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The Migration of Ukrainian Women to Italy and the Impact on Their Family in Ukraine

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Abstract

This paper contains the results of a research project exploring how Ukrainian women's work as domestics in Italy modifies the structure, roles and relationships in the families they left behind in Ukraine. The main research question is: *What is the impact of the migration of Ukrainian women to Italy on their family life in Ukraine?*

This issue has largely been neglected in Ukraine, as researchers pay more attention to the consequences of labour migration (such as "brain drain"), the ageing population and the increase of prices of consumer goods. I also believe that my research fills a certain gap in that most of the research on the impact of female migration on family life is conducted in the countries of destination by western scholars.

In order to answer my research question, I used qualitative methods. I conducted and analysed fifteen semi-structured interviews with women who used to work in Italy as domestics, men and children whose wives and mothers are still abroad and two NGO project managers who have dealt with the problems of Ukrainian female migrants.

The paper argues that the migration of Ukrainian women to Italy often changes family arrangements, challenges the images of mothers and fathers, and shifts traditional gender roles within the family.

The study concludes with the main findings, which show that female labour migration to Italy often causes a shift in gender roles: women become the breadwinners and husbands usually take over the household responsibilities. However, although most fathers can manage the domestic work, they usually fail to perform the 'invisible' work, i.e. provide adequate support to their children. As a result, their children may experience emotional distress, loneliness and insecurity. After coming back from Italy, most women become more financially independent and their social status may rise, but they often have to overcome problems in communication with their husbands and children and cope with feelings of alienation and misunderstanding.

Introduction

During the last ten to fifteen years, the topics of migration and work abroad have become very relevant for Ukrainians. Because of lower paying and unstable jobs in Ukraine, a lot of women took on the responsibility to provide for their families and went abroad to work. As Italy became wealthier, it experienced an increase in the demand for domestic workers, which encouraged many Ukrainian women to travel and work there – albeit illegally – as such.

According to the Western Ukrainian Center "Women's Perspectives", an NGO that interrogated 441 Ukrainian labour migrants in Italy in 2003, most female migrants were 36 to 45 years old, and many were highly educated. Thirty-seven percent of their informants had university degrees, 36 percent held college degrees and 22 percent had completed their secondary education. Before going to Italy, 56 percent of the women worked as specialists, 21 percent held "regular" jobs, 9 percent were unemployed and 3 percent were students, housewives or entrepreneurs.¹ Ninety-four percent of the women interviewed had left their children behind in Ukraine, usually with the children's fathers. In cases where both parents left Ukraine, 66 percent of the children stayed with their grandparents and 33 percent lived alone.²

Reviewing the literature, I have noticed that authors talking about women's migration very often use the term "invisibility". Migrant women are invisible in the scholarship on international migration and under the laws of the receiving countries³; I also think that the emotional work that they do in their own families

1 Women's Perspective" (Western Ukrainian Center) B: Prychyny ta Naslidky roboty Ukrainskyh Zhinok v Italii (Reasons and Consequences of the Work of Ukrainian Women in Italy), unpublished report, Lviv: 2003.

2 Women's Perspective" (Western Ukrainian Center) B: Prychyny ta Naslidky roboty Ukrainskyh Zhinok v Italii (Reasons and Consequences of the Work of Ukrainian Women in Italy), unpublished report, Lviv: 2003.

3 Orsini-Jones, Marina and Gattullo, Francesca: Migrant Women in Italy: National Trends and Local Perspectives, in:

and the problems resulting from female migration are also largely invisible. Although Ukrainian scholars point out economic and demographic problems like the loss of qualified workers, increasing prices of goods, and the decrease in population,⁴ they do not pay much attention to the impact of the migration of women on the lives of their Ukrainian families. Moreover, scholars rarely address the gender aspect in the issues connected with migration and transnational households in particular. I have also found that most of the research projects about the impact of migration on family life were conducted in the countries of destination.⁵ And even when research is conducted in the sending countries, it is organised and interpreted by scientists who represent western scholarship.⁶

The key question of my paper is: *What is the impact of the migration of Ukrainian women to Italy on their family life in Ukraine?* I have conducted qualitative research on families in which the fathers take care of the children in Ukraine while the mothers are working in Italy and documented the resulting changes in the families. Very often, women become alienated from their families, because by leaving home, they are departing from traditionally constructed gender roles. Meanwhile, their transnational family may go through certain transformations during their absence. Therefore, I argue that the migration of Ukrainian women to Italy alters family arrangements, challenges the images of mothers and fathers, and reveals the constructed gender roles within the family. Specifically, it reveals the invisible emotional work that is a major part of women's roles as mothers and wives.

In order to answer this question, I went to Ukraine and conducted interviews with eight women who had worked as domestics in Italy for several years, as well as three men and two children whose wives and mothers currently work as domestics in Italy. I also held two interviews with the project manager and lawyer for the NGO "Women's Perspectives" that deals with the problems of Ukrainian female migrants (see Appendix). Most of my female interviewees were highly educated and had worked as teachers, engineers or military employees before their migration. Working as domestics in Italy, these women experienced "contradictory class mobility".⁷ On the one hand, their financial situation improved and they could provide for their families much better than before their migration to Italy. On the other hand, the women's social status decreased, as they had to work as domestics and do psychologically and physically demanding jobs, mainly looking after elderly people and cleaning.

On the basis of my interviews, I will first look at the dynamic of gender roles in the family before migration, during the women's absence and after the women's return from Italy. Secondly, I will discuss the emotional reaction of mothers and children to the separation. Then I will focus on the actual impact of the mothers' migration on the children left behind. Lastly, I will try to reveal the influence of female migration on spousal relationships.

Floya, Anthias and Gabriella, Lazaridis (ed.): *Gender and Migration in Southern Europe. Women on the Move*, Oxford and New York, 2000, pp.125–144.

4 Malynovska, Olena: *Problema Zovnishnoji Migraciji v Ukrajinu* (The Problem of the External Migration in Ukraine), in magazine *Ji*, November 11, 2003. On <<http://www.ji-magazine.lviv.ua/seminary/2003/sem11-11.htm>> last accessed 06.05.2005; Ombudsman of Ukraine: *Stan Dotrymannya ta Zahystu Prav Gromadyan Ukrainy za Kordonom* (The Situation with the Protection of Rights of Ukrainian Citizens Abroad) Undated report available on <<http://www.ombudsman.kiev.ua/>> Last accessed on 05.26.2005.

5 See: Andall, Jacqueline: *Gender, migration and domestic service: the politics of black women in Italy*, Aldershot, Hampshire, England: Ashgate, c2000; Morokvasic M.: *Birds of Passage are also Women*, in *International Migration Review* vol. 18, no. 4 (1984) 886–907; Raijman, Rebeca, Schammah-Gesser, Silvina and Kemp, Andriana: *International Migration, Domestic Work, and Care Work. Undocumented Latina Migrants in Israel*, in *Gender and Society*, vol.17 No5, October 2003, pp.727–749.

6 See: Parrenas, Rhacel Salazar: *Servants of globalization: women, migration and domestic work*: Stanford, Calif. : Stanford University Press, 2001; Gamburd, Michele Ruth: *The kitchen spoon's handle: transnationalism and Sri Lanka's migrant housemaids*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000.

7 Parrenas, Rhacel Salazar: *Servants of globalization: women, migration and domestic work*: Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2001, p.180.

Gender roles in the transnational family

Female migration often changes family roles in transnational households. Because women go to work abroad and become the main breadwinners, their husbands often have to do all of the housework. The results of my research did not support Parrenas's argument that the husbands failed to perform 'women's duties'.⁸ My three informants, Stepan, Roman and Dmytro, did a good job taking care of the children, cleaning and cooking. And although all of them traditionally considered housework to be a women's job, it became obvious from their stories that men can learn to do housework very well.

For example, I came to interview Roman at his home, warning him about my visit just fifteen minutes beforehand. I was surprised to see how clean and comfortable it was. Before I told him the subject of my thesis, he went out to give his nine-year-old daughter a sweater so that she would not get cold. When she came back, Roman heated the food for her and asked her to wash her hands and eat. It seemed that Roman had successfully taken over his wife's responsibilities in child care and doing household chores, even though he had rarely done them before. As he told me:

Before my wife's journey I only earned money and did 'male' jobs – repairing and so on. My wife did all the 'women's work', as she did not go to work. It was very hard for me, especially during the first three months after she left; I could not do several things at the same time like women do. You know.... women can cook something in the kitchen, vacuum the carpet in the living room and wash clothes in the bathroom at the same time. And they do everything fine. Now I can do it as well. (Roman, fifteen-year-old son and six-year-old daughter)

This example indicates that even though men take over women's responsibilities, the stereotype about the 'female' nature of these tasks persists. Despite the stereotype, some of the husbands I interviewed had started to understand and perform women's duties quite successfully. This was true even in regard to nuances, which are often not considered to be work at all. Yet even a successful swap of gender roles does not preclude the emergence of psychological problems. In cases where the wife becomes the main breadwinner and the husband has to stay home and do the housework, his dignity, self-respect and masculinity can be threatened.⁹

In order to reaffirm their masculinity, men develop different patterns of behaviour as well as ways to justify it to themselves and others. According to Gamburd,¹⁰ men preserve their masculinity through "employment, wealth, political authority, marriage, and alcohol consumption". From the interviews I had with both men and women, a number of the husbands' strategies came to light, including preserving financial independence from their wives by searching for a job that would provide an income comparable to their wives' wages in Italy, and having relationships with other women.

I agree with Gamburd that migration challenges and changes gender roles and images.¹¹ However, my interviews seemed to indicate that this change is just a temporary one, or at least in some cases, the subjects wished it were so. All three men told me that after their wives come back, they will become the main breadwinners again and their wives will stay at home and do the housework. Such a shift had already happened in the family of Galyna, who, after returning from Italy, resumed all the responsibilities of a housewife while her husband went out to earn money. She is satisfied with this situation; however, my other informant, Lena, was quite disappointed after coming back:

8 Parrenas, Rhacel Salazar: *Servants of globalization: women, migration and domestic work*: Stanford, Calif. : Stanford University Press, 2001, p.147.

9 Gamburd, Michele Ruth: *The kitchen spoon's handle: transnationalism and Sri Lanka's migrant housemaids*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000, p.175.

10 Gamburd, Michele Ruth: *The kitchen spoon's handle: transnationalism and Sri Lanka's migrant housemaids*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000, p.176.

11 Gamburd, Michele Ruth: *The kitchen spoon's handle: transnationalism and Sri Lanka's migrant housemaids*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000, p.175.

My husband and fourteen-year-old son did not suffer because I earned more money... You know ... money spoils people. They started to go to restaurants a lot, wasted money. After I came back, they passed back all my responsibilities to me, and were ready 'to sit on my head'.
(Lena, married, fourteen-year-old son)

Another set of important issues comes out here – the appreciation of the mother's sacrifice and mothering from abroad, which I will focus on in the next section.

Transnational mothering

The American gender specialists Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Grace Chang and Linda Rennie Forcey describe the idealised model of mothering as something that is presented to be “natural, universal and unchanging”. According to popular belief, the biological mother is the only person who can and indeed must perform the responsibility of child care.¹² In Ukraine, the mother is one of the key figures in the folk songs and fairy tales. Elementary school textbooks present the mother as a wise woman, the keeper of the family hearth and moral values, who raises her children, feeds them and embroiders their shirts.¹³ By contrast, the father is usually absent from this romantic scenario. Parrenas claims that traditional gender ideology, which presents mothers as the only caregivers, fuels the stress children and mothers experience as the result of separation.¹⁴

However, not all scholars think that separation necessarily has to have a negative emotional impact on children and mothers. There are debates over this issue in the relevant literature. On one hand, Erel states that most of her informants did not have negative feelings regarding the separation from their mothers.¹⁵ She refers to Tizard, who also argues that separation does not have to be traumatic for children.¹⁶ On the other hand, most authors claim that both children and mothers experience distress because of the distance.¹⁷

It is interesting that all the women with children told me that it was hard for them and their children to live without each other, whereas all three men I interviewed stated that their children were doing fine without their mothers. However, when I asked Roman if I could talk with his daughter, he refused, explaining that he did not want to traumatise her by reminding her about her mother. From my interview with Stepan, I learned that his two daughters missed their mother's love and attention as well and expressed this in their telephone conversations with her:

My wife calls home two times per week. And my girls say to her: “Mamma, we do not remember how you look any more. Please, come back home. We do not want bananas and chocolate. We want you to be with us”. But they never cry due to her absence: she told them that

12 Glenn, Evelyn Nakano, Chang, Grace and Forcey, Linda Rennie: *Mothering: ideology, experience, and agency*, New York: Routledge, 1994, p.3.

13 Gaidenko, Viktoria: “Mama washed the window frame”: Gender stereotypes in the primary school textbooks, in: *Primary education*. May, 2004 (with co-author). On <<http://vgaidenko.iatp.org.ua/bookin1.php>> Last accessed 03.14. 2005

14 Parrenas, Rhacel Salazar: *Servants of globalization: women, migration and domestic work*: Stanford, Calif. : Stanford University Press, 2001, p.143.

15 Erel, Umut: *Reconceptualizing Motherhood: Experiences of Migrant Women from Turkey Living in Germany*, in Bryceson, Deborah and Vuorela, Ulla: *The transnational family: new European frontiers and global networks*, Oxford: Berg, 2002, p.134.

16 Erel, Umut: *Reconceptualizing Motherhood: Experiences Migrant Women from Turkey Living in Germany*, in Bryceson, Deborah and Vuorela, Ulla: *The transnational family: new European frontiers and global networks*, Oxford: Berg, 2002, p.136.

17 Lan, Pei-Chia, “MAID or MADAM? Filipina Migrant Workers and the Continuity of the Domestic Labor”, *Gender and Society*, No2, April 2003, pp.187–208; Raijman, Rebeca, Schammah-Gesser, Silvina and Kemp, Andriana. “International Migration, Domestic Work, and Care Work. Undocumented Latina Migrants in Israel”, *Gender and Society*, vol.17 No5, October 2003, pp.727–749; Parrenas, Rhacel Salazar: *Servants of globalization: women, migration and domestic work*: Stanford, Calif. : Stanford University Press, 2001.

they are big girls now and they have to behave like big girls. (Stepan, three- and six-year-old daughters)

I assume that even if fathers fulfil the responsibilities of material care for their children, making sure that they do not go hungry and have clean clothes etc., men have not been socialised to provide adequate intimacy and emotional care to their children. Especially during the first months after mothers migrate, children may experience psychological distress that can later evolve into a feeling that something is missing from their lives.

It is hard enough for mothers to be separated from their children, but gender stereotypes and the image of the ideal mother may aggravate the pain and give rise to feelings of “anxiety, helplessness, loss, guilt and loneliness”.¹⁸ I also think that these feelings result from the discrepancy between the expectations that exist in Ukrainian society towards mothers and their behaviour in real life.

Besides, while working in Italy, women miss their children’s growing up, their first experiences in love, friendship etc. (To counteract this, Stepan’s wife asked him to take pictures and keep a diary of all the details of their little girls’ development.) Moreover, after coming back from Italy, women sometimes experience difficulties with their children, including communication problems, misunderstanding and estrangement.

I was in shock when I came back and did not recognise my son. I left a little teenaged boy and after my return I met an adult man. Everything was alien to me. I felt that I came from another planet and I just could not find a place for myself. I did not know what to talk about with my son, I did not know his friends, I had no idea that he already had a girlfriend. (Lena, married, 13-year-old son)

According to the Western Ukrainian Center “Women’s Perspective” project manager, Marta Chumalo, who researched Ukrainian women working in Italy, some women complain that they have become just a source of money to their families. Very often, women lose the interpersonal communication skills they had with their families. It becomes much easier for them to communicate through letters and phone calls, and however strange it may sound, some women decide to go back to Italy to improve their relations with their children.

Female migrants from Ukraine may try to compensate for their absence through expensive presents and money, although these can hardly replace their intimacy and love. Parrenas defines this mechanism as the ‘commodification of love’, because mothers are trying to replace emotional care with commodities.¹⁹ As Galyna mentioned, it is important for children to obtain both their mother’s care and material support, because without the latter, children start to feel inferior to their better-off friends. At the same time, women tend to idealise their role as mother, and none of them suggested that fathers could also do invisible emotional work while caring for the children. As a result, the children’s lives, including and their behaviour, may change substantially after their mothers migrate to Italy.

Children left behind

On the basis of my research, I discovered that most of my interviewees’ children had become more independent and mature after their mothers’ migration to Italy. First of all, they became involved in household activities, sharing with their fathers some of their mother’s previous responsibilities, or doing all of the chores if they were left alone.

18 Parrenas, Rhacel Salazar: *Servants of globalization: women, migration and domestic work*: Stanford, Calif. : Stanford University Press, 2001, p.120.

19 Parrenas, Rhacel Salazar: *Servants of globalization: women, migration and domestic work*: Stanford, Calif. : Stanford University Press, 2001, p.123.

Children left behind, especially those without the support of their fathers or other members of the extended family, often come to realise that they can rely on themselves. As a result, they begin making decisions and become more self-reliant. At the same time, some of my interviewees indicated that their children had also become more sensitive, taking offence and starting to cry in reaction to the slightest comments or remarks. In addition, some of my interviewees said that their children lacked discipline and were starting to have problems at school.

During my absence my son got spoiled and did much worse in school. After I came back from Italy his teachers complained that he did not respect anybody, came unprepared for classes and frequently had conflicts with teachers and other pupils. (Lena, married, thirteen-year-old son)

Although children usually become more independent, some children become too relaxed and lose interest in studying or 'investing' in the future. Instead, they prefer to rely on their mothers, who are always ready to provide financial support. According to one of my interviewees, who worked for forty years as a schoolteacher, in some cases, the children left behind start to use alcohol and drugs. In addition, it seems that problems with studying can be connected not only with the lack of parental control, but also with the lack of praise, encouragement and support from the father.

Spousal relationships

My next objective was to explore the impact of women's migration on their marital relations. Unfortunately, this issue is neglected even in 'western' literature and rarely mentioned in Ukrainian media or scholarly articles. My interviewees were also not very forthcoming about this topic, because it is considered to be a private sphere and therefore not easy to discuss with strangers.

However, on the basis of my interviews, I infer that women's work abroad has a particularly negative impact on relations that were already strained before the migration. Two of my four female married interviewees told me about serious tensions in their marital relations. Working abroad, women gain new experiences, become financially independent, self-confident and in extreme cases, may decide to put an end to an abusive marriage.

I went to Italy because my younger daughter was a student in the last year of high school and needed money for studying at the university. She stayed at home with her father, who always had problems with alcohol. When I left, there was nobody to control him. I called home on the weekends, but nobody picked up the phone – I knew that he was sleeping after drinking. When I came back I decided to divorce. (Kateryna, married, 17- and 23-year-old daughters)

After several years of living apart, men as well as women may feel that they have become strangers who are used to living alone, deciding everything themselves, not waiting for anybody and not having anyone wait for them. Such minor changes can result in more serious conflicts upon reunification. For example:

When I came back home I felt that everything was alien to me. My husband and son were kind of alienated. I felt that I did not know anything about their lives. I became irritated. I thought that I would go crazy. I solved our financial problems. I sent my husband money so he could improve our home. But he did not do anything. First I really regretted that I had gone to Italy. I even wanted to divorce, but then changed my mind because of our son. (Lena, 3 years in Italy)

In maintaining a long-distance relationship, it seems to me that men are usually more passive than women. And here again, the woman is the one who has to fulfil her traditional role as 'keeper of the family hearth'. For instance, Nadia told me how she tried to preserve her relationship with her husband:

The first month I called him two times per week and we spoke for half an hour. The second month we spoke only for 15 minutes. By the third month he already had nothing to say to me

and I started to initiate our conversation. I asked him different questions, was very patient. I also tried to come home more often to refresh our relationship. (Nadia, 3 years in Italy)

Unfortunately, peaceful or neutral family relations can sometimes evolve into really hostile ones. In the case of divorce, child custody becomes one of the main issues. According to Galyna Fedkovych, the lawyer for the Western Ukrainian Center “Women’s Perspective”, it is very common for husbands to exploit their wives financially, demanding huge sums of money. If a mother wants to take her child to Italy for a while, she needs to obtain permission from the father even if he is an alcoholic and neglects the child. Women often consult with the lawyer of “Women’s Perspectives” because their husbands have demanded \$1000–3000 for permission to take the children abroad.

Thus, among the main problems couples experience as a result of the wife’s work in Italy is estrangement. Still other conflicts arise because the partners are no longer used to cooperating after living alone and making decisions independently. Relations between spouses may become really hostile, and in extreme cases, the fathers may demand money for granting the mothers permission to take children abroad or threaten to seize custody of the children.

Conclusion

The main question posed in this paper was: How does the domestic work of Ukrainian women in Italy affect their family life in Ukraine? I argued that Ukrainian women’s work abroad as domestics restructures family life, challenges the images of fathers and mothers in Ukrainian families and reveals gender roles in the family, especially the invisible emotional work usually done by women.

In Ukraine, it is most often the husbands who take over household responsibilities when their wives go abroad to work. I argue that there is a shift in family roles within Ukrainian transnational families. While working in Italy as domestics, women become the main breadwinners and their husbands take over household responsibilities and child care duties. In contrast to the popular assertion that husbands fail to perform women’s work in the household, in the cases of my interviewees, the men fulfilled their wives previous duties quite successfully.

At the same time, it seems that the fathers failed to perform all the invisible emotional work that mothers usually do and in many cases did not give enough love and intimacy to their children. This can be explained by the social construct of motherhood in Ukraine, where only the biological mother is seen as the caregiver and the keeper of the family hearth. Fathers are socialised in a way that excludes them from the process of caring for their children and as a result, fathers left behind may lack the necessary interpersonal communication skills. Children may therefore experience emotional distress and lack of encouragement, praise, love and warmth. Such findings also support the argument that separation from a mother who goes to work abroad often has a negative emotional impact on children.

After coming back from Italy, most women experience problems in communication, misunderstanding and alienation from the members of their families. Some women may feel that they have become just a source of money for their relatives and have lost their emotional attachment. Very often children and husbands left behind become used to living alone and making their own decisions, which also sometimes creates tension when the mother comes home and tries to become involved in the lives of her children and husband again. In extreme cases, spousal relations may become really hostile and end up in a child custody battle or in demands from the fathers for huge sums of money for permission to take a child abroad.

Appendix

Table 1. The profile of respondents – migrant women.

Name	Age when went to Italy	Duration of stay in Italy	Marital Status	Children and age	Education	Occupation at home	Occupation in Italy
Nadia	25	3 years	Married	-	Higher	Teacher	Live-in domestic work, care for elderly
Vira	31	3 years	Single	-	Higher	Secretary	Live-in domestic work, care for elderly, children
Galyna	56	2 years	Married	Son, 18	Higher	Teacher, school director	Live-in domestic work, care for elderly
Lena	35	3 years	Married	Son, 13	Higher	Accountant	Live-in domestic work, care for children, live-out kitchen staff
Tanya	45	6 years	Divorced	Sons, 15, 18, Daughter 20	Higher	Engineer	Live-in domestic work, care for elderly, live-out domestic work
Maria	36	6 years	Widow	Daughters, 15, 17	Technical	Military	Live-in domestic work, care for elderly
Kateryna	50	1 year	Married	Daughters, 17, 23	Higher	Teacher	Live-in domestic work, care for elderly
Valentyna	50	3 years	Divorced	Son, 30	Higher	Pensioner	Live-in domestic work, care for elderly

Table 2. The profile of respondents – husbands left behind.

Name	Age when wife went to Italy	Duration of wife's absence	Children's age	Occupation before the wife left	Occupation when the wife left
Stepan	35	3 years	Daughters 3,6	Self-employed	Part-time job
Roman	37	3 years	Son 14, daughter 6	Entrepreneur	Part-time job
Dmytro	40	6 years	Son 5, daughter 17	Unemployed	Unemployed

Table 3. The profile of respondents – children left behind.

Name	Age when mother went to Italy	Duration of mother's absence	Occupation before mother left	Present occupation
Natalia	15	6 years	Student	Unemployed
Mariana	17	6 years	Student	Part-time school psychologist