

The Question of Return among Turkmen Educational Migrants

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After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Turkmenistan suffered through several rounds of sweeping reform to its educational system, beginning under president Saparmurat Niyazov. In 1995, the Latin alphabet replaced the Cyrillic in writing the Turkmen language, leaving a severe shortage of Turkmen-language educational materials. Between 1999 and 2003, the final year of secondary education (10th grade) was eliminated from all schools, university undergraduate education was cut from 5 to 4 years, and all postgraduate programs were eliminated. The government also introduced a requirement that students complete a 2-year internship in their field of study prior to applying to university (Turkmenistan Helsinki Initiative 2004). Proficiency in Turkmen was required for university applicants, providing a further barrier to the many students who attended Russian-language secondary schools. Turkmenistan elected a new president (Gurbanguly Bedrimuhamedov) in 2007, and the new government quickly undertook its own set of educational reforms, lengthening years of education and rescinding the internship requirement.

In this unstable environment, the incentive for Turkmen citizens to engage in international education migration was clearly strong. Indeed, out-migration rates from Turkmenistan were quite high through the 1990s and 2000s, although the proportion of those migrants who could be called educational migrants is uncertain. Under both the Niyazov and Bedrimuhamedov regimes, the Turkmen government has been actively hostile to educational migration. Although the Niyazov-era declaration that foreign degrees were invalid for state employment has been rescinded, foreign degrees still require “certification” to be valid in Turkmenistan, and the restrictions on which degrees can be certified are substantial (Chronicles

of Turkmenistan 2014). Given the active hostility to educational migration by the Turkmen government, we might expect that educational migrants from Turkmenistan would have little desire to return home. Surprisingly, in the limited research that is available, this does not seem to be the case. Turkmen citizens who obtain higher education not only express interest in returning home, but actually do so (Hofmann 2018; Turkmen Advisory Council 2012).

In this paper, I use data from an exploratory online survey of Turkmen citizens with higher education to examine what factors predict returning versus remaining among Turkmen educational migrants. I ask whether those who return are being pulled back to Turkmenistan or pushed out of their countries of education, and whether the unique context of Turkmenistan means that the predictors of return are different for Turkmen migrants than for other educational migrants. In addition, the previous research on educational migration from Turkmenistan indicates substantial gender differences in the desire to return, with women more likely to remain in their countries of education. Therefore, I center gender differences in the question of return.

Literature Review

While theories of international migration tend to pay much more attention to the initial act of migration rather than the possibility of return, there has been substantial research on the principal mechanisms driving return migration. The factors behind return migration can be categorized into four groups: failure to integrate into the destination society, preferences for the home country, achievement of a savings objective, and improved opportunities in the home country because of experience gained abroad (Dumont and Spielvogel 2008). Much research has focused on economic integration, and shown that migrants with relatively low levels of income are more likely to return home (Borjas 1989; Constant and Massey 2002, 2003; Saarela and Scott

2017). But earnings alone do not fully explain why some migrants stay and some return, and growing attention is being paid to measures of cultural integration and relative preferences for the home country versus the destination country (Saarela and Scott 2017). Family ties are of course important, with migrants whose spouses or children remain in the home country much more likely to return (Portes 2007). Return migration, like other migration processes, is also gendered. Because masculinity is tied to patriotism, male migrants can feel stronger ties and greater obligations to their home countries, and these ties are intensified when men feel that a return to their homeland implies a regaining of “lost” masculinity (Grima 2017).

Most studies of return migration focus on labor migrants, and educational migration in general is an under-studied area of migration. In theory, educational migrants should be more likely to return than other types of migrant; they often hold visas, or study under bilateral agreements, that require their return upon completion of the degree. Nevertheless, many students aspire to use their international education as a means to remain in the destination country (or as a stepping stone for further international migration) (Findlay et al. 2017). And many students change their goals during their education, as a result of the personal growth that occurs through education and the transition to adulthood (Basford and van Riemsdijk 2017).

Although there is not enough research to make generalizations about what factors motivate educational migrants to return, case studies offer some intriguing ideas. Field of study appeared to motivate the desire to return home in a study of international students in Norway, with those studying international health more likely to find jobs in their (developing) home countries, and those studying in social science, humanities, and basic sciences feeling that they would have few career options if they returned home (Basford and van Riemsdijk 2017). Latvian students felt that a sense of patriotic duty, deliberately cultivated by the Latvian government,

pulled them to return home (Lulle and Buzinska 2017). Exposure to global career opportunities, which is more likely in some destination countries than in others, also shaped students' desires to return home (Findlay et al. 2017). A study of Indian students abroad found that men faced more parental pressure to return home than did women (Sondhi and King 2017).

As discussed above, the question of return migration is particularly challenging in Turkmenistan, where the government is actively hostile to citizens returning with foreign degrees. Nevertheless, Turkmen students abroad do feel a pull to come home, and many—especially men—do so. But we have little idea what factors motivate some students to remain abroad while others return home. Are those who return pushed out of their destination countries, or pulled back to Turkmenistan? How is the process different for men and women? In the remainder of this paper, I will examine the reasons that university-educated Turkmen men and women give for returning (or not returning) home, and the push and pull factors that predict return migration.

Data and Methods

Data for this analysis come from a survey of 107 Turkmen citizens who completed higher education, both in Turkmenistan and abroad, between 2000 and 2016 (see Hofmann 2018). This survey was conducted by the author and a Turkmen national who has chosen to remain anonymous. Due to the lack of previous research on migrants from Turkmenistan, this survey was necessarily exploratory in nature, and utilized a snowball sampling strategy. Respondents were recruited through emails to personal contacts and by posting recruitment materials on social media pages geared towards Turkmen internet users (using Facebook and *Vkontakte*). Recruitment was especially oriented towards social media groups for Turkmen abroad, in order

to secure an oversample of educational migrants. Although certainly not a representative sample, the recruitment strategy did produce a diverse group of respondents, including a relatively equal number of men and women, respondents hailing from multiple regions of Turkmenistan, and graduates of higher educational institutions in more than 10 different countries.

The survey was conducted online in February 2016, using Qualtrics software. The survey instrument included 31 questions covering the respondent's educational and migration background, employment history, opinions on quality of life and career opportunities in Turkmenistan, and basic demographic characteristics. The instrument was made available in Russian, Turkmen, and English. The survey was pilot tested among six Turkmen test respondents, and revised according to their feedback, before recruitment began. Of the 107 people who responded to the survey, nine respondents did not identify in which country they received their highest degree, and an additional 5 did not provide their gender. These responses are excluded from the analyses, resulting in a working sample of 93 (41 men and 52 women). Given the target population, the sample is not surprisingly young (ranging from 25 to 44 years of age), but includes people who graduated throughout the period of interest.

Results

The majority of survey respondents (75 out of 98) were educated outside of Turkmenistan. Figure 1 shows the post-graduation trajectories of the 75 men and women educational migrants. The figure shows clear gender differences in post-graduation trajectories. The majority of men (nearly 80%) returned to Turkmenistan after graduation, while only 25% of women returned. In this sample, at least, staying versus returning seems to be a decision that is made by the time of graduation. The vast majority of both men and women who returned to

Turkmenistan did so in the same year that they completed their degree. Two women and four men did remain for some time (and were employed) in their country of education, but all of them returned to Turkmenistan within four years of graduation. Not all of those who returned to Turkmenistan stayed there; three men and one woman re-migrated after returning, one back to the country of education, and three to new countries. Given that this is a fairly young sample, the respondents have ample opportunity to both return and re-migrate in the future, but in general the decision to remain or not in the country of education appears to be made at a single point in time, rather than being a process.

Figure 1. Post-graduation migration trajectories of men and women educational migrants



In this survey, the subset of respondents (43) who remained outside Turkmenistan were asked whether they intended to return, and why or why not (unfortunately, those who did return were not asked why they returned). As Figure 2 shows, the majority of men who remained abroad (over 60%) stated that they intended to eventually return to Turkmenistan, with another 25% considering returning, and only 10% (2 respondents) expressing no desire to return. Women had more mixed responses and were about equally divided between those who intended to return, those who were considering return, and those who did not intend to return. Figure 3 shows the reasons for wanting to return to Turkmenistan, among men and women who expressed that they

either intended to or were considering returning, and gender differences are apparent here as well. Men were drawn home by family and career opportunities, while women are drawn home by a combination of family ties and a sense that quality of life in Turkmenistan is higher. When asked about reasons that would prevent them from returning to Turkmenistan (Figure 4), men and women expressed a similar sense that the political situation at home and a lack of career opportunities would keep them abroad, but women were also kept abroad by family ties there (as will be shown later, substantially more women than men have family ties in their country of education).

Figure 2. Men’s and women’s interest in returning to Turkmenistan

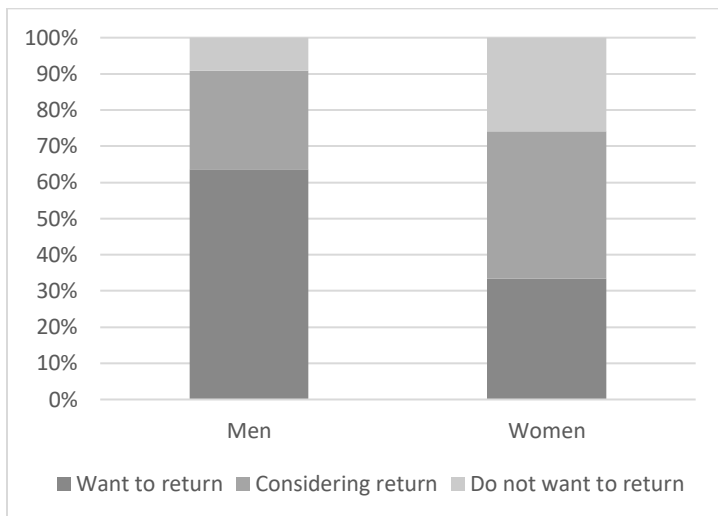


Figure 3. Men’s and women’s reasons for wanting to return to Turkmenistan

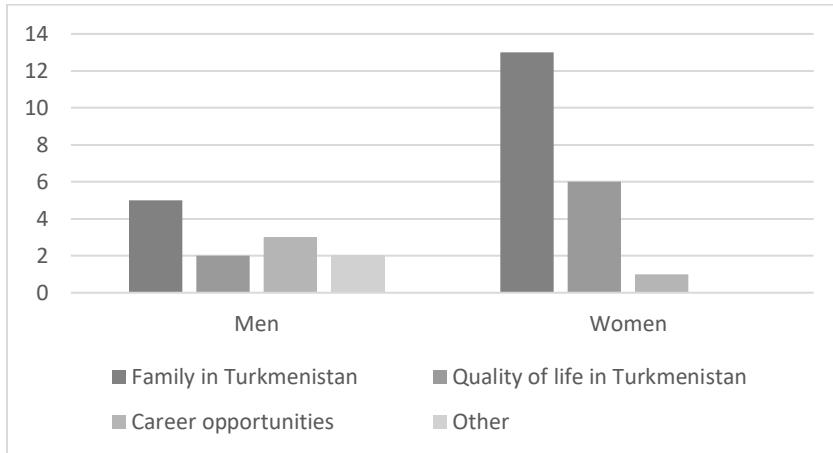
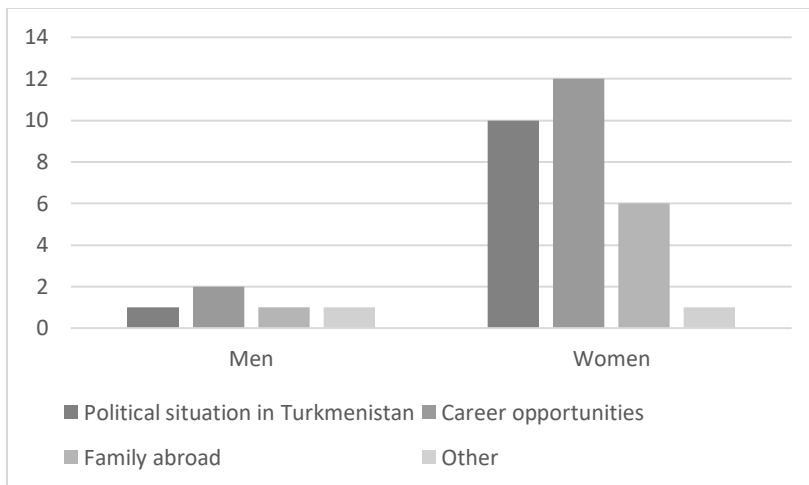


Figure 4. Men’s and women’s reasons for wanting to remain abroad



Given that many of the respondents who expressed an intention to return to Turkmenistan had been abroad for more than five years (in a few cases, more than a decade), and that most people who did return did so soon after graduation, it is not clear that these intentions to return to Turkmenistan will result in migration. However, they do show important gender differences in men’s and women’s emotional attachment to their home country. Interestingly, for men and women who do feel a pull to return to their home country, the reasons are fairly similar, but women are much less likely to feel that pull.

Table 1 shows some of the educational, demographic, and values characteristics of educational migrants who stayed abroad versus those who returned, with never-migrants (those who received their higher education in Turkmenistan) shown for comparative purposes. As demonstrated above, there are many more men among the returnees than the stayers. There are also few men among the never-migrants, indicating that men may be both more likely to go abroad for their education and more likely to return when they do so. In many respects, stayers and returnees look fairly similar. Most graduated fairly recently (since 2008), unlike never migrants who are substantially older. The distribution of countries of education is similar among both stayers and returnees, with the majority of both groups having studied in CIS states, and a sizeable minority in “Western” countries. Returnees are somewhat over-represented in “other” countries, a category that includes South Korea and Middle Eastern countries such as the UAE. Both returnees and stayers are much more likely to be from Ashgabat (the capital city) than are never-migrants. Finally, a similar percentage of stayers and returnees were unemployed during the first three months after graduation (very few respondents in this sample were unemployed after graduation for any significant length of time).

In other respects, clear differences appear between stayers and returnees. Returnees are very likely to have a spouse in Turkmenistan, while stayers are likely to either have a spouse with them abroad, or be unmarried. Nevertheless, 17% of stayers have a spouse in Turkmenistan. Fields of education are somewhat different between the two groups, with returnees more likely to have studied business, law, science, and engineering—a difference that is not surprising, given the gender distribution of these two groups. Stayers and returnees also have somewhat different opinions as to living and working conditions in Turkmenistan, with returnees generally more positive. They are more likely to describe quality of life in Turkmenistan as “good” or “very

good”, and less likely to believe that connections are required to get a job in Turkmenistan or that there are few career opportunities in Turkmenistan overall.

Table 1. Characteristics of stayers, returnees, and never-migrants

	Stayers	Returnees	Never migrants
% male	31.6	66.7	39.1
Year of highest degree			
2000-2004	15.0	6.3	63.6
2005-2008	25.0	28.1	13.6
2009-2016	60.0	65.6	22.7
Country of education			
Turkmenistan	0	0	100.0
CIS	59.5	40.6	0
U.S., Australia, or EU	21.4	28.1	0
Turkey	2.4	9.4	0
China	7.1	0	0
Other	9.5	21.8	0
Marital status			
Married, spouse in TKM	14.3	93.3	87.0
Married, spouse abroad	60.0	3.3	0
Unmarried	25.7	3.3	13.0
Field of Education			
Humanities/Arts	23.1	15.6	17.4
Education	11.9	3.1	17.4
Business/law/ social science	32.6	46.9	21.7
Science/ engineering	16.3	31.2	34.8
Other	16.3	3.1	8.7
% born in Ashgabat	60.5	68.8	43.5
% believing job opportunities in TKM are better for those with foreign degrees	25.6	20	17.4
% thinking quality of life in Turkmenistan is high	63.2	80.0	91.3
% agreeing that you need connections to get a job in Turkmenistan	61.5	53.3	30.4
% agreeing that there are few career opportunities in TKM	26.3	10.0	4.4
% unemployed at graduation	17.1	15.6	4.4
N	43	32	23

To understand whether any of these differences between stayers and returnees are associated with the probability of return, I conducted multivariate regression analyses. Because returning versus staying appears to be a single decision (the majority of respondents either returned to Turkmenistan immediately after graduation and remained there, or did not return to Turkmenistan at all), I operationalize staying versus returning as a dichotomous variable, and conduct logistic regression analyses. In order to capture both the interesting in returning and the actual fact of returning, I test two different operationalizations of “return”. In the first set of models in Table 2, educational migrants who had ever returned to Turkmenistan by the time of the survey are coded as 1, and those who remained in their country of education are coded as 0 (never migrants are not included in these analyses). In the second set of models, I code educational migrants who had ever returned to Turkmenistan or who remained abroad but expressed an intention to return as 1, and those who both remained in their country of education and did not wish to return to Turkmenistan as 0.

The models in table 2 are divided into “push factor” models and “pull factor” models.¹ Both push and pull models control for sex and year of most recent degree. Push factors are conditions or characteristics that could make staying in the country of education either more or less desirable. I hypothesize that:

- Western countries will be more desirable destinations, thus encouraging migrants to stay.
- Having a spouse in the destination country will make the migrant more likely to want to stay.
- Majoring in a STEM field will give the migrant better job opportunities in the destination country, thus motivating them to stay.

¹ Because the sample size of this survey is small, the number of variables that can be included in any one model is limited, so including both push and pull factors in the same model is not feasible.

- Being unemployed at graduation with push migrants to return to Turkmenistan.

Pull factors, on the other hand, are factors that would make living in Turkmenistan either more or less desirable for educational migrants. I hypothesize that:

- Migrants with a spouse in Turkmenistan will be pulled to return home.
- Migrants born in Ashgabat (as the most economically developed city in the country) will be more likely to return.
- Migrants with more positive views of life and career opportunities in Turkmenistan will be pulled to return home.

Focusing first on the findings where return is conceptualized as a completed act, we find that most of the hypotheses are not supported. Being male and having received one's degree more recently are both associated with a higher likelihood of returning, and neither effect is attenuated by the inclusion of push and pull factors. In other words, men are more likely to return, and this greater likelihood of returning is not explained by the countries men go to, the type of education they receive, their family ties, or their opinions on Turkmenistan. Contrary to the hypotheses, country of education makes little difference for return, with migrants in Western countries no more likely than those in the CIS to return. Field of education also has unexpected effects, with those who study education least likely to return, and those who study STEM slightly more likely to return than those who study Arts or Humanities. Being unemployed at graduation has limited effect on the likelihood of return, possibly because duration of unemployment in this sample is so short. The only hypothesis that receives clear support is the prediction that having a spouse abroad will make return less likely.

Table 2. Coefficients and standard errors of logistic regression models predicting return

	Returning vs. staying		Wanting to return vs. staying with no wish to return	
	Push	Pull	Push	Pull
Male	.79	.90	3.30	.74
	(.83)	(1.00)	(1.56)	(1.46)
Year of last degree (ref=2000-2004)				
2005-2008	1.45	1.70	-2.80	-4.52
	(1.35)	(1.11)	(1.83)	(2.77)
2009-2016	.97	3.10	-2.29	-2.24
	(1.09)	(1.63)	(1.83)	(1.99)
Country of education (ref=CIS)				
US, Europe, Australia	.09		-.22	
	(1.00)		(1.31)	
Other	.58		-.65	
	(.90)		(1.35)	
Spouse in country of education	-3.72		-4.93	
	(1.18)		(1.53)	
Field of education (ref=Humanities/Arts)				
Education	-1.23		-.76	
	(1.49)		(1.65)	
Business/Law/Social Science	.65		-.39	
	(1.00)		(1.33)	
Science/Engineering	.28		-.81	
	(1.15)		(1.77)	
Other	.27		.37	
	(1.77)		(2.34)	
Unemployed at graduation	.35		4.69	
	(1.12)		(1.81)	
Spouse in Turkmenistan		5.75		8.69
		(1.56)		(3.23)
Born in Ashgabat		-.95		-4.35
		(1.38)		(2.63)
Job opportunities for foreign degrees		.65		2.35
		(1.41)		(2.50)
High quality of life in Turkmenistan		.43		2.59
		(1.32)		(1.79)
Need connections for job in Turkmenistan		-.46		-4.52
		(1.46)		(2.69)
Few career opportunities in Turkmenistan		-2.36		-.00
		(1.61)		(2.00)
Constant	-1.12	-5.58	3.93	4.07
	(1.40)	(2.30)	(2.23)	(3.04)

Log likelihood	-27.53	-17.47	-16.73	-9.48
Pseudo-R2	.39	.61	.58	.76
N	65	65	64	64

The hypotheses related to pull factors receive more support. Having a spouse in Turkmenistan is strongly predictive of return. Believing that one's foreign degree will be valuable in Turkmenistan, and that quality of life in the country is good leads to a higher likelihood of return, while believing that one needs connections to get a job in Turkmenistan, or that career opportunities in Turkmenistan are few, makes return less likely. Being born in Ashgabat, however, makes return less likely.

Moving to the models that conceptualize return according to both desire and action, we find somewhat different results. Men are still more likely to either return or wish to return, but in these models, migrants with more recent degrees are less likely to return or wish to return. This finding indicates that the wish to return is tied to a sense of patriotism or nostalgia, but not necessarily likely to result in actually returning. When wish to return is included, the effects of country of education are small, but in the expected direction, with those who studied in the CIS more likely to return or want to return to Turkmenistan. Results for field of education are somewhat different, with those who studied Humanities and Arts most likely to want to return, and other groups less likely. The effects of being unemployed at graduation on the wish to return are much greater in magnitude. The negative effect of being born in Ashgabat on return is also more pronounced.

Conclusions

Because these data come from a small, exploratory survey, the strength of the conclusions that we can draw from them is necessarily limited. Nevertheless, these analyses

highlight several important characteristics of return migration from Turkmenistan that are worthy of further attention. First, for many educational migrants, education abroad is not a stepping stone toward more permanent educational migration, but among those who do remain after graduation, they are likely to remain for the long term (if not permanently). Migrants who return tend to do so quickly after graduation. In spite of the Turkmen government's hostility toward educational migration Turkmen educational migrants may actually be more likely to return home than other groups of educational migrants, although this data does not allow me to conclude this with any certainty.

Second, Turkmen educational migrants are largely pulled back to Turkmenistan. Although previous studies expressed concern that difficulty integrating into the local labor market, particularly for those with degrees outside STEM fields, would deter educational migrants from returning to Turkmenistan (Turkmen Advisory Council 2012, Hofmann 2018), this does not seem to be the case. Having a degree in Education specifically may deter return migration, but Arts, Humanities, and Social Science degrees do not. Instead, return migration is strongly predicted by family ties and by opinions about the quality of life and career opportunities in Turkmenistan. The (surprisingly) positive views that respondents held about life in their country seem to explain a great deal about their high rates of return.

Finally, gender differences in both return and the desire to return are important and not easily explained away by gender differences in educational choices and trajectories. Men seem simply to be more pulled to their home country. The masculine connotations of patriotism described by Vlase (2013) may be part of this story. Another part may be related to gender discrimination in Kyrgyzstan. Women may well feel that, as women, they will face

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discrimination in their home labor market, and that, as highly educated and internationally traveled women, they will face discrimination in the local marriage market.