

# WOMEN IN BETWEEN: GENDER, REFUGEE EXPERIENCE AND AGEING

*Hana Havelková – Petra Ezzeddine*

Faculty of Humanities, Charles University in Prague

*Abstract: The study is based on interviews with women with refugee experience from the former Yugoslavia, aged 50+, who have already been living in the Czech Republic for more than twenty years. It covers a long time period of life in migration, which has allowed us to show that the refugee experience of women is not linear but cyclical, gaining new significances at various stages of women's lives, in various social contexts and transnational environments. There is a special focus on ageing and entrance into retirement age, when the women find themselves under a double pressure: they are trying to safeguard their own vulnerable position at work and at the same time to meet the normative commitments (traditionally expected from women) regarding transnational care of seniors. The study looks at migration from an intersectional perspective in investigating how gender, age, ethnicity, migration status and social class of the women we studied formed their life in the new society.*

*Keywords: women; gender; migration; ageing; intergenerational relations; care; social status*

## Introduction

Until recently, migrant women were entirely overlooked in migrant studies, not only in the Czech Republic. As Pedraza (1991) points out, until the 1970s, migrant women were seen as the passive followers of the men who initiated migration. Between 1980 and 1990, migration studies were affected by a strong wave of feminist theories. Feminist theories see gender as a collection of identities, behaviours and power in relationships, which is constructed by culture and society. This paradigm has had a double influence on the way in which gender

is viewed in migration. The first is connected with the patriarchy, the hierarchy of power, male domination and men's control of women – in other words, the patriarchy influences the possibility of migrating, and when and where to settle (Boyd – Grieco 2003). The second influence concerns the relationships between men and women, the change in their relationships with their family members, including partners in the process of migration. It thus looks at the way in which the patriarchy is included and/or reconstructed over the course of migration. Researchers have also focused on the issue of the labour market participation of migrant women in their new countries, on relations of power, position and roles in the family, and at the greater inclusion of male work in care of the household and family, and the transformation of masculinity in the process of migration.

Our research is based on a **feminist paradigm**, above all in the sense that the research sample consists exclusively of women, and the research question concerned, chiefly, their **specific refugee and migration experience as women** and its changes in connection with the ageing process. At the same time, however, their answers thematise the position of women as people who, in the migration situation, take a central position and have significance within their families. Our research into the women has given us a picture of **highly complex family relationships**, starting with partner relationships and a reflection of the situation of men, and ending with the no less significant intergenerational relationships in both directions – on one hand with their own children, and on the other with their parents, including their partner's parents. Conversely, it was and is these social relationships that, in the end, have decided and continue to decide the personal life strategies of the women we surveyed. Our perspective thus corresponds more to the second sphere mentioned, with an emphasis on a complex gender picture, with the actual concept of the patriarchy not being connected so much with male hegemony, but rather being represented by traditional family customs. We put much more emphasis on the **agency** of the women interviewed.

The issue of **ageing in the process of migration** is one that has been long neglected in migration studies. This is largely because migration policies are not conceived of with a long-term horizon – it is not assumed that the migrants will be growing old in the countries to which they migrate, and at the same time, ageing migrants – both male and female – are no longer visible, because they are no longer “productive” on the local labour market. Academics have been more interested in the connection between migration and ageing recipient societies, and in transnational practices of care for ageing parents and relatives

in the country of origin (Deneva 2014, Baldassar 2007). Researchers have also focused their interest on “life style migration” by well-off seniors (in the context of the EU) to the coastal areas of the Mediterranean (e.g. King – Warnes – Williams 2009). The second type of study dealing with ageing consists of analyses that look at the structural disadvantage of senior migrants, both of those who have returned home, and those who stayed in their country of origin (Ackers 2004).

We, likewise, look at this important issue in our study, but we focus most of our attention on the **migration and integration policy of the recipient country with regard to the population of ageing migrant men and women**. A special category of migrants consists of circulating ageing migrants, where studies analyse how they organise the care of their family (both of their own family in the country of origin, and of grandchildren who have migrated). These studies show that although the economy is globalised and benefits from mobility of economic capital, social systems are of a heavily **national character** and do not reckon with transnational trajectories and migrants who live in more than one country (Deneva 2012). On the contrary, their “reproductional” mobility may put them at a major disadvantage. As Deneva points out, migration research has completely left out the category of ageing migrants who move between various geographic and institutional localities with the aim of providing care to various members of their own family (parents, grandchildren).

In this study, however, we are looking not at public policy as such, but its impacts on individual life strategies from the point of view of migrant women themselves. We look at the **subjective reflection** of their own migrant history. We consider an important specific feature of our research to be that it covers **a long time period of life in migration**, which has proven to be just as **academically** valuable as it is highly **politically** instructive. Although it is not classic longitudinal research, but data gained with the help of retrospective narrations, it allows us on one hand to reconstruct the dynamic of migration experience in time, and on the other to capture these experiences as experiences that may be individually or typologically differentiated, but which nevertheless show significant similarities across the research sample. The long time period has allowed us, among other things, to show that the refugee experience of women is not linear but **cyclical**, gaining new significances at various stages of women’s lives, in various social contexts (including the context of institutions) and transnational environments. The second aspect, the question of whether experiences can be generalised across individual stories, relates above all to the

choice of **life and family strategy** in the new situation, and also to questions of **ageing and entrance into retirement age**, which usually means becoming sharply aware, once again, of one's status as a migrant woman.

Last but not least, it is worth emphasising that in our study we look at migration from an **intersectional perspective** – in other words we also reflect on other identities and the inequalities that stem from them and which have an impact on the women we studied, such as age, ethnicity, migration status and social class (Brettel 2000). We have thus tried to capture the complexity of the phenomena and relationships that are formed under the influence of migration and life in the new society.

We chose for our research a group of women with refugee experience from the former Yugoslavia, aged 50+, who have already been living in the Czech Republic for more than twenty years. They are the first generation of women to be taken by Czechoslovakia, later by the Czech Republic, as part of humanitarian programmes during the war in the former Yugoslavia. We asked ourselves the following questions: **how women with a refugee past reflect on their personal migration life trajectory, how, in narrative terms, they give relevance to their life during the war and the beginnings of their life in the new society, how they reflect their gender role and their gender identity and its changes during the migration process, and how they give relevance to their refugee experience at an older age, and above all in retirement age. We also asked ourselves how normative pressures affect the care and emotional work of women in the migration process.**

In this study, however, we present only some of the data gained, since its focal point is the question of ageing in migration, as mediated by the narratives of the women we interviewed.

## **Research methodology**

Given the applicational nature of our research project, we decided to use qualitative methodology, and we collected the data by means of in-depth, thematically-oriented interviews (Denzin 1989). We believe that this type of questioning has allowed us not only to explain the refugee experience of women as a former of social progress, but also to “localise” the concrete lived experience of gender, migration and ageing. The in-depth interviews were built around a guide list, which outlined the themes around which we conducted the interviews. The themes that interested us during the interviews were as follows: migration

history (the context of the departure/flight from former Yugoslavia, arrival in the Czech Republic and life in temporary stay facilities); work and employment (work history, coping with work at a more advanced age and the conditions of work at an older age); care (of children and transnational care of parents in the country of origin); preparation for retirement, strategy and experience of retirement age.

The data we gained during the interviews we then transcribed from the sound recording into written form (in the former of a complete transcription) but for the publication we edited them into formal written Czech. Three of the interviews were carried out in Serbo-Croat and then translated into Czech. We are aware that the research interview is a dynamic and formative process, into which not only the narrator but also the listener enters. The significances of the narrative are thus formed together with the various positions and interests of the listeners. As Erel argues (2007: 5): “The story of the flight from the home may take on various meanings, depending on whether it is told by a feminist migrant group, a social worker or a wider group as part of internet communication.” Most of the interviews in our research were collected by our colleague Goranka Oljača, who herself has experience of refugee history and whose specific positionality had a marked influence on the way she led the interviews – in terms of the data she accepted, but also what kinds of themes she avoided in the interviews. In our interpretations we also worked sensitively with the fact (in the sense of ethical work with data and its representation) that our research project would be of a socially-engaged nature and that its outcomes would be made available to the women we interviewed (who were invited to the closing conference and will obtain a copy of the published outcomes of the project). For our research we chose the purposive sampling method. Contact with the individual women took place using the snowball method. The sample we put together consisted of 37 women with a refugee history from the former Yugoslavia. The main criteria for inclusion in the sample was that the women had to have come to Czechoslovakia during the war in the former Yugoslavia, and today they had to be over 50. The women in our sample lived before the war on the territory of present-day Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Croatia and Montenegro. We also included in the research sample three women who had returned (for various reasons) to their country of origin. We believe their specific experience has allowed us to understand in a more complex way the life trajectories of those who remained in the Czech Republic.

Since we were working with the aid of qualitative research, during the application of which personal data (in the sense of Law 101/2005B of 1.1.2005) were expected to feature, we used informed agreement, which informed the participants in our research about the way in which data would be used (including anonymisation, archiving and other types of outcome). For this reason we **anonymised** in our study all the names of the women we interviewed. Some of the women we interviewed had already acquired Czech citizenship or applied for it, or they felt a deep affinity with the Czech Republic, and thus after 20 years in migration they no longer wanted to be described as migrants or foreigners. For this reason we refer to them in our study as **women with refugee experience**.

## Retirement age I: a foreigner once more

The experience of ageing in the case of women with a refugee experience is represented by the word retirement, whether the women are approaching retirement age or are already in it. While this is undoubtedly a stage of life that affects the majority population, the experiences of the women we interviewed show a number of specific, often surprising, features.

**1. The still-vivid emotional trauma of leaving.** The research revealed the fact that the traumas of leaving do not grow weaker after so many years in emigration, but these traumas return. The described dynamic of these experiences indicates that although the everyday struggle for a dignified life in the new country had shunted these emotional traumas into the background for a certain time, they return unexpectedly in a later phase of life, when, among other things, the children have already been taken care of. It is clear that the **absence of psychological help** at the time of arrival means that they did not have a chance to process these traumas, and for many it is still difficult for them to speak about them today. Not only that: the interviews indicated that these traumatic events may have had an impact on the process of their integration – they put off **applying for asylum** purely so that they did not have to talk to officials about the traumas of their departure.<sup>1</sup> The Czechoslovakia public also did not have

---

<sup>1</sup> A total of 282 people returned to their mother country in 1996 (during what was known as voluntary repatriation) and in 1997 190 people. Pilar-Whalen (2007) describes the specifics of some decisions to leave: “Probably because an asylum application was not a necessary part of the reception procedures, and so people with temporary asylum were spared the interviews otherwise necessary for entering the

the opportunity to create a sufficient idea of the circumstances of the departure of the immigrants from their country of origin. It is worth giving here a more detailed and plastic **complex picture of the causes of departure**, as shown by our research, and which also has a number of important **gender** aspects. It was not just about fear of loss of life, whether in battle or as the result of attacks, but about a refusal to fight, the fear of having to kill. In our research this concerned not just the **sons** of our informants, but also their **husbands**. Among other things this helps us to realise why there are so many young men among the refugees in the current refugee wave. This reason was also, in the case of flight from the former Yugoslavia, present where whole families left. At the same time, however, the policy of refugee aid was conceived of in a traditional, and certainly understandable, way as an attempt to save above all women and children, for whom special buses were sent. The men became a special group remaining unwillingly in their country of origin. In addition to the dramatic and often life-threatening course of the transports, it was the women's fear for their sons and husbands, as well as for other relatives who had stayed behind, that represented an **emotional trauma that stays with them today**. The second phenomenon that has stayed with the women we surveyed throughout their life in migration has been, according to their testimonies, a **feeling of guilt** towards those who stayed at home, guilt that they had been privileged in some way. This is something they are reminded of even today on visits to their country of origin. The women sensitively reflected criticism from their compatriots who held it against them that they had left and were living abroad, while they had had to stay behind and suffer a hard life during civil war. They also come across this when dealing with officials in their home countries, since they have meanwhile become **foreigners for the authorities** in their homeland. Bojana says: *"When I go to Bosnia, they ask what I want, they say that they don't have any money for people who live over there. I'm not over there, but I'm not over here either! I'm a foreigner here, it doesn't matter what citizenship I have."*

**2. A Czech citizen but a foreigner.** The above-mentioned statement refers to the experience that the women we interviewed had with the Czech authorities, which they are now unexpectedly encountering in their present situation. Most

---

asylum procedure. The idea that they would have to tell police officers about the events that preceded their departure from their country was what put off Bosnian refugees, in particular, from making asylum claims, above all because these events were among the blackest moments in their lives. It was for these reasons that many citizens of countries of the former Yugoslavia, highly traumatised and with very good reasons for asylum, decided not to apply to extend their stay."

of the women we interviewed had **gained Czech citizenship** over the more than twenty years they had lived in the Czech Republic, and from the legal point of view had fully equal rights as citizens. In interviews with them it could be seen that they subjectively felt that this significant change in their status would be reflected in their everyday life, above all in contact with state institutions. During interviews, however, the migrant women reflected on their great disappointment at being **once again classed as foreigners by institutions**. The women themselves saw their own experience as migrants as a stage in their lives that had already passed, and in terms of future life plans they were (or were planning to be) fully committed to staying in the Czech Republic, where they had their families, friends and work. The period when they applied for an old age pension became a significant time in that their migration status, which overlapped with their status as citizens, once again came to the fore.

**3. Interspace and transnational belonging.** It is important to be aware that identification with the new country is also significant on the **emotional** level. As Gordana says: *“Yes, here. I couldn’t start there again, it’s my native town, where I lived for 30 years, but I don’t know anyone there any more! The old people who stayed there are gradually dying off. I was there for a week not long ago, every day I went into town, my mother would send me into town for something. You’re walking down the street in your native town, and there’s no one to say hello to. That’s really stressful for me. I couldn’t go back there! There was always a hope that we might go back, but not any more! My children are finishing school here, I hope they’ll get married and have children. My future is where my children are!”* At the same time there was a feeling present in the narratives of life in some sort of **interspace** – I’m a foreigner both there and here – but at the same time, apparently paradoxically, the women we interviewed expressed subjective feelings of **transnational** belonging. On one hand they felt a sense of belonging to the Czech Republic, on the other hand to an idealised and sentimental idea of life in the former Yugoslavia – in a pre-war Yugoslavia where they were young, full of élan and lived happily surrounded by their nearest and dearest. They tended to be critical of life in the new states that had formed on the territory of the former Yugoslavia, and during the interviews they said that *“life there is not what it used to be.”* This subjective dual identity connected with migration does not disappear with age, maybe almost the other way round.

**4. An undignified level of old age pension.** The process of calculating the old age pension reveals the **work history** of the women, which also took place in part in the former Yugoslavia. When their pension is calculated they are drastically reminded of the fact that they have lived and worked for part of their life in one country and part in another, because they have not worked for enough years in either country in order to qualify for a decent pension. The overall undignified level of the pension after the low amounts from each country are added together is something that was for many women both surprising and shaming. The women we interviewed had **worked full time for all their productive lives**. They rightly stress that they “did not choose migration”, and that in many cases they worked – especially at the beginning of their migration – in less well-qualified jobs, such as cleaners and shop assistants. Returning to their original profession, or **requalification**, had taken them much effort, which was still not sufficiently appreciated by society, and not just in financial terms. They were sharply critical of the “good advice” of officials who had suggested that instead of retirement in poverty in the Czech Republic they should choose to “go home”, where they would “maybe be better”. Once again we see a reminder of migration from outside, particularly unkind in the context of ageing.

**5. The contrast between the legal (formal) concept of citizenship and the concept of social citizenship** (Yuval – Davis 1991: 5). Although some of the women we surveyed had obtained Czech citizenship, our data show and the interviews illustrate that it does not entirely guarantee them access to and participation in all public services (such as full right of entry into the pension system) and their rights and entitlements are doubted, especially in the institutional environment. (McMahon 2012). As Hradečná and Jelínková (2016) argue, the social rights of migrant women in retirement are recognised **selectively** on the basis of their residential status. Persons from EU countries have the same advantages and responsibilities as Czech citizens, but this practice is nothing exceptional in the EU. What is often criticised is the long-term **discriminatory practice** or disproportion between the obligation of citizens from non-EU countries to pay into the social system and their realistic possibility of their being able to draw from it in case of need. The conditions for the provision of a pension to a migrant woman (or man), or to Czech citizens with a migration history, differ **according to the country of origin**. The women interviewed by us are in an uncertain situation with regard to their pension.

**6. Discrimination on the basis of age.** Women with refugee experience have had to come to terms, particularly in the workplace, with discrimination not only because of their gender and ethnicity, but also because of their older age (Brettell 2000). This is commented on by Marija: *“I had an interview, did difficult tests, all sorts of things via a personnel agency. They had to record us on film all the time. I didn’t write how old I was. At all. But she said they didn’t take me because of my age. Since then I’ve not looked for that kind of job. The manageress of the personnel agency told me afterwards.”* We identified subjective feelings of age discrimination in the case of women who worked as **employees**, above all in the media and the sphere of banking services and economic consulting, where there is an expectation of a high degree of dedication to the job, flexibility and use of modern technologies – in other words competitive work environments with a focus on individual performance. The women themselves were convinced that work teams should be diverse in age, that *“they still have something to give”*, and they placed a heavy emphasis on the **significance of their work and life histories**. On the other hand they commented self-critically that they no longer had as much physical energy, and were thus less able to compete in this regard with their young, go-ahead and dynamic colleagues of both sexes. Women who **jointly owned companies** or who themselves worked for smaller companies, or for non-profit-making organisations, were in an entirely different situation. This type of work environment seems to be **age-sensitive**, since employers were able to get to know individual employees in more detail and in person, and to know their specific migration and life stories. On the other hand this type of employment requires the intensive participation of all members of the family **regardless of their age and state of health**. This is mentioned by Jelena, the joint owner of a family restaurant, who also employed three Czech employees in her restaurant and has been allotted (in the Czech Republic) a pension of 130 EUR a month. *“The whole time, until a late age, I worked from morning till night, in fact I still work hard today. I thought I’d be able to save something. Unfortunately it didn’t work out quite as I imagined. When you have a restaurant you have to work all the time, Nobody asks if you’re ill. Only today one of our staff had a minor accident, she couldn’t come in. I was in bed at home, I didn’t feel well, but I went into work, because I had to. When it’s a family business, you have to!”* Although in the majority population, too, age discrimination is, as is well known, more likely to be suffered by women, from the interviews it was apparent that in these cases migration history was still likely to enter the mix in addition.

**7. Threatened social status.** Given the above, it may seem redundant to mention this aspect, since an undignified pension and the existence of age discrimination already imply threatened social status. As with majority-society women of a similar age, older women with a refugee experience, especially if they are widowed or divorced, find themselves on **the edge of poverty** (Sokačová 2015). As Sýkorová and her team argue, the vulnerability of seniors in the Czech Republic is above all an issue of vulnerability concerning housing. Seniors frequently have insufficient resources to mobilise, and, if necessary, combine, in order to maintain an acceptable living standard (Sýkorová and team 2014). In our research we found that **married women** were in a better economic situation, being able to rely also on financial support from their (still working) husband, with whom they jointly shared household expenses. During interviews, however, these women, too, reflected considerably on their vulnerable economic and social situation, clearly articulating their fears as to what would happen if their husbands died or became seriously ill. In the case of the women we surveyed, however, the question of social status has a special dimension, since it represents a specific social group. The immigrants in our sample were by and large from the **middle class**, and the upper rather than lower middle class at that – an **educated and well-qualified** middle class that in the country of origin had been very well off materially (thanks to which they were able to “afford” emigration). This social status appeared to result in this group of immigrants having fewer problems – they were “independent people” who did not want much from the state and did not take much. They were entrepreneurial and invested in their children. The women in our survey also had, in most cases, high levels of qualifications, having worked in their countries of origin as doctors, lawyers, journalists and so on. The receiving country did not know how to make use of this potential, and at the start the language barrier played a natural role, so that women who were used to a certain social status were providing for or helping to provide for their families by working in unqualified jobs. As mentioned above, the fall in living standards and experience of discrimination is currently perceived by them as undignified largely because of the great effort that they put into being able to once again reach a professionally higher level in their new country. Because, however, the economic situation and their own disposition forced them to be active in terms of work, they enter into jobs that are **once again far below their qualifications**. They are thus still waging a **struggle for the social status** which they originally held, and to which they had with much effort worked their way up to,

and they once again find themselves in a position where they are on one hand grateful for any work, but on the other perceive the indignity of their situation after having spent their lives putting in an above-average performance both in the sphere of **reproductive work** – it is often thanks to them that their children have integrated so well not just into Czech society, but often into its elites – and on the **labour market**.

## Retirement age II: a hero again<sup>2</sup>

The previous chapter looked at the external circumstances affecting women with a refugee past in connection with their ageing. In this chapter we shall focus on the **strategies and thinking** of the women we interviewed, as retirement approaches or when already of retirement age. The title of the chapter expresses the dominant fundamental attitude of these women – not to be dependent on anyone and to take care of themselves for as long as possible. The central theme here is **care** – the migration history of care for others and a continuing willingness to provide care, and at the same time a particular lack of preparedness to accept care. A no less distinctive phenomenon is **activity** – one might say the activity ethic of these women – which is undoubtedly connected both with the determined nature of their work performances in migration, and with the morality of their social class. An integral part of this was reproduction work, which played a significant part of the integration of their families into Czech society, as we have indicated above. The following categories represent subjective cogitations, reflections on the existing situation and social strategies for its solution.

**1. Reproduction work and its consequences.** However important we consider it to draw attention to the dark side of the migration experience, in no case is it the fundamental finding of our research that the women surveyed are wretched victims. The central message of the overall analysis is, on the contrary, **a picture of exceptionally strong women**, a picture of **heroism** in the proper sense of the word, if we are not defining it in the old-fashioned sense of the heroism of warriors. It seems to be almost universally true that in an emigration situation, women become in some way the heads or at least **the centres of families**,

---

<sup>2</sup> The concept of hero does not, of course, come from the women we surveyed, who would certainly not call themselves such, but the authors consider it a suitable expression for the remarkable performance of these women, which ensues from the analyses and is justified in the subsequent passages.

and not only where the family is fatherless. In the research they declare that they automatically took upon themselves responsibility both for the **material security** of the family, above all the children, in order to minimalise their social marginalisation, and for the family's maintenance of a **dignified position**, which they tried to achieve by, for example, creating an elegant external impression. These efforts by the women to maintain a middle-class social status were present throughout the period of migration. The basic strategy that they chose was to **give up on their own professional ambitions**, and to **transfer these to their children**, in support of their education. According to the testimonies these strategies bore fruit in the form of a successful and educated second generation of migrant families. Nevertheless, as we have already mentioned, a number of the women we surveyed had gradually found a place in the more qualified professions, and the most effective path from the economic point of view appeared to be starting a family business. It is interesting that the women in the interviews, reacting to the undignified level of their pension, **thematised their performance**, and connected the low financial evaluation of their work with a failure to appreciate their reproductive work.

In this connection we were fairly surprised that the women declared that they definitely **did not want their children to look after them when they were old**. *“I don't think about my retirement. I say that when things were at their worst, we had to manage somehow, and now is someone supposed to help us, or what... I don't want someone to help me. Not even the children. If my health is what I'd like it to be. I don't think my children should help me, but I don't know how things will be. I'd like to manage everything myself, so no one has to help me”* (Selma). Above all this attitude goes against the **declared tradition** mentioned in the interviews whereby the family has to help itself and it is the duty of children to help their parents in their old age. Let us explain this peculiar attitude by means of the hypothesis that this is a **continuation of the women's migration strategy**. They invested their time in migration in the next generation – this, for them, is the generation that matters. The idea that their children might have to look after them seems to be connected with the idea that it might hold the children back in their successful take-off, and the women would then be weakening their previous “investment”. This rationale can be judged from the testimonies only indirectly, nevertheless at the given moment this group of women intend to continue in their heroic strategy, although the great majority will, given the woefully low level of their pension, have to scrimp drastically, and above all to work until they drop.

**2. Care of seniors.** The status of hero does not, however, relate only to their exceptional professional and personal performance for the benefit of their children. The women themselves stress the **tradition of extended family ties**, custom and the duty to help one another, and they try to take care of their parents as well as possible. However, we are aware from the testimonies themselves that in their countries of origin, where these women were frequently professionally active and successful, the wider family also helped them considerably, above all with child care, and as well-off women they also engaged paid help with household work (as well as with childcare). This, however, **changed fundamentally when they became immigrants**. The tradition of mutual aid in the extended family was here **reduced to the service provided by middle-aged women to the rest of the family**. From their testimonies, only some of them had received help with childcare from the grandmother, others instead taking care of their mothers and mothers-in-law, who had come with them and who felt lost and helpless in the new country. This tradition was articulated in the interviews as the strategy of “*sticking together*”, which was important for the women in **all the phases of migration** and inclusion into Czech society, when the women emphasised the importance of intensive family relationships for them and their families. The women we interviewed said that they were considering for this reason moving seniors to the Czech Republic, but that they were afraid that the move would be too physically and psychologically demanding for the seniors. They also stressed the language barrier that they would face when communicating with the majority population. As a result, some women were considering **a return to their country of origin**, although, as we have already mentioned in previous sections, they definitely do not idealise such a return. Two women had in fact returned (so far) temporarily to their country of origin, precisely so that they could care intensively for their sick parents and relatives. Only two women from our research had solved the issue of caring for their relatives by **taking them back with them** to the Czech Republic. Given the state of health of senior parents, who as migrants from a non-European country (above all Bosnia and Herzegovina) would not be assured of access to the state health insurance system, the parents who had moved to the Czech Republic were exclusively seniors with Croatian citizenship. Jasna says: “*We Balkan women consider it a matter of course that you look after your parents and your partner’s parents. My mother lived with us, it had to be that way, because she couldn’t stay on her own in Sarajevo. She couldn’t understand it, she couldn’t accept it. She suffered the whole time, it was depressing, it was*

*hard. Then she broke her hip, and after the operation she never recovered, she died here. At that moment my childhood finished, suddenly I grew old overnight. Before she died, my mother said she felt safe and well, that I had given her some energy and happiness. She was happy about her family. My parents-in-law were also from Sarajevo, then they found themselves in Belgrade and stayed there. My mother-in-law died 10 years ago, but my father-in-law is still with us, he's 90. I admire him – he's a bit deaf, so he can't learn Czech, but that doesn't bother him. He walks through the town with his head held high, he has his café here, we're here for him as he needs us. I've looked after all our parents a lot, and I want to be a daughter for my father-in-law until his last days, although I'm not his own daughter."*

**3. Transnational care.** Migration often brings with it the globalisation of kinship and family ties (Bryceson – Viurela 2002). As Deneva argues, in transnational families, too, we can observe the negotiation of commitments, cohesion and duty, and practical mechanisms and strategies, the aim of which is to reproduce the family in a multilevel environment (Deneva 2012). Although most of the women were definitely not financially well-off after coming to the Czech Republic, they tried also to **help their parents at home**, who were suffering hardship in war-torn Yugoslavia. As soon as it was possible, they tried to send at least some non-perishable food and tins to Yugoslavia, although the beginnings in the new country were not easy for them. After the war finished, they continue to provide help – mostly financial – not only to their parents but other relations who had stayed at home during the war, because the economic situation in Bosnia in particular is not good. They currently go to help them personally during their holidays, although they themselves are of pension age. **Transnational care of seniors** is for them a **moral commitment** (as the above-quoted Deneva also describes it) which is important to fulfil regardless of their own geographic location: *"I think it's normal – when someone has money, they have to help their parents"* (Jadranka). In the interviews we analysed, the informants marked as significant the fact that they had, over time, got used to being separated from their family in the country of origin and that the situation had become *"normal"* for them, and on the other hand they stressed that *emotional bonds "have no borders"* and that separation concerned only everyday matters. In the interviews, however, they talked about how sad they were that they could not be with their parents, above all at a time when the parents intensively needed (their) help.

This moral commitment is, however, **gender differentiated**, with women reflecting the **normative pressure in the country of their origin**, where there was an expectation that the daughter would “naturally” care for her old and infirm parents. The narrative category of a **feeling of guilt** thus appears again in connection with their permanent absence from their country of origin. From what socio-cultural context does this gendered conditioning of transnational care come? As Jones argues, these behavioural patterns and stereotypes developed in the patriarchal Balkan environment (and also in other central European societies) in combination with the norms of socialism and consumerism, and have remained significant in the changing society of the states of the former Yugoslavia. As in other socialist countries, Yugoslav women took an active part in manufacture and production, which ideally was meant to lead to economic independence and liberation, but in reaction led to the practice of the “double day”, in Czech labelled the double (or even triple) shift, whereby women worked not only in the workplace, but continued with their reproductive work in the environment of their home<sup>3</sup> (Jones 1994). This context was very similar to that which was experienced by Czech women during socialism (Havelková 1993). We believe this **specific experience of “balancing”** their lives by women during socialism was of significant help to them during migration, when they once again actively cared for their migrating families, while at the same time significantly entering the productive sphere and ensuring the household’s financial stability, building it up again from the start.

An important means of maintaining social relationships over a distance is **modern technology** (Lutz – Palenga-Möllenbeck 2009). For the women we surveyed this was, from the start of their migration, mostly the telephone, as a technology to which both they and their elderly parents were used. Other types of technology are currently used in cases where women communicate with their siblings and friends, who now commonly use the internet and social media.

The women organised their **visits to their country of origin** according to whether the women themselves worked, in other words depending on when and for how long they were able to take **holiday**, which according to their testimonies they did not use for their own recreation. As we said in the previous sections, some women were, as a result of being older, in a vulnerable position

---

<sup>3</sup> In other words the emancipation of socialist women on the labour market did not lead automatically to their emancipation in the private sphere, with men failing to become significantly involved in the running of the household and care of the family.

on the labour market, and so it was not easy for them to organise their “caring” visits to their parents. In their current “retirement age” situation they find themselves under **double pressure**: pressure to protect their own vulnerable position at work due to their greater age (and thus ensure themselves a more financially secure old age) and the pressure of the normative commitments to transnational care of seniors.

**4. Frugality strategy.** Women who were about to retire spoke in the interviews about retirement exclusively as a **period of frugality**, when they would have to live on limited financial resources. For us, however, it was interesting that they found it very hard to estimate the final level of their pension, and the officially-established amount (on average around 167 EUR) thus shocked them. The strategy “*I managed alone then, I’ll have to manage in the future too*” was, of course, present in all the interviews.

The second group consisted of women who were expecting a low pension and who had been preparing for that situation **systematically and long-term**. Their strategies for “coping” financially with the fall in their monthly income were various – saving, lowering their housing costs by moving into smaller flats, renting out rooms or flats to tourists, or various forms of additional pension insurance (which in some cases, however, were not enough). Razija works in a specialised health care profession: “*I earn well and I pay all my social contributions. My idea was that once I received a pension, I’d be able to pay my food and rent with it. And that I’d have to pay for everything else myself and save up for it. I’m getting ready for retirement, I’m changing my electrical appliances, and when you’re retired you don’t need as much as a working person*”.

**5. Work in retirement.** Women who were already retired **tried to actively resolve** their economic situation in various ways. Some women were considering, or had already started, working as hired home help (cleaning), their first work when they came to the Czech Republic. The second strategy was to continue with their current employment. Milica works as a cashier. “*I’m 65, and so I’m not completely healthy. My eyes, my hips, my thyroid. But because I have a pension of 210 EUR, I have to carry on working for as long as I can last out. I don’t want to sit at home, I’d be the first to say that, but it’s one thing when you’re doing it as your own decision, and another thing when you have to.*” In both these cases, however, **they have to stay active on the labour market** at a time when other people are already drawing a pension, and yet their real

chances on the labour market are highly problematic. They thus often find work in precarious jobs (Sokačová – Formánková 2015).

Work, however, did not just mean significant financial support during retirement, but for some women it fulfilled the function of **emotional support**. It maintained the feeling that they were “still useful” to society, in other words it maintained **the continuity of their own biography**, which until then had been built exclusively around care and work. Vesna says: “*The hardest thing would be if I didn’t work. To be retired and not working. I’d feel as if I were sitting at home waiting for death. But I do work, I have a goal, I’m happy, I’m cheerful, I want to live.*” Milica talked in a similar way: “*To start with, when I came back (note: to the Czech Republic) life was normal. In time, though, I got into a depressing situation. I wasn’t used to doing nothing. I couldn’t sit at home, I used to walk around the city a lot, wander, and I didn’t do anything. That’s the worst possible thing, when you’re not working, you don’t have a goal. You don’t have anything that lets you say, I’ve done that and that, I’m useful. I didn’t have it. I started to look for work and ask around if there was anywhere I could work. Thanks to someone who helped me, I got work in a supermarket. I work when they need me, and my day’s full. The work is like a medicine for me, because I come home tired, lie down, rest and look forward to the next day. I’ll be back among people again. As well as working we have a laugh and talk about all kinds of things. I come home happy and satisfied*”.

Women who were already retired tried, as they put it, to “do something”, which healed them emotionally to deal with the change in lifestyle and to develop **new social relationships and interests**. Dubravka says: “*When you retire, you don’t know what to do with yourself, it’s terrible. You have to find some sort of activity, so the days don’t seem like years. I’m very active, the only thing is I don’t have to get up early, like I did when I went to work. I go to tai-chi and there’s a lot of women there. Then I go to German and English, so I have a very short day, And I’m especially fond of serials. Everyone has to find something, so that the day isn’t as long... Pensioners have to have their life, too, not just sit there. The worst is when people don’t know what to do with themselves.*”

The above-mentioned strategies show that the women we interviewed intend, in their current phase of life, to **continue** with their previous (intensive) migration performance both on the labour market and in the area of family care, and thus from our point of view continue with their heroic performance. The ageing process, however, makes it more and more difficult to harmonise these

two areas, and it brings increased vulnerability. **Further development** is open, since our research took place at a time when the women we surveyed were right at the beginning of retirement age. It is to be expected that with increasing vulnerability, the effects of the imperfect social system on their lives will be more dramatic, and it will be interesting from a research point of view to see how the tradition of family solidarity and mutual care, strongly thematised in our interviews, will develop.

## Conclusions

The complex picture of ageing among the women in migration surveyed by us clearly shows the shortcomings of social policy towards migrant men and women and the gaps in the institutional provision for this group of citizens in their old age. Although we currently see the globalisation of economies and the interconnection of capital markets with the aim of profit for certain companies and states, on the other hand it can be seen that **national social policies do not reckon with the mobility of citizens and their transnational lives and social rights**. What we see here, instead, is the territorialisation of social rights, which also puts migrant men and women at a disadvantage. As a result the women we interviewed are in a situation whereby, despite the fact that they spent their whole lives looking after their families and working, they are not properly provided for in their old age. As Hradečná and Jelínková (2016) recommend, it would be advisable for measures to be taken to remove the long-lasting discriminatory practice or **disproportion** between the obligation of citizens from non-European countries to **contribute** to the social system and the real possibilities of **drawing** on it in case of need. In addition it is important to approve system changes and partial changes in the area of **pension insurance**, seen by Hradečná and Jelínková in the fiction of the affidavit on including the period of insurance or establishing the opportunity to pay the additional necessary insurance, or to subtract the requested time from the length of stay on the territory of the Czech Republic and at the same time to alter the pension calculation so that the level of their pension is calculated in an established way from the average wage, etc. Such measures would not lead to migrant women or persons with a migrant background being given an advantage, but to the **equalisation of their unequal position** (Hradečná – Jelínková 2016).

The problem of ageing in migration is not just an institutional concern, however. The qualitative research that we carried out allows a view of a wide

range of subjectively-articulated phenomena connected with this life situation. The stories captured show that **just as leaving never ends, neither does arrival**. It is in the period of preparation for retirement that migration history often returns, in an unpleasant way. Local people continue to touch upon the fact that the immigrant is from elsewhere, but this is even more concerning in the case of authorities, where according to the interviews, officials in many cases continue **to deal with clients as if they were foreigners, although they have long been Czech citizens**. This then has to be considered a lack of basic professionalism, and in human terms, boorishness. Entering retirement age is demonstrably a critical period that brings with it the risk of falling below the **poverty** level and a new struggle to maintain the social status achieved in migration, as well as new **clashes with multiple types of discrimination**. Looked at intersectionally, these clashes are connected with gender, **age, ethnicity (or the label of foreigner) and social status**. The narratives reflect age discrimination on the labour market, with which Czech women aged over 50 are also familiar (in other words ageism), although a number of the women had, during their time in the Czech Republic, progressed professionally and had something to offer.

This new stage of life in emigration thus creates pressure for **new survival strategies** from the purely economic point of view. Their economic situation and their own character force the women we surveyed to be economically active, but the discrimination they encounter in reality means they enter jobs that are far below their qualifications. They are still therefore waging a **battle for the social status** from which they originally came, and which they laboriously regained in emigration. Once again they find themselves in a position where on one hand they are thankful for any work, but on the other they perceive the indignity of their position, having put in an above-average performance all their lives, both in the area of **reproductive work** – thanks to which their children have integrated well not only into Czech society, but often also into its elites – and **on the labour market**.

From the broader human perspective they are dealing with an even more serious dilemma, connected with the above-mentioned **traditional moral commitment** to care for their families in their far-off native country. In the new situation it is more difficult for them to organise “caring” visits to their parents, and they thus find themselves under a **double pressure**: they are trying to safeguard their **own vulnerable position at work** (and thus also make their own retirement more economically secure) given their greater age, and at the same time to meet the normative commitments (traditionally expected from

women) regarding **transnational care of seniors**. The research has shown that only the complex investigation of identity and social position from the point of view of gender, the “foreigner” label and ageing gives us an insight into the difficult social situation of women who have behind them a performance that is, without exaggeration, heroic. The women we surveyed still continue to maintain the position of **independent, active** women, sacrificing themselves for others and at the same time rejecting the help of those close to them, but without seeing themselves as sacrificing, let alone as victims. They see their position as their own free choice, which is evidently a very important part of their migration identity. However, the interviews with them took place at a time when they were on the threshold of retirement age and the ageing process, and so the question remains open of how their own strategies and the strategies of their families will change in connection with their expected growing social vulnerability.

PhDr. **Hana Havelková**, Ph.D. is a sociologist and co-founder of the Department of Gender Studies at the Faculty of Humanities of Charles University in Prague, where she teaches feminist and sociological theories, empirical research on gender in the socialist era and gender in politics. She is a member of the board of the Institut für Konfliktforschung in Vienna and of the international journal *L’Homme. Zeitschrift für feministische Geschichtswissenschaft*, member of the editorial board of the American journal *Social Politics*. She is co-author and co-editor of the recent publications “Waste of Talents. Turning Private Struggles into a Public Issue” (European Commission 2004), “The Politics of Gender Culture under State Socialism” (Routledge 2014) and “Vyvlastněný hlas. Proměny genderové kultury české společnosti 1948–1989” (Sociologické nakladatelství 2015).

**Petra Ezzeddine**, Ph.D. is a social anthropologist. She lectures at the Department of Anthropology and Gender Studies, Faculty of Humanities (Charles University in Prague). She teaches courses on Anthropology of Migration, Gender in Migration and Applied Anthropology. Her ethnographic research deals with gender aspects of migration, transnational forms of parenthood, the globalization of care for children and the elderly and female migrant domestic workers, gender and ageing in migration. She is a member of the editorial boards for *Gender /Rovné příležitosti/Výzkum* (Gender and Research) and the *Journal of Human Affairs* (Springer). She cooperates closely with several Czech and Slovak non-governmental and international organizations working with migrants.

## References

- Ackers, Louise, and Peter Dwyer. 2007. *Senior Citizenship? Retirement Migration and Welfare in the European Union*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Aranda, Elizabeth Malca. 2003. "Care Work and Gendered Constraints: The Case of Puerto Rican Transmigrants." *Gender and Society*, 17 (4): 609–626.
- Baldassar, Loretta. 2007. "Transnational Families and Aged Care: Themobility of Care and Migrancy of Ageing." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 33 (2): 275–297.
- Boyd, Monica, and Elizabeth Grieco. 2003. *Women and Migration: Incorporating Gender into International Migration Theory*. Migration Policy Institute.
- Brettell, Caroline. 2000. "Theorizing Migration in Anthropology: The Social Construction of Networks, Identities, Communities, and Globalscapes." Pp. 97–137 in Brettell, Caroline B., and James F. Hollifield J. (eds.). *Migration Theory: Talking across Disciplines*. New York – Oxon: Routledge.
- Bryceson, Deborah, and Ulla Vuorela. 2002. *The Transnational Family: New European Frontiers and Global Networks*. Bloomsbury Academics.
- Daniels, Kaplan Arlene. 1987. "Invisible Work." *Social Problems*, 34 (5): 403–425.
- Deneva, Neda. 2012. "Transnational Ageing Carers: On Transfomation of Kinship and Citizenhip in the Context of Migration among Bulgarian Muslim in Spain." *Social Politics*, 19 (1): 105–128.
- Denzin, Norman K. 1989. *Intepretative Biography*. Qualitative Research Methods Series 17. London: Sage.
- Erel, Umut. 2007. "Constructing Meaningful Lives. Biographical Method in Research on Migrant Woman." *Sociological Research Online*, 12 (4): 4–5 [online]. Available at: <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/12/4/5/html> [accessed 2010–10–03].
- Ezzeddine, Petra. 2012. "Materství na dálku: transnacionální materství ukrajinských migrantek v České republice." *Gender / rovné příležitosti / výzkum*, 13 (1): 24–33.
- George, Sheba Mariam. 2005. *When Women Come First: Gender and Class in Transnational Migration*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press.
- Havelková, Hana. 1993. "'Patriarchy' in Czech Society." *Hypatia*, 8 (4): 89–96.
- Hradečná, Pavla, and Marie Jelínková. 2016. "Analysis of the Position and Situation of Older Middle Aged and Senior Migrant Women with a Migration Background." Pp. 5–61 in Hradečná, Pavla, Marie Jelínková, Petra Ezzeddine, and Hana Havelková. *Women at the Sidelines(?): Gender, Migration and Ageing*. Prague: SIMI.
- Jones, Adam. 1994. "Gender and Ethnic Conflict in ex-Yugoslavia." *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 17 (1): 115–134.
- King, Russel, Tony Warns, and Allan Williams. 2000. *Sunset Lives. British Retirement to the Medditeranian*. Oxford: Blumsbery Publishing.
- Kopytoff, Igor. 1986. "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as a Process." Pp. 64–91 in Appadurai, Arjun (ed.). *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lutz, Helma, and Ewa Palenga-Mollenbeck. 2009. "The 'Care Chain' Concept under Scrutiny." *Príspevek na konferenci Care and Migration*, 23.–24. 4. 2009. Goethe University, Frankfurt nad Mohanem.

- Massey, Douglas S. et al. 1993. "An Evaluation of Migration Theory: The North American Case." *Population and Development Review*, 20 (4): 699–751.
- McMahon, Simon (ed.). 2012. *Developments in the Theory and Practice of Citizenship*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Oakley, Ann R. 1974. *The Sociology of Housework*. London: Martin Robertson.
- Pedraza, Silvia. 1991. "Women and Migration: The Social Consequences of Gender." *Annual Review of Sociology*, 17: 303–325.
- Pilat-Whalenová, Marie. 2007. *Zkušenosti České republiky s dočasným útočištěm a organizovanou dobrovolnou repatriací do Bosny a Hercegoviny*. Výzkumná zpráva. Praha: Ministerstvo vnitra ČR.
- Sassen, Saskia. 2008. *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages*. Princetown: Princetown University Press.
- Sokačová, Linda. 2015. "Chudoba a prevence chudoby v genderové perspektivě." Pp. 130–132 in Smetáčková, Irena (ed.). *Stínová zpráva o stavu genderové rovnosti v České republice v roce 2015*. Praha: Česká ženská lobby.
- Sokačová, Linda, and Lenka Formánková. 2015. "Trh práce a politika zaměstnanosti." Pp. 76–83 in Smetáčková, Irena (ed.). *Stínová zpráva o stavu genderové rovnosti v České republice v roce 2015*. Praha: Česká ženská lobby.
- Sýkorová, Dana a kol. 2014. *Bydlení v kontextu chudoby a stáří*. Ostrava: Ostravská univerzita.
- Yuval-Davis, Nira. 1997. "Women, Citizenship and Difference." *Feminist Review*, (57): 4–27.