

TRANSNATIONAL HOUSEHOLDS IN THE CONTEXT OF FEMALE MIGRATION FROM SLOVAKIA TO AUSTRIA

Martina Sekulová

Abstract: *The article concentrates on transnational care-giving practises of Slovak women providing home elder care in Austria related to production and consumption in their families in Slovakia. The article focuses on how trans-border migration influences care-giving, organisation of the household and family practises in domestic workers' families in Slovakia. My argument is that in order to understand deeper contexts and consequences of transnational migration of domestic workers in private households we must consider gender as a complex multi-dimensional category. The emphasis of the article is put on how women reflect and manifest their gender identity and how "ways of doing family" are gendered in transnational families of Slovak elder care providers. Theoretical starting points for analysis are a transnational approach and gender perspective.*

Keywords: *migration; gender; transnational family; care-giving practises*

Introduction

The household as a basic unit of economic and social production has been facing significant challenges in the contemporary changing world, which Castles and Miller (Castles and Miller 2013) metaphorically portrayed as the "age of migration". Practises of the families are deeply embedded in the movements and mobilities of the world. The large body of scholarship admits that transnational, trans-local families are increasingly common. A transnational family, a family whose members are living in different countries and maintaining active family ties and practises across borders (Parrenas 2001; Haidinger 2008) are challenged to restructure ways of production and consumption. Especially the absence of

women who are key providers of reproductive labour within the families has far-reaching consequences. One of the new migration types emerging recently in the area of Central Europe is labour migration of domestic workers who provide care for family dependants (children, ill or disabled persons or seniors) in Western European countries such as Austria, Germany, Switzerland or the United Kingdom. Slovakia has recorded a remarkable extent of migration of women providing home elder care in Austria. Slovakia had traditionally been following the men breadwinner model; female elder care migration from Slovakia is in line with broader global migration patterns and the feminisation of migration. The aim of the article is to contribute to the debates about the new international division of reproductive labour in the area of Central Europe both theoretically and empirically. Most of the anthropological literature during the last two decades has concentrated on the home care provided to those at the beginning of the life circle – child care, while elder care has not been sufficiently elaborated. At the same time the article poses the argument that for deeper understanding of transnational domestic care migration it is important to take more than gender into account for analysis of the intersection – social identities of gender and age which significantly determines contexts and consequences of female labour migration related to home care.

A few remarks to research methodology

The article brings empirical findings from anthropological research. The central focus was on female perceptions, life-stories and experiences, personal reflections on gender identity. The spouses/men were not included in the research as my main research interest was given to female reflections on gender identity and their transnational care-giving practises. The research methodology consisted of a combination of methods – ethnographic interviews, participant observation and secondary analysis of theoretical literature, secondary analysis of statistical sources, legislation and other relevant documentation. The key research method was semi-structured in-depth ethnographic interviews with female elder care providers from Slovakia working in Austria. In order to collect sensitive data about experiences with domestic care, reflexions on gender in the process of transnational migration (often very emotional), I put particular emphasis on confidentiality. Except for a pilot informant there was no personal tie between me and the informants. I decided to enter a virtual forum for elder care providers with a request for women to participate in the research. I approached selected women

according to the region they came from, their age, family status and structure. Therefore the research sample was purposive. The research sample consisted of 18 women from all parts of Slovakia between 28 and 71 years old. The time spent in elder care was between of 2 and 10 years. I analytically divided the whole group of informants into two separate groups – younger women (or women with dependent children) and older women (or women with adult children)¹. Twelve informants were married; two were divorced; two widows (one of them living alone with children); one was single. Six women had children over 15 years old. The data were collected during the period between May 2011 and June 2012. The mutual dynamics of the relationship between the informants and me differed. The number of informants was too high to have deeper interconnections with more of them. I met repeatedly with a core of the group; besides personal meetings we stayed in touch and also exchanged information, experiences and progress in life through e-mail, telephone and social networks. An additional source of information was participant observation. During the fieldwork I attended meetings of the women where they shared their own experiences with work, troubles, emotional demands of being a transnational parent and partner. I also participated in shopping before going abroad.

Elder care migration from Slovakia – new migration pattern

Women² from the whole Slovakia commute every two or three weeks to different parts of Austria in order to take care of elder people in Austrian families – in private households. In most cases they do not have a professional healthcare license; they are retained as elder care providers after completing a special course and after completing a German language course at least on the basic level. The work of elder care providers in private households in Austria is legal. The domestic work service sector in Austria was regularised³ in January 2008; care providers from EU member states may work freely on the basis of a trade license (see also Bachinger 2008). Besides legal status stability many elder care providers benefit

¹ I use the division only analytically in order to differentiate contexts for women with dependent children (children under 18 years old who are in the full responsibility of the migrant) and women with adult children who either are or are not living in the same household (in the case of the research sample women over 45).

² Men are also a small proportion of Slovak migrants providing paid elder care in Austrian private households. The main reason for employing men is clients who need physical strength. The small proportion of men choose this type of work for economic purposes.

³ The Act on Domestic Work Service (*Hausbetreuungsgesetz (HbeG)*).

from the social welfare system and, in the future, after meeting the criteria of Austrian legislation, receive a retirement pension. The key specific of their work is that all of them provide *live-in* eldercare in private households consisting of 24-hour service for fourteen days⁴. After two weeks they change shift with other care providers (mainly care providers from Slovakia) and commute back to their families in Slovakia for another 14 days. They are circular migrants regularly returning to their home country after two weeks with very active transnational social behaviour during the time spent abroad. They are transmigrants as their activities are performed across wide transnational space; their social practises are present in two localities. The very nature and framework for elder care providers sets them in constant “motion”, crossing borders as a long-term strategy. Thus, elder care migration is in line with contemporary debates about migrations in social sciences which emphasize changing migration modes and patterns in comparison to the previous era. Specifically, new modes of migrations arise, as Morokvasic points out; many people use migration and commuting as a long-term strategy – they are settled in mobility (Morokvasic 2009).

Gender and age in the context of a transnational household

The concept of the household, as the basic social unit of economic production, faces challenges in the transnational context. The concept as such is considered rather problematic from the perspective of anthropology (Wilk 1991). However, for the purpose of the article the household is understood as a person or group of persons with mutual economic production (Švecová 1997). The transnational household is understood as a household where material, emotional and social ties among household members are upheld across the states (Haidinger 2008). Transnational households develop alternatives of reproduction and organisation within and between households which typically involve different and/or more persons than the classical nuclear family as household members must cope with economic and social reproduction strategies that transcend national labour markets (Haidinger 2008: 140). Although the primary purpose of the household is economic production of the household members, the forces pushing household transformation onto transnational are not exclusively economical. The importance of non-economic factors is in correlation with the age of migration actor. As Wilk argues, in order to understand transformations and change in the

⁴ Private households provide domestic workers accommodation and food besides daily wages.

production and consumption within the household it is crucial that the household is a part of larger social units, contexts and economic forces (Wilk 1991: 2). Several forces meet in the fast emergence of Slovak female migration to Austria: wider demographic trends related to ageing in the society, the increasing presence of two-career families, the increasing number of nuclear families and the consequent “care deficit” in Austria and, last but not least, labour market policies. The regularisation of domestic work from 1st January 2008 encouraged many Slovak women to migrate. Bachinger points out that 24-hour elder care simply fills in the gap which emerged due to the demographic and social changes in Austrian society (Bachinger 2009: 8). An important influence, on the part of Slovakia, was the economic downturn, increasing unemployment and worsening life situation. The maintenance of the household in Slovakia was a key expressed push factor among the informants’ life-stories⁵. Being an elder care provider is an easy way to achieve. At the same it promises a solution to the lack of employment opportunities and higher wage in comparison to wages in Slovakia. Young women with dependent children perceived working as an elderly care provider abroad rather as “forced” migration. Most of the interviewees before starting migrating abroad experienced unemployment, too low wages in Slovakia which simply do not correspond with needs of the household and its expenditures. In many cases the complicated situation of the household was strengthened by the unemployment of the partner/husband and the impossibility of finding a job. Wages from providing care abroad make a noticeable contribution to the household budget⁶.

“I started seven years ago. I was forced because of the lack of money. We did not have money for basic household expenditures. I did not have money to buy the kids bread or sweets. My husband was unemployed at that time. I was forced to look after the kids during the day and learn German at nights whether I liked it or not.” (Zora, 37, married, 3 children)

⁵ The research findings are similar to previous surveys showing that elder care migration from Slovakia was boosted by increasing unemployment and worsening economic conditions (Bahna 2011). The analysis by Bahna shows growth of elder care providers from 6588 in 2008 to 15,937 in 2011. The “jump” in data happened after the economic downturn.

⁶ The research identified wages most often varying from 50 Euros per day up to 65 Euros per day either with or without social security and health insurance. Some employers pay social security and health insurance, others not, based on the negotiations between care providers and family.

However, on the level of society in Slovakia there have been other structural (macro) and individual (micro) non-economical factors influencing the decision of women to go abroad. Firstly, the structural non-economic influences I see in the social structure of a particular society and the social construction of particular categories of differences. The average age of an elder care provider is about 43 years old (Bahna 2012) and women over 45 have the predominant share. Only the social construction of reproductive work (either paid in Austria or unpaid at home) as gendered does not explain the diversity of elder care providers from Slovakia and the high proportion of women over 45 years. Gender inequalities and gender discrimination are important components of “push” factors, “gender regimes” (Lutz 2007) as boosters of domestic work migration on both sides – sending and receiving countries. Because of gender discrimination in Slovakia women face far-reaching negative consequences. The research scholarship indicates that females are over-represented in low security jobs; they cope with threats of career discontinuity due to motherhood, and more specifically for elder care providers, women face age discrimination to a much higher extent than men (Filadelfiová 2007; Bútorová 2008; Sekulová – Gyárfášová 2009). Scholars employing an intersectional approach towards migration argue that, in order to fully comprehend the migration process and the position of female migrants within society, it is important to analyse the intersection of more social categories than just gender. To take only gender into account does not fully explain the heterogeneity of the society (Knudsen 2006; Sekulová 2011). Thus also the “predisposition” to migration, to become a migration actor, not only the position of a migrant in the host society, is shaped by the interaction of social categories of difference, as the intersectionality theory suggests.

Secondly, the narratives with informants suggest that age, as a category of difference, has much wider importance in the context of domestic care migration, as previous scholarship elaborated. Women over 45 years old emphasised in narratives the need to change their life, to experience something new, to try to be independent, to gain fresh breath in life, to experience something new after years of an unsatisfactory career and look for new dimensions for life before retirement. The decision to go was therefore the result of a combination of individual, personal or psychological reasons and the promise of improvement of the economic situation.

“I was not forced to take this job. I did not have a problem with unemployment; I had a full-time job in a company where I had been working for many years. I decided to change because I had been working with administration and papers for almost my

whole life... I simply needed a change. I had burn-out. I felt depressed so I decided. And indeed, there was also financial motivation because, in those times, at the time when I started, it was very financially attractive in comparison to salaries here.”
(Zuzana, 59 years, married, childless)

Once women become elder care providers in Austria, they become circular transmigrants, active in transnational households. As transmigrants they are “acting, deciding and caring and identifying themselves as members of networks which tie them to two or more societies at the same time” (Heidinger 2008:128). The social categories of difference, gender and age have a further differentiating influence on transnational social practises. What kind of transnational social practises and strategies do Slovak women develop for transnational households and their own transnational families? The next chapter concentrates on looking for answers.

Ways of “doing a household”

The circular “settling in mobility” creates a specific framework for transnational practises. Slovak domestic workers have to overcome a relatively close distance for a relatively short time, in comparison to domestic care providers in other part of the world. The large body of scholarship argues that the long absence of women at home has a significant influence on migrants themselves and their families in the home country, such as Latin Americans domestic workers in the US (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2007) or Filipino domestic workers in Europe (Parrenas 2001). Although they are absent from their own families they still have two weeks of the month to adopt their position in their family in Slovakia. Similarly to other domestic workers, they “leave home in order to stay at home, which results in pendular transnational migration rather than emigration” (Lutz 2007: 234). None of the informants expressed the intention of staying and integrating into Austrian society regardless of the time spent working as elder care providers.

“We established our own mode of existence” – responsibility for a household remains on the woman’s shoulders

The absence during half of the month may have the potential for a change in the division of labour within a household. It seems it is not applicable to Slovak women providing elder care. The household maintenance strategies are gendered

and transnational family practises of women are one of the manifestations of their gender identity. Women were confronted with their gender identity of being an appropriate mother, daughter or wife. They preferred to be mainly responsible for the needs of the household such as cleaning or nutrition. Their main strategy put emphasis on care “in advance” and care “afterwards”. The need to assign housework had different forms – to clean up the space, do laundry, iron for all the family members, buy food to refrigerate or stock or to cook and freeze several main courses in order to make the nutrition of the family as easy as possible. The food was frozen afterwards and ready for easy consumption – to be put in the microwave oven, for instance.

“I really hate the time before my departure. I think every female has it. I must clean up everything, water the flowers, fill the fridge, freeze cooked meals. Of course, I also leave money for my daughter; she can also access my account... I do the ironing. I really hate those two-three days prior to my departure. I always say it should not count as a day off.” (Julia, 56 years, widow, 1 child, Western Slovakia)

The “leaving ritual” is very similar to the one after the return. Females in accordance with criteria of the social role of women do what should be done and was “missed”:

“After my return everything is waiting for me. For four days I do laundry, tidy up, iron... Oh my God... It is too much sometimes. My husband simply cannot do it. But I think that the most important thing is that he is able to eat, that he cooks for himself and only housework waits for me.” (Mirka, 59 years, married, childless)

Spouses/male partners of elder care providers took over household responsibilities less often; the everyday tasks were more often taken over by female family members – daughters or grandmothers.

“When I am abroad my mother cooks for the children; my husband eats at work. I buy a lot of food before I leave... And regarding household cleaning, my 16-year-old daughter took over that responsibility. But of course, when I come back home, I do everything once again my way (laugh). And regarding the laundry, for instance, my mother comes and does it. At first my daughter did it, but she is too young. She does not have the appropriate skills for it. So my mother does it also.” (Veronika, 37 years, married, 2 children)

Another example is the story of 47-year-old Eva. A key care provider is her daughter who cooks and takes care of her smaller brothers and sisters. The husband remains rather aside in terms of the housework:

“My husband never sweeps, hovers or washes the floor. He just puts his clothes into the washing machine and that is it and the kids do the dishes... I buy frozen food; it is easier for my daughter to prepare the food. Occasionally they go out for lunch to granny’s place or our granny comes over to cook. We try every possibility.” (Eva, 47 years, married, 5 children)

The same woman, Eva, is also an example of how migration might influence the change of perception of gender roles ascribed to women and men in Slovakian society. Experience with Austria and a family with different social norms applied to gender may “open the eyes” of women. Some informants have started to perceive their husbands and the husbands’ contribution to their families and households from a new angle after 5 years of working abroad:

“I can see many differences...And the husband of my patient can really stand a lot. She is very rude to him. He comes home and she starts to yell at him; she tries to send him on a guilt trip. A Slovak man would be really angry with her immediately. I know that’s not true of every man, but many females I know complain how choleric their men are... And Austrians are much more hard working. This one, in the family where I work, comes home from work and then works here around the house... My husband comes from work tired and he doesn’t want to do anything. I know that he is a car-mechanic and works hard. But the Austrian man is much older. And I really can’t tell this to my husband; he would be really angry that I was criticizing him.” (Eva, 47 years, married, 5 children)

The researchers in other geographic areas argue that migration has the potential of influencing the gender division of labour in households (Mahler – Pessar 2006; Tostorkorova 2012). Tolstokorova argues that female migration leads to a “migration paradox”. The example of Ukrainian women migrants shows that migration has empowering effects on women in terms of their self-awareness. Migration does not lead to economic or gender equality in the family in spite of the economic independence of the women. Also Uhde, who developed the concept of “deformed emancipation”, argues that inequalities in society persist in spite of the economic independence of female migrants. Self-realisation of the women

did not lead to more equal division of labour, in the context of the transnational family to more equal division of labour in the family (Uhde 2012).

Who cares for whom? Strategies to cope with a “care deficit” in family

Elder care providers with a circular presence in their own family in Slovakia and a family in Austria, with no intention of staying in Austria for a longer time are active across the national borders and maintain close ties with their family at home – they are members of the transnational family. They are absent and the missing care, or “care deficit” as Hochschild (1995) metaphorically portrays it, must be filled. Transnational families are essentially those that “reside in different countries but which sustain active, regular links and connections with one another across state borders; they develop new ways of “doing” family care – the ways in which organisational arrangements, relations and practices of family care-giving are structured across long distances and national borders” (Yeates 2009: 23). Transnational family practises have widely been studied; however Orozco warns of generalisation of typical transnational family patterns (Orozco 2006) as migrating actors and remitters are diverse migrating men and women from different age groups, social statuses, cultural and social contexts. In particular, in Slovakia, time spent at work is important. The shorter time spent abroad set specific framework and patterns of “doing family” in the case of Slovakia in comparison to other transnational families of domestic workers.

The strategies of women in providing care depended upon the family life-circle. Missing effective social mechanisms related to welfare, care of children or seniors on the part of the state deepened “problems”. Strategies of elder care providers were determined by the type of family (nuclear, two generational family), marital status, children and their age as well as the (un)presence of broader family/kinship networks in the near area. Like the argument of Heidinger (2008), the transnational families of Slovak women included more members than the nuclear family. An important aspect of the family practises of elder care providers is the emergence of global care chains. The entrance of Slovak women into the new international division of reproductive labour to “sell” care while absence creates a care deficit at home means that Slovakia has become part of the global care chain. Global care chains are “a series of personal links between people across the globe based on the paid or unpaid work of caring” (Hochschild in Yeates 2009:40). The global care chains concept defines such social practise

when a woman takes paid domestic care abroad and her absence is substituted with another either informal/unpaid or paid person, a woman, often a migrant (Yeates 2009). The analysis of life-stories of females revealed several types of substitute care in Slovakian families – informal, unpaid, provided by nuclear or wider family members or paid care.

“Everyone helps; we try every possibility”

The most common pattern to fill in missing reproductive care most often takes the shape of informal, unpaid care provided by closest kinship (family members such as a spouse, parents, brothers and sisters of the parents, often also the children themselves). In this context Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila (1997: 567) argue that transnational motherhood erodes the traditional notion of the family, the family which is present in one household and one common place. Women are pushed to improvise parenthood in the context of new structures in order to provide care for children. The narratives reflect that the burdens of everyday care are most often taken over by closest family during the absence of women. Spouses/husbands/fathers were primarily responsible for those tasks according to informants; among others were older children or grandparents. The higher activity of men in providing care for family members rather than doing household tasks indicates the way reproductive work is gendered:

“...My son had too many ties to me; he was 10. Those beginnings were difficult. Always before my departure he said that he was feeling bad, he was ill; there was always something wrong with him. Luckily their grandparents are there. At least there is someone for them because my husband works hard as well, from early morning to the late evening. He doesn't have time and space to study with them. My son and daughter have to be self-reliant and now I can see that there is also something positive in this – my son stopped being dependent on me; it is better now.” (Veronika, 37 years, married, 2 children)

From a theoretical point of view unpaid care cannot be perceived as “full-value”. The delegation of the reproductive care duties in informants' families was only short term, until the time of return. Women tend to delegate reproductive work only partially, while woman put a lot of emphasize on doing as much as possible “in advance” and “afterwards”. This pattern lasts even if commuting continues for several years. According to the family type and the presence/absence

of wider kinship relations, the spouse also takes over certain responsibilities. These are mainly related to providing care for children and parents, but exclude most of the tasks traditionally attributed to women (such as laundry, ironing, cleaning of the house, etc.).

If you need to pay someone else

Hiring an external person to provide paid care during the absence of a woman is done in Slovak families as well. Paying for reproductive care seems to be the last solution which women employ due to financial demands. Even though they earn more in Austria than in Slovakia, the earnings are still too low to pay another person. Zora, a 37-year-old mother of three children below 15 years of age, hired a nanny as her husband also worked abroad and none of the relatives could help her. At the time of the interview, it was the first month when she quit her domestic work in Austria, as she could not bear the situation:

“At the beginning I had a grandma here, but then she passed away so I hired a nanny. I pay another person here and Austrians pay me there. I used to say it is simply the irony of fortune because I have to take care of someone and some stranger is taking care of my kids.” (Zora, 37, married, 3 children)

She employed a similar strategy to what she had been experiencing in Austria – to provide food and accommodation for a nanny for 14 days. She expected a 24-hour job which consisted of care for children, cooking and basic cleaning. She did not expect the nanny to do housework. The nanny she hired was an unemployed woman before retirement from a city near her village (25 kilometres). The widow lived alone; her children were adults; however social security benefits did not allowed her to survive with dignity so she was forced to work:

“The nanny spent the whole two weeks with the kids; she slept and ate at my place. I did not want her to tidy up, except in the kitchen after cooking. Mostly, I wanted her to pay attention to the children, so they wouldn’t feel alone. I wanted her to play with them, to study with them because I noticed that when I was at home they had better results in school. When I was away they had much worse grades. It was clear how important their psychological health was to them. But later when they got used to the nanny, they became friends and it was much better.” (Zora, 37 years, married, 3 children)

The relationship of Zora with the nanny was, according to her reflections, satisfactory. Unsatisfactory was leaving the children alone regularly for two weeks as a long-term strategy. Due to the emotionally demanding situation Zora quit work in Austria.

“I was very satisfied with her. But as I say, those times were extremely difficult for me and for the kids and I cried a lot in Austria. It was simply difficult and this led to some psychological problems for the children. They have some traumas because they were without me. Well, I must say, now it is better after those years; they have already coped with it because they are older now. But still, I think that this will never disappear from their memory.” (Zora, 37, married, 3 children)

The analysis of narratives indicates that age is an important differentiating factor having great influence on how women reflect on their gender identity. Although women with no exception felt responsible for reproductive work for their household, women with dependent children expressed great pressure arising from social norms. The “care deficit” at home and missing “mother” were intensified with feelings of guilt, sadness and pressure arising from the social norms defining the role of “appropriate mother”.

Reflections on family separation in the context of gender and age

The separation of women migrants from the family creates various emotions and emotional demands on family members. The most intensive feelings are experienced by transnational mothers who have to leave their children. As Parrenas points out (Parrenas 2001: 116), the pain of family separation creates various feelings, including helplessness, regret, and guilt for mothers, and loneliness, vulnerability, and insecurity for children.

Informants with dependent children reflected on the strongest feelings of the separation experience. They expressed huge difficulties emerging from their separation despite the temporality. The narratives include feelings of failure to provide care for the children – moral care (meaning the provision of discipline and socialisation), emotional care (meaning the provision of emotional security) and material care (provision of the physical needs of dependents). Domestic workers also are used to be labelled as “labourers of love” or “labourers of sorrow” due to the fact that their sole motivating force for seeking domestic work is their love

for their children; migrant mothers seek every opportunity to maximize their earnings in order to bring money to their children (Parrenas 2001: 120).

“I have cried many times. God, what a life do I have? But, many women live like me. Do we need such a life? But the kids are the reason. A person simply has to go. Kids need clothes, bread, this and that, a new jacket or shoes... I do it for them.” (Zora, 37 years, married, 3 children)

Women employ several strategies to balance their absence. In order to remain “virtually present” in the everyday life of their children they emphasize communication. Although their earnings are not very high and communication is expensive, keeping in touch with the family is worth more than money. A mother of the three dependent children explains that she figures she can afford to call every second day for five minutes and it is worth it to her:

“I try to call every two days because calling to Slovakia is pretty expensive. But if you don’t hear them it is even worse and I know that I can’t go without staying in touch with the kids for two weeks. They are my kids; I don’t care how expensive calling is then and call them every two days. I don’t mind the money I spend. I need to talk to my children but it hurts when they are happy that they hear me. I call every two days but don’t speak more than five minutes.” (Maria, 37 years, married, 3 children)

The strategies to balance the absence include substitution of missing moral and emotional care for the kids with material goods, gifts:

“I always try to bring them something. They expect it, some biscuits or chocolate, etc. When I worked in the city I also used to buy clothes, shoes. They were really happy to have something from Austria...” (Eva, 47 years, married, 5 children)

“He has become pampered, I have to admit, because I have started to buy him many things, gifts. And it was my fault because I tried to give him everything that I had not been able to give him before. I bought him clothes, toys, I don’t know whatever, a bicycle, a really good one which cost 200 euros. It was his first year at school; the other children had bicycles from their early childhood. Even though my mum tried hard I had very great difficult periods of life.” (Jarmila, 27 years, divorced, 1 child)

Other women established “return rituals”. In order to make up for their absence, after their return home some women would always take their children out to dinner, cook a special dinner, go to an amusement park or cinema or go out and buy the children a present they wished for. The pain of transnational parenting was excused by the precarious situation. Informants emphasized their efforts to explain to the children the reasons for their absence, that they couldn’t return because of the family’s dependence on their earnings:

“To be honest with you, the beginnings were very hard for me. I was used to spending a lot of time with my small children. We used to study together; I did everything with them. I felt guilty. But now I think they understand that this is not my free choice; it is a must. Because of the financial situation, the purchase of the house and a loan and house reconstruction. It was very hard, terrible for me. But now (after two years) it is much better.” (Veronika, 37 years, married, 2 children)

“I take care of strangers and my mother needs help”

Women with adult children and dependant parents expressed different reflections on gender identity. The women in the upper-end of the family life circle, women with adult children and senior parents, were confronted with the role of “daughter”. How to substitute missing care for their own parents, who are of the age of their “clients” in Austria for whom they care for a wage while their own parents are dependent? None of the informants have parents in nursing homes. However almost every day work experience with seniors and dependent adults in Austria push women to reflect on how to handle own parents, how to provide care for them if they are absent. The women with self-reliant parents were worried about the future, about the health of their parents, their needs which they may not be able to fulfil by themselves soon. They expressed worries about which strategy would be the best? Who will take over the responsibility? They repeatedly expressed the view that the strategy consisted of either plans to stop working abroad or to manage somehow, including paying for care, necessary care while commuting.

“My mum has some health problems. She was in hospital and now she feels better. I take care of strangers and it would be better if I could take care of my mum... What I would like best is to care for my mum even for free. But it is simply impossible. However, if she really becomes immobile, my mum, maybe I really will stop doing this work. I want to be with her up to her death. I hope she will never need such support but one never knows.” (Eva, 47 years old, married, 5 children)

Transnational partnership: reflections on spouse/partner

The relationship between a migrant woman and her spouse/partner faces a challenge as well. The absence of the woman, an “isolated life”, puts new demands on the couple. The reflection on marriage/partnership by women, the subjective view on how absence influences a relationship, significantly challenges previous patterns in the family. Long-term absence, in several cases, also reinforced by the migration of the husband/partner, causes various negative impacts, most likely alienation of the partners. The strongest feelings of alienation were expressed mainly by younger women with dependent children – they expressed regret and sadness over their situation:

“My husband works abroad and he commutes on a monthly basis. It is terrible and not ideal at all as we rarely see each other. The children don’t get to see him as well. We are too far from each other... Under such circumstances a lot of couples get divorced; people do not understand each other any more. They are no longer man and wife. One is here, the other is there; they are not a family... When we meet after a certain time, we are alienated and do not have any common topics to talk about. Unfortunately, after a few days together, when it becomes better, he or I have to go abroad.” (Zora, 37 years, married, 3 children)

Other women consider the separation as a challenge – a challenge for strength. As separation is only temporary, relationships might discover new levels of closeness based on the rareness of being together. Again, research has shown a different perception and impact on those families with small children and young couples from among those of an older age.

“My absence definitely has some influence on the relationship. When I was married my ex-husband migrated to work abroad. I stayed at home and it was hardly bearable because of jealousy. But in this relationship we have been together for two years; it is always like at the beginning... And we always look forward to each other. We discuss everything; we have very long talks. And maybe because of all those problems which we have – with finances, health problems which I have, nerves, the problems with the kid, it empowers us. My boyfriend really is concerned about me...when he sees how sad I am sad because I have to leave and go abroad.” (Jarmila, 27 years, divorced, 1 child)

Age influences reflection on the partnership among women working in Austria. Women with adult children felt less concerned about household and family as such. The work abroad meant for some of them space for personal self-expression, looking for a new experience, a chance for personal growth or financial independence. Feelings of self-realisation may have a positive influence on a relationship. Also absence and separation – the informants perceived it as a good “lesson” for husbands on how important they are. Until their separation, some informants had not realized how much they and their husbands valued each other:

“I perceive this time without being with my husband (laugh), as being good because he is now aware of my value and who I am for him. He values me when I come back home. I can see that he appreciates me, that he likes me more now than at the times of being together every day. If we are separated for a while, it strengthens our love and our relationship. I know it is not always like that in my family and I know some couples who divorced – divorced because the woman went to work in Austria.” (Petra, 53 years, married, 3 children)

Migration might be a strategy to escape unfavourable social relations with a spouse or wider family relations. Hondagneu-Sotelo (2007) found out that in the case of Mexican domestic workers in the US women embarked on migratory projects in order to change their relationships with their spouses or other relatives who oppressed them back home. The narratives of some Slovak women indicate that being a transmigrant separated from the family and relationship might be a strategy to escape from an unfavourable partner relationship.

“My husband works on a three-weekly basis. Sometimes we meet only for one day; he came on Monday evening and I left on Tuesday. We have an ideal marriage... I think that my husband did not expect us to end up this way – living separately because of my work... You know... We (women) had eyes for the children when they were small. We overlooked our husbands. The children were everything. Then they grew up; only empty space was left. And then... we started to fight with our husbands somehow; we started to blame each other and the relationship became quite difficult. Then it is better to leave...” (Katarína, 53 years, married, 2 children)

In such cases migration of elder care providers is paradoxical – women look for self-expression and self-realisation in the gendered work and in the environment with asymmetric power relations – in families in Austria.

Conclusion

The increase in migration undoubtedly challenges families in Slovakia nowadays, especially if a woman leaves her family, children, spouse or parents behind. She must overcome the difficulty in adapting to a foreign country and a new job and she must negotiate a position in the private household where she works. Besides this there are other specifics differentiating female migration from male migration. The migrating male continues the previous strategy of being a socially constructed male-breadwinner model – he only changes country of work and the family must overcome his absence. On the contrary, the migrating woman acts against social norms defining her gender identity of mother, wife or daughter. She leaves her family and the social and psychological aspects of this act make the situation very demanding. Anthropological scholarship elaborates a wide range of different strategies concerning how females perceive the transnational family or motherhood. The Slovakian case of elder providers in Austria has several specifics – time (the absence of women for two, rarely three weeks) and distance (they work in a relatively close foreign country). This setting “allows” persistence of the social norms and gender division of labour in the families.

Households in Slovakia under the pressure of the missing females develop alternative strategies. The housework tasks are taken over by close family or kin; the spouse/partner exceptionally, female family members in particular. The “care deficit”, the need to take care of dependent family members is most often taken over by a partner/spouse or another family member. Hiring a paid care provider from outside, such as a nanny for the children, is present as well, but rather an exception due to the financial demands. Women remain responsible for reproductive labour in the households in spite of their absence during half of the month. The reflection on gender identity in life-stories shows that gender is a multidimensional category. Female migrants reflect on their gender identity and manifest it different ways – in close correlation to age. Women with dependent children have difficulties with overcoming the paradox that they leave their children in order to provide them with complex care (material, emotional). They confront their social role of mother. Women with adult children and parents who may need their help are confronted with different roles and gender contexts. At the same time gender also influences motivation to work and the perception of work as such. To be an elder care provider means self-realisation for them – they are paid for the work they understand as “their area”, they gain new experiences with a foreign country, they learn a language and, what is specifically important, they

gain financial independence and self-confidence. Reflection on gender identity in this context is intensified by the fact that women with adult children provide paid care to people of the age of their parents while their own parents may need them. While manifestation of gender identity is oriented towards family left in Slovakia for females with dependent children, women with adult children manifest their identity through elder care. Migration of Slovak females to Austria strengthens gender norms in society in several ways. Women provide care-giving (for a wage), work socially constructed and ascribed to females, and the way women act in relation to a transnational household also tends to follow social norms related to gender.

Martina SEKULOVÁ (Mgr.) graduated at the Department of Ethnology and Culture Anthropology, Faculty of Arts, Comenius University in Bratislava. At the same institution she defended her PhD. thesis in July 2013 related to the impact of transnational care-giving practises on migrant families in Slovakia. She works as a Research Fellow in the think-tank Institute for Public Affairs in Bratislava. Her main area of expertise is minorities, migration, antidiscrimination and gender.

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