

Between vulnerability and agency: the migration decision-making experiences of women from Central Asia in Russia

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Abstract

This article examines how migrant women from Central Asian countries make decisions about migration to Russia, focusing on the interplay between vulnerability and agency at the earliest stages of migration. It is based on in-depth interviews with 50 women from Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan. The analysis reconstructs women's pre-migration conditions, decision-making trajectories, and the gendered configurations of power within which these decisions unfold.

The findings identify several strategies through which women enter migration: following a husband, negotiated migration, kin-based chain migration, migration as escape, autonomous migration, women-led “pioneer” migration, and repeated migration. Across these trajectories, patriarchal norms, kinship and family hierarchies, and economic constraints shape the choice, yet women exhibit differentiated forms of agency—ranging from moral argumentation and strategic negotiation to autonomous mobility and survival-driven flight.

The study demonstrates that vulnerability and agency are not mutually exclusive. Instead, women act within and through constraining structures, transforming traditional gender roles and obligations into resources that enable mobility and the pursuit of safety, stability, and expanded life possibilities.

Key words

Vulnerability; agency; migrant women from Central Asia; Russia; migration decision-making

1. Introduction

Migration has remained a key factor in Russia's development throughout the entire post-Soviet period. Despite the cyclical nature of migration flows and their sensitivity to economic and political shifts,

contemporary Russia consistently functions as one of the major centers of migrant attraction in Eurasia. While the 1990s were dominated by forced migration, since the 2000s the core of inflows has been formed by labor migrants, a significant share of whom gradually transition to long-term residence. According to statistical data, nearly 90% of net migration growth is generated by all CIS countries; however, in recent years—especially the past five years—the decisive contribution has come from migrants from Central Asia (Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan) (Rosstat, 2023; Denisenko & Karachurina, 2024).

The feminization of migration has long been recognized as a global trend (Sassen, 2000; Teodorescu, 2024), and its manifestations are becoming increasingly visible in the Russian context as well (Tyuryukanova, 2011; Ledeneva & Mishchuk, 2023). Official statistics record 19-20% women among labor migrants, while sociological studies show substantially higher figures — approximately 30%. The annual presence of women migrants is estimated at no fewer than 1 million persons, amounting to roughly one-quarter of all labor migration (Florinskaya, 2022). CIS states remain the primary sending countries for women migrants, but their relative contributions are shifting: the share of Ukraine and Moldova nearly halved between 2015 and 2019, while the importance of Central Asian states increased. At the same time, the proportion of women among migrants from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan remains consistently low (12-13%), underscoring the gendered specificity of mobility (Florinskaya, 2022).

Against the backdrop of extensive international literature that conceptualizes gender as a central analytical category in migration research (Christou & Kofman, 2022), the Russian scholarly tradition has only gradually begun to move away from viewing women as “secondary” actors in migration. Meanwhile, women’s migration reveals some of the most vulnerable segments of the Russian labor market (Florinskaya, 2022), and examining women’s strategies — from everyday navigation to transnational family decision-making — makes it possible to understand how gendered, legal, and economic conditions jointly shape the structure of opportunities and constraints, thereby defining the contours of female migrants’ vulnerability and agency.

Migration is a multi-stage process that begins long before any physical movement takes place; its starting point is the very decision to

leave (Massey et al., 1993; Castles, de Haas & Miller, 2014). It is at this early stage that the basic configurations of women's subjectivity and dependency are often formed shaping their subsequent migratory and life trajectories. In this article we focus specifically on these initial moments of migration, since the ways in which women from Central Asia make decisions about relocation — how initiative is formed and distributed — partially predetermine the format of migration, the degree of vulnerability, and the potential forms of autonomy that emerge later.

2. Data and Methods

The empirical data derives from the longitudinal project “Family in Motion: Theoretical and Empirical Challenges in the Context of Labor Migration in Russia” (2022-2024), which examines how families transform under conditions of migration and how these transformations shape social outcomes both for migrants themselves and for the countries engaged in migratory exchange. The core theoretical and methodological premise is that contemporary migration constitutes a complex, multi-layered process encompassing diverse family situations, household forms, and a wide range of migration circumstances shaped simultaneously by the institutional and social contexts of both sending and receiving countries. The combination of scenario-based, biographical, and longitudinal approaches made it possible to trace individual and family trajectories of the Central Asian migrants in dynamics.

The study relies on qualitative methodology. The units of analysis were families of migrants from Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan residing in Russian regions that represent major destinations for labor migration. The sample included couples with and without children, representing various forms of marital arrangements and a range of legal statuses—from temporary residents to citizens of the Russian Federation. A key inclusion criterion was the long-term co-residence of most family members in Russia. Participants were recruited using the snowball method through community organizations and personal networks. A distinctive feature of the research design is its longitudinal nature: each family participated in at least two rounds of interviews. Interviews were conducted not only with primary informants but also with their spouses, adult children, and other

family members, providing a longitudinal, intergenerational, and intra-family perspective on migration processes.

In total, 54 families were included, of which 38 represent longitudinal cases. The sample comprises 14 families from Kyrgyzstan, 18 from Tajikistan, 18 from Uzbekistan, and four mixed families. Most households are nuclear families with children; the average number of children is three, with a maximum of six. Twenty-six families were formed in Russia (including the four mixed families), while the rest were formed in the countries of origin. In some cases, “double families”, households in which a man has two wives, were documented.

This article focuses exclusively on interviews with women who have migration experience and who moved to Russia either independently or together with their husbands. The analysis draws on 50 interviews with 50 women: 40 married (including five in a second marriage) and 10 divorced or widowed. By country of origin, the sample includes 17 women from Kyrgyzstan, 12 from Tajikistan, and 21 from Uzbekistan. Their ages range from 30 to 70 years.

The interviews were conducted as in-depth semi-structured conversations lasting from 1.5 to 3.5 hours. The thematic blocks covered: personal and family biographies (including the histories of extended families and marriage), individual and family migration trajectories, changes in household composition, the distribution of resources and authority in the parental and marital family, shifts in gender roles before and after migration, transnational ties and practices of maintaining kinship, and views on childrearing, employment, and leisure. This design enabled the collection of rich, multidimensional material on women’s experiences of vulnerability and the everyday forms of agency they employ across different life situations, including at the stage of making the decision to migrate.

The informants’ names have been anonymized. The following notation is used in the text — M. (1987, Kyrgyzstan): M. indicates the name, 1987 the year of birth, and Kyrgyzstan the country of origin.

3. Theoretical Background

In contemporary social theory, agency and vulnerability are increasingly considered not as opposites but as mutually constitutive elements of analysis. Vulnerability becomes an analytical lens through which the distribution

of opportunities for action can be observed, whereas agency becomes a way of describing how subjects redefine, undermine, or circumvent structural frameworks.

Although A. Giddens does not use the term “vulnerability” directly, his theory of structuration explains how individuals exercise their agency within constraining structures (Giddens, 1984). In practice-oriented approach, actors’ actions are shaped by their position in the field and by available forms of capital, yet not fully determined by them; even under conditions of subordination, actors find possibilities for resistance (Bourdieu, 1977). The relational model conceptualises agency and vulnerability as processual and temporal (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Goffman’s microsociology adds an important dimension: even under social control, individuals retain the capacity to manage impressions and interaction, that is, to express agency within vulnerability understood as an everyday constraint (Goffman, 1959). According to M. Archer, agency is grounded in reflexivity, or the capacity to evaluate circumstances and to form projects of action (Archer, 2000). Feminist theorists strengthen the link between agency and vulnerability, showing that action is carried out not despite constraints but through them, for example through “everyday forms of resistance” (Scott, 1985) and the performative reproduction of norms, which contains the possibility of their subversion (Butler, 1990). Thus, the evolution of the concepts of agency and vulnerability reflects a shift from structural explanations to processual and relational models that emphasise the plurality of forms of action, their temporal dynamics, and their dependence on configurations of power.

In migration studies the categories of agency and vulnerability acquire particular importance, as migrants often act under multi-layered constraints—legal, status-related, linguistic, institutional, and infrastructural. Migrant vulnerability is typically described as a structurally produced by limited access to protection, rights, and resources (Quesada, Hart & Bourgois 2011; Carruth 2021; Innes 2023; La Spina 2021). Within the structural approach, it is produced through unequal access to opportunities, dependence on intermediaries, and discriminatory border regimes (Castles, de Haas & Miller, 2014). The concept of survival migration emphasises that many migrants are driven by the necessity of survival yet remain outside legal categories and protection mechanisms (Betts, 2013). In de Haas’s

“aspirations-capabilities” model, vulnerability arises from the gap between aspirations and capabilities shaped by state and market structures (de Haas, 2021). Similarly, the aspiration-ability framework shows that this gap emerges even prior to migration (Carling & Schewel, 2018).

A number of studies attempt to overcome the portrayal of migrants solely as “victims of structure.” O. Bakewell argues for the necessity of recognising migrants not only as objects of governance but also as subjects—people with initiatives, decisions, and projects, even when these are formed under strong structural constraints (Bakewell, 2010). A similar logic can be seen in the transnational perspective, within which agency appears as migrants’ ability to maintain, modify, or create social ties and institutions across two levels—the country of origin and the country of residence (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004). The “acts of citizenship” approach conceives migrants as subjects who constitute themselves as citizens through acts that make claims, perform rights, and bring new forms of citizenship into being (Isin & Nielsen, 2008). Gilodi et al. (2022) shows that individual acts of everyday resistance, when becoming collective, transform vulnerability into a resource for political action capable of reshaping local institutions and intergroup relations. A contribution to this critique is also made by studies oriented towards the everyday dimension of agency. J. Scott (1985) and H. Vigh (2009) demonstrate that under conditions of uncertainty and structural pressure, the key role belongs not to strategic acts of resistance but to “tactics of survival” —subtle, routine ways of navigating limited opportunity spaces.

Overall, despite attempts to restore agency to migrants, many migration studies retain a structural bias. Even when authors seek to avoid victimising interpretations, constraints consistently appear more significant and more thoroughly analysed than the opportunities for overcoming them. As a result, agency appears predominantly as forced, reactive, or situational. This generates one of the methodological tensions in migration studies: the aspiration to take migrants’ initiatives and actions into account constantly encounters empirical realities in which structural pressure shapes not only the degree of vulnerability but also the very boundaries of possible action.

This tendency is very evident in women’s migration scholarship (Christou & Kofman 2022). Just gendered perspective radicalises the

understanding of agency and vulnerability by demonstrating that migrant women face “double” and “triple” marginalisation—as women, as migrants, and as members of ethnic minorities (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994; Parreñas, 2001; Pessar & Mahler, 2003; Schrover). Pessar and Mahler (2003) show how gender structures all stages of the migration process—from decisions to migrate to the distribution of power within transnational families. The intersectional approach develops this framework by showing that the intersection of these characteristics forms not a sum of factors but a system that produces qualitatively different regimes of dependence and unequal repertoires of action (Crenshaw 1989; Anthias, 2013). Zlotnik and Kofman (Zlotnik, 1995; Kofman, 2004) challenge the portrayal of women as passive family dependants. Emphasising women’s economic role in global care chains, they simultaneously reveal the structural sources of their vulnerability—labour market segregation, legal precarity, and institutional dependence. Within this logic, migration merely transforms ‘patriarchal bargains’, opening up new possibilities for women’s action while simultaneously reinforcing certain forms of dependence (Kandiyoti, 1988). L. Baldassar and M. Nedelcu try to move beyond the victim/actor dichotomy, viewing transnational family practices as spaces where vulnerability and agency coexist and mutually shape one another (Baldassar & Nedelcu, 2014). N. Piper highlights collective forms of migrant women’s agency, in which vulnerability becomes not only a constraint but also a source of political action, turning protective strategies into practices of survival and solidarity (Piper, 2006).

A gendered perspective radicalises the main conclusion of migration studies: vulnerability is not a side-effect of mobility but its structural condition. The vulnerability of migrant women arises at the intersection of gender regimes, labour markets, migration infrastructures, and political-legal restrictions; it is intensified by the gap between aspirations and capabilities and is distributed extremely unevenly. Agency appears precisely within this dense field of constraints—through adaptation, navigation, resistance, everyday survival strategies, and political acts. Thus, the agency of migrant women constitutes a structured, intersectional, and often compelled form of action that arises at the intersection of power, dependence, and the aspiration to transform one’s lives.

4. Research Findings

The living conditions of most women in our study prior to migration were shaped by patriarchal norms that regulate women's everyday lives and define their life trajectories. In the countries of Central Asia, such norms are embedded in routine expectations such as "a daughter must obey her elders" or "a daughter-in-law must serve her husband's family." Control exercised by a woman's parental family or her husband's family functions not as a background condition but as a structural mechanism that sets the boundaries of acceptable actions and decisions. Within this framework, women's agency is embedded in a system of expectations in which their roles—as daughters, wives, or daughters-in-law—are defined through loyalty, responsibility, and obedience. These observations correspond with the notion of the "patriarchal bargain" (Kandiyoti, 1988), which conceptualizes women's decisions, including decisions about migration, as a form of negotiated response to an existing system of subordination. At the same time, the degree of control is far from uniform: it varies both across Central Asian countries and within them, depending on whether a family is urban or rural, its economic status, and the density of kinship obligations.

The pre-migration context is not merely background—it is crucial for understanding why migration becomes a form of agency for women. Individual life stories reveal extreme manifestations of patriarchal norms. The experience of M. (1978, Uzbekistan) illustrates nearly total control: "even if you go to a neighbor, you have to call her (mother-in-law) and tell her where I'm going and what I'm doing." Even harsher forms appear in the story of Z. (1987, Tajikistan), who experienced physical violence from both her husband and her mother-in-law/aunt, yet was unable to divorce immediately due to family pressure, fear of shame, and public condemnation. These cases show that the lives of some women prior to migration are shaped by systemic vulnerability, where restricted access to resources is combined with rigid moral obligations and expectations of obedience. In such contexts, women's migration rarely emerges as an intentional project; rather, it becomes possible only when the established system of patriarchal obligations begins to falter—under the pressure of violence, economic crisis, the breakdown of family ties, or new opportunities created through migrant networks.

Although patriarchal gender relations are not the only factor shaping women's mobility from Central Asia to Russia, they constitute a fundamentally important backdrop. Women's migration strategies emerge at the intersection of patriarchal norms, family negotiations, personal aspirations, and socioeconomic circumstances. The subsequent analysis focuses on these strategies and on how vulnerability and agency intertwine within them—from dependent trajectories to more initiative-driven forms of mobility.

4.1. "Where the Husband Is, There Is the Wife"

A classic migration trajectory in Central Asia assumes that the man leaves for wage work while his wife remains in his parents' household, responsible for childcare and domestic tasks. After some time, the question of family reunification arises—typically initiated by the husband or his senior relatives. This model is deeply rooted in patriarchal norms and is perceived by women as a socially expected and morally justified scenario.

M. (1982, Tajikistan) underscores how normative this is:

"When my husband said we should go, I didn't even think about it. That's how it should be—end of story. My parents approved: a wife should be with her husband."

In another case, K.'s husband (1990, Uzbekistan) left almost immediately after their wedding, while K. herself, already pregnant, remained in his parents' home—despite the fact that

"at our very first meeting he said that where the husband is, there is the wife,"

and despite her repeated insistence that she wished to leave with him. Only a year later, and after receiving permission from his parents, was she able to join him:

"It happened just as I expected... I cooked for him, our daughter and I waited for him to come home from work... It made me happy, because my first duty is to serve my husband, like a good wife".

In the biography of A. (1975, Tajikistan), the decision to migrate was also initiated by her husband and father-in-law, yet it was A. who articulated the problem of the growing distance between father and children:

“He keeps coming and going, and the kids are growing up... I told him, ‘This won’t do.’”

Her father-in-law supported her and reaffirmed the traditional formula “where the husband is, there is the wife,”

after which the husband finally said: “Come here too, let’s struggle together—children suffer without their father.”

Across these biographies, women’s agency is expressed primarily through their interpretation and moral evaluation of men’s decisions. A woman may disagree with her husband’s departure, feel distressed by long separations, or perceive the distribution of responsibilities as unfair, yet she continues to act within normative boundaries. Thus, the strategy of following the husband —“where the husband is, there is the wife”—creates a paradoxical configuration of dependence and activity: women rarely initiate migration themselves, yet their actions often lead to their own migration and to family reunification.

A variation of this strategy is marital migration, which typically relies on the continued prevalence of arranged marriage practices in Central Asia. In some of our cases, a man living in Russia quite literally “brings over” a wife from the country of origin. But other trajectories also exist. D. (1986, Uzbekistan), whose aspirations to live abroad were shaped by school trips to the United States and Germany, married a man from an Uzbek family who had been socialized in Russia. This produced a distinctive blending of norms: a shared cultural background combined with different models of gender socialization, simultaneously expanding a woman’s opportunities and creating new zones of vulnerability. As D. notes, “his mentality is different”: her husband expresses dissatisfaction openly but does not demand strict adherence to an “Uzbek” model of care; even the mother-in-law does not insist on rigid role divisions. The Russian context does not

eliminate traditional gender expectations, but it makes them more flexible, creating an intermediate space in which gender norms are renegotiated and women's everyday agency is reconfigured in migration.

4.2. Negotiating Migration

Although our material contains no examples of genuinely egalitarian, jointly made decisions about migration, it is possible to identify conditionally joint strategies that emerge through family negotiations. In such situations, both spouses participate in the discussion, but their influence is unevenly distributed: gender hierarchies remain embedded in the very process of decision-making, even when the initial impetus comes from the woman.

Women's initiatives vary in intensity. The most pronounced type appears when a woman effectively compels her husband to reconsider the family's overall strategy. U. (1987, Kyrgyzstan), who met her future husband in Moscow, returned to Kyrgyzstan after their wedding and spent nine years living with her mother-in-law and four daughters, seeing her husband only once a year. Facing emotional and material vulnerability, she finally raised the issue of ending their long-term separation:

"We argued a lot. It was impossible to live like that. I told him, 'We need to be together—anywhere, but together.'"

A similar dynamic appears in the case of K. (1990, Uzbekistan), whose exhaustion from many years of living apart culminated in what was essentially an ultimatum:

"This is not a life: he's there, and we are here..."

In both cases, the formula "where the husband is, there is the wife" was used as an argument for living together, rather than as a tool of subordination.

A softer form of initiative emerges in a negotiation-based model, where the decision is formally joint but the momentum originates with the woman and has a strategic character. Zh. (1984, Kyrgyzstan) explains that the need to secure independent housing pushed her to insist

that her husband migrate:

“You go, earn some money, and when you come back—we’ll buy an apartment.”

In G.’s story (1982, Uzbekistan), the migration decision also took shape through family negotiations: after her husband lost his job, the couple discussed their next steps together, and the presence of G.’s mother in Moscow became an additional resource. As a result, they made a shared decision to move to Moscow in order to earn money for an apartment in Tashkent.

These examples show that decisions made through family negotiations are neither fully dependent nor fully autonomous. Women identify the problem, initiate the discussion, and often take on the organizational work of relocating, yet they act within conditions of structural vulnerability—material dependence, emotional risk, and the absence of institutional protection. Traditional roles of care and moral responsibility persist but are transformed into a resource for action, enabling women to guide family mobility. Thus, migration decisions take on a dual character: women’s initiatives develop within a traditional model, and it is precisely this model that makes their agency socially legitimate.

4.3. Kin-Based Migration Network

Kin-based migration represents a form of collective mobility in which women are incorporated into pre-existing migration chains established by relatives. In such cases, the decision to move emerges as a product of family agreements and expectations embedded within kinship structures. Tradition here functions simultaneously as a resource and a constraint: it provides safety but requires the consent of elders, the maintenance of loyalty, and adherence to established family routes.

In its simplest form, this pattern appears as the gradual expansion of a kinship chain. U. (1988, Kyrgyzstan) describes the process as follows:

“First my sister went, then my husband. When they called me, I didn’t go alone—I went with my niece. The relatives helped with housing.”

A similar trajectory is seen in A. (1980, Kyrgyzstan):

“My parents went to Krasnoyarsk in 1998; then my husband and I followed them.”

In some cases, it is the elders who initiate migration. For example, G.’s mother (1982, Uzbekistan), after retiring and facing her husband’s unemployment, was the first to move to Moscow and spent more than ten years working as a nanny. Later, G. found work in the same family, effectively relying on the trust her mother had already established.

Migration of unmarried young women requires additional conditions. The key factor is appropriate accompaniment and supervision; parental permission is taken for granted. S. (1986, Tajikistan) arrived in Moscow at age 17 because she was going to her cousin and accompanying the cousin’s young son—having an older female relative present lowered the risks. P. (1983, Tajikistan) was allowed to migrate alone at age 20 because her brother and brother-in-law were already living in Moscow, sharing a room with her. U. (1987, Kyrgyzstan) emphasizes:

“If I had come alone, it would have been hard, but I had sisters.”

Thus, mobility—particularly for unmarried women—becomes socially acceptable only when embedded in kinship structures, especially since the purpose of such migration is often to earn money to support the family.

This strategy illustrates the interweaving of structural vulnerability and agency: dependence on elders’ decisions and adherence to patriarchal expectations coexist with women’s active use of kin networks, their role in maintaining migration chains, and their function as intermediaries within the family’s broader mobility.

4.4. Migration as Escape

For some women, migration becomes a means of rescue—a way out of marriages and families marked by physical, psychological,

or sexual violence, rigid control, and the absence of protection. The life story of Z. (1987, Tajikistan) is one of the most striking examples. At 18, she was married off to her cousin “to remove one extra mouth to feed.” She did not know that he already had a first wife. Her mother-in-law, who was also her aunt, routinely subjected her to physical violence:

“She beat me hard. Not just hurt me — she beat me.”

Attempts to leave were blocked by family pressure: “divorce is condemned.” Her admission that “the divorce broke me” shows that the separation was both a profound trauma and the only way to stop the violence. Migration became the next step toward safety.

M.’s story (1976, Tajikistan) reflects a similar pattern. Married at 17 supposedly to protect her during the civil war, she faced beatings from her husband and, after divorce, attempted sexual assaults by a relative and a neighbor. Her status as a divorced woman made her a constant target: “divorced women... as if we’re to blame that we divorced... even if a man kills you, the woman is still the guilty one.” The decision to migrate was made by her mother, who was already in Russia at the time:

“My mom urgently bought me a ticket... and I ran away to Moscow.”

In L.’s case (1990, Tajikistan), migration prevents a forced marriage:

“My father wanted to marry me off to a cousin. My mother took me to the bus at night and said, ‘Go to your aunt... you’ll be safe there’.”

In all these cases, migration emerges as a forced yet deliberate act. It is not aimed at expanding opportunities but at preserving life, bodily integrity, and dignity. Escape becomes an expression of agency: women make decisions despite fear, social condemnation, and tight control—and in doing so assert a minimal right to safety. These stories echo what Parreñas (2001) describes as the “dual agency” of women in migration: the capacity to act within constraining structures that both suppress and create openings for withdrawal. In such contexts, women

possess a limited but sufficient degree of autonomy to flee immediate danger and begin building new forms of stability once in migration.

4.5. Autonomous Migration

Autonomous female migration emerges when the move is initiated by a woman's desire for independence, economic stability, or rebuilding her life after divorce in a context where opportunities at home are limited. Although the level of initial vulnerability is lower in such cases, structural constraints—parental control, economic instability, and the stigma of divorce—continue to shape the boundaries of decision-making. In these trajectories, agency takes on a reflexive character: women themselves determine the direction, goals, and strategy of their mobility.

Economically compelled migration occupies a distinct place within this category. Here, the move is primarily a response to acute financial pressure: debts, unstable income, or the failure of male migration projects. M.'s story (1978, Uzbekistan) is illustrative—her husband's unsuccessful attempt to migrate to Germany left the family in debt. M. states clearly:

"We needed to earn money, that's why we came."

Her vulnerability arises from debt dependency and structural inequality, while agency is expressed in the fact that she effectively assumes the role of the main breadwinner, despite patriarchal expectations to the contrary.

Other women display autonomy even more explicitly. G. (1976, Kyrgyzstan) emphasizes that her decision was firmly individual:

"I didn't come to Moscow to work. I came just to look around... and then I stayed."

In such biographies, migration becomes a personal project rather than one anchored in family strategies or control.

In some cases, autonomy takes shape gradually, as a consequence of earlier experiences of vulnerability. Z. (1987, Tajikistan), having reached Russia after fleeing violence, slowly built financial independence, which became the basis of her agency:

"I want to be independent... your own money is your own money."

Despite persistent risks—low pay, dependence on intermediaries, informal marital arrangements—her trajectory reflects a shift from a life under control to a search for stability and the ability to manage her own life.

These cases show that autonomous migration is not synonymous with complete liberation. Rather, it is a form of agency exercised under conditions of significant uncertainty and limited resources, yet grounded in personal choice, the pursuit of economic independence, and the desire to expand one's life possibilities. Women's agency remains embedded in patriarchal norms, but their ability to reinterpret and adjust their strategies points to a qualitatively different mode of action—self-directed, reflective, and oriented toward creating their own life space.

4.6. The Woman as a "Pioneer" of Migration

Although this strategy partially overlaps with autonomous migration and can be viewed as a subtype of it, it warrants separate attention because it demonstrates a distinct form of agency: the woman initiates and carries out the move, opening a migration pathway for the entire family. The case of F. (1984, Tajikistan) is particularly illustrative. After the family's first move to Russia, they returned to their home country, yet F. repeatedly traveled to Moscow on her own—first alone, later with her children. Finding herself in Moscow "as if on vacation," she received a job offer and persuaded her husband to relocate, grounding her argument in the need for their children to receive a Russian education:

"I was more focused on moving forward... so the children could get a proper education."

Her agency is visible in her strategic decision-making and her ability to justify the move; her vulnerability lies in conflicts within her husband's extended family and in the uncertainty created by repeated moves.

In such cases, the woman becomes the initiator and the first

migrant—the one who opens the route for the family and assumes the initial risks of relocation. Yet her actions remain embedded in patriarchal hierarchies and require ongoing negotiations with husbands and senior relatives. In other words, this strategy brings together a high degree of initiative and significant structural vulnerability, rooted in the need to legitimize her decision within the boundaries of family norms.

4.7. Repeat Migration

The informants' life stories show that the decision to migrate is rarely a one-time event. Many women leave and return multiple times, gradually developing their own reference points and balancing family obligations with long-term goals. Repeat migration functions as an adaptive process in which women's agency is expressed through their ability to reassess their circumstances and choose new trajectories.

The cyclical moves of F. (1984, Tajikistan) illustrate this dual process: her capacity to evaluate her life prospects independently coexists with legal instability, emotional exhaustion, and pressure from her husband's extended family. Similarly, in the case of S. (1986, Tajikistan), external constraints—specifically, a re-entry ban—interrupt her migration path without diminishing her desire for the stability she associates with life in a Russian city. Decisions to migrate again are often made in response to children's needs—health, schooling, language environment.

Thus, repeat migration emerges as a strategy through which women pursue stability, education, professional development, and emotional safety. Women's agency is expressed in their ability to revise plans, recalibrate family strategies, and orient themselves toward long-term objectives, especially those concerning their children's well-being.

5. Discussion

Analysis of the life stories of migrant women from Central Asia shows that women's mobility takes shape within a complex configuration of institutional vulnerability, family norms, and structural constraints, while also unfolding within a space of multiple forms of agency. The

pre-migration context, permeated by patriarchal expectations, does not merely serve as a backdrop for decisions about migration; it defines the range of acceptable life scenarios and, consequently, the motives and possibilities of migration trajectories. Yet women's agency does not disappear in these settings: it takes on specific forms embedded in patriarchal expectations, economic circumstances, and family hierarchies. These observations align with Kandiyoti's (1988) concept of the "patriarchal bargain," which emphasizes that women's strategies—including migration—are shaped as responses to systems of constraint and dependency. For many, migration therefore becomes not an independent initiative but a reaction to crises in family relations, violence, economic pressure, or the collapse of previous systems of control.

Despite these structural constraints, we observe varying degrees of autonomy in women's migration-related decision-making—from following a husband's lead to initiating and organizing the family's entire move. In the "where the husband is, there is the wife" strategy, women's agency is expressed through their interpretation and moral evaluation of men's decisions. Although the impetus for relocation often comes from husbands or their senior relatives, it is frequently women who gently—or insistently—steer family mobility. This duality corresponds with the analytical framework of *gendered geographies of power* (Pessar & Mahler, 2001), which emphasizes that gendered agency is produced within multilayered structures of power—from family relations to transnational contexts. Women act within systems where social roles both constrain their opportunities and serve as resources through which influence over family decisions can be exercised.

Negotiated forms of migration—from subtle expressions of initiative to more forceful demands to end long-term separation—demonstrate that family decisions are neither fully collective nor fully individual. Women define the problem, initiate conversations, and often take responsibility for the practical organization of the move, yet their capacity to act is limited by material dependence, social criticism, and the need to adhere to norms of loyalty. This hybrid configuration confirms that women's agency in migration develops within, rather than outside, traditional gender and family roles.

Kin-based migration plays a particularly important role. It demonstrates that being embedded in kinship networks makes mobility both

possible and socially legitimate, especially for unmarried young women. Here, patriarchal structures both constrain and support movement: the presence of older relatives provides oversight and safety, while simultaneously establishing obligations and requiring the family's approval.

The most extreme form of vulnerability that pushes women into migration is violence. In these situations, relocation becomes a forced measure aimed at preserving physical safety, ending abuse, or avoiding a forced marriage. Women act under conditions of total constraint, yet it is precisely these constraints that create a narrow but vital possibility of escape. Flight becomes a way of asserting a minimal right to life and dignity, even though it entails profound risks, emotional losses, and social stigma.

Autonomous migration represents a more explicit form of individual decision-making. It is linked both to economic pressures (debt, unstable income, the failure of husbands' migration projects) and to women's desire to rebuild their lives after divorce or in contexts with limited prospects at home. Agency here is reflexive: women often define the direction of movement and the means of achieving financial independence on their own. However, even in autonomous migration, patriarchal norms continue to shape women's choices, restricting the range of options available to them.

Special attention should be given to cases in which a woman becomes the "pioneer" of migration—initiating and carrying out the move first, thereby opening the route for the entire family. This strategy combines a high degree of initiative with the need for constant negotiation and legitimation of her actions before her husband and senior relatives. As a result, a distinctive model of female leadership in migration emerges—strategic, yet still embedded in patriarchal structures.

Repeat migration highlights the dynamic and processual nature of migration trajectories. Women leave and return multiple times, adapting to legal, economic, and family-related changes, balancing obligations with long-term goals. These cases support the argument in migration research that migration is not a single act but a sequence of decisions made over time and revised as circumstances evolve (Bakewell, 2010; Carling & Schewel, 2018). Within this dynamic, the resilience of women becomes especially visible, as does their ability to adjust strategies and maintain a

focus on ensuring safety and well-being for their children.

Taken together, these observations reveal a multilayered and heterogeneous structure of women's agency in migration decision-making. Women's agency does not stand in opposition to vulnerability; rather, it coexists with it, taking diverse forms—from negotiated participation to forced escape, from initiative rooted in tradition to autonomous choice. Women manage to transform patriarchal roles and family obligations into resources, reinterpret norms, and construct new trajectories that lead toward economic stability, safety, and expanded life opportunities.

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