive a portion of their pay off the books.

10 Our thanks to Kathleen Beegle for the suggestion.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Collection Method</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Activity 1. Community Questionnaire</td>
<td>To gain an understanding of the local context, and community level factors that influence economic mobility and labor markets. This includes a discussion on how these factors affect men and women differently.</td>
<td>– 1 or 2 key informants as needed to complete questionnaire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity 2. Focus group discussion: Economic Mobility, Jobs, and Entrepreneurship among the Employed</td>
<td>To explore with adult women and men who work: – trends in local economic opportunities, and factors affecting this; – economic mobility and the middle class – access to labor markets and entrepreneurship opportunities – impacts of labor market policies</td>
<td>– 1 FGD of 8 to 12 adult females, ages 25 to 55 – 1 FGD of 8 to 12 adult males, ages 25 to 55 (employees and entrepreneurs in formal and informal sectors)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity 3. Focus group discussion: Economic Mobility, Jobs, and Entrepreneurship among the Non-Employed</td>
<td>To explore with adult women and men who do not work: – trends in local economic opportunities, and factors affecting this – economic mobility and the middle class – barriers to accessing labor markets and entrepreneurship opportunities – impacts of labor market policies</td>
<td>– 1 FGD of 8 to 12 adult females, ages 25 to 55 – 1 FGD of 8 to 12 adult males youth, ages 25 to 55 (unemployed and inactive)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity 4: Semi-structured interview Individual Life Story</td>
<td>To explore with adult women and men: – how and why some individuals climb into or stay in the middle class, while others fall into poverty or remain poor. – the factors that facilitate or hinder access to labor markets and entrepreneurship opportunities – the role</td>
<td>– 1 adult female worker – 1 adult male worker – 1 (either sex) on social assistance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity 5. Key informant interviews: Gender and Local Employment and Entrepreneurship Opportunities</td>
<td>To explore with knowledgeable informants: – local economic trends affecting enterprises and labor force opportunities – access to labor markets and entrepreneurship opportunities – impacts of labor market policies – Differences across gender and age-groups in access to jobs and economic opportunities</td>
<td>– A major private sector employer – An official with a major local public employment service agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity 6. Focus group discussion Young People Moving Ahead in Work and Life</td>
<td>To explore with young women and men: - Education decisions - Barriers to accessing labor markets and entrepreneurship opportunities - Motivations behind labor market decisions - Family formation preferences and how they link to labor market choices - access to youth services - use of free time and risky behavior</td>
<td>– 1 FGD of 8 to 12 female youth ages 18 to 25 – 1 FGD of 8 to 12 male youth ages 18 to 25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
PART I: GETTING AHEAD

I’d say [the men are] all in a lethargic state, so no one even thinks about finding a way out of the whole situation they’re in…” – Employed man from Sveti Nikole of Macedonia

“Yes, she got employed and then helped employ other family members.” Employed woman from a village near Pristina, Kosovo

The youth got employed, some moved abroad, some got educated, and some others went to live in the city…” – Employed focus group of women on how a woman can get ahead, Village near Pristina, Kosovo

This study asks people on the ground to assess economic mobility trends for households residing in their own community, and then explain how these upward movements are perceived by men and women where they live. In each of the study communities, these questions were asked to four types of focus groups: working men, jobless men, working women, and jobless women.

The general mobility patterns fall into two contrasting groups: six countries where poverty is perceived to be falling in over half the focus groups, with a third in fact reporting very high rates of 30 percent or more poverty reduction; and two countries where a significant majority report that poverty has increased for large segments of their community. It is important to remember that country samples were not chosen to be representative of overall growth or poverty trends. But these findings are presented to highlight the general mobility patterns that were perceived across the small country samples, and because this strong divergence provides useful structure for the analysis and presentation of findings to follow.

Mostly Up, Except Where It’s Not

The exploration of mobility trends and factors— and their gender dimensions— was anchored in an exercise entitled the “Ladder of Life” (Narayan and Petesch 2006). The activity was only conducted in focus groups discussions with employed people, but the jobless focus groups were also asked for their views of how individual men and women have escaped poverty in their community. The ladder activity, which is identical whether conducted with men’s or women’s focus groups, needs to be described in some detail in order to understand the findings.

Focus group members begin to build their ladder by detailing in their own words the characteristics of the “best off” and “worst off” households residing in their community. The traits of each are then noted by the focus group facilitator on a flip chart with just the top (for the best off) and bottom (worst off) steps of a ladder depicted. Focus group members then move on to outline the characteristics of households on a step added just above the bottom step (or step one). Next they describe any additional steps that may be needed to capture the different levels of wellbeing that they perceive to be present in their locality. Most ladders feature between three and six steps, representing different levels within their community. Box 2 provides a general overview of the typical information on a focus group’s ladder. Definitions went well beyond types of assets, jobs and education levels that are common at the different levels, so that household members who lack “dignity” or are “hungry”, “stressed”, “lazy”, and “honest” also populate the ladder.
The top ladder steps are typically the economic and political elites of the communities, who may be one and the same according to many focus groups. They live in the best housing, own the most land if rural, drive fancy cars, "educate their children in private schools", vacation overseas and "as long as they like" untethered from work schedules, and so forth. "They are in a position to do whatever they want", but they often "don’t find time for their relatives” or neighbors.

The middle steps may typically include households with professionals and stable salaries, some farmland if rural, perhaps with multiple income earners; they may carry some debt, live paycheck to paycheck, but overall “can take care of the necessities and pay the bills”. Middle steps might also have good or adequate housing that could be owned or rented, educated children whom “they can take to entertainments” or sports clubs, and "go to either summer or winter holidays, but not both”. Households at these steps are perceived to “live honestly” and be “calm”.

The bottom step or steps will often depict deeply poor and vulnerable households, “swimmers” who rely on unstable income sources and social assistance, but in some cases may have government jobs as cleaners. They live “on bread and tea” in poor housing and “cannot afford to pay for electricity and water supply, but somehow barely survive”. Their members may be widowed, divorced, elderly, disabled, and their children instead of attending school may be doing farm work or washing car windows on the streets to pay for food. At the lowest step, households may live “below human dignity” and it is not uncommon that they “have problems with alcohol and other vices”.

Most ladders describe some of the social and emotional lives of the different households, with these attributes generally becoming more desirable as you move up the ladder; however, many groups mention that households up on the top are the “overnight bourgeoisie” who profited during the transition years or perhaps from more recent political connections.

After identifying the community poverty line and the steps seen to belong in the middle class, focus groups are asked to distribute 100 households in their community across the steps, representing first the current situation and then the distribution ten years ago. Focus groups then move on to discussing trends in inequality and reasons for mobility up and down. This section presents the overall mobility patterns, and then with these patterns in mind, the report backs up to present findings from the exercise in greater depth.

The ladder exercise makes it possible to compare local perceptions of changes in poverty over time, by using a “moving out of poverty” (MOP) summary statistic. Individual ladders cannot be directly compared because the steps and their traits may vary, even within the same community. Nevertheless, it is possible to compare roughly the change on the ladders reported by the focus groups. From their allocation of 100 households at two points in time, a summary statistic is used entitled “moving out of poverty” [or MOP = (initial poor – poor now) / initial poor]. So for instance, an MOP index of 0.5 would indicate that the share of poor households was halved between 2003 and 2013. A negative MOP of -1, instead, would indicate that share of poor households was twice as high in 2013 compared to 2003.

The dataset displays strongly diverging mobility trends, dividing the country sample in two sets. The first set includes the six countries (and 27 sample communities) that mostly display poverty reduction,
measured through the MOP summary statistic (figure 5). Half of the focus group ladders in this group of countries show poverty falling more than 30 percent. Rural focus groups report much more poverty reduction than the urban sample, where men actually perceive on average a slight increase in poverty. The second set (figure 6) is for the two countries (and 10 communities), FYR Macedonia and Serbia, where not a single ladder displays any poverty reduction. Rather, they show stagnating (4 ladders) or rising poverty trends.11

**Women generally perceive more extreme changes than men.**12 And it makes sense that women, because they have less control over assets and decisions, but manage their household’s day-to-day budget, would be more sensitive to both good and bad shocks in their environment. These shocks, as explored more below, affect more than just markets and services, but also the climate for women’s voice and inclusion.

---

**Figure 5: Moving out of Poverty Index, country set with decreasing poverty**  
*Share of initial poor (2003) moving out of poverty by 2013*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MOP</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>0.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>0.21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 6: Moving out of Poverty Index, country set with increasing poverty**  
*Share of initial poor (2003) moving out of poverty by 2013*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MOP</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>-1.07</td>
<td>-0.62</td>
<td>-1.02</td>
<td>-0.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>-0.2</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>-0.8</td>
<td>-0.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: MOP = (initial poor – poor now) ÷ initial poor.

---

**The findings of such extensive perceived descents into poverty in FYR Macedonia and Serbia deserve further study.** As mentioned above, the intention of the sampling design was to have a good range of mobility experiences to learn from within each country. But the emerging story of poverty increases in these two countries cannot be ignored. Speaking of three sites (or half of the communities surveyed) in FYR Macedonia, the local research team elaborates that: “...all used to be associated with ... a certain industry/factory which employed most of the community members but [went bankrupt] or reduced its

---

11 For country figures, see Annex 1.
12 The same pattern of women reporting more extreme dynamics emerged with a similar ladder activity that explored changes in men’s and women’s power and freedom in Muñoz Boudet and others (2013), except in that larger and more global sample it was urban women reporting the highest mobility and only urban men perceiving downward mobility on average.
labor force as a result of the privatization” (draft national report 2013, page 18). As the second case study from Belgrade (which can be found at the end of the report) shows, however, the economic hardships across the sample from these two countries are not confined to the “one company towns.”

The mainly encouraging mobility results in the bulk of the sample are likely sensitive to the focus group composition. The ladder exercise is time-consuming, and was conducted only with the employed focus groups rather than the jobless. A taxi driver warns from a village near Aktobe city in Kazakhstan, “I hear different things. Some people tell me [the community] is better, and some of them tell me it is worse. People who are employed believe that it is better.” When digging into specific communities to assess the local climate for mobility, we also crosscheck perceptions with the jobless focus groups. While they did not construct ladders, the jobless were asked nearly identical questions about what it takes for a poor man or poor women from their community to get ahead and improve the wellbeing of their families, and whether this is easy or difficult. Their observations are very consistent with the focus groups of workers.

Mostly, then, this is a sample where quite large numbers of people feel on the move and say their lives are materially better. But there are also men and women concentrated in two countries who mostly feel left behind.

What Counts Most?

“Work. Work. Work...It is all only about working.” – Jobless men’s focus group, Karakol, Kyrgyz Republic

My entire dad’s inheritance was given to my brothers by my mom. Family support can be a lot more for some men. Depends on the family.” - A housewife in Mardin, Turkey

Jobs and factors related directly to them – connections, entrepreneurship and migration – top the list of upward mobility factors. Figures 7 and 8 display the most frequent responses by individual focus group members to the closed-ended question on what they believe to be the two most important upward mobility factors for their own gender. \(^\text{13}\) While these are not representative samples and answers to closed-ended questions need to be treated with care, the responses provide a useful introduction to patterns in the narrative data.

All four sample groups display “jobs” as the single most frequent response, with urban women stressing jobs as the key driver for upward mobility the most among all groups. Nearly 60 percent of female focus group members in urban areas selected this option, while rural women, rural men and urban men identify

\(^{13}\) The facilitator queried: “What two factors do you think have been the most important for the [sex of focus group] of this community who have moved their household up the ladder?” Along with the question, the following list was displayed on a flip chart, and focus group members were asked to rate individually their top two factors on small slips of paper. The list of options includes: 1. New or better job; 2. New or growing business; 3. Migration; 4. Remittances; 5. Social assistance; 6. Pensions; 7. Education/ Training; 8. The right attitude and hard work; 9. Supportive family; 10. Obtained loan/credit; 11. Good budgeting and saving; 12. Marriage, divorce or separation; 13. Good connections; 14. Increased crop production/livestock (if rural); 15. Access to land (if rural); 16. Other; 17. Other.
jobs in significant but lower proportions (42-43 percent of respondents in each of the three groups). The weight of other factors associated with jobs also differs somewhat among the four groups. The rural men and urban groups see entrepreneurship and migration as other important pathways up. The role of connections in upward mobility appears to represent mainly an urban concern.

The rural sample points to stronger gender differences than the urban, which is consistent with the presence of more restrictive gender norms in the countryside. Rural women are more likely than the other sample groups to see contributions to mobility from their role in building a supportive family, their careful management of the household budget, and their own agricultural activities. Surprisingly, education ranks of middling importance for mobility among the adults, and about as much as having good attitudes and working hard.

Figure 7: Upward mobility factors, urban communities

Figure 7: Upward mobility factors, urban communities

Notes: [1] Each focus group participant was asked to select two upward mobility factors; the results indicate the share of participants who chose a given factor among the top-two factors. Since roughly 2 percent of participants selected fewer than two factors, these figures were approximated. [2] The figure includes only factors voted by at least 10 percent of participants.
The importance of jobs for upward mobility differs between the two sets of sample countries with falling poverty versus rising poverty. Jobs are perceived to be even more important in the largely “negative” mobility communities of Macedonia and Serbia compared to the other six research countries with favorable mobility trends (figure 9). The emphasis on jobs echoes the significantly higher unemployment and inactivity rates in these countries. Women from the two countries are not only the most likely to identify jobs as central to mobility, but they also rate the need for connections more frequently than any of the other sample groups. In the samples where poverty reduction is reported, other outlets besides jobs apparently have more space and promise to play a larger role.

Figure 9: Jobs as upward mobility factor, by sets of countries (perceived falling vs. rising poverty)
The Gendered Playing Fields of Poverty Escapes

“A woman is more industrious. She needs to feed children, she will take any work. The man has a selective attitude.” –Jobless woman, Village near Aktobe, Kazakhstan

“My husband wasn’t lazy at all in working the land, but there was no profit. He wouldn’t stop working the land all summer even though he also works in the public sector. But it is useless.” –Employed woman, Village outside Pristina, Kosovo

“Women are not picky about work, but men are. I was looking for any type of work, and was ready to work in anything, whereas my husband was picky. And the kids at home don’t say, daddy I’m hungry, they say: mommy I’m hungry. So you’ll do what needs to be done, for the kids to have food on the table.” –Employed woman from the same neighborhood

The numerical findings on mobility factors obscure important gender differences in upward mobility processes that are readily apparent in the narrative data. The figures in the previous section capture focus group members’ opinions about the top two factors shaping their own gender’s mobility. Before being offered a list of ideas about mobility factors to choose from, however, focus group members freely discussed how households in their community had moved out of poverty and into the middle class. The facilitator prompted the focus group to consider men’s initiatives separately from women’s. And while overall the figures above suggest minor differences in how men and women get ahead, the narratives about what makes for mobility point to a more nuanced story of men’s and women’s roles in upward mobility.

The open-ended discussions regularly elicit reports of women’s significant economic roles in helping their households to cope with and move out of poverty, often in the face of periods of men’s inactivity. The accounts of women’s strong contributions to the upward mobility varied little by urban or rural status or by local poverty trends. “Now women are not housewives. Now there is a tendency for men to sit at home,” an employed man explains from a small Tajikistan town of Khujand where both men and women report quite high poverty reduction. Themes of women’s heightened activity and men’s inactivity will emerge again and again throughout the remainder of this note, with part II focusing on women’s even more crucial roles in periods of downward mobility.

Where mobility is most uphill and why combinations of factors are needed

The bottom step is widely seen as the hardest step of the ladder to move up from for both women and men. For a poor man to escape poverty, focus groups of both men and women stress that he will need to overcome his frustration and discouragement with local economic opportunities, and do whatever is necessary to seek and keep a job. For instance, according to a jobless women from a village near Vushtrri in Kosovo, to get ahead a poor man needs to “find a job and also work hard; not filthy jobs but a decent one.” Another woman then elaborates on the great difficulty of this, “No one gives fair wages to these people because they know that they have to accept it under any condition.”
For a woman to climb out of poverty, the constraints are generally seen to be more numerous than men’s because while having paid work will also be key for their mobility, women must at the same time continue to manage their many domestic responsibilities. This jobless woman from Pristina, Kosovo, reflects on a poor woman’s diverse impediments to escaping the bottom rung:

I think it’s easier to move from middle class to upper class because you already have the basics. Whereas moving from lower class to middle class is the hardest. You don’t have the basics— you don’t have the wherewithal to start. For example, those who are on social assistance, or their husbands are sick and cannot work, and they also have children. How can they start? How do they become middle class?

In the face of diverse barriers to mobility, focus groups of both sexes frequently identify combinations of factors as important for unlocking mobility. By far the most talked about combination is the need for connections to access jobs, even the bad ones. The quotes below are just a small sample, indicating that both men and women are acutely aware of the need for connections:

- “I am a builder, if I had good connections I would win a tender and become rich.” (Jobless man, Aktobe suburb, Kazakhstan)
- “I’ve been abroad, I’ve experienced the life abroad, so I can say that we Macedonians are hardworking people, but the biggest problem in our country is you need to be a member of the Party so you can get employed, good connections too of course. If you ain’t got those, education and knowledge don’t matter at all. (Jobless man in Skopje, FYR Macedonia)
- “I voted [for connections] because most people work and find jobs if they have any relatives who might help. For example, I went to many interviews for work that I found from newspaper advertisements, but it didn’t make any sense because they already have someone for those positions. Nowadays, this is very important if you have any relatives who might help you to find a job. I, myself, witnessed such situation when organization hired a man who only had High school degree. I have bachelor’s degree, but this is not a strong factor now to hire people. Therefore, I think that having good connections is very important today. (Jobless woman in Dushanbe, Tajikistan)

Overall in the sample, men rated connections somewhat more important than women, and this is consistent with earlier survey work in the region. Drawing on data from 1992 and 1999, Hanson and Wells-Dang (2006) examined men’s and women’s attitudes about opportunity in seven East European countries and compared them with three countries of Western Europe. The study explores responses to survey questions requiring rankings on the extent to which structural (e.g. family background and connections), individual (education, natural ability, skills, ambition, hard work, effort), and ascriptive and other (race, religion, region, gender, political beliefs) factors are perceived to matter for getting ahead. The authors find the sample from post-communist countries more likely to stress structural factors as important for getting ahead, and countries of the West more likely to stress individual factors. However, women from both regions are “less likely than men to see structural impediments [i.e. family background and connections] ... affecting their opportunities for getting ahead” (page 21). This includes women’s relatively low concerns for gender inequality as a barrier for mobility. Citing Connell (1987), the authors attribute women’s views to the strong influence of patriarchal norms on assessments of opportunities and constraints.

While gender norms—and attendant issues of women’s child and elder care obligations, restricted physical mobility, scarce time and control of assets, poor access to services, discriminatory treatment
in labor markets, and other disadvantages — would appear to make women the less likely candidates for escaping poverty, this dataset consistently paints a picture of women’s great agency and resourcefulness. Case study 1 at the end of the note explores each of the four focus groups’ accounts about mobility processes from a village outside Aktobe in Kazakhstan, where poverty has declined rapidly. Importantly, women’s roles began to change during the transition years of the 1990s, when the local agricultural economy collapsed and men’s jobs disappeared. In the intervening years, market trends, male migration, and new investments in public services have reinforced women’s increased economic roles, as reflected in the dialogues in the focus group with employed women. Yet, even as the village is seen to be more prosperous, the other three focus groups (of employed men and jobless men and women) report strong discouragement with their local economic outlets— as do so many others across the sample communities in this study.

Given limited opportunities in the formal economy, focus groups members mainly describe routes out of poverty through informal pathways and the need for multiple household members contributing income. Gender analysis offers further insights into these dynamics.

The structure of the local economy interacts with gender norms and status concerns to fuel sharply different job opportunities and preferences for poor men and women seeking to improve the wellbeing of their households. In the urban sample, notably, the local labor market often consists of mainly retail and other services, and this could be seen to favor women, especially young ones with a “good appearance.” Domestic jobs in cleaning and caregiving can also be reasonably plentiful and give poor women an edge in income earning in their households. In several cases, local factory jobs may be more likely to hire women. In the urban neighborhood visited in Kutaisi (Georgia), for instance, a female grocery store owner volunteered, “From my perspective more women than men are employed. I once wanted to start work in a local lemonade factory and when I went there I saw that women were doing very hard chores like lifting heavy boxes. It turned out that the salary there is very low and men refuse to work.”

A jobless man from a focus group in the Roma community of Skopje explains that for a poor man to get ahead from his neighborhood, “... he’s dirty, somewhat uncomely... It’s understood that for him to find [a job] he needs an organization to take care and find him a job...” By contrast, another man from this focus group suggests that “Women... they can get ahead... for a female it’s a lot easier to find a job. First of all a female is judged by physical personal traits.”

In rural areas women face stronger normative pressures not to work as well as fewer outlets. According to the jobless men’s focus group in a primarily Muslim village near Jalal-Abad, Kyrgyz Republic, for instance, a poor man can get ahead by running a business and making an effort, but: “According to our mentality, women cannot run a business.” The poor men indicate that local women still nevertheless help their households to get ahead by “Sewing at home,” or other jobs in the home and home garden. They acknowledge that women could also find factory work, which they do not indicate as an option for men perhaps because, as in the Kutaisi case above, local factory work pays little and such jobs are deemed undesirable for men.

Jobs at the lower steps of the wellbeing ladder tend to be the most gender-segregated, with poor women often described as more willing than men to take up insecure and poorly paying work in the informal sector. Most often focus groups identify some share of the upward mobility factors as gender-specific and others as outlets available to both genders. Important gender differences are especially evident in discussions about the types of local economic opportunities associated with mobility. The jobless in the sample are more likely than the employed to observe gender differences in mobility.
pathways; and this makes sense because many in these focus groups are poor and their job options more segregated by gender. It is important to remember, however, that people’s perceptions about jobs are colored by norms, but the reality may differ. For example, although it may not be desirable for women to be doing physically arduous work, such as “men’s” hauling jobs, they are indicated to be doing these jobs.

The jobless women’s focus group from Osh City in Kyrgyz Republic illustrates well the strong normative frameworks that underpin these gender differences in movements out of poverty. In this urban area, both men and women report substantial poverty reduction, and like in the Aktobe village in case study 1, their accounts indicate strongly that women played crucial roles in this. Table 3 below presents the field notes from the facilitator’s flipchart that was created during the focus group with the women. It highlights their views of the most promising avenues for local men and women to climb out of the bottom step. These women happen to only talk about jobs, which is very unusual for a focus group.

Table 3: Field notes from question on how poor women vs. poor men get ahead (Focus Group Discussion with jobless women, Osh City, Kyrgyz Republic)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The way of poor men getting ahead</th>
<th>The way of poor women getting ahead</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Job search</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction work</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Run a business</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Migration</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>handcraft (work at home)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child minding (babysitter)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When reflecting on how men from the neighborhood have moved their households out of poverty, a woman from the jobless focus group immediately replies, “He should work.” Another agrees, “Men should be provided with work.” But then their discourse turns sharply, “There is no work in Kyrgyzstan now,” followed by, “I think men are lazier than women. Currently women work.” Another concurs, “Women are trying and work in the markets.” Then the conversation goes back to men, and “one should find a job for them to make [the men] work.” Evidently there are lots of construction jobs in the city during the spring, “But one cannot earn much. Men avoid working there because of the fraud.” The women then ponder other options for poor men, like running a business, driving taxis or migrating to Russia; but they conclude that these are out of reach because money is needed, which poor men do not have. They close their discussion about poor men’s mobility asking in frustration, “How can he not work when his children are hungry?”

In contrast to the women, the employed men’s focus group of Osh City speaks less about jobs and more about how a poor man will have to stop being “a pessimist” and change his behaviors and attitudes if he hopes to get ahead: “In the first place you need to set a goal in life,” explains an employed man. The other men agree and chime in one-by-one calling for: “Hope.” “Tenacity of purpose.” Internal belief.” “Endeavor.” “Risk.” This focus group also, however, indicates work or seeking migration opportunities in Russia as ways to move up the ladder.

When the facilitator next asks how local women have brought their households out of poverty, both male and female focus groups are more likely to raise gender-specific factors—such as a “lucky marriage” or issues around “maternity leave”—but they never question the importance of women’s contributions to
household mobility processes. A jobless woman offers that women can move up by making “handicrafts or work[ing] according to their specialty.” Then others in this same group suggest that a poor woman can “sell food in the market”, “babysit”, “work as maids”, “work at home” in “the gardens” (if no other way), “cook and sell pies.” But they do not stop at jobs common for women. They also mention possibilities with “migration”, “business, too” “Yes, the building site, too. They work at brick plants and conduct house repair.” The focus group agrees that “Women will always find a job;” and “Women can do everything.” The other focus groups from Osh reaffirm local women’s engagement in diverse jobs as well as their contributions to reducing poverty in the community. And it is likely that the lower expectations for women to be good providers give the discussions about poor women’s climbs out of poverty a more positive tone than accounts about poor men’s mobility processes.

Moving up the ladder, all communities describe progressively more stable jobs and often gender-neutral white collar occupations. Workers are usually better educated, employment becomes formal, and men and women can be engaged in the same professions. Box 3 provides an overview of focus group accounts about how jobs are perceived to vary by gender and for different steps of the ladders.

Box 3. Jobs on the Ladders

Highlighted here are typical job profiles of women and men on a four-step ladder. In people’s normative assessments of their community’s social structure, gender inequalities in economic opportunities are seen to gradually ease and then tighten again as individuals scale the ladder.

At the bottom step, women and men are typically not working, rely on social assistance benefits or small pensions, and only sporadically engage in low-paid informal and seasonal activities. With the exception of agricultural work (e.g. fruit picking, honey making, tending livestock etc.), jobs vary greatly by gender: men engage in seasonal activities such as construction, while women work as cleaners or caregivers. Although gender roles appear clearly defined among the worst-off households, most FGDs stressed that either partner needs to work if the chance comes. In Turkey, where the husband’s role as default breadwinner emerges in most FGDs, respondents claim that women need to work when their husbands cannot or fail to provide. Women’s resourcefulness in situations of extreme need was also stressed in some Central Asian communities, with particular reference to single mothers.

Just above the bottom step are households struggling to make ends meet despite relying on two incomes. Their jobs are usually informal, although regular, and highly gender-specific: “In level 2 people mostly do black work... I think that males and females are working equally: men are laborers and women cleaners” (Tajikistan, women FG). Throughout the region women at this step are described as cleaners, bakers, hairdressers, sellers and waitresses (the last mainly in the Western Balkans). Men are typically drivers, plumbers, construction workers, car mechanics etc. Formal employment is not completely absent among households at this step: many communities in the Western Balkans place most public sector workers (including teachers, nurses and office clerks) among the “survivors”, often living in poverty; and in Turkey men working formally at minimum wage characterize households at this level.

Moving up to the middle and top steps of the ladder, gender differences in jobs profiles tend to fade. “Stable” or “secure” households, often identified with the middle class, rely on at least two formal incomes, earned by both partners. Public sector employees, professors, office clerks, bank clerks, small business owners and managers, professionals, and a new class of “young specialized staff in the service sector” (Kazakhstan) belong here. Most FGDs stress that men and women perform the same activities, except religious leaders, policemen and customs officers would typically be male. Likewise, women and men are engaged in similar professions also at the very top step of the wellbeing ladder. Here, household members are top managers, businessmen, politicians, judges
or land owners that benefited from the Soviet system or the transition to capitalism. While it is true that women at this step typically have the same jobs as men, focus groups in all countries underline that working men outnumber working women among the best-off. “Women spend, they do not work” (Macedonia FG) or “She does not work, she counts the money” (Kyrgyz Republic men FG) are typical remarks in large number of communities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TYPICAL JOBS FOR MEN AND WOMEN AT DIFFERENT STEPS OF THE LADDER OF LIFE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>4. “The (new) rich”</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male workers or businessmen outnumber female workers at this level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women often do not work: “Women spend, they do not work” (Macedonia, x focus group)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When women do work, they perform the same professional tasks as men (top managers, business owners, running family business, judges, MPs, consultants, governors)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both can manage inherited wealth/land</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3. “The stable”</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both men and women are employed in the formal sector and have a stable income</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They typically have similar jobs, often requiring higher education (doctors, teachers/professors, SME owners and managers, accountants, staff in international organizations, translators, bank clerks or mid-managers, architects etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public sector employees in mid-ranking positions (men and women equally, with the exception of army/police forces)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At the lower levels of this step, in poor and rural communities, women may perform informal activities (making and selling crafts, midwives etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2. “The survivors”</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men and women at this stage often engage in irregular, unstable or minimum wage employment: “They move from one salary to another, they have no big plans for the future” (Kazakhstan, Women FG)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informal self-employment is typical of this step</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women who are working informally tend to work as cleaners, nannies, tailors, hairdressers, waitresses, or they sell goods produced at home: “A man at this step is working at minimum wage; if his wife is not working they cannot get by […] Women have to work in those houses; she would knit, sew, take care of animals… whatever she can do she does” (Turkey, male FG)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men who work informally are typically drivers, handymen, security guards, plumbers etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poorly paid low-level public sector workers can be found at this step; they can be either men or women engaged in similar jobs (janitors, low level public administration jobs, clerks etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. “The poor”</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both men and women in these households are usually jobless or working irregularly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They might receive social assistance benefits, children’s benefits or very small pensions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women and men both need to resort to do “any kind of job”, on a seasonal, irregular and informal basis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both women and men can be found fruit picking, digging in the garbage, farming on other people's land</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some men sporadically work in construction or other labor intensive activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban women can resort to cleaning or providing children or elderly care</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Migration**

Across the study communities, even in the cities visited, young men are clearly on the move in large numbers, seeking seasonal or permanent jobs elsewhere in their own countries or, more often, across borders. In a small town near Batumi in Georgia, for instance, “70 percent of [local] men go to Turkey to work on hazelnut picking;” however, focus groups in Georgia and the other study countries mention workers in countries as varied as Russia, Italy, Iran, South Korea, Dubai, China, France, Portugal, Poland, Afghanistan, Morocco, Qatar, and the United States. In a neighborhood of Vrsac, Serbia, an employed man reports that “A lot of people have left. They work as waiters abroad. They come and then they go for a month or two.” In the suburb of Istanbul visited for the study, men have likewise migrated for factory jobs in Germany, Denmark and Switzerland. In the village visited near the city of Mardin in Turkey, however, some “50 percent migrate” to Istanbul. In Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, both urban and rural focus groups report young men leaving for Russia to find better paid work and less often to combine that with finishing their university degrees. Many focus groups report that the poorest members of their
communities lack the funds or connections to migrate, while those at the top steps are rarely reported to leave their families for distant jobs.

Rural focus groups sometimes mention that their villages became more prosperous due to market diversification and new entrepreneurship opportunities, public investments (schools and roads), land distribution programs for farmers (Kazakhstan, Tajikistan), better markets for their produce, and anti-corruption campaigns (Georgia). But it is often their young people’s months and years abroad that are really seen to be engines for good local change. Very many study participants describe housing purchases and improvements with earnings from abroad. But migrants also return with new mindsets, more education, new skills (especially in languages and construction), work experience, and assets to invest in productive activities. In the village near Vose in Tajikistan, migration to Russia is common, and working women mention that men return with skills for making furniture and a local woman was hired as a college secretary “because of knowing Russian and computer [skills].”

Overall it is far more common for men than women to migrate for jobs in this dataset; but high migration rates for women were also reported in the Georgia sample and selected communities in Serbia and the Central Asian countries. Family obligations are cited repeatedly as constraints to women’s migration; and in Turkey only a married women traveling with her husband was seen to have such opportunities. When women do migrate, it is typically for jobs that mirror their gender roles. Study participants mention women’s opportunities in overseas domestic work and child and elderly care, jobs which often pay better than men’s jobs in seasonal agriculture or construction. Throughout the Georgia focus groups are reports of women seizing migration opportunities: “Many women went to Turkey and Greece to work, some started small trading businesses and that is how they managed to move their families into the middle class,” observes an employed woman from Kutaisi, Georgia. In some communities of Tajikistan, it was said that only widowed, divorced or older unwed women would migrate; but in other communities visited lots of young women were reported to be seeking better opportunities in Russia, and this included difficult jobs on farms and in construction. Their lack of Russian-language skills prevented them from accessing more desirable jobs in offices, factories, or caregiving.

While migration is largely discussed in a favorable light, the testimonies also contain accounts of arduous and fruitless migration experiences. Study participants report problems with obtaining overseas jobs, “rough work,” scarce earnings, mistreatment and nonpayment from employers, and public harassment. In Prokuplje, Serbia, a jobless mother worries for her daughter working two jobs in Belgrade in a hospital and nursing home, but “still asking me for money.” In a neighborhood of Mardin, in Turkey, a poor women’s focus group exclaimed that migrants “wouldn’t be able to go up any steps, but they will be able to pay their debts.” In a village near Shymkent, Kazakhstan, it was estimated that 80 percent return “with no money” after two-to-three month stints due to unscrupulous employers in the country’s construction sector.

Education: fundamental and yet not enough

Reports about the contributions of education to mobility are also mixed. A good education is seen to be important but insufficient for getting ahead. Men and women reflect frequently on how education, normally a key avenue to get a good job, is overshadowed by the prominence of connections. An employed woman from Bes-dala, in Kazakhstan, relates a view shared by many other focus group participants:
"My classmates, who studied perfectly well, could not find a job, and those who do not study at all became directors. It all depends on connections today. It does not matter how you studied, what education you've got. There is no sense in trying to find a job without connections and money. Now all educated people with diplomas work at the market.” (Employed adult woman from Bes-dala, Kazakhstan)

The frustration with the failure of education, and especially higher education, to lead to a good job—or a job at all—is widespread. Men and women, with no distinction, express exasperation that who you know matters more than credentials, and they protest the lack of jobs for their educated peers and youth. “There are a lot of unemployed people with university degrees. Right now, university seems like nothing to me,” says a Kosovar woman. The lack of jobs frequently results not in unemployment, but rather in qualified people giving up their ambitions and getting whatever job they can to get by, like “a girl who completed law with the top grades and she doesn’t work in her field,” according to an employed woman in Serbia. Alternatives such as this are viewed with anger: “If you graduate in economics, you cannot work as a bus ticket seller, because you gave your best to graduate,” insists a man in Kosovo. Frustrations like these can be found across the focus groups of the Western Balkans, and are common in Central Asia as well.

However, no one in the dataset questions the value of education. For respondents that perceive it as a recent achievement, like many Turkish women (see box 4) or the Roma community sampled in Macedonia, education is viewed as particularly powerful to help women move their households up the ladder. And even in settings where connections and unemployment seem to rule, people admit that you “have to get educated. It’s not a guarantee of success but it is a prerequisite,” as an unemployed man from Vrsac of Serbia says. And from rural Tajikistan, where education opportunities are still very poor, a woman who works on a collective farm states, “Women are the main future educators in families, therefore, it is essential to educate and provide them with a job. In our community the women are not allowed to get education but I want all women of our district be educated and employed.”

Box 4: A Turkish story: “Because we live in a men’s world”

Accounts from the five study communities in Turkey stand apart from the other countries because traditional norms remain prevalent and the environment for working women both inside and outside their homes is often described as highly restrictive. The focus groups of employed women describe how they must navigate carefully the prevailing dictates for women to be subservient and to strictly prioritize their domestic responsibilities. When asked about why few women take up jobs or run businesses in the country, employed women reply that many women are indeed earning income, but the “majority” hold jobs without social security. “As women are housewives, they can work part-time like three or four hours,” states a woman in Istanbul who works as a cook. Also, local women generally do not run their own businesses because of “lack of courage,” and “There is oppression from men. You won’t be able to convince anybody in the house. [They will say] don’t take that risk... Women get intimidated.” Another woman in the same community further conveys the sharp discouragement that they face: “Think about it, if I wanted to do something, what could I do? There is no money, no support. My husband won’t support me. He would say, ‘What we have should be enough for you.’”

Strong gender differences are also reflected in observations about factors that fuel upward mobility. Employed women in central Istanbul say women move up the ladder when they “get divorced”, “the number of children decreases” and they “saved”. But men move up when they “migrate from elsewhere”, sell their house or get sources of income from other family members. Women indicate, however, that their voice and agency grow
stronger as they move into the middle class (see figure below from employed women’s focus group in the Istanbul community).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Moving out of Poverty</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>From step 1 to 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>worked</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gave the house to the contractor</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>saved</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From step 2 to 3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wives worked</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kids worked</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Had pension from father/mother</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of children decreased</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From step 3 to 4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Migrated from somewhere else</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced husband</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Moving into the middle class:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Has to listen to woman, women has foresight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being thrifty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being courageous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Must work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Must send daughters to the school</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Along with growing prosperity, traditional norms for women’s roles have relaxed. “If I talk about my own daughter, she is going to university. They live in a different world from us,” says for example an employed woman in Istanbul. This different world is one where women pursue their education and, like Tugce (see introduction), can help their households climb up the ladder or be more resilient to a fall. Education comes up again and again as a game changer for women in Turkey. For poorer women, pursuing education or making sure their children receive one might mean moving their households out of poverty, which otherwise “is hard if you don’t know how to read and write”, says a jobless woman in Mardin. “In the past people did not value girls, but now things are different. Now girls are given the same opportunity as boys”, concludes a non-working woman in Ankara. And these opportunities start with education (see extract below from the jobless women’s focus group in Nurtepe).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How poor men can get ahead</th>
<th>How poor women can get ahead</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Work hard</td>
<td>Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extra job / second job</td>
<td>Networking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needs to be careful with his spending</td>
<td>Needs to be social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Should not have bad habits</td>
<td>Support from the family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Should invest</td>
<td>No children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Should get some more education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Disparate normative barriers

To ascend the ladder, focus groups also discuss the importance of good attitudes and hard work in combination with other factors, again with men struggling more than women on this front. According to a jobless man in a village near Jalal-Abad, Kyrgyz Republic, for instance, “A man should work, do what
he can. He should find a job with a good salary, to be sociable, work without [skipping days]. He should be healthy and have a will, trying to achieve his aims.” His observations echo the employed man of Osh City above who stress a need for “Tenacity of purpose.”

Yet, poor men were more likely to be portrayed by both women’s and men’s groups as vulnerable to hopelessness, laziness, lethargy in their job search, drinking problems, and struggles with showing up and sticking to a job. When asked what it takes for a poor man to move up who lives in a neighborhood of Karakol city, Kyrgyz Republic, a member of the jobless women’s focus group says that a man who wants to climb, “First of all, [needs to] stop drinking.” And others then add he must “find a job and work hard. Spend finance wisely.” In other words, he needs to be a good provider as gender norms dictate for their role, but the paucity of promising outlets for this is widely acknowledged to be crippling for men. The jobs on offer rob men’s self-esteem, social standing, and influence with others; but the same is just not described for women at lower steps of the ladder.

Unlike men’s, women’s mobility processes in most communities are more about the need to resist normative prescriptions of submission and domesticity for their gender. For a woman to climb in Karakol city, “First of all, they must place the kids [in preschool] to go somewhere to work.” And another then adds, “Then [she needs to] find a job.” Strong gender barriers to mobility are perceived especially among the focus group with non-workers. In Shymkent, Kazakhstan, for example, nonworking women can move out of poverty with, “A nice look, appearance. If she does not look nice, how can she get married?” Or, the women say, “girls who want to go into business... need a grip.” Others concur, adding “diligence” and “ambition” and “A girl should be advanced and adventurous.” Different focus group members then go on to talk about other needs for poor women’s upward mobility:

- Family support is also important. It is important for girls. At first, my husband did not encourage me. My husband did not let me work. Then when I found a job and began to work, I greatly regretted that had obeyed him.
- Migration is important, but it depends on a person and their age. It is reasonable only up to a certain age, if you’re under 35 years old. For girls, migration is not very important, most often it depends on a man.

But the nonworking men in the same neighborhood of Shymkent did not display quite so many stereotypes in their notions of mobility factors. They thought, for instance, that both men and women could get ahead if they had connections and state assistance with aid, employment, and housing. Nevertheless, these men associate jobs and businesses as routes out of poverty that only local men use.

At the same time, as do most other focus group, men in Shymkent voice great discouragement about the economic opportunities available to men. They express frustration not only with the need for good connections, but also how it’s better to run a business than work for hire, because workers are “never appreciated,” and the employer “might not pay.” And the only jobs to be had for local men are for unskilled workers, like laying asphalt or pouring concrete, but “This is not a proper job.” They speak of corruption in trying to obtain social assistance benefits, and workers returning from migration without much savings due to low wages.

In sum, while escaping poverty requires grit and drive of both sexes in the face of constrained economic opportunities, the underlying factors and processes described vary profoundly by gender. Even as localities differ greatly in the nature of their economic opportunities, poor men are widely indicated to
need greater encouragement and resolve to get out there and earn income, and to resist the psychological pressures posed by their expected role as main providers but weak employment prospects. An urban man participating in the study from Turkey explains, “A man has more responsibilities, he would be more stressed [in difficult times].”

Paradoxically, although a poor woman is more disadvantaged than a poor man in many ways—including in the time she can devote to earning income and in what she can earn—it is the women at this bottom strata who are reported with great frequency to persevere the most to get their households up and off the bottom rung. The very slow relaxation of inequitable gender norms that govern how resources and responsibilities are allocated in households, as well as mindsets about the jobs deemed desirable and acceptable for each sex, are key to understanding how it is possible that this same phenomenon of women’s increased activity in the face of men’s vulnerability to fall into inactivity can unfold again and again for poor households across the very different landscapes in this study.

This quote from a woman who joined the jobless focus group in the Georgian village of Artana, (although of course she works when she can) speaks for so many women in this study: “Men should be providers for the family but there are very few jobs for men. I have to work in the vineyard all day long and I am so tired in the evening that I cannot even read a book to my child.”
PART II: STUCK OR FALLING

“In most of the families only one person has a job and they are not able of pulling the family out of poverty. If all the family members worked the problem would be solved.” – Unemployed woman from Kutaisi, Georgia

Both men and women view job or business loss as the overwhelming trigger of descents on the ladder for their gender (figures 10 and 11). This is what emerges from the closed-ended responses by focus group participants (workers only), who were asked to select the top two factors behind downward mobility out of a list of possible factors.14 Between 50 and 64 percent of focus group members in each group profiled (urban men/women and rural men/women) voted jobs among the top two factors bringing households down.

The importance of economic shocks for downward slides magnifies greatly in the sample of 10 communities from FYR Macedonia and Serbia (figure 12). Focus groups also talk about households tumbling when knocked by sets of economic hardships, including unemployment, business failures, insecure and low wage jobs, high costs of living, and indebtedness. Generally, both women and men were seen to be equally vulnerable to these risks. “No job, no money... You fall immediately. It takes time to find another job. Some never manage. [This is the] same for women and men,” indicates an employed woman from Skopje, Macedonia. Another from the same focus group adds, “During the last two-to-three years, living costs have gone up a lot. People are giving up on some basic necessities, such as central heating.”

The makings for downward slides are not just economic, however. Urban men in large numbers identify vices like alcohol, gambling and drugs as one of the top reasons why men in their communities bring their households down the ladder. The other sample groups warn of these vices too, but more in line with their other second-order risks. Although vices are often described as consequences of men’s joblessness, focus groups do not distinguish triggers and consequences in their assessments of factors that push households down the ladder. In the village visited near Kicevo (FYR Macedonia), men ascribe the rise in poverty to causes such as factory closures that have led to thousands of job losses, banks that refuse to ease debt terms, problems of depression, and “We drink alcohol to relax from everyday problems.”

Numerous additional factors emerge as important for downward mobility, also with significant variations by sample group. The rural communities differ from urban in that they express vulnerability to a wider range of risks—natural disasters, depression, loss of public assistance, and wedding and death costs. Also of note, women across the sample are more likely than men to say that family illness or death

14 Note that the closed-ended question on downward mobility factors was only posed to focus groups of workers, contrary to the question on upward mobility factors. The facilitator queried: “What two factors do you think have been the biggest risks facing especially the [sex of FGD] in this community, and have resulted in bringing their households down the ladder to a lower step?” Along with the question, the following list was displayed on a flip chart, and focus group members were asked to rate individually their top two factors on small slips of paper. The list of options includes: 1. Lost a job/business – unemployment/inactivity; 2. Inconsistent work opportunities; 3. Too much debt or no access to credit; 4. Reduction or loss of remittances; 5. Less government assistance; 6. Own or family illness, family death; 7. Depression; 8. Family conflict, divorce or separation; 9. Costs of wedding, dowry or death expenses; 10. Gambling, alcohol, drug addiction; 11. Rising cost of basic necessities or bad economy; 12. Natural hazard/disaster (drought, floods, etc.); 13. Bad harvest (if rural); 14. Death of livestock (if rural); 15. Other.
send their households into a tailspin. As their family’s caregivers, and with less control over household assets and income earning, women’s lives are no doubt more vulnerable to these shocks. However, it is a sign of accessible healthcare institutions and safety nets that health risks rate as a relatively moderate concern in relation to the others.\textsuperscript{15} In the open-ended discussions on downward mobility, nevertheless, where focus groups did not have to choose among just two options, the impoverishing effects of a family illness are discussed by women and men alike. “People have lost their jobs because of poor health, and then couldn’t pay the hospital bills,” says a hairdresser from a village near Kicevo, Macedonia.

\textbf{Figure 10: Downward mobility factors, urban communities}

![Downward mobility factors for own gender in urban communities](image)

Share of men and women rating the factor among top-two factors, 42 focus groups in 8 countries

Notes: [1] Each focus group participant was asked to select two downward mobility factors; the share indicates the share of participants that chose a given factor among the top-two factors. Since roughly 2 percent of participants selected fewer than two factors, these figures were approximated. [2] The figure includes only factors voted by at least 10 percent of participants. [3] Data from women focus groups in Ferizaj and Pristina (Kosovo) are not available.

\textsuperscript{15} Death and health shocks are the most significant risks from similar field work conducted in India (Narayan and others 2009, Krishna 2007).
Figure 11: Downward mobility factors, rural communities

![Downward mobility factors for own gender in rural communities](image)

**Notes:** [1] Each focus group participant was asked to select two downward mobility factors; the share indicates the share of participants that chose a given factor among the top-two factors. Since roughly 2 percent of participants selected fewer than two factors, these figures were approximated. [2] The figure includes only factors voted by at least 10 percent of participants. [3] Data for women’s focus group in Dara (Turkey) are not available.

Figure 12: Jobs as downward mobility factor, by sets of countries (falling vs. rising poverty)

![Jobs or business loss is a much bigger risk where poverty is growing](image)

**Notes:** [1] Each focus group participant was asked to select two downward mobility factors; the share indicates the share of participants that chose a given factor among the top-two factors. Since roughly 2 percent of participants selected fewer than two factors, these figures were approximated. [2] The figure includes only factors voted by at least 10 percent of participants. [3] Data for women’s focus group in Dara (Turkey), Ferizaj and Pristina (Kosovo) are not available.

**Strong Normative Pressures Accompany Descents**

“If men are unemployed they stay at home and ask their wives to go clean houses, they say men can’t do this but women can.” A nonworking woman in Ankara, Turkey

“Unemployed men often drink and play on betting terminals, so they sell items from their households.” A male head of a university laboratory, Kutaisi, Georgia
Relative to upward mobility, the numerical and narrative data on downward mobility are more consistent. Job and business losses, limited work opportunities, and a weak local economy are indicated again and again to be leading triggers of downward mobility by the focus groups, whether they are voting or freely discussing how and why local households experience a decline in wellbeing. In addition, problems of men's emotional distress and vulnerability to drinking and other vices are very prevalent in both the closed- and open-ended data.

Perhaps even more than with movements up, however, gender norms exercise a strong role in driving significant gender differences in experiences with downward mobility. The stress of expectations surrounding men’s provider roles contribute to men and women adopting sharply contrasting coping mechanisms in response to negative shocks. Closely echoing their upward mobility accounts, focus groups relate with high frequency the great emotional toll on men of joblessness and how some men may become paralyzed by poor employment prospects, especially when their economies are stalled or contracting, pushing women into doing whatever it takes to put food on the table. Over time, as discussed more below, these processes are reported to be emasculating for men but empowering for women.

In the Albanian village visited near Tetovo, Macedonia, working women explain that both women and men have been hit hard by the economic crises in recent years. They stress that men have been more affected by small businesses going bankrupt and job loss, and have “returned to their homes.” The men’s group from the village laments, “If you lose your job or business, there are no other alternatives. The state does not give you other opportunities.” In the urban neighborhood of Debar, Macedonia, which is also heavily Albanian, the men’s focus group identifies various factors for downward mobility that equally affect men and women (closure of factories and state offices and nepotism), but acknowledge that only men fall out of the middle class because they are “not looking or asking for a job.”

Surprisingly, these very same processes can also be found in Central Asia where poverty is perceived to be falling. This exchange about men withdrawing from the labor force comes from a focus group of women in a suburb of Aktobe (which differs from the village in case study 1) in Kazakhstan:

- I wish the man was given a certain amount, as an incentive when he gets a job so that he had a desire to work and earn more.
- Every day we lose our men before our eyes. They get frustrated and lose their desire to work.
- They are flabby. If they are not paid, they will hit the sauce. They will feed on their parents.

A few men articulate the challenge in similar terms, like this Kyrgyz man in a suburb of Osh: “[...] there are some men who start drinking and those who sit without work one-to-two years and then find a good work, improve their life and relations in family. Women are more psychologically stable in such situations.” Indeed, people most everywhere are finely attuned to men’s and women’s contrasting responses to periods of shock and downward mobility. When a household is stressed for cash, women’s informal market activities or cleaning and daycare jobs may instead be more plentiful and less taboo than men’s jobs on offer, whether local economies are strained or growing. Even the Roma community visited in Skopje, where gender norms remain highly restrictive, education levels low, and numerous other disadvantages have left the neighborhood trapped in poverty generation after generation, women are still perceived to have greater economic outlets to help their households cope (see box 5).
Box 5: Voices from a Roma community of Skopje, Macedonia – trapped in poverty and still falling

Strong gender dynamics accompanying downward mobility and persistence in poverty affect greatly the poorest and most excluded of the communities in this study – the Roma settlement visited in Macedonia. Generation after generation, this Roma neighborhood in Skopje has been struggling more than any other in our sample with extreme material deprivation. Men and women alike report being trapped in poverty and perceive things as “only getting worse” over the last ten years. “Nobody cares … [not] about the pollution, the sewage, unemployment,” relates a Roma woman. With anger, the men explain that half the neighborhood has no electricity, and, “In the 21st century for someone to be without electricity is outrageous.”

As in the rest of the dataset, lack of jobs is the most frequently mentioned factor preventing women and men from improving their household’s wellbeing. “Ninety percent of the people don’t work;” “They see our face and we don’t have any kind of rights;” “There is great discrimination …” declare members of the men’s group. Both women and men’s focus groups estimate the community’s poverty to be as high as 70 percent, and “only with opening new jobs” could they turn around their lives. “We are not lazy. We want to work and we are very intelligent. It’s just that no one gives us a chance,” observes a woman who works as a seamstress and cleaner.

And like elsewhere, women here can often play a major role in ensuring the day-to-day survival of their households by finding whatever work they can. “Women… they can get ahead… for a female it’s a lot easier to find a job,” agree the jobless men in their focus group. And it is, as expected, low skilled informal jobs that women perform to help their households cope with poverty: “Throughout the hood, we see our mothers, our aunts, collecting trash, [doing] house cleaning…”. But despite women’s economic contributions, gender norms relegate them to a subordinate role in the household and discourage their income earning: “[Men] mostly don’t let their wives [work], it’s the man’s responsibility to work” or “I can’t let my wife, I got two little kids, can’t let her, I must work so she can take care for them…” are common responses by men to questions on barriers to work for women.

Traditional norms are not specific to the Roma community within this sample. But differently to what happens in most communities, these women must endure the double disadvantage of being women and being Roma as they struggle to move up. Their options to find work as domestics and in small shops as more promising than men’s outlets for earning income; but focus groups say the women need at least a high school education, which the large majority of Roma women lack, and that people are generally scared to hire them. Access to jobs for Roma women and men is evidently as much a function of unequal access to opportunities, due to discrimination or low levels of education, as it is of lack of jobs in the country. Discrimination and exclusion hinder both women and men’s chances for upward mobility. “Our Roma are molested. Wherever you seek help you’re treated as animal,” says a Roma woman, “Our people have such miserable lives. We are only consulted during elections, otherwise it’s as if we don’t exist.”

Breaking this poverty trap will require policy action on diverse fronts. Things appear to be slowly improving in education, which might open opportunities for positive change among young women and men in the community. “There are possibilities for education, especially with the new law on education, which makes high school education compulsory,” relates a young Roma woman. And her colleagues in the young women’s focus group agree: “We do not feel as discriminated as before, and there are benefits especially for us, such as free books;” “Education gives you status in society.” Indeed, a radical breakthrough, starting with a greater sense of agency and improved human capital assets, will be key to breaking the vicious cycle of poverty and exclusion and set excluded communities such as this on an upward mobility track.
Men are at higher risk than women of bringing their households down the ladder. The extent of this gender difference is unsurprising given the persistence of social norms attributing men with the role of main breadwinners in the household. Focus groups of both sexes often identified fewer triggers why women compared to men would bring their households down the ladder. An understanding of gender norms and gender power relations, and men’s emotional burden upon failing to comply with their expected breadwinner’s responsibilities at bad times—which can bring them to engage in vices and to add further to their household’s risks of falling—are important for making sense of these commonly held perceptions about the significant gender differences in both the causes and overall risks of downward mobility.

In urban Khujand of Tajikistan, for instance, the men’s focus group identified “destroyed family” and default on loans as risks that both men and women face, but perceive only men to also be vulnerable to job loss, imprisonment and alcoholism. Or in a village of Naryn District in Kyrgyz Republic, the members of the working men’s focus group acknowledge that leading reasons local men bring their households into poverty include “alcohol, laziness, divorce, family conflicts, misbehavior.” But they associate none of these as risks for their local women. It is in this sense that gender norms, and the differences that they give rise to in how men and women respond to changes in their local opportunity structures, appeared to be more forceful and stressful in the data on downward mobility compared to upward mobility.

Although less common in the dataset, in the neighborhood visited in Pristina, Kosovo, working men perceived relatively few gender differences in downward mobility factors. They initially identified “disability/illness, poor management, lack of education, unemployment and a large family” as factors that cause both men and women to fall out of the middle class. Yet, upon further reflection, a man qualifies this by adding “except for gambling,” indicating that only men were vulnerable to that; and another adds that “marriage” is a factor that affects only women because, “She didn’t find herself a good husband or she couldn’t manage appropriately and therefore dropped down.” Certainly some focus groups indicate that women are vulnerable to problems with depression, drinking, drugs (such as anti-depressants) and financial mismanagement, but such risks are widely seen to be rarer among women compared to men.

Three focus groups even argued that women in their communities just do not cause their households to experience falls. Women in Pristina identify lack of skills and connections as important factors for men falling down the ladder, but when asked how women fall, they had only one response, “There is no woman moving down her household.” Similarly, in Ferizaj of Kosovo, a woman argues, “Women cannot lead their household into poverty because they do not waste money and don’t spend on nonsense. But men can do it. Men may work the whole month and at the end they may spend their money in coffee bars or in casinos. [W]omen don’t do this kind of thing.” Finally, in the village visited outside Mardin in Turkey, men say they bring their households into poverty through inability to repay loans, over-reaching on their agricultural activities, and drought, but local women do not cause their households to fall.

Job loss due to childbearing is an important cause of descent that only women shoulder. “There were lots of cases when the woman who used to work got married and if she decided to have a child, nobody keeps her job for her. She is basically doomed to lose her job,” explains a working woman from Tbilisi, Georgia. In Ankara, Turkey, a female owner of a baby clothing store indicates that women will fall down the ladder due to “Marriage. Quitting her job because of becoming a mother.” And others in that focus group identify women’s everyday household care and work responsibilities as triggers for falling only for women. Reports can be found from all corners of the dataset and from all types of respondents—“blue collar” and “white collar” workers, entrepreneurs, jobless, employers, government officials—that women
are expected to withdraw from their jobs or face being fired the moment their childbearing begins. In some cases women report having to sign contracts that they will not become pregnant as a condition for getting hired; and in Serbia, focus groups indicate that women’s wages fall once they have children. These practices push educated and ambitious young women onto lower trajectories for earning income the rest of their lives. If they manage to get back to work at all. Closely related, the lack of daycare emerged as a repeated concern for women across communities. Facilities were either too expensive, too far, too overcrowded, or all of the above, to make it practical for women with small children to work.

Focus groups of both sexes observed that job loss will be a greater jolt for workers who are older than 35 or 40 than for younger workers. The women in Prokuplje, Serbia, worry, “The loss of a job is a horrible shock for a woman because it’s a question whether she’ll be able to find work again;” and another focus group member chimes in, “Especially if she’s over 40.” An employed man from Bishkek (Kyrgyz Republic) similarly laments “A man who spent 20 years at the factory as a lathe, and then he was left without a job, where should he go? He cannot do trade, he becomes unemployed. Now a lot of people of the older generation are unemployed.” Most focus groups talk about similar difficulties for older men and women in accessing jobs, mainly due to their physical weakness and obsolete skillset.

When entire communities—and not just a few scattered households—are tumbling down, these dynamics seem to take hold and become traps that constrain recovery. The second case study in the back of the report zeroes in on a neighborhood of Belgrade, Serbia where both sexes report rising poverty. Households have been squeezed by spikes in living costs and indebtedness, and study participants describe an unrelentingly difficult climate for job seekers and holders alike. Connections are absolutely indispensable and wages meager and unreliable. And focus groups of both sexes speak of men’s greater difficulties coping with the stress, and their problems of hopelessness, depression and violence against women.

There is a growing gender and conflict literature about how the shock of violent political conflict can often mark a time when women assert more authority in their households and communities, and begin new or increase their economic participation, forcing a relaxation of gender norms for women’s roles that may or may not persist into the recovery phase. In fact, a widow of Dushanbe, Tajikistan who identifies herself as a director speaks of these very processes shaping her own life:

I know that after Civil War the number of female in business increased. However today they moved from small business to big businesses. Unfortunately their opportunities are limited by men. There are women, who divorced and almost all of them dealing with small businesses. Many women are working with micro-credits.

Indeed, many accounts can be found of women who more than rise to the occasion and feel empowered by their experiences of pulling their families through hard times. Parallel to this process is men’s sense of frustration and disempowerment. “Many men started drinking, they fell into depression after job loss [during the transition years]; and women, on the contrary, became stronger to have food for their families,” explains a working woman from Shymkent, Kazakhstan. Likewise, an employed man from a village near Kicevo in FYR Macedonia explains that a leading reason why men push their households into poverty is because “We drink alcohol to relax from daily problems.” In Prokuplje, Serbia, jobless men in

their focus group say job loss means “you lose power;” and “You lose the job, you get depressed, you get divorced and then you start gambling and drinking. It’s all linked.”

While women’s roles in the market and their households grow during periods of stress, this does not necessarily fuel lasting normative change. Again, from the same Dushanbe, Tajikistan focus group where the woman above notes an expansion of local businesswomen, there is also reports of numerous barriers facing working women: “In Central Asian states the respect for women is very bad, even among educated people. They limit opportunities for doing business. According to our mindset man is higher than woman. This is our understanding for women.” So even as some or possibly many women’s economic roles and civic leadership are advancing in the public sphere of their communities, restrictive gender norms are still reported to be governing, limiting women’s choices and actions. The normative pressures on local men to retain control even (or especially) when they may not be contributing income or otherwise helping their family (or perhaps even becoming anti-social and dragging down the household as they themselves confide in the mobility discussions) is important for understanding why gender inequalities can remain so persistent even as women’s roles and responsibilities in their society are changing greatly.

What Makes for Resilience?

Focus groups wound up their discussion of mobility by considering what factors make households more resilient to downward slides. Their notions varied, but most focus groups stressed the economic characteristics of households as well as the roles of education, emotional resilience, cohesive families and communities, and state institutions that provide a safety net.

Economic characteristics are viewed as the primary characteristics making households more secure from downward mobility. “Stable and predictable jobs,” “good permanent income,” “a guaranteed salary” and “savings” are widely mentioned by working men and women alike as factors making households less vulnerable to descend. But “if you work here you are never sure when you can lose your job… if someone sends you money from abroad that income is more stable” worries a man in Kutaisi, Georgia. Alternative sources of finance such as “remittances from family members abroad” and “interest-free loans” can indeed mitigate the temporary impact of a lack of employment income.

But when financial vulnerability puts households at risk of descending into poverty, resilience factors other than economic ones can equip men and women with tools to resist the fall or to recover if needed. “Education and culture are the key things. If you are poor, you’ll handle it with dignity and you’ll maybe do jobs that are not adequate for your education but you’ll get out of poverty.” says a woman in Belgrade, Serbia. “Having enough knowledge and skills” is mentioned throughout the region as an important insurance against poverty; so much so that, a man in Tajikistan states, “teachers are clever, they can’t move down!” Aside from education, coping with the risk of downward fall also requires “good behavior and hard work” says a men in rural Kosovo, as well as a strong network of professional and personal connections, “solidarity and friendships,” explains a man in rural Tajikistan. Informal safety nets indeed appear to provide financial support at times of economic difficulties and an avenue to land a new job throughout the region. But “family harmony” and “mutual support among partners” are even more frequent mentions among both women and men, who indicate that family cohesion makes households stronger and more resilient. Men in Bishkek, for example, stress the importance of “moral authority and mutual support” and of “raising children, wife, yourself, and being in charge of your family.”
According to focus groups, resilience factors such as education, personal honesty, hard work, and family attitudes are most often associated with households in the middle class. “Good money management is a resource” and “budgeting helps” they typically add, for instance among women in Kosovo. It therefore comes as no surprise that a large number of men and women mentioning household characteristics (very frequent in Kosovo, Turkey and the Kyrgyz Republic) stress that the middle class is often more secure than the top class. People in the middle steps, according to working women in Kosovo, “have the right education, a normal good life, and are satisfied with what they have;” instead, people at the top, explains a rural woman working in Kosovo, “have moved up the ladder quickly and may fall quickly as well.” The rich, in the eyes of many focus group participants even beyond Kosovo, are made vulnerable due to the way they reached their position: due to dishonest or risky business, or political connections that can end with the rise of a new administration.

Finally, women and men throughout the region believe that “public programs are not enough” but that government programs have a strong role to play. “The government could help” such as increasing “minimum wage” – suggest several men in Turkey. In Georgia, Turkey and among the Roma in FYR Macedonia and Serbia state programs are important to prevent absolute poverty. Women in Kutaisi, Georgia, stress that “the government saved people from dying of hunger,” and their male peers point out that the “government’s medical insurance might save you from expenses that would make you poor.”

PART III. THE MIDDLE CLASS: NOWHERE AND EVERYWHERE

“Maybe there is a middle class, but they are much poorer than they used to be.” A man from the town of Vrsac in northern Serbia

“We are not full. We are not hungry.” A woman of Mardin, Turkey

There was such a striking consistency in people’s initial responses about what it means to be middle class that the answers seemed nearly automated: “I think there is no middle-class at all,” reports a male cell phone operator from Dushanbe, Tajikistan. Or from Pristina in Kosovo, a working woman insists, “The way I see it, the middle class is the one that fits with neither the richest nor the poorest. But I don’t think there is such a class here. I think we are either very poor or very rich.” Likewise in Dara, Turkey, a women out of the labor force remarks, “I think five or six years ago the middle class disappeared. There is only very rich and very poor. I think we are in the poor class. I cannot go to cafes.”

It is likely that perceptions of polarization and rising inequality are fostering this sense of a disintegrating middle class. When asked about trends in inequality, 76 percent of focus groups – including the majority of those registering poverty reduction – perceived the gap between the rich and poor in their community to have grown over the last decade. A newsstand owner in the women’s employed focus group in the small town of Prokuplje, Serbia could speak for many in the study on what they see to be driving this discouraging trend: “Here we have only the rich and the poor and there’s no middle.” And a woman who works informally in a grocery store confides, “I live catastrophically bad. My boss is getting richer, I’m getting poorer. I’m not reported but luckily I’ve known him from before. Otherwise he’d never give me a job because I’m getting older. I work for the same money now as four years ago, while he’s expanding his company and constantly getting richer. The employees don’t get pay
raises while his capital is increasing.” A female worker in a Prokuplie printing shop adds, “Our life has changed. The things that are available for purchase and the things we can afford are two extreme opposites.” “A wage four years ago was worth more than now,” concludes a bakery worker from the same focus group.

Nevertheless, after proclaiming the middle class to be nearly vanished, focus group members then often proceeded to elaborate traits for the middle class of their localities that encompassed all but the poorest and richest households. Other empirical research corroborates that individuals of very different socio-economic positions and mobility prospects will often identify themselves as members of the same “class” (Grusky and Sorensen 1998). In a relatively poor peri-urban neighborhood of Aktobe in Kazakhstan, for instance, a jobless man suggests: “To the rich, we look poor. And those who look poor to us, don’t consider themselves poor. They have self-esteem just like everybody else. I don’t have a car, but I am not poor.” Among women and men everywhere, there appears to be a great longing to be “in” rather than “out” – and their understandings about the middle class generally allow for that.

There was a shared sense of losing ground, and living lifestyles that were not terribly different from poor families – so much so that two urban communities in the Western Balkans even identified the middle class as living below the community poverty line. “According to the living conditions, there is not a big difference between middle and poor class. Both classes of the society have the same kind of home appliances, but unlike the middle class, the poor class has a food consumption problem,” relates a small businessman from the seaside settlement near Kutaisi in western Georgia. And women and men alike declared that in an earlier period a household could get by with one or two workers, but they now required multiple workers to tread water. A women’s group in Tbilisi, Georgia declared, “Its middle class if in the family of six, five people work.”

In the peri-urban neighborhood of Aktobe in Kazakhstan, the women’s focus group indicates that their middle class families live “from one salary to another.” They can just afford housing, food, clothes, and their children’s education, and a very occasional night out: “If we go once in a month to the city, we are happy about it.” Depending on the locality, urban households may have a car and perhaps a vacation; and the rural middle class could have farm equipment, some livestock and land.

People clearly anchored their notions of middle class in the conditions of their localities. In the better-off neighborhoods sampled, stable jobs, good educations, and vacations received more mentions of what makes for middle class. In the area visited of Osh city in Kyrgyz Republic, a 48 year-old man who is unemployed indicates that the middle class includes “all people having a house, car, phone, and house in the countryside… and living “without much difficulty.” While in the poor village of Ush-Aul of Kazakhstan, a woman in the jobless focus group suggests: “For example, almost all residents in our village don't have a job, so we all can be attributed to a middle-class. We are not worse or better than anyone else.”

In sum, the query about the middle class triggered an immediate impulse among many to declare it almost missing, “a small social layer” (jobless woman in Skymkent, Kyrgyz Republic). But upon further reflection, most everyone squeezed in. This seems to be a matter of pride and dignity and social standing with others. According to a housewife from Karakol in Kyrgyz Republic, middle class families have:

... enough money for buying of bread, not enough - for meat. We don’t buy sausages and cheese. Only the most essential things are accessible. We just make both ends meet with regard to children education. Sometimes we borrow money. Therefore, the middle class is the crowd, the majority of people; at the same time there are a few well-to-do people, a few poor people too.”

More than simply losing ground, the middle class seems to be changing shape in the eyes of the focus groups, to accommodate the reality of diminishing wellbeing.
REFLECTIONS FOR POLICY AND RESEARCH

“[Middle class families have a] ... normal life by paying all their bills and property taxes every year, [having] a car, which is not a luxury but a need, and covering the costs of students. But they cannot save money. In our community these families do not exist,” A nonworking woman in Ferizaj, Kosovo.

“In my experience I have never seen a man to move his household out of poverty. But, I know of one case, my neighbor’s. But their children started to work and to bring more money in the household.” – A working woman Skopje (non-Roma neighborhood), FYR Macedonia

This field study presents a puzzling picture of significant poverty reduction amidst deep concerns about a disappearing middle class and rising inequality.

A slight majority of focus groups (53 percent) reported poverty declines in their communities, while much of the poverty increase or stagnation was concentrated in two countries. Although not intended to be a representative sample, the mobility outcomes are generally in line with the promising but mixed poverty trends in the region. Yet it is surprising that the gains in material wellbeing did not translate into perceptions of positive advances by men and women on the ground.

The large majority of focus groups –whether employed or jobless, urban or rural– talked about their communities becoming more unequal, the cost of living rising, and outlets for earning income deteriorating. Hardships with making ends meet affected even non-poor households. The feeling of unfairness and disappointment with the economic opportunities around them fuels perceptions of a disappearing rather than a growing middle class, despite their reports about local poverty trends. The most widely voiced concerns focus on the lack of jobs –especially decently paid ones– and difficulty in getting or holding on to them. And yet, scores of households have somehow found the wherewithal to move out of poverty despite the harsh labor markets that surround them.

Women’s increased economic participation in the face of men’s hardships with breadwinning—and the stress on gender roles and relations that this entails— is crucial for making sense of this paradox. Although both sexes perceive relatively weak outlets for making a living and getting ahead in their local opportunity structures, men and women are responding very differently to this challenge. Across diverse local contexts, descriptions of mobility processes are more likely to express concerns for men’s difficulties with being good providers, and to acknowledge women’s important contributions to poverty reduction in their households and communities where this took place, and also to mitigating the downward slides where that was prevalent. Beneath the well-known story about the centrality of jobs for mobility, is a deeper story about important regularities in the gender differences that surround poverty escapes and descents, and with how upward and downward mobility processes are experienced by women and men on the ground. These processes are largely hidden from statistics and explanations like “got a job” or “lost a job.”

Ultimately, the imperative to put food on the table is giving women more freedom to work and contributing to meaningful improvements in the welfare of their households. But as discussions about the low and uncertain wages on offer consistently revealed, these exits from poverty required great perseverance, hope, and hard work. It should thus not be surprising that poverty reduction and a flowering of women in low-end jobs are not registering very strongly with most in the study as clear
improvements in wellbeing. Some of this discouragement is likely associated with unmet expectations about what governments and economies should be delivering in this day and age. But the lack of energy around important progress on poverty may also be due to normative pressures that overlook or devalue women’s economic and household roles and prevent them from being fully recognized for significant accomplishments in their own lives and in the lives of others in their families and communities. A better valuation of women’s roles in their society is important because it would contribute to greater equality in their status and influence with men and strengthen their capacity to shape their life path in the ways that they value.

There are widespread reports from the field that men continue to be the gatekeepers for women to be able to access and benefit from jobs; and most study participants describe large areas of their local economies to be segregated by gender. These findings suggest that job creation initiatives, including those investing in building skills and providing financial services, need to have their eyes on both women and men and be sensitive to the fact that their preferences are likely to vary. Microcredit, job placement, and skills training services, including those directed at women, are reported to be present in many communities, but they are rarely mentioned as effective supports for becoming formally employed or for building profitable ventures. More strategic programs are needed to support women in economic leadership or to enter sectors of the economy that are more productive and perhaps dominated by males; however, these programs will likely go further where men are able to participate in and benefit from these initiatives as well and not feel threatened. Indeed, in community after community we heard women hoping for better opportunities for their men as crucial for their own economic security. Yet, catalyzing more dynamic and inclusive markets where such processes have long been absent likely requires larger and more innovative investments than tried to date.

Women in both the urban and rural samples consider having jobs just as significant as men to their own economic mobility, but many barriers remain in place that make it difficult for women to access, stay, and climb in the formal labor force. This dataset makes it evident that women across the region are working and the normative environment largely allows for this. But much of their climbing up the ladder, especially at lower steps, is occurring in the informal sector with few protections. In discussions about downward mobility, what often emerges are reports about highly restrictive norms that push women with good jobs out of the labor force in their childbearing years. These realities weaken women’s capacities to press on labor markets to make them more fair and inclusive. While this study did not explore the domestic sphere, recent fieldwork from the region and elsewhere indicates that similar inequalities persist there, if not more so (Muñoz Boudet and others 2013), further impeding women’s access to and benefits from their economic participation. These processes also limit women’s capacities accumulate assets and contribute more effectively to the resilience of their households to life’s inevitable shocks.

Among other measures, government can especially help women to access and advance in the labor force and better meet their caretaking responsibilities by providing affordable and accessible daycare. Daycare programs are important investments in future growth, but they can also benefit women more immediately because they create jobs in sectors where women traditionally work. In some communities there was mention of public works projects, but they seemed to provide jobs in construction principally for unemployed men. Targeted measures are needed that also open opportunities for women, including in fields such as health, education, and agricultural extension services, provided lower wages in these sectors do not exacerbate further the gender gap in economic life. There is also evidence of female entrepreneurship across this dataset, but of scarce experiences with supportive financial intermediaries.
A startling finding is the extent to which men across very diverse economic environments are described as being debilitated by the poor quality of jobs on offer. Urban men are the most frustrated with unemployment and low wages and the need for “more workers” to carry their households—all of which challenge men’s authority position and provider role. The common coping strategy among men of withdrawing from economic participation until more promising opportunities unfold is a clear manifestation of gender power differences. However, such practices limit men’s possibilities for finding productive ways forward while adding to the stress of inactive periods on themselves and their households and communities. Their coping mechanisms slow upward mobility in the best of circumstances, and speed household falling and asset depletion in the worst. Problems of excessive drinking among men were widely reported in this study. Policies are needed that not only catalyze more and better jobs on the ground but that can also take fuller account of the strong social and emotional consequences of economic turbulence and job insecurity, especially on men and household gender relations.

Wider access is needed to psychosocial counseling services, particularly for men who are struggling with joblessness, depression, drinking problems, and perhaps intimate partner violence. New individual and group counseling programs are showing promise that build awareness of the constraining elements of masculinity and other gender norms and give men effective tools for managing emotional stress and problems of drinking and aggression, and also provide them with doable stepping stones towards new jobs and roles in their households and communities that bring strong social bonds, meaning and satisfaction (Instituto Promundo and others 2012). While this study did not look at issues of gender-based violence, reports of these problems emerged unsolicited and indicate that many women are victims and would benefit as well from more access to criminal justice, counseling and social services.

Finally, the study brings to light how closed-ended data, even when disaggregated by gender, can provide a very partial picture of economic mobility unless accompanied by contextually grounded information about why and how movements up and down are perceived and experienced by both genders. Although men and women report quite similar factors as shaping their mobility, the narrative data paints a wholly different picture about significant gender differences in who is actively pursuing work and earning income and who is carrying their households and communities through good times and bad. Research on mobility needs to do better at getting at the processes that affect poverty dynamics, particularly the roles of social relations and status positions, and the norms and values that underpin and drive significant gender differences in perceptions of opportunities and responses to shocks. Such findings can then be tested for their significance in well-designed surveys and follow-up comparative case study work (Narayan and Petesch 2007, 35).
Case Study 1: Many Climbing, Some Stuck in a Kazakhstan Village

“If you have an aim, you can improve your life.” – Employed woman, Aktobe village, Kazakhstan

“Many families are supported by women. There are lots of women jobs.” Jobless man, Aktobe village

The most meaningful way to appreciate how strongly gender structures mobility processes is to dig down deep into the specific experiences of a single community. For this, a village outside Aktobe in Kazakhstan with a population of 4,000 provides a very rich set of field notes. Like so many other villages in the sample, the Aktobe village is reported by both women and men to be more prosperous since 2003, and much of this seems to be due to the village’s success with nonfarm diversification and attracting new public services. In fact, the new developments in the area give the village an urban feel. This helps to explain the more modern gender norms on display and why many of the factors seen to fuel and inhibit mobility resonate more widely across the sample beyond the countryside.

Livestock production, once a mainstay of the village, collapsed during the country’s transition years of the 1990s, but since 2003 the local economy has seen a flowering of small businesses. Car and computer repair shops run by men, for instance, can be found in the village that did not exist a decade ago. Yet the men’s focus group describes a challenging local business environment, reporting needs to pay bribes for loans, inspections from different agencies (“sanitary-epidemiological, fire service”), and the “choke” of taxes. In order to get electricity, “one will have to spend a lot of time, nerves, money.” Importantly, focus groups of both men and women indicate that women run just as many if not more of the new local enterprises: “all those who keep shops, cafes – they are all women,” relates a member of the employed women’s focus group.

The women say that the shock of their collapsing agricultural economy and men’s joblessness in the 1990s helped to fuel a strong relaxation of gender norms and new economic outlets for women as they struggled to put food on the table. Women not only hold a significant presence in the local market but a woman stands as the community’s elected political leader. The women’s discourse, in fact, conveys a more positive sense than the men’s about business opportunities, including appreciation for governmental programs that are encouraging small businesses and “bankers who go to the grassroots”. The women also speak proudly of new construction of preschools, schools, and hospitals and of many local organizations providing cultural events. And when the business owners in the women’s focus group are asked about their preferences of employing men versus women, one responds, “Basically, we tend to hire women because if necessary a woman can even climb onto the roof. In today’s world, a woman necessarily adopts the role of a man.”

The focus group of employed women range in age from 26 to 53 and include a school principal, two teachers and a librarian, a veterinary technician, daycare worker, coffee shop assistant, speech pathologist, and a civil servant. They positioned the entrepreneurs of the village on the top step, along with households with workers “who have a regular job, who support themselves” (see table 4 for ladder). The top step families may have two or three cars, “real estate in the city”, probably a tractor, and can

---

18 According to a local principal, interviewed for background on the village, “A women’s rights commission was created at the rayon level. They discuss gender policy issues. They arrange meetings with business women of the rayon.”
afford to educate their children and take vacations in foreign countries. These households relax on weekends.

The middle classes on the women’s ladder also benefit from a worker in the household with a reliable job and income; they can “afford a cow, but may keep ducks” for some added income. The better off households on middle steps own their homes while others usually rent. They may be educating their children in the nearby city, and “spend holidays in Kazakhstan” rather than overseas like the rich.

Then the women add a step to distinguish households with workers who are poorly educated and rely on unstable jobs from a group they call the “quitters” who “live for the moment” and “do not want to work” or “keep a farm.” These bottom-step households lack assets (“no land, no car”), “live on benefits” and “lead an immoral lifestyle.” Such deeply negative assessments from focus groups about the worst off households are not uncommon. Yet, the women say that these “[p]ests of society” have dropped from a quarter of the village population to ten percent over the last decade.

In response to questions about how men and women have helped to bring their households out of the bottom step, the women assess options to be varied and welcoming for both men and women to climb, describing a few tactics that both genders use and more tactics unique to each. Poor men in the village, explain different women in the focus group, have gotten ahead by finding a job, construction work, migrating for what they call “rotational work” (such as two weeks on and two weeks off an oil rig), “aspirations, hard work,” and also because of “more opportunities now” and “additional earnings.” But these women jump in, unprompted yet by the facilitator about women’s roles in mobility, and qualify their explanations about men’s mobility initiatives: “Ten years ago when there were no jobs for men, husbands stayed home, cooked, cared for the children, and let their wives work and earn money.”

Table 4. Ladder of Life, Women’s focus group, Village near Aktobe, Kazakhstan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ladder of Life – focus group discussion with employed women</th>
<th>Shares of 100 households</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Now</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entrepreneurs. Those who have a regular job, who support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>themselves. Those who have a private household, work, a</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>farm, a plot of land, and a vegetable garden. They</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>have a private house. They run a business. Those who</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>have a small business. They mainly hold shops, bakeries,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hairdressing saloons, farms, and restaurants, as well as</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>provide leather working services, public services etc.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They may have a car, or even 2-3 cars in the household.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They may have real estate in the city. Probably, they</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>have a tractor. They have a regular stable income. They</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>have a private house. They go on vacation within</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kazakhstan. They are able to afford entertainments for</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>their children. They can afford the rest in foreign</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>countries. They travel to Germany or Turkey. They</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>may relax on Saturday and go to play billiards. Their</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>children study in the city, and sometimes in Russia.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They can afford foreign education for their children.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rest cannot afford to go on vacation only because they</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cannot leave the private household.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
When the women next focus on how their female peers of the village have gotten ahead, they repeat the importance of jobs and additional earnings, likely from livestock activities, like for the men. But other key strategies adopted by women are quite gender-specific. For example, they associate only women with bringing their households out of step one by having earnings from children who “grew up and began to support the family,” living “on [social assistance] benefits”, or getting “involved in each other’s businesses.” Families benefit from “birth grants” that defray the cost of childbearing; and “Now children from poor families are provided quarterly with allowances at school. And earlier they did not receive any support.” Children receive “free hot meals.” And women again mention the local preschool that appears to be popular among working women with young children, and the other preschool under construction.

After a free-flowing discussion about movements up the ladder, the facilitator then followed-up with a closed-ended question about how women in the community helped their households to move up the
ladder. The women were guided to note in private on their own slips of paper which two options from a long list are most important for moving up the ladder. They most frequently opted for “education/training” followed by getting a “new or better job”. By way of explanation, a woman remarks, “[Women] need to undergo training courses. To get a profession – a hairstylist, a cook, and then to provide services.” “Those who don’t work,” comments another woman, “they are unemployed only due to their own fault. They don’t want to be trained.”

By comparison with the employed women’s assessments, the other focus groups are less sanguine about the possibilities for escaping poverty that their village offers. The employed men’s focus group also produced a five-step ladder, but they instead concentrate their upward mobility on steps two to three just above the poverty line. For the men, the quarter of the village households that were poor a decade ago are largely still stuck on step one with little income except for some “pick-up work” and “occasional jobs.” Rather, most of the poverty escapes occurred from households on step two, which moved up through somewhat better temporary and seasonal jobs and perhaps ownership of a cow on the side. But in response to the closed-ended question on the two most significant mobility factors, the men largely disregarded the first option on “new or better job.” This is unusual for a focus group, but it is likely because the men just do not see their local job options as very good. Rather, and almost unanimously (nine out of ten of them), the men stress “good connections” as key for mobility, followed by “the right attitude and hard work” (at six votes). Laments one of the men who works on rotation for an oil company, “Even if there are new jobs, it is impossible to find a position without connections.”

There is no record in the field notes from the employed men’s group about why quite a few selected “attitude and hard work” as so important for mobility. Fortunately, the jobless men’s group talked precisely about this. When asked how easy or difficult it is for a villager to move up into the middle class, the response from a single 30 year-old unemployed man implies that jobs are sparse and so require great will and self-restraint to pursue: “If there is nothing to do, one begins to drink. Then it is difficult to prevent this person from drinking. Everything is in their hands…” While another agrees, “Everything depends on personal attitude.” The jobless women are far blunter on the emotional dimensions of their local men’s mobility processes. “In general, men are weak and lazy…” and for men to climb, say jobless women, they need “desire, aspiration;” and “If a woman doesn’t pull up her man, the man won’t raise a family up. Few men can cope without the wife’s support.”

Unfortunately, men’s struggles with unemployment, low and uncertain wages, and limited coping mechanisms are recurring themes throughout this report – even in communities like this village where poverty had fallen rapidly. The other side of this coin is the real toughness, ambition, and hope that can be heard in women’s voices.

\[19\] The facilitator queried: “What two factors do you think have been the most important for the [sex of focus group] of this community who have moved their household up the ladder?” Along with the question, the following list was displayed on a flip chart, and focus group members were asked to rate individually their top two factors on small slips of paper. The list of options includes: 1. New or better job; 2. New or growing business; 3. Migration; 4. Remittances; 5. Social assistance; 6. Pensions; 7. Education/Training; 8. The right attitude and hard work; 9. Supportive family; 10. Obtained loan/credit; 11. Good budgeting and saving; 12. Marriage, divorce or separation; 13. Good connections; 14. Increased crop production/livestock (if rural); 15. Access to land (if rural); 16. Other; 17. Other.
The jobless men go on to acknowledge that “support of relatives,” “connections” and “stable work” can help with climbing, but their remarks show mainly discouragement: “Money is needed to open a shop. There is no proper work, only pick-up work.” For these men, and so many others in the dataset, “pick-up work” is “just for surviving,” and not deemed to be a stepping stone but rather crushes self-esteem and hope. If they cannot be good providers, many men seem to prefer to wait out the lean times. And when asked about options for women to get ahead, a man from this group insists: “The main thing is that the husband earns enough.” While others in the group go on to acknowledge that women play important roles, traditional norms for men to be the main if not the sole provider are still present in this village and everywhere else in the sample.

The tone of the jobless women’s focus group was also dispirited. They echo the men saying it’s possible to get ahead, “if you have the money,” and detail the same and additional barriers: scarce jobs, “lack of connections,” age; and elsewhere they report employers who “cheat” and “humiliate” their workers. The jobless women warn, “Wherever you go, they hire their relatives...”; “They don’t employ people over 45 years of age.” Jobs can be found at the Employment Exchange but only “to collect garbage” and only for six months. These women out of the labor force do not say they have no desire to work or are too busy with housework and raising children; but rather, like the men, they are hoping for more adequate opportunities: “I would like to be employed even as a cleaner.”

Across the 37 communities in this sample, the climate and outlets for mobility vary but almost two thirds of the rural workers’ focus groups report extensive poverty reduction like the employed women in this Aktobe village. These women’s views are no doubt being shaped by their new economic roles, and their contributions to and benefits from the growing private sector and public services in the area. By comparison, the employed men perceive much less poverty reduction, are less satisfied with available economic outlets, and stress a need for connections. Jobless men express hopelessness and the lure of anti-social behaviors. “There is no prospect in [the village],” laments a jobless woman. And another from the same group says she is encouraging her daughter to work hard in school and get a scholarship so she can study and then work in the city, “There is no future here. The only way is to migrate.”

Case Study 2: Sliding down in Belgrade: losing jobs and hope

“We are pressed into the ground, with no initiative, no future.” .... “Ten years ago we had a lot more. We had work.” – A male bookstore owner of Belgrade, Serbia

“Loss of job and loss of close people, that’s the most severe misfortune in life.” – A 47 year old bus driver in Belgrade.

“What [business] to open and what to do? We citizens have no more ideas.” – A single woman on social assistance who heads her household in Belgrade.

In two middle class “blocks” of central Belgrade, Serbia, conditions appear to be welcoming for its residents. There are preschools and schools, a safely enclosed park for small children, a post office, shops, and other conveniences of city life. A female bureaucrat who covers local employment matters says the area has seen an influx over the past decade of “banks, private companies, representatives of foreign companies” who are active in “trade, marketing, wholesale, export, import, sales, various agencies...” She adds, “In the transition process [economic restructuring and privatization since the early 2000s] the larger
companies were shut down and the smaller ones were being opened, and the possibility of jobs at these is higher than earlier.”

Yet, the residents who participated in the study mainly speak of unrelenting economic decline over the last decade. They report being squeezed between ever rising costs of living (“electricity is 12 percent more expensive now”) and poor choices for earning a living. They speak of poorly paying jobs with no contracts, and a business climate where competition is fierce and customers lack any purchasing power. The men mention “20 or 22 shops selling food” around their block, and “[e]very business lives for a year or two, then it goes down, and some new business is opened in its place.” A woman who runs a health food shop declares, “But people only buy the essential stuff because they haven’t got any money. I have two sons and I know that life is hard.”

Indeed, the Belgrade men’s ladder (table 5) portrays a startling 60 percent of the community currently living in poverty on the first and second steps. This is up from half the community’s households a decade ago, according to men. But women in the same community, who identified a larger “survival” ladder step just over the poverty line, also see the number of poor households increasing dramatically – almost tripling. The Belgrade men perceive downward mobility happening among households that used to be perched on step three and relying on multiple workers and perhaps pensioners to get by. When asked by the facilitator how a poor man living in their neighborhood has moved their household up the ladder, a sense of hopelessness coursed through their narratives. A bus driver who lost a company job in 1991 replied, “Men can’t do anything primarily because they are not well educated.”

The men then detailed that both men and women could possibly escape poverty by joining a political party [and the job connections this brings], their children beginning to work, taking jobs as city cleaners, engaging in agriculture, getting some training, taking an “additional job” or “working in grey or black zone.” The zone refers to informal or illicit economic activities, including “crime, selling drugs, stealing cars.” The men explain that some activities in the grey zone used to be “in the white,” and a 21 year-old father and business owner in the group says how he got his family off the second step by working in the zone, “The state stimulates illegal work, you can’t succeed if you are doing everything legally.” Women, they add, may also contribute to moving their households out of poverty with sewing, domestic work, and babysitting.

The men subsequently reflect on why a man or a woman might bring their households down the ladder and out of the middle class. Their views do a nice job displaying how causes of descents are presented with an even more gendered tone than is the case with upward movements. They say the local men’s greatest risks for falling are due to: job loss (“yes, 75 percent”), drug addiction, “his wife left him and he started drinking;” and “They live with their parents, they didn’t do well at school, [nor] … at work… They simply failed and can’t cope.” Of these, men admit, only job loss and divorce affect women. But they acknowledge that women also face additional risks such as “problematic children”, “violent husband” and “problematic family relationships”.

When asked about what sends households all the way down into poverty, this group of men then took an unusual turn and pointed to systemic factors that go well beyond isolated cases of downward slides and that ensnare both men and women. They spoke of a “ruined state”; “ruined companies”; “prices going up all the time;” “indebtedness”; “mortgage bondage, people lose houses, they lose everything”; “You don’t even have anything to sell any more;” “apathy”; “depression”; “illness”; “family violence [and] no support of close or broad family” [these two face women only] … “It’s a general tragedy.”

51
The employed women’s focus group also speaks of men and women “equally affected” and “falling down due to the financial crisis;” “chaos in the country” and “the company is not doing well.” Yet, the women perceive economic shocks to be harder on the men than themselves, and attribute it to the view that men are less prepared to adapt and also less emotionally resilient in harsh times. For instance, according to a postal worker in the women’s group, “Many business owners have failed because they couldn’t operate in capitalism. Women are a lot harder working and ready for work and change, and that’s why men are more affected.” In a somewhat similar vein, a female doctor adds that job loss “is a greater shock for men psychologically because women are psychologically more stable. But it’s an equal shock financially [for both].”

Earlier in their focus group the employed women share stories about how hard it is to earn a living in their difficult economy, and share some of the hurdles that they have had to negotiate because they are women. A pharmacist who runs her own business in the neighborhood, for instance, explains that profits from her business are tiny, including because she vies for customers with another pharmacy that set up a shop right across the street. Moreover, the better paying and more secure jobs with local pharmaceutical companies all go to men because they are free to “be away from home and drive around the city all day [e.g. making sales].” The pharmacist reports that working for companies can be difficult for most women because “...if you don’t want to sign a contract, goodbye – you won’t get a job. That’s the overall employment strategy – you have to sign that you won’t get pregnant ...” And the barriers to work can start for women even before they face their employer’s discrimination. “We live in the Balkans,” says another woman, “A woman has a lot of responsibilities towards her husband and children and she hasn’t got the time to engage in business.”

As so common throughout the dataset, the Belgrade focus groups describe a normative environment for working women that is perceived to be both supportive and unsupportive. “I am lucky to have a good husband who has taken over most responsibilities in the house and towards the kids, and I just do the laundry.... If I didn’t have that family support I don’t think that I’d make it,” says a shop owner. Yet, opinions can also be found like this one from a 56-year old man who is serving as a secretary for the community: “I have a traditional outlook. A woman’s place is at her husband’s side, and she decides about her destiny. If she wants to embark on politics or some other work, then they are weaker in other areas of life.”

The civil servant who works at the public employment agency concurs with the focus group assessments that local unemployment and poverty have grown alongside the emergence of many new businesses in the area. She also acknowledges that working women face higher barriers. In her view a key hurdle is that many current job seekers had poor educational opportunities and so lack the work experience and skills – particularly foreign languages and computer savvy – that many local employers now require.

Meanwhile, public sector employment opportunities have nearly disappeared due to a ban on hiring; any opportunities are closed to “political party employment, where a young and highly educated individual, can’t get into a public company without previous recommendation and that’s a fact.” While she perceives that “highly qualified women are just as sought after as men,” she echoes reports that are consistently voiced across this dataset that “most employers want women who haven’t got children.” Some highly educated women have retrained to open their own bookkeeping agencies or salons for cosmetics and hairdressing. In fact, a 49 year-old woman in a focus group introduced herself as: “I have a husband and two children. I own a health food shop. But I’m a qualified mechanical engineer.”
While the men’s focus group perceives the recent economic crises as a major cause of rising poverty in their neighborhood, the women express deep concern about the emotional toll of the times that they are living in. They argue that men and women can bring their household down to the bottom step from “Individual weakness, depression, loss of morals, giving up on life, illness”; but only men are seen to drag their households into poverty due to “alcoholism, gambling, drugs.” While not evident in the closed-ended responses, the narratives about falling down the ladder are laden with emotional trauma, antisocial vices, and strained and perhaps violent marital relationships. The theme of men being less prepared to cope with change and harsh times comes up again in the discussion among Belgrade’s women. Gender norms for men to be in authority positions and good husbands and providers interact in ways that weaken their coping skills and capabilities for adapting to their changing circumstances. Women, meanwhile, do their level best to step up.
Annex 1: Moving out of Poverty Index, by country

Figure 12: Moving out of Poverty Index, average of women vs. men focus groups in each of 8 countries (74 focus groups with workers)
## Annex 2: Research Teams in the Study Countries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Research Team</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>Georgian Opinion Research Business International (GORBI), Tbilisi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kazakhstan</td>
<td>Business Information, Social and Marketing Research Centre (BISAM), Almaty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kosovo</td>
<td>Index Kosova, Pristina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kyrgyz Republic</td>
<td>M-Vector Research and Consulting, Bishkek</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FYR Macedonia</td>
<td>Center for Research and Policy Making, Skopje</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serbia</td>
<td>IPSOS Strategic Marketing, Belgrade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tajikistan</td>
<td>M-Vector Research and Consulting, Dushanbe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>A2F Consulting, Bethesda MD, USA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


