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A Life Course Perspective in the Analysis of Self-Experiences of Female Migrants in Belgium: the Case of Ukrainian and Russian Women in Belgium

SUMMARY

This study analyzes how migration transforms experiences of the self in Russian and Ukrainian women in Belgium, from a retrospective life course perspective. The author particularly focuses on gender identities in interaction with other aspects of the self such as educational and professional background, nationality and legal status. She aims both to highlight variation in gendered responses between Russian and Ukrainian women (inter-subjective variation), and within Russian and Ukrainian women (intra-subjective variation) over time and in two life domains (family and the labour market). The present analysis draws on the transversal analysis of the FEMIGRIN-project, a Belgian science policy project on female migration that cross-compared 5 case studies of female migrants in Belgium. The results of this transversal analysis were grouped in the construction of several “characteristic” migration trajectories of female migrants in Belgium. The present article reconstructs these trajectories with the qualitative data of the Russian and Ukrainian case study, from a life course and intersectional theory perspective. The combined life course and intersectional research perspective enabled the author to study how personal goals, aspirations and experiences of the self are continuously interpreted and re-interpreted in the course of migration, in interaction with the surrounding environment. Since women’s migration life courses develop largely according to their legal status and migration type, the author can conclude that female migrants’ opportunities and constraints are highly determined by these social categories. The analysis reveals that women’s life courses seem to be less structured by the investment of individual level capacities than by policy determined categories.

KEY WORDS: migration, gender, social change, life course, Russia, Ukraine

INTRODUCTION

During the last two decades, ethnographers invested efforts to move gender from the margins to the centre of migration studies (Mahler and Pessar, 2006: 27; Gabaccia et al., 2006).¹ It is now commonly accepted that the emancipating effects

¹ The initial version of this article was presented at the conference “Migratory processes in Europe: Evolution of the migratory interactions between the EU and Central and Eastern Eu-

of migration on gender roles are seldom an either/or question and that migration simultaneously produces upward and downward mobility (Foner, 2001; Pessar and Mahler, 2003; Dannecker, 2005; Piper, 2005; Carling, 2005). In-depth qualitative studies demonstrate that changes vary according to domains (family, labour market, community, study), in interaction with other power dimensions (social class, migrant status, race/ethnicity) and are further conditioned by structural opportunities in the receiving societies (labour market opportunities, social networks, discrimination). Despite these insights, the social and cultural processes that structure gender relations and expectations throughout migration processes remain poorly understood (Pessar and Mahler, 2003; Parrado and Flippen, 2004). The analytical focus of most studies remains fairly static, focusing on “outcomes” at one point in time and aiming at identifying “gains” and “losses” in terms of gender equality. What remains uncomprehended is the evolution of gender relations throughout the migration life course. The re-shaping of gender relations after migration does not have a fixed outcome, but is a continuous process. From a “doing gender” perspective (West and Zimmerman, 1987), there is an ongoing struggle “to maintain and change gender relations” (Ferree, 1990: 870, in Lee, 2006: 386). Rather than demonstrating the gains of migrant women in some domains and the lack of progress or even losses in others, this continuous negotiation of gender relations and how gender relations change over the migration trajectory should be systematically researched. Specifically, analyses should identify the conditions under which transitions are taking place. Besides the lack of insight into the evolution of gendered responses, the remainder of the studies a priori determine social categories in migrants’ backgrounds (e.g. nationalities, legal statuses, types of migration, educational level) or structural opportunities in the migration environment (migration policy, labour market structure) that are assumed to differentiate the experiences and positions of female migrants. There is a need for more open-focused explorative research that systematically compares a broad variety of potentially relevant social categories, so that structuring conditions can speak out of the data, instead of prefixing certain social categories in the analysis.

The present analysis contributes to the existing research by drawing on a study that systematically compared parallel in-depth ethnographic fieldwork in 5 case studies² of female migrants in Belgium (FEMIGRIN³) (Timmerman et al., 2011).

ropean countries”, in Odessa, 24–25 September 2010. Special thanks go to the anonymous reviewers for their valuable feedback and comments.

² 1) Post-Soviet countries, Ukraine and Russia, 2) The Philippines, 3) Nigeria, 4) Romania, 5) Brazil, Ecuador and Colombia.

³ FEMIGRIN (Factors and dynamics affecting and explaining female migration and integration in Belgian society; September 2008 – December 2010). Project funded by Belgian Science

The systematic comparison within and between the case studies based on nationality (transversal analysis) permitted the supersedence of the social category of nationality and grouping the findings in the construction of common trajectories of female migrants. In this article, I elaborate on the results of this transversal analysis of the FEMIGRIN-project. I frame the construction of the trajectories and the analysis of changes in experiences of the self in a life course (MacMillan and Copher, 2005; Lee, 2006) and intersectional theory perspective (Wekker and Lutz, 2001; McCall, 2005; Denis, 2008). This is done by the qualitative data of the Russian and Ukrainian case study of the FEMIGRIN-project (Heyse, 2011). The combination of both theoretical perspectives enabled me to study how some aspects of the self – in this case gender identities in interaction with other aspects of the self such as legal status, educational and professional background, and nationality – become more preliminary along the path of Russian and Ukrainian women’s migration life courses in Belgium.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In the present article I analyze how migration transforms experiences of the self in Russian and Ukrainian women in Belgium, from a retrospective life course perspective. I particularly focus on gender identities in interaction with other aspects of the self such as educational and professional background, nationality and legal status. I aim both to highlight variation in gendered responses between migrant women (inter-subjective variation), and within migrant women (intra-subjective variation) over time and in two life domains (family and labour market). Gender identities are defined here as “views of self as a particular sort of masculine or feminine” (Grad and Rojo, 2008: 10). In line with a doing gender perspective, gender is approached as a fluid and relational aspect of the self (West and Zimmerman, 1987). In this view, the self is a social construction, in that we “constantly construct and reconstruct a self to meet the needs of the situations we encounter, and do so with the guidance of our memories of the past and our hopes and fears for the future” (Bruner, 2003: 182). In extremis, this theoretical position views gender identity as completely emergent and contingent upon each specific social interaction (Guo, 2007). However, recognizing the social constructive nature of the self does not rule out its stability and continuity. It only places the meaning of the self within a broader social context and stimulates contextualization of analyses of identity processes (De

Policy (Belspo), under coordination of Centre for Migration and Intercultural Studies (CeMIS, Universiteit Antwerpen). Project team: Universiteit Antwerpen (CeMIS), Université de Liège (CEDEM), Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (HIVA) and Université Libre de Bruxelles (MET-ICES)

Fina, 2003; Vitanova, 2010). Exploring under what conditions articulated identities are changing and under what conditions they remain the same provides insights into the social conditions in which these processes are taking place. A re-analysis of the qualitative data of the Russian and Ukrainian case study demonstrated that two contextual factors significantly shaped identity processes: significant others and the transnational migration context (stratification and socio-historical context in both sending and receiving societies). Both intersectional theory and a life course perspective integrate these context-relevant elements in their theoretical premises and stimulate a contextualized analysis of roles and identity construction processes. From a life course perspective, the content and meaning of gender relations vary depending on the domain, the timing in the life course (e.g. before marriage, after child birth), the socio-historical context, the individual's connection to important others and individual level psychological processes (Furstenberg, 2003; MacMillan and Copher, 2005; Lee, 2006). Intersectionality claims that identity is composed of a changeable intersection of several identity dimensions (e.g. gender, ethnicity/nationality, education level). From an intersectional perspective, identities and roles are continuously co-constructed in interaction with the socio-historical context and significant others (Wekker and Lutz, 2001). Important life course events and changes in a person's surrounding society, for example caused by migration, can transform the content and distribution of power dimensions and bring certain intersections more to the foreground (Mens-Verhulst, 2007; Heyse, 2010). Besides intersectionality's conceptualization of identities, this analysis adopts intersectionality's critical stance towards social categories. In line with an "anticategorical" approach (McCall, 2005: 1773), the project team did not start from a priori defined social categories, but questioned the boundary-making and boundary-defining process itself by using an open, explorative analysis across categories and variables such as nationalities, migration types and legal statuses, with the aim of identifying the dividing lines that come out of the qualitative data. Instead of rather static "categorical" constructs, the project team used more fluid and dynamic concepts such as events, transitions and characteristics in the migration life course of female migrants and the surrounding context. The exclusive data collection on women prompts the impression that the social category of gender has primacy over other events and characteristics. In a strict sense, an intersectional analysis rejects such a priori assumptions. However, the aim of the study was not only to analyze how migration experiences of men and women differ, but especially how migration experiences *in-between and within* women vary. In line with an "intracategorical intersectional approach" (McCall, 2005: 1773), this intensive single-group case study permits breaking the broad category of "migrant women" and highlighting the diversity within this "group" (Denis, 2008).

METHODOLOGY

Methodology of the FEMIGRIN-project

In the FEMIGRIN-project, parallel qualitative data were collected in the above mentioned 5 case studies, grouped by the criterion of nationality. Both the choice for the criterion of nationality and the selection of the specific nationalities resulted from analyses of migration statistics in Belgium, and a round table debate with stakeholders on (female) migration in Belgium (policy makers, women's and migrants' associations, labour unions, federal police, academics). Nationality largely influences the initial structural opportunities of migrants after arrival in Belgium (e.g. visa requirements, national- and gender-stratification of the Belgian labour market). Furthermore, initial interviews with migrant women revealed that the approach on the basis of nationalities corresponds to a larger extent to the self-identification of the respondents than, for example, a grouping on the basis of the language. Russian and Ukrainian migrants, for example, are often labelled as "Russian-speakers" (e.g. Troitskaia, 2009; Heyse, 2010). Notwithstanding the observation that Russian and Ukrainian women sometimes identify themselves as one group, thereby referring to the shared history of communism and a common language, the term "Russian-speakers" seemed to be problematic for some Ukrainian respondents in this study. Some Ukrainian women distanced themselves from their "Russian identity" and stressed the importance of Ukrainian language, socio-cultural practices and Greek-Catholic religion in their daily activities. However, the grouping on the basis of nationality was a heuristic choice to facilitate the data gathering by various researchers and to enhance the comparability between the collected data. The analysis ultimately aimed to transgress the social category of nationality and unveil general dynamics between gender and migration processes. A two-stage analytical strategy fulfilled this aim: a within-group analysis per case study followed by a transversal analysis that systematically compared the case studies. Notwithstanding the rich diversity between and even within migrant women, this two-stage analytical process permitted the project team to group the experiences in the construction of several "typical migration trajectory". In each trajectory, the FEMIGRIN-team further explored the evolution of gender roles on the labour market and in the family, and the conditions that further differentiate the experiences of women. The identified trajectories, events, categories and characteristics are constructions of the researchers in the sense that they result from interpretative processes of the collected data against a background of social concepts and theories. However, the qualitative data collection was as open as possible, with the aim of letting the data speak for themselves.

The research approach combined the theoretical perspective of the life course and the qualitative research strategy of retrospective life history interviewing. The qualitative data gathering consisted of in-depth interviews with migrant women, round-tables with experts and key figures, extensive participative observation in the selected communities, and group interviews. For the Russian and Ukrainian case study, the data collection in Belgium was complemented with participative observation activities during a language training program in Ukraine (Odessa, Kiev and Lviv). The interviews and round-table debates were conducted in Dutch, French, Portuguese and/or English. Anonymity was secured and participants were asked for informed consent to audiotape the conversation. In each case study, 21 to 34 in-depth interviews were recorded and transcribed. This resulted in a total corpus of 134 biographical life history interviews that were analyzed with the qualitative software package NVivo. A common topic list guided the narrative interviews in order to enhance the comparability across the case studies. This topic list was unstructured, but focused the life stories on experiences of gender relations before and after migration, and on how goals, experiences of the self and behaviour changed throughout the migration trajectory, both on the labour market and in the family. In order to avoid prefixing certain social categories in the data gathering and to circumvent the risk of essentializing (e.g. attributing certain migration types to specific nationalities), the FEMIGRIN-team started from a general respondent profile. This profile stimulated us to vary the respondents in each case study on socio-demographic characteristics and life cycle stages that have proven to be relevant for migration experiences of female migrants such as age, education level, legal status, type of migration, family situation, time in Belgium, and labour market situation. This common respondent profile enabled cross-comparisons between the groups.

Respondent profile and specific methodology of the Russian and Ukrainian case study

In what follows, I elaborate on the constructed trajectories of the transversal analysis of the FEMIGRIN-project by re-analyzing the qualitative data of the Russian and Ukrainian case study from a combined intersectional and life course perspective. The Russian-speaking community has become one of Belgium's fastest growing migrant populations. Visa data reveal that migration from Russia and Ukraine is highly female. It is mainly women who enter Belgium through family reunification (marriage or cohabitation with a legally residing partner in Belgium), a job contract or study⁴ (Perrin and Schoonvaere, 2009). In the FEMIGRIN-project,

⁴ The number one long-term visa for the Russian Federation in Belgium constitutes asylum migration. It is mainly Chechens who apply for asylum in Belgium on humanitarian grounds. Because Chechens are not included in this study, the number one visa for Russian and Ukrainian female migrants is family reunification.

the Ukrainian and Russian women with legal residence status (family reunification, labour migration, students) participated in in-depth life history interviews. In total, 15 Russian and 10 Ukrainian women participated in life history interviews. The interviewees' ages ranged from 24 to 50 years and, at the time of the interviews, had been in Belgium between 1 and 5 years. All respondents stated that they had a higher educational degree or had obtained specialized professional training, with a duration ranging from 1–5 years after secondary education. In 2008, the educational attainment levels of Russia and Ukraine were above the EU-27 average, as the vast majority of people aged between 25–64 years had at least upper secondary education (European Training Foundation, 2011). Next to in-depth interviewing, four round-table debates with Russian, Ukrainian and Byelorussian female key figures (e.g. community workers, language teachers, academics, journalists) were organized, two at the beginning of the project to prepare the in-depth interviews in the Russian and Ukrainian case study and to facilitate networking between the stakeholders involved, and two at the end of the project to discuss the results. Topics such as the characteristics of Russian and Ukrainian female migration, opportunities and constraints, emancipation, and feminism were discussed. Quotations of these respondents will be used throughout the text.

A significant part of the Russian and Ukrainian population in Belgium falls beyond statistic registration because of the illegal residence status. In recent years, a group increasingly dominating this illegal migration flow are Ukrainian women who migrate (individually or with their families) to perform domestic work (household, child care) in Belgium (Troitskaia, 2009). They mainly originate from the West-Ukrainian oblasts Lviv, Ivano-Frankivsk and Ternopil. This group constitutes only a small part of general Ukrainian (irregular) female labour migration flow from the West-Ukrainian oblasts to Southern and Western Europe (Harney, 2009; Boccagni and Banfi, 2011; Vollmer et al., 2011). In the FEMIGRIN-project, this irregular Ukrainian migration was selected as a case study. I performed participative fieldwork activities during and after Ukrainian Greek-Catholic mass services in a church hired by the Ukrainian community in Antwerp. During participative activities, I conducted several informal (group) interviews. Analyses are based on field notes and, hence, no interview quotations will be used. Instead, the results will be integrated into the overall text and clearly distinguished from secondary material from other studies.

RESULTS

Both the analysis within nationalities and the transversal analysis reveal that the way of entering the country in terms of legal status (legal – illegal) and migration type (marriage, labour, student, asylum), in combination with the family situation (individual, with partner, with children) are the most fundamental socio-demographic characteristics that structure the migration life course of migrant women. The position on these dimensions not only determines the women's legal status and rights, but also conditions the women's work opportunities, their access to social services and institutions, their possibility to valorise personal capacities and to mobilize a social network. Stated differently, the mode of entrance stipulates the structural opportunities and constraints in an initial phase and significantly influences the deployment of the migration life course further on. These structural opportunities and constraints are not fixed and evolve in interaction with individual life courses. In the same way, experiences of these structural factors and responses to them significantly differ between women and depend on social, economic and cultural capital, coping strategies and uncontrollable factors such as luck. It is, however, possible to construct characteristic life courses of migrant women on the basis of mode of entrance, being 1) family reunification (marriage or co-habitation), 2) legal labour migration and/or study migration, 3) illegal labour migration for domestic work. I present these life courses here, with stipulating in each life course of variations between women and transitions in experiences of the self within women over time.

Family reunification

A unique characteristic, differentiating female family migrants' trajectories from (ir)regular labour migrants and study migrants, is marriage or legal cohabitation status with a Belgian citizen. The fieldwork reveals that family migrants' experiences and trajectories are to a large extent determined by their initial conceptualizations of gender relations, their ideals and expectations and by how these initial expectations develop in interaction with power relations in the household and in the surrounding society (gender and national stratification of the labour market). Women's experiences of the self, migration goals and trajectories evolve particularly in interaction with the love partner. Particularly, transitions develop around tensions between imagined selves/others and experienced selves/others.

Consistent with previous research (Constable, 2003; Charsley and Shaw, 2006; Beck-Gernsheim, 2007; Riaño and Baghdadi, 2007; Lauser, 2008; Flemmen, 2008; Heyse, 2010), my interviews reveal that the dissatisfaction with gendered power relations in the own society and the desire for more satisfying power relations

is a major incentive for searching for a partner abroad. Most of the cited studies describe dissatisfying gender relations in terms of “unequal power relations” and “patriarchy”, and satisfying gender relations in terms of “a greater involvement of the husband in the household”, “an increased participation of women in the public sphere” and “more democratic gender relations”. However, the round table debates reveal that ideas on emancipation and gender relations not only vary between Belgian and Russian/Ukrainian/Byelorussian women, but also among and within Russian/Ukrainian/Byelorussian women. In intersectional and life course terms, the content of the gender and nationality dimensions and the distribution of gendered power relations differ between women and even within women throughout the life course.

A recurrent self-representation of Russian and Ukrainian women is one in which they compare themselves with Belgian women and describe themselves as “more traditional”. Some women are characterizing Russian and Ukrainian women as female, home-loving and caring and are taking a critical stance towards the Western feminist ideal of liberal gender relations and an equal participation of women in the public sphere. Instead, they perceive gender relations in more natural and innate terms, seeing men and women as inherently different and complementary. They describe this as a specific feature of Russian and Ukrainian women that differentiates them from Belgian women and gives them a comparative advantage in finding their way to the heart of Belgian men.

A: And you Belgian women have lost something. You have jumped into the public life. But men are hunters. For them it's important when they are gaining success in public life and return to their homes, that they find their home as a fortress. And our women haven't forgotten this female role. And that's why women who know to lead their life like this are searching to conquer the hearts of Belgians. Maybe you are too independent, too emancipated. In our country we are still women!

B: With these women they [referring to Belgian men] can feel like a man

(Round table, 07. 09. 2009).

Gender conceptions and beliefs need to be situated in the socio-historical context of changing socio-demographical conditions and gender roles in communist and post-communist societies. The overt Soviet gender ideology was one of gender equality (Nielsen, 2004). Women were supposed to be men's equals on the labour market. Socialist governments managed to integrate women into economic and public life to a degree unseen in most Western capitalist societies (Glass, 2008). Reproduction and motherhood were considered as a duty to the state, for which

women received a broad set of state-sponsored benefits aimed at supporting women's full involvement in paid work – like free childcare, family allowances, parental leaves and guaranteed maternity. The state developed a special alliance with mothers, and the role of mother gained higher status than the role of the woman-worker (Issoupova, 2000). It is particularly in these policies and practices that a failure to institutionalize gender equality was hidden, since they were not accompanied by a gender division of labour in the home. Women remained concentrated in less prestigious jobs with lower wages (Glass, 2006). In other words, although socialist governments were overtly committed to the “gender equality” model, the “gender complementarity” model was silently kept alive (Stetsenso, 2002). The failure to install a policy-driven, top-down gender equality model during Soviet times partly explains why this model has been generally rejected during Post-Soviet times. Today, the concept of gender equality is associated with obligatory uniformity (Nielsen, 2004). Post-Soviet countries like Russia, Ukraine and Byelorussia revitalize a complementary gender ideology, proclaiming child rearing to be a typical female duty, and financial support of the family to be a male duty (Ashwin, 2002). However, the ideal image of a female caretaker who is supported by a male bread-winner for the family, hardly corresponds to reality. High male mortality, the rising divorce rate and the high number of out-of-wedlock children in Russia and Ukraine, often makes women the sole contributors to the household income (Remennick, 2005; White, 2005; Gavrilova and Gavrilov, 2009). Only in a small niche of wealthy households can women deliberately choose to withdraw from the labour market. For the remainder of the population, women's wage work is necessary for the survival of the family. Some of my respondents describe how they became tired from being responsible for the household and the children, while at the same time being the main bread-winner for the family. Not all the Russian and Ukrainian women I interviewed were longing for more equal labour market relations outside the home. On the contrary, some explained that they saw emancipation in terms of a possibility of withdrawing from the labour market and dedicating themselves to marriage and the family. In this regard, a lot of women are inclined to find a husband who supports them financially so that they can take up their caring female role. By marrying a European, they hope to realize this dream. As the respondent hereunder describes, a lot of Russian women do not recognize themselves in the programmes of most western feminists. Some respondents distance themselves from the term “feminism”. The failure of the Soviet state actually to achieve gender equality makes a lot of Russian and Ukrainian women sceptical towards the benefits of women's public participation for their socio-economic conditions, and their equality and well-being.

And I'm not a feminist. (...) Just... I can say that in Russia women mostly – mostly – don't want to be feminists, like feminism. (...) Not feminists. But if you

ask them, all of them would say that we want to have a husband leader. That husband will be leader.. (...) Because we are too tired to carry everything from our work. Too tired (Russia, 28 years, 1 year in Belgium, higher education background).

Yet, it is important to note that not all Russian and Ukrainian agree with this more traditional representation of Russian and Ukrainian women. They do acknowledge that the search for a more stable family life is an incentive to marry abroad, but stress the necessity to interpret aspirations in the life stories of individual women and not exclusively in the more traditional orientation of Russian women in general. They plead for a more nuanced representation of women's motives. The perception of more stable and secure socio-economic conditions, democratic rights and a developed social security system in Europe is a major attraction for women, according to some respondents.

They migrate to find a better life. They are searching for new opportunities: marriage, work, study opportunities, a better future for the children. All these elements play a role in their migration projects. Divorced women are experiencing a lot of difficulties in Russia and Ukraine. There, they need a job with sufficient income for the children. Here, you have social security that is not only protective for women, but also for the children. Here, there is double protection: women are more protected in Europe because of women's rights, the legal protection is completely different. And also, children are two times more safe in Europe. They even don't need a husband in Belgium [laughs]. It is all about the quality of life, that they believe will be better in Belgium. People don't leave their countries for worse. The reason to leave is the belief in a better future, whatever this "better" may signify (Round table, 07. 09. 2009).

Other Russian women stress the importance of their professional background and situate their incentive to marry abroad in their belief in creating a better balance between a family and a career life in Europe. As the Russian woman hereunder describes, it is now especially difficult for women in Russia and Ukraine to make this combination. A lot of women in big cities such as Moscow, St. Petersburg and Kiev feel that they have to make a trade-off between a family and a career life. If they choose a career, which they often initially do, they have to invest all their time and efforts, leaving them hardly any spare time for a personal life. Reaching their mid-twenties, several women state that they have become too old for the national marriage market. This motivates them to search for a partner abroad. Family is important, they say, but they equally want to continue their career in Belgium. They hope to find a better balance between a career and family life in Europe.

When I must decide about getting married or to stay and continue my career in Russia, I was thinking that I really wanted to have a family someday. I really want to have children. But if I say “no” and if I will continue to work like this, I will never get a family. I will never have my own life. And it’s not good to work like this (Russia, 41 years, 5–10 years in Belgium, higher education background).

How different the initial aspirations may seem, a shared experience is that of disillusion with initial expectations after some time in Belgium. A lot of Russian and Ukrainian women who initially perceive themselves as purely dedicated to the family gradually aspire to extend their life to the public sphere. However, women encounter several obstacles, both in the private and the public context. In the first place, women state that Belgian partners often do not acknowledge and support their professional aspirations. Some men fiercely forbid women to work, while others use more subtle forms of manipulation. However, some women state, on the contrary, that their Belgian partner facilitated the acquisition of the language and supported their efforts to find a job. Some key figures at the round table problematized the unequal power relation that inherently characterizes a family reunification status. Women gradually become aware of their dependency on their partner on the level of the language, legal status, social contacts and income. This dependent position becomes even more problematic for women with a high educational level and professional background. Several women at the round-table said that Russian and Ukrainian women cannot imagine ending up in a dependent situation like this.

Women do not foresee the situation they will end in, that they will completely depend on their partner. So in the first place, it is a juridical matter; they don’t know their rights, they don’t know they will have to stay for three years with this man or that they will have to go back... they don’t realize the situation they will be in. That is important. A relationship is a very personal matter and nobody can offer a guarantee, of course, but they don’t realize they will be in the most vulnerable position. They simply cannot imagine themselves, because women from post-Soviet countries always participated on the labour market, they simply cannot think about ending up in such a dependent situation. And this is often the reason for divorce, because they cannot live in such a dependent position (Round table, 07. 09. 2009).

The potential barriers in the private realm are intensified by obstacles in the public domain such as problems with legalizing diplomas, difficulties in language acquisition, limited labour market opportunities and discrimination. While women seem at first to comply with a traditional bread-winner model, especially the content and power distribution of these gender relations become contested and stimulate

women to invest their social, economic and cultural capital in changing this content and power distribution. As a consequence, the educational background and professional career become more prevalent in experienced selves and self-descriptions after a while. The content of the intersection of the gender, class (educational level, professional status) and national identity dimension seems to change according to the timing of the migration life course and in interaction with the surrounding context.

During the first year, everything goes well, they feel like a princess. But after one year, they start to encounter several problems: they don't find a job, there is the language problem, cultural differences between the partners pop up. A lot of women feel very unhappy (Round table, 07. 09. 2009).

Transitions develop around tensions between imagined selves/others and experienced selves/others. While in the beginning both partners – men and women – perceive gender relations in more general, idealized and stereotypical terms, this perception becomes more nuanced and complex after some time in Belgium. Partners gradually become aware of their contrasting expectations, the unequal power distribution and differences in social status. I did not systematically study the side of the Belgian husband, but secondary data and informal conversations illustrate that this disillusion is also visible in men. Men imagine women from Russia and Ukraine to be more traditional and family oriented than Belgian women. As demonstrated, it is especially these traditional roles that become contested by a lot of women after some time in Belgium.

Highly educated regular labour migration and student migration

In the context of work, the interviewed family, regular labour and student migrants make an intersection between gender, nationality and social class (educational and professional background) and discriminate themselves from other migrant women. They often represent Russian and Ukrainian women as highly educated and ambitious. For this reason, they say, Russian and Ukrainian women want to valorise their professional and educational background in Belgium. Some women claim that Russian and Ukrainian women are more flexible in integrating into Belgian society than other migrant nationalities. They attribute this specific feature to the rapidly changing social, economic and political conditions and the unpredictability of the life to which they had to adapt in Russia and Ukraine.

And Russian women can live everywhere. They had many problems in their history. Many problems. And they used to being alive when everyone had stopped living. They are strong. A strong character. But it's from the past, past, past. And our parents always say this "you must be strong. You must be strong. You must

help yourself". And help yourself and... It's since childhood. But for European people it's very difficult to live there... For them it's a crazy country. Because sometimes it's too hard, the rules, but sometimes no rules (Russia, 29 years; 1–5 years in Belgium, higher education background).

However, a more in-depth analysis of their migration careers reveals a tension between their represented selves and their actual work experiences in Belgium, between their "ideal selves" and "real selves". Most legal female Russian and Ukrainian migrants (family, labour, study) share the experience of professional devaluation because of migration. They have difficulties in finding a job according to their educational level. Since work is a central aspect in their identities and a source for their feelings of self-worth, this professional devaluation feeds sensations of personal de-empowerment. Consistent with research in Norway and Finland (Warkentin, 2000; Flemmen, 2008; Lotherington and Fjærtøft, 2007), many Russian and Ukrainian women with a higher education background develop a polarized relationship with Belgian society. They become polarized between fiercely aspiring, on the one side to participating fully in society and, on the other, experiencing significant barriers towards that participation. They view this as a lose-lose situation for both Belgian society and migrants. Some experts claim that the impossibility of working on their educational level induces de-motivation and reduces a person's work efficiency after a year. In their opinion, most integration facilities in Belgium provide assistance to lowly skilled migrants. Highly skilled migrants are supposed to manage on their own. The majority of the women say that better initial assistance would have made their work and educational investments more efficient. This is especially true for family migrants, who are generally approached in the context of the family, thereby leaving their work aspirations out of consideration. As indicated before, they depend on their husbands' assistance, whose expectations and goals may differ from their own.

Like I said at the beginning also, I was guided just by my husband. It was very difficult because he said "you go this way", and no other way even to search. It is like this. And sometimes you feel that it can be different things. At the beginning it is all right. But you cannot find everything by this way. And it's not fine. And umh... And also when you come here without the language, without knowing the language, it's not easy. It's very, very important in the beginning. You know, just right now, after 6 years being here, I... For the newcomers it's very, very important. You have to find somebody who translates your documents. You have to find somebody who will put a stamp... legalize here, there. I mean... (Russia, 41 years, 5–10 years in Belgium, higher education background).

This common experience of unrealizable potential and the felt absence of services that can facilitate women's life courses, create fertile ground for female activism. Russian and Ukrainian women – work and family migrants – are gathering in associations and platforms that lobby to enhance their possibilities on the labour market. The “Advanced Women” platform, for example, organizes round-table debates and networking activities on topics related to working and family life in Belgium for – what the organizers refer to as – “highly educated Russian women”.

R: I think that before this there were no events for Russian women together. I: So you think that for highly educated Russian women there are no activities, there are no organizations. R: No, now there is. Because we created this organization. It's a European platform for advanced women (Russia, 29 years, 1–5 years in Belgium, higher educated background).

A factor differentiating the perspectives of family and labour migrants is that the residence status of labour and study migrants is not dependent on their spouse. Instead, their residence status is conditional upon a work contract, an internship or a study enrolment. This creates both opportunities and constraints in comparison with family migrants. On the one hand, they do not experience the unequal power distribution that inherently characterizes a family reunification status. Moreover, entering the country through a pre-existing work contract is a major buffer against the professional degrading that is experienced by the majority of highly skilled female migrants. On the other hand, work migrants have a less secure long-term perspective than family migrants. The dependency upon a work contract or study enrolment creates another type of vulnerability: when the work contract is over or the study program ends, people have to return back home or risk ending up in illegality. Since their residence permit is conditional upon their work contract, they feel forced to take up any job position, beneath their educational level or with unsatisfactory salaries. Along the same lines, student migrants experience difficulties in the transition from study to the labour market in Belgium.

In sum, while a pre-existing labour contract and the enrolment in a study program initially protect migrant women from professional and educational devaluation, women experience their working conditions as precarious and perceive limited mobility opportunities on the Belgian labour market. Another identified buffer against professional devaluation is membership of the European Union, as was illustrated by the case of Romanian women in this project. For these women, migration more often creates upward professional mobility as well for highly educated, middle educated and low educated jobs.

Irregular labour migration

Legal residence status has been identified as a main social category fundamentally shaping the life course of female migrants. In Belgium, the economic niche absorbing a high proportion of irregular female migrants is the sector of care, more specifically domestic services (household, child care, care for the elderly). This is part of a global feminization of irregular migration induced by the internationalization of care, initially referred to as the “global care chain” (Hochschild, 2000: 131). The changing demographic composition in Europe (ageing of the population), the changing family model (from “male bread-winner model” to “dual earner model”) and the lack of employees in the care sector explain the demand for (foreign) domestic services. This demand for cheap labour is responded to by the labour surplus and migration pressure in poorer countries (Yeates, 2005). I concentrate here on the case of Ukrainian women who irregularly perform domestic services in Antwerp. These are mainly women who migrate (individually or with their families) to sustain the family in the home country or to build up a more socio-economically secured family life in Belgium. The unstable economic conditions, the increasing amount of single women, mothers and widows in Ukraine and the absence of a husband and hence a second income have a decisive impact on Ukrainian women’s migration decisions (Boccagni and Banfi, 2011). Divorced women generally take up full financial responsibility for the family, without any support from their ex-husbands. Notwithstanding the diversity in the profiles, projects and trajectories of Ukrainian women illegally working in Belgium as domestic servants, their life courses on the labour market and in the family show communal features that permit me to differentiate them from family, regular labour and study migrants.

Irregular labour migration – the labour market

International indicators demonstrate that the educational level of the Ukrainian population is comparatively high. In 2005, only 12% of the economically active population had no secondary education degree, while 45% had a specialized secondary or polytechnic education degree (Vollmer et al., 2011). Most of the Ukrainian irregular migrants I interviewed are working under their educational level. I interviewed former teachers, doctors, CEO’s, and industrial engineers who are performing unskilled domestic services in Belgium. Unlike most of the interviewed educated family, regular labour and study migrants, they do not perceive their downward professional mobility as problematic. The following life course characteristics and social categories influence the personal experience of professional degradation: the family situation before migration (more specifically: children), labour market position before migration, perceived actual job opportunities

in the region of origin, perceived job and educational opportunities for the children in the region of origin and the position of the individual in the migration project. While the life courses of educated marriage, study and labour migrants are merely driven by individual goals and oriented towards participation in Belgian society (position of the individual in the migration project), the majority of educated irregular Ukrainian female labour migrants conceive their migration project as a means to increase the life standard of the family back home, or in Belgium. According to my respondents, this additional revenue is necessary for basic needs such as education and clothing for the children, and for making investments like the renovation of a house or the purchase of a car. It differentiates their experiences from women viewing their migration as an individual project and claiming to have had satisfying socio-economic conditions before migration. Many Ukrainian mothers are giving up their own professional goals. They do not consider this as a sacrifice, but as their maternal duty in providing for a better future of the children. Furthermore, while family, study and labour migrants are taking Belgian women as a point of reference, Ukrainian irregular respondents tend to compare their actual situation with the opportunities in the region of origin. In addition, a lot of women in Ukraine are currently experiencing professional degradation (Hormel and Southworth, 2006) and are combining various jobs in the informal economy to make ends meet (Wanner, 1998). In contemporary Ukraine, the market value of human capital has significantly decreased. Low wages force highly skilled professionals such as doctors and academics to search for lowly skilled jobs (e.g. taxi driver, bar tender). According to some of my respondents, working illegally in Europe promises better financial prospects than staying in Ukraine.

Unlike the rather accepting attitude towards their educational and professional devaluation, my respondents perceive their illegal social status as problematic. They consider their precarious residence status and the risk of being caught by the police and being repatriated to their home countries as inconsistent with the high demand for cheap female domestic labour in Belgium. The Belgian system of fiscally attractive “service vouchers”, created to regulate the domestic work black market, is not able to meet this demand. “Service vouchers” can be used for cleaning and household activities, but not child care and care for the elderly. The insufficiency of the regular labour market in filling these demands generates possibilities for irregular labour migration. Furthermore, irregular labour is less expensive and more flexible than legal labour. Some of my respondents have the feeling that their labour is necessary for Belgian families and that authorities are turning a blind eye to it. However, their illegal status deprives them from all social rights. For this reason, they invest major efforts in regulating their residence status. The interviews reveal that efforts to obtain a regular stay permit in Belgium are not necessarily motivated

by the desire to build up a life in Belgium. Among the women who left their families behind, a large number strives to legalize their residence status so as to facilitate commuting between the regions of origin and Belgium. Because of the illegal situation, women have the feeling of being cut-off from their families. Travelling back and forth is too dangerous and expensive under these conditions. By regularizing their residence status, they hope to be able to combine short-time working periods in Belgium with regular visits to their families back home. For women who have migrated with their families, regularization is also a major concern. Families without a legal residence permit live with the constant fear of being repatriated to their home countries and hence lack any long-term perspective with secure social rights (e.g. education, medical care, housing).

Irregular labour migration – the family

The analysis of evolutions in gender relations of irregular Ukrainian women differs from the analysis of regular family migrants in the sense that for the latter, no family relations had been established before migration. The Ukrainian irregular women in this study were either accompanied by their partner (and/or children), or migrated individually to sustain their family in the region of origin.

Transitions in gender relations in irregular Ukrainian families in Belgium: a reconfiguration of “traditional” family models in the context of migration

The respondents explain that the global economic crisis reduced job opportunities for Ukrainian men in the construction sector in Europe. Nowadays, women’s income through work as a domestic servant offers a more stable and secure contribution to the household budget. Furthermore, domestic services jobs are less risky than work in construction: it is inside the house of families, which reduces the probability of being caught by the police on the grounds of no legal residence documents. Women are often the main bread-winner of the family. Women’s increased economic participation contributes to their power position in the household. They aim to gain independence and to achieve more discretionary power over the family budget. However, notwithstanding men’s larger participation in household activities because of women’s wage work, women state that they remain mainly responsible for childcare and the household. Moreover, the absence of a social network and the assistance of family members in Belgium puts more weight on women’s shoulders. Women are experiencing a double burden. Some respondents say that they hope to bring over family members to assist them. This reconfiguration of traditional gender relations potentially causes tensions among both men and women. Men can become frustrated with the limited work opportunities in Belgium in comparison with those of women. They experience inconsistencies in their self-image,

inconsistencies between the ideal image of a male bread-winner and the actual financial return from labour. Women tend to be more socially involved in Belgian society than men through the school and extra-school activities of the children. Furthermore, the fieldwork reveals that it is mostly women who are active in the church and who are creating various initiatives to transmit Ukrainian culture and language to the children. An example is the creation of a Ukrainian school – related to the church - in Antwerp, where children are familiarized over the weekend with Ukrainian language, socio-cultural practices and Greek Catholic religious traditions. The better work opportunities and more stable socio-economic conditions for women, together with the gradual embeddedness of children's lives in Belgium contribute to the transition in the perspective of most women's migration projects from short-term to longer term.

Transitions in gender relations in transnational families: a reconfiguration of “traditional” family models in a transnational context

The migration of Ukrainian mothers changes the gender power relations in transnational families. There is not merely one type of transnational family (Boccagni and Banfi, 2011). Still, some general transitions can be discerned. The migration of mothers for work abroad fundamentally reshapes the traditional Ukrainian family model, in which women are primary responsible for the family and the men's main duty is the provision of a family income. My respondents experience their absence during their children's development as problematic. In Ukraine, a lot of children are currently growing up without their mother or even without both parents (“transnational childhood”; Parreñas, 2001, 2005). The respondents state that in some cases, parents are not even recognized by their children after a few years of absence. According to my respondents and additional interviews in Ukraine, the high number of female outmigrations leads to divorced and torn-apart families. The significance of this problem for Ukrainian society today is reflected in the widespread term “emigration orphans” (Danzer and Dietz, 2009). A lot of women describe this situation as extremely painful or even unbearable. They compensate their feelings of guilt for their physical absence by sending back remittances. Transnational mothers appear flexibly to readjust the bread-winner/caregiver boundary. If her economic role conflicts with her conception of motherhood and femininity, she may make her work experiences consistent with her feminine role by framing her economic migration in the context of a better future for future generations (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila, 1997). Similarly to women who migrated with their families, their contribution to the household income increases the power position in the transnational household. Some of my respondents claim that money gives power, just as it does everywhere in Ukrainian society today, also on the level of the family.

In addition, individually migrating irregular Ukrainian migrants are resetting goals and career perspectives in interaction with the situation in Ukraine and Belgium. Often, women's initial aim is quickly to earn as much money as possible and to return back home, to their children. In contrast to expectations, the situation in Ukraine is not stabilizing. Earning and saving money in Belgium is also going slower than expected. Furthermore, some of my irregular Ukrainian respondents state that they get used to a more "relaxed and stabile European way of life". Notwithstanding women's feelings of guilt for their physical absence, their illegal situation in Belgium, and their hard work (women mostly work 6 days per week and 10 hours a day), they also enjoy their more relaxed and stable lifestyle in Belgium. They consider life in Belgium as easier and more predictable. The vagueness and uncertainty about the progress of the migration career is a common feature characterizing their life histories. The emotional ties with Ukraine remain profound. The region of origin and more precisely "home" is an important point of reference in the evaluation of the migration career and is used in various significations during the life history interview. For some, "home" has a very concrete signification, in the sense of a house to which one wants to return. However, in most life histories "home" has a more symbolic signification, referring to a nostalgic desire to return one day. Tkach and Brednikova (2009: 10) demonstrate the importance of the region of origin in the construction of the current career and identity. The difficult life conditions in the region of origin are stressed, for example, in order to underline the success of the migration project: "Narratives and memories about the previous place are extremely important as a point of reference for 'updating oneself'. The Homeland becomes a point of departure for one's own career and development. Moreover, it is a place of confirmation of one's success. Nostalgic longings are much less frequent as narratives of the homeland that are alarmist categories of collapse and ruin, unemployment or of boredom and nothing to do".

CONCLUSION

The present analysis was based upon the transversal analysis of the FEMIGRIN-project, that cross-compared 5 case studies of female migrants in Belgium. The systematic comparison of the case studies based on nationality in the FEMIGRIN-project enabled the project team to supersede the social category of "nationality" and to aggregate the observations in the construction of several "characteristic" migration trajectories of female migrants. The present article reconstructed these trajectories with the qualitative data of the Russian and Ukrainian case study, from a life course and intersectional theory perspective. The identified life courses are neither sequentially fixed, nor closed. People can move between courses or can

combine elements of several trajectories. In extremis, there are as many life courses as there are female migrants. However, with these critical remarks in mind, the combined life course and intersectional perspective facilitate a dynamic approach to gender in migration processes and hence corrects static gender analysis that focuses on outcomes at one single point in time. A life course perspective enables studying how personal goals, aspirations and experiences of the self are continuously interpreted and re-interpreted in the course of migration, in interaction with the surrounding environment. The data resulted from retrospective life history interviewing, concentrating on experiences of transitions of the self (gender, educational and professional background, nationality, legal status) throughout the life course. Retrospective interviewing always draws on a recollection of memories from hindsight and contains a re-interpretation of former selves into actual situations. In this sense, this analysis can be seen as a first step that needs to be continued by longitudinal qualitative data gathering, following and re-interviewing individual migrants on specific key moments during the migration life course.

Besides the theoretical relevance of the life course perspective for gender and migration studies, several practical implications can be drawn. In general, a life course perspective stimulates a more holistic approach to migration. It counterbalances the policy view on migration that tends to approach migrants in line with migration types (family, labour, study, asylum, illegal migration). Since women's migration life courses develop largely according to their legal status and migration type, I can conclude that female migrants' opportunities and constraints are highly determined by these social categories. Legal status and migration type are not characteristics of women themselves, but constructions of migration policy. As such, the analysis reveals that women's life courses seem to be less structured by the investment of individual level capacities than by policy determined categories. These policy categories also play a role in the state-provided migrant integration services. Family migrants are, for example, mainly approached in the context of the family, leaving their professional and educational aspirations largely out of consideration. A more holistic approach to migrants' life courses in migrant integration facilities can counterbalance this rather narrow policy approach and may increase the opportunities for migrants to valorise their social and cultural capital in Belgium. Through the analysis, I identified socio-demographic characteristics and life course events that differentiate the experiences between, but also within, female migrants. The data for example demonstrate how the professional and educational devaluation of highly skilled migrants is experienced differently between labour, family and study migrants on the one side, and irregular female labour migrants on the other. In addition, the analysis revealed that the available migration integration facilities (language courses, education and labour market orientation) do not

correspond to the needs of a lot of highly skilled female migrants. They appear to be mainly conceived for lowly skilled female migrants, leaving highly skilled migrants to manage on their own. The Russian and Ukrainian respondents stressed the importance of initial orientation and assistance after their arrival in Belgium. In sum, insight into the life course events, migrant characteristics and factors in the migration environment that differentiate the experiences between and within women offers important inspiration to diversify the migration policy in accordance with important dividing lines (gender, legal status, professional and educational background, family situation) of the target population so as to make their migration life courses more rewarding and satisfying, both for the people involved and for society in general.

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Petra HEYSE

Perspektiva životnog toka u analizi vlastitog iskustva migrantica u Belgiji – primjer Ukrajinki i Ruskinja u Belgiji

SAŽETAK

U radu se analizira kako migracije preobražavaju iskustva sebe kod Ruskinja i Ukrajinki u Belgiji iz perspektive retrospektivnoga životnog toka. Autorica se posebno usredotočuje na rodne identitete u interakciji s drugim aspektima sebe kao što su obrazovna i profesionalna pozadina, nacionalnost i pravni status. Cilj joj je istaknuti variranje u rodnim odgovorima kako između Ruskinja i Ukrajinki (međusubjektivne promjene) tako i unutar njih (unutarsubjektivne promjene) tijekom vremena i u dvije životne domene (obitelj i tržište rada). Analiza se oslanja na transverzalnu analizu projekta FEMIGRIN, belgijskoga znanstvenog projekta o ženskoj migracijskoj politici koji je križanjem usporedio pet studija slučajeva migrantica u Belgiji. Rezultati te transverzalne analize grupirani su u konstrukciji nekoliko »karakterističnih« migracijskih putanja (trajektorija) migrantica u Belgiji. U članku se pomoću kvalitativnih podataka ruske i ukrajinske studije slučaja rekonstruiraju te putanje iz perspektive životnog toka i interseksijske teorije (*intersectional theory*). Životni tok i perspektiva interseksijskog istraživanja uzeti zajedno omogućili su autorici da istraži kako se osobni ciljevi, aspiracije i iskustva sebe neprestano interpretiraju i reinterpetiraju tijekom migracije, u interakciji s okolinom. Budući da se migracijski životni tok žena najvećim dijelom razvija u skladu s njihovim pravnim statusom i tipom migracije, autorica zaključuje i da su te društvene kategorije uvelike određene ženskim migracijskim prilikama i prisilama. Analiza otkriva i da ulaganje individualnih sposobnosti, čini se, manje strukturira ženske životne tokove nego politički određene kategorije.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI: migracije, rod, društvena promjena, životni tok, Rusija, Ukrajina

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La perspective du cours de la vie dans l'analyse de l'expérience du soi de femmes immigrées en Belgique : l'exemple des femmes ukrainiennes et russes en Belgique

RÉSUMÉ

Le présent article fournit l'analyse de la manière dont la migration transforme l'expérience de soi chez les femmes russes et ukrainiennes en Belgique sous l'angle du cours de la vie rétrospective. L'auteure se concentre particulièrement sur l'identité de genre en interaction avec les autres aspects de soi tels que le bagage éducatif et professionnel, la nationalité et le statut juridique. L'étude a pour objectif de mettre en évidence la variation dans les réponses de genre tant entre les femmes russes et ukrainiennes (variations intersubjectives) qu'en leur sein (variations intrasubjectives) au fil du temps et dans deux domaines de la vie (famille et marché du travail). La présente analyse repose sur l'analyse transversale du projet scientifique belge FEMIGRIN, sur la politique migratoire des femmes, lequel a procédé à une comparaison en croisement de cinq cas d'étude d'immigrées en Belgique. Les résultats de

cette analyse transversale ont été regroupés dans la construction de plusieurs trajectoires migratoires « caractéristiques » des immigrées en Belgique. L'article offre, à l'aide des données qualitatives des cas d'étude russe et ukrainien, une reconstitution des parcours sous l'angle du cours de la vie et de la théorie intersectionnelle. La combinaison du cours de la vie et de la perspective de la recherche intersectionnelle ont permis à l'auteure d'examiner la façon dont laquelle les objectifs et aspirations personnels de même que les expériences de soi sont constamment interprétés et réinterprétés au cours de la migration, en interaction avec l'environnement. Etant donné que le cours de la vie migratoire des femmes évolue, en grande mesure, en fonction du statut juridique et du type de migration, l'auteure arrive à la conclusion que ces catégories sociales sont largement déterminées par les opportunités et les contraintes migratoires propres aux femmes. L'analyse révèle également que le cours de la vie des femmes semble être moins structuré par l'investissement des compétences individuelles que par la politique de certaines catégories.

MOTS CLÉS : migrations, genre, changement social, cours de la vie Russie, Ukraine