

A WELCOMED SEPARATION.

Understanding female migration in light of limited access to divorce

Abstract

This article explores the relationship between migration and empowerment, and demonstrates the benefits of addressing the conditions migrants leave behind, to understand migration flows. Among Ukrainian migrants, a significant share is women aged 40–70 who leave family behind in Ukraine to care for the elderly in Italy. The article describes several factors that have shaped the high level of mobility for this generation women in Ukraine, and identifies as a key mechanism the religious and economic limitations on divorce.

Keywords

Migration • Ukraine • Italy • domestic work • divorce • empowerment

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Introduction

In the past decades, female-dominated migration flows have grown in size and numbers, and in countries like Philippines, Sri Lanka and Indonesia, there are now more women than men who go abroad to work (Parreñas 2008). Scholars disagree on how to interpret this. Some argue that women are empowered through migration, as it constitutes opportunities for economic independence, and a chance to get away from family control, repressive gender roles and unsatisfactory relationships at home (Morokvasic 1993 in Kofman 2000; Constable 2005). Others see the increase in female mobility as an indicator of female marginalisation. Their mobility is understood as a sacrifice for the wellbeing of their families, and not as a move to improve own lives. Migration is not seen as empowering, but rather as a mechanism that marginalises and increases vulnerabilities for exploitation (Bonifacio 2012; Ehrenreich & Hochschild 2002).

In descriptions of migration flows in much feminist literature on migration, exploitation and marginalisation on one hand, and empowerment on the other, tend to be treated as opposites. In this article, I show how this is not always the case. Through an analysis of one of the major female migration flows in Europe today, the flow of middle-aged Ukrainian women who go to Italy to care for the elderly, I show that when female migrants leave unsatisfactory relationships at home and go abroad as domestic workers, it is not easy to classify their migration as either good or bad; empowerment or exploitation. They often work under exploitative conditions, but in spite of this, many experience the move as empowering.

This appears more clearly if we consider what the women see as alternatives to migration and what they leave behind. Here, it

does not suffice to look at the economic conditions migrants would have lived under had they stayed, but also their familial relationships, working conditions and the opportunities they have to shape their own lives.

This article draws on a study of international migration from Ukraine to Italy. Italy is second in importance as destination country for Ukrainian migrants (UCRS 2009). Approximately 80% of the migrants to Italy are women, most of them between 40 and 70 years of age¹. To analyse the mobility in light of what migrants leave behind, I have studied it as it appears from the country of origin, drawing on interviews with both migrants and non-migrants.

I start my analysis with a short overview of the role of family and divorce in migration research, before I describe the data on which this article is based. The next sections describe the factors that have shaped this particular migration flow; the economic crisis of the 1990s and the changes in the organisation of families that coincided with this, the demand for care workers in Italy, and the conditions of life and work for women in Ukraine. Before I conclude, I return to the questions of empowerment, family and migration.

Family and marriage – a reason to stay or leave

There is extensive variation how migrants organise their mobility and in the reasons they have for migrating (Kofman *et al.* 2012; King 2002). But although there is extensive variation, migrants do not travel the world at random. They often go to the same places

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as other migrants in their community; they organise their travels in similar manner, search for jobs in the same way and live under similar conditions while abroad (de Haas 2010; Tyldum forthcoming). Migration is structured, but it is not structured in a uniform way across social groups or contexts. These structured and structuring (in that new migrants copy the ways of previous migrants) properties of migration, makes it useful to think of migrants as agents who produce and reproduce distinct practises of migration (Bourdieu 1977).

In this article, I approach one specific practice of migration, the Ukrainian women aged 40 and above, who go to Italy for care work. I show how this mobility is shaped by economic, social, political and cultural relationships particular to this geographical place and historical juncture (Castles 2010). Several contextual and institutional factors are of relevance to understand how this practice of migration has emerged in a population group that tends to be relatively immobile in other regions. First of all, the unique historical experiences of this generation women in Ukraine have accustomed them to take the economic responsibility for the family and made them value economic security. The opportunities for employment for women of their generation in the Italian labour market are also of importance. However, first and foremost, this mobility needs to be understood in light of the relations these women have to their families, and the institutions of marriage and divorce in Western Ukraine.

The relationship between migration and the family has been given extensive attention in the migration literature. There is extensive scholarship on family migration (White 2011; Kofman *et al.* 2012), international marriages with ethnic majority population (Tyldum 2013; Constable 2003), international marriage within minority groups (Timmerman & Wets 2011; Nadim 2014) and how migrant women develop caring practices across transnational spaces (Schmidt 2011; Parreñas 2001). While much of this literature focusses on how migrants establish, maintain or renegotiate familial relationship through migration and across space, current scholarship have given less attention to how men and women can use migration to intentionally create a distance from members of their family.

In the European scholarship on migration, there are some authors who address how familial relationships in regions of destination are not always a positive resource; Evergeti and Ryan (2011) points out that the migration literature tends to emphasise the positive relations with families back home, but does not recognise the heavy demands these relations can place on migrants. Other authors write of female migration to Europe as a way to improve own life, distance themselves from family expectations and patriarchal societies (Timmerman & Wets 2011; Schmidt 2011).

There are few explicit references to divorce in the European literature on female migration, and as in the literature worldwide, if it is mentioned, divorce is usually described as a *consequence* of migration (see for instance Lan 2003; Landale & Ogena 1995). However, the relation between migration, marriage and divorce is more complex than this, and sometimes migration may be more fairly presented as a temporary or permanent solution to marital problems, rather than their cause. Migration can become an alternative to divorce, in response to marital problems, when divorce is not available. This is pointed out in several studies on migration in Asia, and in particular, in studies of migration from the Philippines, one of very few countries in the world, where the state does not grant legal divorce (Constable 2003). In the Philippines, two-thirds of migrants are women, and female migration tends to be long term, with a significant element of marriage migration (Parreñas 2001). The population in the Philippines sometimes talks of migration as a 'Philippine divorce' (Ehrenreich & Hochschild 2002), as Filipino women whose marriages are failing, tend to opt for migration, to assert their independence and

minimise the stigma attached to separated women (Tharan 1989 in Zlotnik 1995). Nana Oishi (2005) writes about 'Distressed women' (mainly from the Philippines and Sri Lanka) who emigrate to free themselves from problems at home, either with husbands or in-laws. Nicole Constable (2003) shows how a dream of (re-)marrying can become a reason to migrate for women who are not able to do so in the Philippines because they have had a child outside of marriage, or because of lack of access to divorce. The Asian context may seem very different from the European context at first glance; however, the above-mentioned countries all have institutional and economic obstacles to divorce, an institutional trait they have in common with Ukraine, as I will demonstrate below.

Although aspects of migrants' marital situation and access to divorce has been identified as shaping some of the major female migration flows worldwide in the literature referred above, the notion that problems or conflicts in marriage can make women (or men) leave, is still rarely considered in the migration literature. This can, in part, be because the migrants can be reluctant to express this as their reason for leaving. Difficult personal relations may not necessarily be a reason to leave, or a push factor for migration (although they can). But they can give people less of a reason to stay. Some turn down opportunities to migrate, because they wish to be close to family and friends for practical and emotional reasons (Fisher, Martin & Straubhaar 1997). Men and women whose close relations do not hold them back, are more likely to grasp these opportunities to go abroad to work.

Methodology and data

The subsequent analysis is based on four periods of fieldwork conducted in Western Ukraine between 2008 and 2011. Through personal interviews, focus groups, participant observation and monitoring of newspapers and magazines, I explored how migration is understood by the migrants themselves as well as people around them.

Seventy-two interviews and two focus group interviews were conducted in urban and rural areas in the Lviv region in Western Ukraine. The interviews used a life-history approach, giving particular emphasis to situations where migration decisions were made, covering respondents' family situations, work experiences at home and abroad and their relationship to and perception of (other) migrants in their local communities. Interviews lasted from 30 minutes to 3 hours. Most of the interviews were conducted in person in Russian and Ukrainian without a translator, recorded with the permission of the respondents, and transcribed and translated to English by native speakers. Pseudonyms are used to protect respondent's privacy.

Respondents with varying experiences of migration were targeted, including families of migrants, return migrants, and people planning to go abroad. The project deliberately included non-migrants in order to contrast their situations and actions with those of migrants.

The aim of my research has not primarily been to assess how people describe and explain their own decision to migrate. Instead, I have investigated how migration is understood in the communities migrants leave behind. Migration is here understood as a cultural repertoire (Swidler 2001), a type of behaviour that is seen as natural or possible in a given situation. When potential migrants decide whether or not to migrate, they draw on local understandings of what migration entails, and who it is appropriate for in a given situation. In my analysis of female migration between Ukraine and Italy, I draw on only eight interviews with return migrants in this group.

The female return migrants told relatively similar stories, and it was assumed that additional interviews in this group would not add much new information. Instead, I expanded the study by including other respondent groups who could give complementary perspectives on the families and communities from where these women leave. I interviewed women in similar life situations who did not go abroad, as well as left behind family members and neighbours. I interviewed nine non-migrant women over forty, some of them middle class, others living in poverty, asking why they had not gone abroad to work themselves. Among my respondents were also five children of middle-aged female migrants in Southern Europe, and several siblings and neighbours. As most respondents had a neighbour or acquaintance in Italy, this mobility was touched upon in all interviews. The middle-aged women's narratives are also contrasted with the narratives of other groups of migrants, including five younger women and men who have been in Italy. I also lean on scholars who have interviewed Ukrainian women in Italy (Fedyuk 2011; Solari 2010; Vianello 2011).

Experiences from an economic and ideological collapse

The flow of migrants to Italy emerged from the mid-1990s (UCRS 2009). The women who go to Italy work for private households, either as live-in caregivers for the elderly or as cleaners or caregivers working in households, but living separately. Most of them have no legal basis for residence. The women mainly migrate alone or with friends, leaving husbands in Ukraine. It is not uncommon to stay from 6 to 10 years; some stay even longer (Fedyuk 2011; UCRS 2009). To understand why Ukrainian women dominate among domestic workers in Italy, it can be useful to look at the shared history these women have. Larger migration flows often emerge in societies that are in transformation and rapid development, and not necessarily in countries that are stable and poor (Massey *et al.* 2008). Major changes in society tend to spur migration, as people become displaced from their traditional livelihoods and need to look for new solutions in a changing world (Sassen 1988). In Western Ukraine, extensive restructuring of politics and economy throughout the last century, has forced the population to regularly adapt and find new strategies for livelihood. In the massive economic restructuring of the 1990s, the generation of women that today are in Italy, were among those most harshly affected.

With the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, most of the Ukrainian women who are in Italy today were in their twenties and thirties. They had grown up in the Soviet Union, married and had children without ever lacking food, healthcare or heating². As Ukraine gained its independence, a major restructuring of the economy took place. By 1993, employees in all sectors of the economy could go months without salaries, and unemployment was rising quickly. Some were paid in kind (anything from cement to eggs), items that they then needed to sell at local markets. Those still being paid in cash saw their money rapidly lose value, with more or less constant hyperinflation between 1992 and 1994. Shops were almost empty of goods, and there were queues everywhere. Many attempted to make ends meet selling things at the market. During my travels in the post-Soviet region in the early 1990s, it is difficult to forget the women and men who were selling used light bulbs and a few pieces of old cutlery on a small table by the subway stations. The acute poverty was intense.

The major political and economic changes throughout the 20th century and in particular, the reforms of the 1990s has made Western

Ukrainians used to adapt to change, and this flexibility is likely to have made them more mobile than the population in more stable societies (Sassen 1988). But the reforms of the 1990s also started micro processes that contributed shaping migration flows, as the restructuring of the economy and ideological changes in government also had consequences for division of labour within the family.

Ukraine achieved a high female employment rate under the communist regime. This gave women a degree of economic and social independence from their husbands, as extensive welfare arrangements and strong institutions were developed to assist in the raising of children. To a certain extent, the governmental welfare provisions made the traditional male role of provider and patriarch for mothers and children obsolete. Men were encouraged to develop alternative masculine identities based on work. Motherhood was strongly politicised in the Soviet ideology, and simultaneously, there was a relative neglect of fatherhood. This created mothers with much responsibility, and undermined the position of men within the family (Ashwin 2000).

The erosion of the Soviet welfare provisions coincided with process of nation building and a renewed focus on traditional values, including reemphasis of traditional gender roles (Fedyuk 2011), and in popular culture, masculine ideals where men reassumed the traditional 'male' responsibilities as providers and patriarchs dominated. However, the expectations to fill traditional male responsibilities came at a time when male-dominated industries were particularly, badly hit by the economic crisis (Ashwin 2000). Some did succeed in 'properly' fulfilling the role of head of the family, but with record-high unemployment, hyperinflation and salaries not being paid, this was often difficult. The widespread male labour migration within the country and to neighbouring countries throughout the 1990s and 2000s (mainly short-term circular migration) needs to be understood in this light. The men who failed as breadwinners had few alternative roles available to them, as they were deprived of their identity as workers and the role of caregiver in the family was perceived as only available to women. During these years, male suicide rates and male alcohol consumption rose to become among the highest in the world (BRAINERD 2001; Ashwin & Lytkina 2004).

And as many men struggled to fill the job as breadwinner, their wives often felt that the responsibility for the family rested on their shoulders alone. Some of my respondents describe how they, in the mid-1990s, had two or even three jobs, in addition to the daily struggle to make ends meet at home, as poverty creates a lot of extra work. Few could afford processed food and thus, all food needed to be made from scratch. Hours were spent standing in queues, and yet more hours were spent travelling to markets where food was cheaper, or to nearby forests for berries or mushrooms. Some were lucky enough to have access to a plot of land, but they needed time to plant and harvest, and also process cabbage, berries and other products so they would last through the winter. Even so, many saw their families go hungry.

My respondents were often reluctant to speak of how they managed in the 1990s. In between narratives of coping and general statements of how hard life had been on her, one woman described the sadness she felt when she had to put plastic bags in her son's shoes when the first snow fell. Another spoke of how she served the same dish for dinner every day for months, even for Christmas. One woman told how she still, 10 years later, can wake up at night with nightmares of her daughter crying because she is hungry. From 1995 the economy gradually improved and - just when people had started to believe in economic stability - a new crisis struck in 1997. Again, salaries were not paid, factories closed, and unemployment rose.

The middle-aged women who have worked in Italy for the last 15 years, not only experienced this strongly chaotic and for many very frightening period; they were often in a particularly vulnerable situation at the time. They were young mothers who had had children within the economic security of the Soviet Union, but were suddenly left to provide and care for their families alone.

These experiences of poverty and instability are not easily forgotten, and they create an important incentive for going abroad to earn money. It is through this lens we need to understand the immense satisfaction these women express when they speak of their bank accounts with international currency saved up through work abroad. One of my respondents, a woman in her seventies told me how it felt to come back from her first trip abroad in the mid-1990s. She had been in Poland to work in agriculture:

It wasn't hard. What is there to it? You pick an apple. There is a ladder, and you stand on the ladder. We were talking, laughing. [...] Then it started snowing. Not all apples were picked, but I said that I was going home. It was cold already. I had earned... [sighs happily]. I went to the market and bought... [another satisfied sigh]. We had nothing then! My God! I bought a jacket for my daughter. I bought shoes for myself. I was so happy!

She only stayed home a few weeks before going abroad again, this time as a domestic worker. She came back 14 years later with hundreds of euros in a bank account. Today, she lives mainly off the interest from her savings and her pension.

Mid-life migration, and the care for grandchildren

While this mobility is often talked of as the mobility of mothers, the women who leave are rarely mothers of young children, and quite often, they are already grandmothers (Solari 2010). However, in Ukraine, there are strong expectations of grandmothers to retire early to take care of grandchildren to allow their children to work. The women who go to Ukraine break with this expectation.

One of the few authors, who explicitly frame this mobility in light of their role as grandmothers, is Cincia Solari (2010). She argues that gendered ideologies in Ukraine now demand that younger women stay home with their children, and that as a consequence of this, the older generation is expected to go out to earn. When I did my interviews in the Lviv region, I did not find that there is a strong expectation for this generation women to go out to earn (Tyldum 2015). Rather I find a tendency to condemn women who go out and leave family behind, independent of how old their children are. Similarly, Olena Fedyuk (2011) documents in her work how female migrants often face condemnation by children and other family members for leaving. For although the women themselves sometimes talk of their mobility as an act of sacrifice for their families, it is not always understood as such in the society at large.

The female migrants described in my material mainly left when their children were in their late teens or early twenties, and before the children had started a family of their own. The migrants' daughters were, in other words, not yet stay-at-home moms and their sons were not yet married. Two of my respondents had grandchildren in Ukraine while working in Italy, and have, upon return, started looking after the children while their daughters are working. They both say explicitly that staying at home taking care of grandchildren is not their preferred choice.

One of them, Victoria went to Italy and left the responsibility of the farm, the household and her husband to her daughter and son-in-law. After she left, her husband's drinking got worse and there were constant quarrels between him and his son-in-law. In the end, the daughter convinced Victoria to come back. Upon her return, her daughter and son-in-law left for Poland, leaving their two teenage children with Victoria. She thinks it is hard work to raise two teenagers, and says that she wishes she could have stayed in Italy longer. But she did not have a choice. They needed her at home.

Economic need and migration

In this article, I show how migration can sometimes be motivated by a wish to get away from a difficult marriage. In this, I do not intend to argue that this mobility does not improve the economic situation for the migrant women and their families. It is, however, worth noting that in my data, the female migrants' economic situation at the time of leaving can rarely be argued to be worse than the situation for the ones who choose to stay; as in other high mobility areas, it is rarely the poorest that leave (Massey *et al.* 2008). Neither can sudden economic shocks explain the mobility of the women I interviewed. The women who move abroad often do so at a time when one could expect the pressure on their finances to lessen, when their children have left home or have started working.

In the interviews, the women give much emphasis to practices of sending home gifts and remittances, and talk extensively of the gratitude of family members and the importance of their contributions. But upon more detailed enquiry, respondents explained that they would send home presents and money to their children (and sometimes also husbands) at regular intervals, but most of the money was saved and brought along on return. The money earned abroad was, in other words, not mainly used to cover expenses in daily life in Ukraine while they were gone, but rather saved for later investments or for security when they reached retirement age. Some say they did not trust their husbands or children to spend the money wisely, but there was also no acute need of money at home that made it necessary to send all money home at once. Thus, it was possible for these women to save up considerable amounts that they could bring home and decide how to use, upon return. However, the women sent home enough money to legitimise being absent, and through these remittances, engaging in labour migration becomes a legitimate way of leaving behind family and responsibilities in Ukraine.

Italian opportunities for Ukrainian caregivers

The women who leave for Italy work in the Italian domestic sector, often as live-in caregivers for the elderly. The Italian welfare model has economic transfers to households with elderly to enable them to make arrangements for necessary care themselves. Rising female labour force participation rates in Italy combined with an aging population has made it increasingly difficult for households to self-produce these services, creating a demand for hired help. The local labour force does not meet this demand, and immigration has become part of the solution (Sciortino 2004; Solari 2010).

In Italy, there is a demand not only for migrants who accept low salaries, but for migrants who are perceived as trustworthy and caring, and who will not only accept the slow pace and limited freedoms associated with this kind of work, but are likely to stay long term in spite of it. The middle-aged women I interviewed found such work acceptable.

Although male domestic workers exist (Sarti & Scrinzi 2010), women are generally seen as more suitable for this kind of work among employers (DeVault 1991). If it is physically demanding, the job as care worker may seem more appropriate for younger women. However, younger Ukrainian women would often be frustrated by the lack of freedom to leave the house and the relatively slow pace of the job. In Italy, migrant care workers are expected to stay with their clients day and night, except for some hours on Sundays and Thursday afternoon. I met several younger women who had worked or had considered working as caregivers for elderly; none of them described it as a job they would actively seek. One young Italian student tried to work as a live-in caregiver for 3 weeks, and gives the following description of her experiences:

Some Ukrainians found a place for me. Then I worked - if I could call it work - for three weeks. I looked after one old woman. She was very nice. I had no problems with her. [...] But I still didn't like it. I was used to being free, to go wherever I wanted, and do whatever I pleased. [...] I couldn't leave if I wanted to. I could go out of course - it was not a prison. After about a week, we watched a movie together... It was not an interesting movie. She was 80 years old. After the movie she said: 'It was not so good, but we watched it to kill time.' I realised that I - 25 years old - was sitting there killing time with her! I wanted to live! [laughs]

The women who have worked in Italy claim that younger Ukrainian women can hardly stay in such jobs for a few weeks, because of the limited freedom and slow pace. The middle-aged return migrants I met did not seem to mind the slow pace, and many described how they enjoyed the company of the person they cared for, a relationship that sometimes developed into mutual respect and friendships. This is reflected in the way Elisa talks about the summers she spent with her client at their holiday home; they treated her as one of the family, and she felt that she belonged to the family as well:

G: Were you the only person to come along, who was not a family member?

E: I did not feel that I was not a family member. They treated me very well. I went everywhere with them - to all restaurants and bars. They bought the same food for me as they did for themselves. They asked me what I wanted. We went for a walk along the coast every evening.

Several respondents stayed with the same employer for 6 to 10 years, changing jobs only when the employer died or became too ill to stay at home. Some stated explicitly that they would not work in families with children, as this entailed much more work.

Dirty and degrading work, but less exhausting than what they left in Ukraine

Relative to the standards expected in Western Europe, the conditions under which the Ukrainian migrants in Italy live are harsh. They work in an unprotected sector of employment, often without proper documents, away from family and a familiar way of life. This is also reflected in my interviews with return migrants from Italy, and many describe the first year abroad as particularly tough. The women who worked as live-in caregivers usually changed employers at least once before they found someone they could accept and many had bad experiences along the way. This is thoroughly described in existing

studies on Ukrainian-Italian migration (Fedyuk 2011; Montefusco 2008; Piperno 2006).

However, in approaching migration from the country of origin, and from the perspective of both migrants and non-migrants, I also heard stories where migration was given different value, and that has been given little attention in the literature thus far. All of my respondents said they ended up with a job they were satisfied with in the end, and spent most of their time working abroad in such a job. The job itself was rarely claimed to be physically demanding, and some even described their jobs as slow-paced. All respondents, without exception, said that housework in Italy was easier than in Ukraine. Their employers could usually afford processed food, and Italian food was claimed to be simpler, both in terms of the number of dishes and extent of work involved compared to Ukrainian food. There were often dishwashers and other modern equipment for cleaning, and the houses were easier to clean. And while cleaning and caring was their only job in Italy; in Ukraine, the women would all have had one or two jobs outside the house in addition to housework and caregiver roles. On their day off (Sundays), they all reported more or less the same programme: after church, they visited the parking lot for the minibuses about to leave for Ukraine (Fedyuk 2011). Here, they met other Ukrainians and sent home presents with bus drivers. The rest of the Sunday was spent with Ukrainian friends, sightseeing, going to a lake or the ocean, or simply getting together to eat and drink³. This is a kind of freedom many could only dream of in Ukraine. As one respondent pointed out when comparing life in Italy with her life now:

Here [in Ukraine] I cannot go for a walk every Sunday. I need to prepare lunch [...], and there are lots of other things. I can perhaps visit my sister or a friend for a half an hour and that's it.

My respondents would also talk about how much their work in Italy was appreciated by the people they worked for. All the return migrants I interviewed told of old men and women who would regularly let them know how grateful they were, who gave expensive presents for Christmas and cried when they left. When these women talk of their life in Ukraine prior to departure, there is little that indicates that they felt as valued by husbands and teenage children.

Some of the return migrants I interviewed talked extensively about how difficult it was to be so far away from children and grandchildren while in Italy. Others gave more emphasis to how their children had missed them, and said they came back for practical reasons, such as the need to care for grandchildren or a drinking husband. Several of the women also arranged for their adult children to join them abroad, and two of my respondents had returned while their children were still in Italy.

Marriage and divorce in Western Ukraine

While only 8% of male labour migrants in Ukraine are formally divorced, this is the case for 22% of female migrants surveyed in Ukraine (UCRS 2009). Legal divorce is quite easy to obtain in Ukraine, and divorce rates for the country at large are relatively high with 1 divorce per 2.5 marriages. However, while in eastern regions of Ukraine, 1 in 2 marriages end in divorce; in Lviv county, where the fieldwork for this study was conducted, there is only 1 divorce per 3.5 marriages (KyivPost 2011).

Greek Catholicism is the main religion in Western Ukraine, while Orthodox faith dominates in the rest of the country (Razumkov Centre

2011). The Greek Catholic Church does not grant divorce and can only offer annulment or separation under certain conditions, mainly if the marriage was entered into under false premises. As married couples have promised to stay together for better or worse, the onset of alcoholism, mental illness and psychological abuse do not qualify for annulment. Growing apart, becoming tired of each other or even disliking each other are not seen as acceptable reasons for separation. This can be argued to have few practical implications for women who wish to move away from a husband, as legal divorce is easily granted and the church has no formal sanctions if a couple chooses to separate. However, in a highly religious society as Western Ukraine (Razumkov Centre 2011). The strong emphasis on the sanctity of marriage and keeping families together make men and women willing to endure more to save their marriages. It produces practices where women and men, who find it difficult to live with their spouses, find alternative ways to live apart, and put off formal divorce for as long as possible. For example, Katarina travelled abroad together with a friend whose husband had an alcohol problem. She talks about her friend's situation in the following manner:

Katarina: They did not live together. [...] He did not work much. All this... He went to his mum there, in [city] to his parents. And she was here.

G: Why didn't they divorce?

K: She was saying: 'I am not going to remarry. I don't need a divorce'.

Katarina's story illustrates how it, in some social groups, is not uncommon to separate in practice, but still stay married on paper. Katarina's husband is also a heavy drinker, but she sees wedding vows as sacred and believes it to be her duty to endure. She thinks young people take marriage too lightly and are not willing to make concessions. She admits that if she could do it over, she would not have married him, but would have raised her daughter alone. However, having committed to the marriage, she will not abandon him. But as soon as her children had grown up and moved out, she travelled to Europe to work for years.

It is not only tradition and religion that may make it difficult for women and men to end a marriage. In Ukraine, the legal provisions pertaining to the division of shared financial resources can be complicated in cases of divorce. According to a divorce lawyer at the West Ukrainian NGO 'Women's Perspective', courts may decide not to evict a spouse from a shared dwelling, if his share of the income from sale of the apartment will not be enough to acquire a new dwelling. This has been the ruling even in cases where violence has been documented. Consequently, a woman who has divorced her husband may still have to continue living with him if he does not agree to move out or sell. Housing costs are high relative to incomes in Western Ukraine, and some women move back in with their parents after a divorce while their spouse remains in the shared apartments. For others, labour migration becomes their best chance to get away, earn enough money to find a separate dwelling and make a fresh start.

In recent years, Ukrainian women have been the second largest group to enter into international marriages with Italian men (Gilardoni 2010). International marriages were also often a topic in interviews. Some would joke about the opportunities of finding an old, rich grandpa to work for and later marry, while others told that they had met Italian men who were interested, but that they themselves were not. Women who had divorced or were contemplating divorce in Ukraine would argue that opportunities for remarriage in Ukraine were few for

middle-aged women with children. Italian men, on the other hand, do not mind if you have a child, they said. In all the villages I visited, there was at least one woman who had left and married in Italy, and the return migrants from Italy would all know several Ukrainians who had stayed and married.

Among the female return migrants I interviewed who left after turning 40, all were married when they left, and their husbands remained in Ukraine. None of them described a close relationship with husbands. Some simply stated that they had grown apart and developed different interests; others reported open conflicts, substance abuse and domestic violence. One divorced her husband upon return, another came back after her husband died. The others claim they returned only because they had to, usually due to a conflict between their husbands and children. They all said they would have stayed longer in Italy if they could have.

For some, migration to Italy is a first step towards divorce, as migration gives geographical distance, creates opportunities for economic independence and opportunity for remarriage. For others, it is a response to lack of access to divorce, but is not understood as a form of divorce, as many would see divorce as morally wrong. Most of my respondents didn't talk about their mobility as a way to get away from their husbands. Due to the stigma tied to women who leave family behind, and live a good life abroad, such a narrative is hardly available to Ukrainian women (Tyldum 2015). It is their remittances, and their willingness to sacrifice themselves for the good of the family, that legitimates their absence. They all describe complicated relationships with their husbands, but only one said explicitly she left to get away from a husband. Non-migrants in their community are, however, more likely to talk about this migration as motivated by a wish to get away from a bad marriage. A Greek Catholic priest, who has worked with migrants in Ukraine and abroad, explained:

I think that migration can be a mediator or an environment that creates circumstances where a woman says: 'Thank God, I'm free now. I can suit myself. I no longer work hard in the fields every day with cows, pigs and so on. I feel like a normal woman here. I don't live with the smell of alcohol every Friday or every day in my home. [...] So migration entails some sort of freedom for the women. And some don't want to come back because in their words, their life in Ukraine was a hell before they left.

Some respondents reported that their husbands have problems with alcohol, and this is also reported in qualitative studies among migrants in countries of destination (Fedyuk 2011). There is no way of knowing if the rate of alcoholism among the husbands of migrants is disproportionately high, as such data are not available. But far from all husbands that are left behind have problems with alcohol.

Conclusion

Several factors have shaped the high level of mobility among midlife women in Western Ukraine. First of all there are employment opportunities, particularly well suited for this generation of women in Italy. Experiences from economic and political reforms have made them more independent than what is common elsewhere for women of their generation, and have made many give particular importance to economic security and predictability. Finally, the religious and economic limitations on divorce in Ukraine has made migration a part of the cultural repertoire of this generation women, as a way to get a welcome separation from a husband, and still be perceived

as responsible mothers or grandmothers. Some may leave because they want to get away from a situation of violence or abuse, where problems in marriage function as 'push' factors for migration, and opportunities for independent income and a fresh start works as 'pull' factors. Others are more fairly described as leaving because there is less holding them back, as they do not mind having some distance from their spouse.

The aim of this article has been to show how migration can enable and empower women to leave situations of oppression, and that in response to limited opportunities at home, some Ukrainian women leave and start a new life abroad. I have also showed how exploitation and empowerment are not necessarily opposites in migration analysis. When Ukrainian women go to Italy, they often meet conditions of life and work that are harsh and exploitative. Simultaneously, they often leave behind a situation of hardship in their countries of origin. The empowering potential of migration does not make the exploitation of migrants acceptable. However, women can and do express their agency through migration, in choosing one way of life over the other.

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Notes

1. Much insecurity is tied to these estimates. Migrants are only partially covered in surveys in both country of destination and origin. In Ukraine, the best source of migration data are produced through an attachment to the labour force survey in 2008. This survey only targets the officially defined labour force, excluding women aged 55 or older. Women or men who are no longer counted as members of a household in Ukraine will also not be included, which probably means there is an underrepresentation of divorcees. And finally, as the reference period is only 3.5 years, long-term migrants are not included. According to these data, 38% of the female migrants in Italy are aged 40–49, and another 23% are aged 50–54 (data made available to the author by the State Statistics Committee of Ukraine, November 2011).
2. The information in this section is taken from interview data produced in this and other qualitative and quantitative research conducted in post-Soviet countries between 1997 and today, from travels in the region from 1990 and until today, as well as stories conveyed by Ukrainian and Russian friends and colleagues who lived in the region these years.
3. These practices are also thoroughly described in research conducted in Italy (Fedyuk 2011).

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