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

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Introduction

During the last 10-15 years the topic of migration and work abroad has become very relevant for Ukrainians. Because of lower paying and unstable jobs, a lot of women took on the responsibility to provide for their families, and went abroad to work. As Italy became more developed, it experienced an increase in the demand for domestic workers, which encouraged many Ukrainian women to travel there and work illegally as domestics.

According to the Western Ukrainian Center “Women’s Perspectives”, which interrogated 441 Ukrainian labor migrants in Italy in 2003, most female migrants were 36 to 45 years old, and many were highly educated. 37 percent of their informants had university degrees, 36 percent college degrees and 22 percent secondary education. Before going to Italy, 56 percent of women worked as specialists, 21 percent worked as regular workers, 9 percent were unemployed and 3 percent were students, housewives and entrepreneurs (Women’s Perspectives, B 2003).

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? In my work I document the changes in the Ukrainian families caused by women’s migration abroad. Very often women become alienated from their own families and their transnational family may go through certain processes of transformation, as mothers no longer fit within the traditional construction of gender roles within the family. Therefore, I argue that the migration of Ukrainian women to Italy changes
family arrangements, challenges the images of mothers and fathers, and reveals the construction of gender roles within the family. Specifically, it reveals the invisible emotional work, which is a major part of the construction of women as mothers and wives.

In order to answer this question, I went to Ukraine and conducted interviews with eight women who used to work as domestics in Italy for several years, as well as three men and two children whose wives and mothers work as domestics in Italy, and I also held two interviews with the project manager and lawyer for the NGO “Women’s Perspective” that deals with the problems of Ukrainian female migrants (see Annex). Most of my female interviewees were highly educated and worked as teachers, engineers, military employees etc before the migration. Working as domestic workers in Italy these women experienced “contradictory class mobility” (Parrenas 2001, p.180). On the one hand, their financial situation improved as they could provide for their families much better then before their migration to Italy. On the other hand, the women’s social status decreased, as migrant women had to work as domestics and do psychologically and physically difficult jobs, mainly looking after elderly people and cleaning.

On the basis of my interviews I first look at the dynamic of gender roles in the family before migration, during the time of the women’s absence and after women’s return from Italy. Secondly, I discuss the emotional reaction of mothers and children to separation. And finally, I focus on the impact of mother’s migration on the children left behind.

1. Gender roles in the transnational family

The female migration often changes family roles in transnational households. Since women go to work abroad and become main breadwinners, their husbands often have to do all the housework. The results of my research did not support Parrenas’ argument about husbands’ failure in performing ‘women’s duties’ (Parrenas 2001, p.147). My three informants Stepan, Roman and Dmytro did a good job taking care of children, cleaning and cooking. And although
all of them traditionally consider housework to be naturally a female job, from their story it becomes obvious that men can learn how to do this very well.

For example, I came to interview Roman in his house, warning him about my visit just 15 minutes before the interview. I was surprised to see how clean and comfortable it is in his house. Before I told him about the subject of my thesis he went out to give his 9-year-old daughter a sweater so she would not get cold. After she came back, Roman heated the food for her and asked her to wash her hands and eat. It seems that Roman successfully took over his wife’s responsibilities in caring for children and doing the household chores, although he rarely did them before. As he told me:

Before my wife’s journey I only earned money and did a male job – 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 3 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, 15-year-old son, and 6-year-old daughter).

Here it becomes clear that though men take over women’s responsibilities the stereotype about the female nature of such jobs prevails. However, some husbands left behind start to understand and perform women’s duties quite successfully, even those nuances, which are often not considered to be work at all. Thus, the ability to fulfill gender roles is learned not given, which demonstrates that they are socially constructed. Furthermore, “they are also intensely meaningful, deeply ingrained, tenaciously maintained, and central to the sense of self” (Gamburd 2000, p.173). So, in the case when a wife becomes the main breadwinner and a husband has to sit at home and do the housework, men’s dignity, self-respect and masculinity can be threatened (Gamburd 2000, p.175).

In order to reaffirm their masculinity, men develop different patterns of behavior as well as ways to justify this to themselves and others. According to Gamburd, men preserve their masculinity through “employment, wealth, political authority, marriage, and alcohol
consumption” (Gamburd 2000, p.176). From the interviews I had with men and women I identified such strategies as preserving financial independence from the wife, searching for a job that will provide almost the same income as the wife has in Italy, and having relationships with other women.

I agree with Gamburd that migration challenges and changes gender roles and images (Gamburd 2000, p.175). However, from my interviews I concluded that this change is just a temporary one. All three men told me that after their wives come back they will again provide for living and their wife will stay at home and do the housework. Such a shift had already happened in the family of Galyna, who after returning from Italy, took over all the responsibilities of a housewife while her husband earned money. And she is satisfied with this situation. However, my other informant, Lena, was quite disappointed after coming back:

My husband and 14-year-old son did not suffer because I earned more money… You know…money spoils people. They started to go often to restaurants, wasted money. After I came back they passed back all my responsibilities to me, and were ready ‘to sit on my head’ (Lena, married, 13-year-old son).

Other set of important issues comes out here – the appreciation of mother’s sacrifice, mothering from abroad, about which I am going to talk in my next section.

2. Transnational mothering

Mothering, as well as gender, is not a biological, but a social construct, which has historical and cultural connotations (Glenn et. al. 1994, p.3). The idealized model of mothering is seen as “natural, universal and unchanging” and presents the biological mother as the only person who can and has to perform the responsibility of caring for children (Glenn et. al. 1994, p.3). In Ukraine, the image of the mother is one of the key images in the folk songs and fairy tales. Analysis of elementary school textbooks revealed the image of 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 (Gaidenko 2004). By contrast, the father is usually absent from such romantic pictures. Thus, Parrenas claims that such traditional gender ideology, which presents
mothers as the only care-givers, fuels the stress children and mothers experience as the result of separation (Parrenas 2001, p.143).

However, not all scholars think that separation must have a negative impact on children and mothers’ emotional states. There are debates over this issue in the related literature. On the one hand, Erel states that most of her informants did not have negative feelings regarding the separation from their mothers (Erel 2002, p.134). She refers to Tizard who also argues that separation does not have to be traumatic for children (Tizard 1991 cited by Erel 2002, p.136). On the other hand, most authors claim that both children and mothers experience distress because of the distance (Lan 2003, Raijman et. al. 2003, Parrenas 2001).

It is interesting that in my research all the women with children told me that it was hard for them and for their children to live without each other and all three men I interviewed stated that their children are doing fine without their mothers. However, when I asked Roman to talk with his daughter he refused me and explained that he does not want to traumatize her by reminding her about her mother. From my interview with Stepan I came to know 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 because of the absence of my wife, as she told them that they are big girls now and they have to behave like big girls (Stepan, 3 and 6-year-old daughters).

I assume that even if fathers fulfill the responsibilities of material care for children, making sure that they are not hungry and they have clean clothes, they are not socialized to give enough intimacy and emotional care for their children. It appears that, especially during the first months after their mother’s move, children may experience psychological distress, which can later transform into a feeling that something is just missing from their life.

3.3. Children left behind
On the basis of my interviews I have learned that most children of my interviewees became more independent and mature after their mother’s migration to Italy. First of all, they become involved in household activities, share with their fathers some of their mother’s previous responsibilities or take over all of them if they live alone.

Children left behind, especially those without the support of their fathers and other members of the extended family, often start to understand that they can rely only on themselves and begin making decisions and become more self-reliant. At the same time some of my interviewees indicated that their children also became more sensitive, and got aggrieved and started to cry in reaction to the slightest comments or remarks. In addition, some of my interviewees said that their children needed to be controlled and because of the lack of control started 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 the classes and frequently had conflicts with teachers and other pupils (Lena, married, 13-year-old son).

Although children usually become more independent, to my mind, there is always a threat that children can become too relaxed, not interested in studying and ‘investing’ in the future. Instead they prefer to rely on the mother, who is always ready to support them financially. According to one of my interviewees, who used to work for 40 years as a schoolteacher, in some cases 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. To sum it up, mother’s migration can make children more independent and mature but there is often a threat that uncontrolled children will become spoiled and indifferent to their future.

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

The transnational family temporarily stops being a family with the traditional gender division of labor. By contrast to the experiences in other countries like Sri-Lanka (Gamburd 2000) and Philippines (Constable 1997), where female members of the extended families substitute as mothers, in Ukraine, there are fathers who take over household responsibilities, although they may fail to perform emotional work, as it is invisible and does not fit with the image of a man.

I argue that there is a shift in family roles in the Ukrainian transnational families. While working in Italy as domestics, women become the main breadwinners and their husbands take over household responsibilities and caring for children. In contrast to the argument about husbands’ failure in performing women’s work in the household, in the cases of my interviewees, men performed women’s previous responsibilities quite successfully.

At the same time, it seems that fathers fail to perform all the invisible emotional work that women usually do, and in many cases do not give enough love and intimacy to their children. This can be explained with the social construction of motherhood in Ukraine, where the biological mother is seen as the only caregiver and the keeper of the family hearth. Fathers are socialized 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 skills for personal communication with them. Also, when fathers take over women’s responsibilities their feelings of manhood and masculinity may be threatened. In order to preserve it, men use different strategies, one of which may be the resistance to perform invisible emotional work. Therefore children may
experience emotional distress, lack of encouragement, praise, love and warmth. Such findings also support the argument that separation from the mother who goes to work abroad often has a negative impact on children’s emotional state.

Bibliography


Tizard, B. “Employed Mothers and the Care of Young Children”. In A. Phoenix, A. Woollett and E. Lloyd (eds), Motherhood: Meanings, Practices and Ideologies, London, Sage, 1991


Periodicals analyzed:

Last accessed on 05.26.2005
## Annex

Table 1. The Profile of Respondents - Migrant Women

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age, when Went to Italy</th>
<th>Duration of Staying in Italy</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Children, their age</th>
<th>education</th>
<th>Occupation at Home</th>
<th>Occupation in Italy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nadia</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>higher</td>
<td>teacher</td>
<td>Live-in domestic work, care for elderly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vira</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>single</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>higher</td>
<td>secretary</td>
<td>Live-in domestic work, care for elderly, children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Galyna</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>Son, 18</td>
<td>higher</td>
<td>teacher, school director</td>
<td>Live-in domestic work, care for elderly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lena</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>Son, 13</td>
<td>higher</td>
<td>accountant</td>
<td>Live-in domestic work, care for children, live-out kitchen staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanya</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>divorced</td>
<td>Sons, 15, 18, Daughter 20</td>
<td>higher</td>
<td>Engineer</td>
<td>Live-in domestic work, care for elderly, live-out domestic work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>widow</td>
<td>Daughters, 15, 17</td>
<td>technical</td>
<td>military</td>
<td>Live-in domestic work, care for elderly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kateryna</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>Daughters, 17, 23</td>
<td>higher</td>
<td>teacher</td>
<td>Live-in domestic work, care for elderly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valentyna</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>divorced</td>
<td>Son, 30</td>
<td>higher</td>
<td>Pensioner</td>
<td>Live-in domestic work, care for elderly</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2. The Profile of Respondents - Husbands, Left Behind

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age, when Went to Italy</th>
<th>Duration of Wife’s Absence</th>
<th>Children, age</th>
<th>Occupation before Wife Left</th>
<th>Occupation when Wife left</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stepan</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>Daughters-3,6</td>
<td>Self-employed</td>
<td>Part-time job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roman</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>Son-14, Daughter-6</td>
<td>entrepreneur</td>
<td>Part-time job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dmytro</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>Son --5, Daughter-17</td>
<td>unemployed</td>
<td>unemployed</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. The Profile Respondents – Children Left Behind

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age, when Mother went to Italy</th>
<th>Duration of Mother’s Absence</th>
<th>Occupation Before Mother Left</th>
<th>Present Occupation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Natalia</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>student</td>
<td>unemolpyed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mariana</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>student</td>
<td>Part-time school psychologist</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>