

Balkan Life Courses

Part 2

Kinship, Religion and Memory,
Mobility and Identities

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Just Work? Bulgarian Female Labour Migration to Italy and the Moral Economy of Care

Ana Luleva, Sofia

Abstract

Since the early 1990s, female labour migration from Bulgaria has become a common practice and has acquired unprecedented dimensions. In this paper I will address the characteristics of the most popular form of the Bulgarian female labour migration to Italy, namely work as caregivers of old people, sick family members and children. The specificity of work – from the decision to get employed abroad as domestic care workers – through its practice to its meaning for the families of the female migrants marks it as an intersection point of pure economic goals and relationships, on the one hand, and moral ones, on the other. This defines my research problem: to analyse the moral economy of care from the perspective of women care workers.

Introduction

The end of the communist regime marks the end of the closed Bulgarian borders as well. Bulgaria became a state releasing a constant flow of labour migrants due to the harsh economic crisis accompanying the transition to market economy. Depending on labour markets and migrant regimes of host countries, the emigration from Bulgaria takes various forms: family emigration to North America, family or seasonal to Spain or England; seasonal migration to Greece, England or Spain. While family migration prevails to England, Germany and Spain (Markova 2010, Krasteva 2015), Italy and Greece have become destinations for female labour migration (Dimitrov 2015, Thoma 2010, Angelidou 2013). The latter includes work in family households: elderly care, childcare, care of sick family members; house and office cleaning and seasonal work on the fields (picking tomatoes, oranges, tobacco etc.).

Female labour migration abroad was not an unusual practice in Bulgaria before 1989. In the years of late socialism Bulgarian women (doctors and medical staff) worked in North African countries along the lines of state agreements for the “export” of Bulgarian specialists in then friendly countries. This, however,

was a migrant experience reduced to a very limited circle of people. After the end of the regime, since the early 1990s, female labour migration from Bulgaria has become a common practice and has acquired unprecedented dimensions. It has defined characteristics related to the gender regimes of socialist and post-socialist Bulgaria. The consequences for the families left behind in Bulgaria became a topic in the media. Contrary to the scale of the migration process, it was relatively little studied by anthropologists and sociologists (cf. Guentcheva 2010, Markova 2010, Thoma 2010, Angelidou 2013).

In this paper I will address the characteristics of the most popular form of Bulgarian female labour migration to Italy, namely work as caregivers of seniors, sick family members and children. Since the early 1990s this practice continues to this day with the tendency to persist. I will try to answer the following questions: how do women-caregivers describe their work and migrant experience; how does this experience become incorporated in their life-trajectories, goals and values and how is it reflected in their family relations, social status and recognition relevant for their identity. The specificity of work: from the decision to get employed abroad as domestic care worker, through its practice to its meaning for the families of the female migrants – marks it as an intersection point of pure economic goals and relationships, on the one hand, and moral ones, on the other. This defines my research problem: to analyse the moral economy of care from the perspective of women-caregivers.

In reviewing these questions, I will consistently address: the dominant interpretations of female labour migration in the media discourse; the broad context of the process: female employment and roles inherited from the period of socialism and transplanted as a biographical experience into post-socialism; the structural conditions for choosing women-caregivers in Bulgaria and Italy. Then I will analyse the data from my ethnographic research through the concepts of care and moral economy of care in the context of migration and life course.

Female labour migration in the media

In the Bulgarian public discourse emigration is dealt with as a nation-centric discourse focussing on economic aspects. The discussions are mainly about the financial transfers made to relatives in Bulgaria and the “brain drain”, the depopulation of entire villages and towns, the extinction of the Bulgarian nation. In the terms of this discourse, the emigrants are viewed as a “loss” for the national interest which is blamed on the Bulgarian politicians who have “driven away” the best of the Bulgarian nation. During pre-election campaigns the politicians, in their turn, speak about their intentions to “return” the Bulgarian emigrants back to the homeland. In this perspective the migrants are regarded as a

national resource which is either lost or regained. Female labour migrants, however, are missing from that discourse. Obviously, they do not fit into the idea of “brain drain”. The media usually represent them in two contradictory images: with lamentation (mourning them) as sufferers, victims of the transition in Bulgaria, forced to seek jobs away from their families, or condemning them as women irresponsible to their children and husbands who abandoned them because they preferred to look for a “better life” away from home. In both cases, the destruction of the established gender order is lamented because of women’s migration. In this line there are publications about broken family ties and demolished families of female emigrants. In the victimizing discourse about migrant women there are interwoven nostalgic feelings and memories of socialism, nationalism and Europhobia; and the main “guilt” for the female migration is thrown upon the post-socialist transition (“the democracy”), which has brought unemployment, poverty and uncertainty to people and which has demolished their regulated world of socialist life and work.

Indicative of this discourse is the book “Princesses – servants in Greece” (Hadži Kirkova 2002), in which the author writes: “During socialism we were like princesses – we were dressed and we went to work, filled with the high self-esteem, that we are significant in our workplace and in the country.” According to her, after the end of socialism, these women-princesses – with education and professions – “go down the hierarchical work ladder far downwards” and become “maids, martyrs in foreign countries”, “live with the self-confidence of black slaves: people looking at you, evaluating and recruiting you for work”.¹

The messages of the documentary film “The City of Women *Badante*” (2009) by director Stefan Komandarev and screenwriter Diana Ivanova are not so highly victimizing. This is the only documentary to date dedicated to migrant women in Italy. Against the backdrop of the sadly funny picture of a small town in northwestern Bulgaria, four families are shown in close-up, in which women work as caregivers in Italy. The four examples illustrate the different variants of the emigrant experience and the implications for the rest of the family in the town: in the first case, the former female accountant begins her second year of work in Italy as a caregiver. At home her husband takes care of their ten-year-old daughter. The separation of mother and child is difficult; her lack is offset by gifts – plenty of clothes and other small purchases for the home. In the second case, the grandparents raise their two grandchildren alone for 10 years while the mother works in Italy. The prospect is that this situation continues as long as the two aged grandparents are able to look after their grandchildren. The relation-

¹ I express my gratitude to Dr. Zlatina Bogdanova who had brought to my attention this book which contains all the arguments of the victimizing discourse.

ship of the children with the mother is ongoing daily through Skype. Here the emotions are more mastered; the physical absence of the mother is redesigned as part of the routine of everyday life. In the third case, the wife has been working in Italy for eight years, where she has raised foreign children "as her own". She is grateful to her husband for having raised "her children". She is proud of her work for being able to send money to her family to maintain a good lifestyle. Her husband has accepted this family situation as inevitable, for granted, and tries not to complain about his loneliness. The last example is of a man whose wife has left more than seven years ago and abandoned him. He badly feels his loneliness and hopes to find another companion in life.

In the specialized website for film criticism "The Other Cinema", the film is presented in an article titled "The city of women *badante* or what happens to the Bulgarian family?" In the review of the film critic women's labour migration and its consequences for the family are seen through a "patriarchal" prism as an apocalyptic picture: the destroyed good old patriarchal order, broken family ties, weak men, overturned gender stereotypes – women earn money, men wait for them at home. The sympathy is directed towards the men who have lost power, but not to the women who have chosen the role of double caregivers – as breadwinners for their family and as *badante* in the foreign household.²

Gravitating towards the victimizing discourse is the article by Diana Ivanova published in the weekly "Kapital" under the title „*Lavoro come badante*. Global outsourcing of suffering".³ According to her, the care of the elderly in Italy by Bulgarian women is a "sharing of suffering" for both parties: for old Italian people who suffer at the end of their lives and accept foreigners in their home to take care of them, and for the Bulgarian women who are employed to do this heavy, debilitating work. "The rich world rents out its own suffering. The other world, with ease and even some naïveté, accepts to serve this suffering", the author concludes.

The public discourse creates context and imposes gender stereotypes, influences gender arrangement and the idea of "normal" gender order and ideology (Luleva 2005). It creates a public image of women-caregivers. As mentioned before, in the media the images are mainly two: of the victim and of the woman who has abandoned her family. What is the picture revealed by my ethnographic research?

² http://drugotokino.bg/content/gradt-na-zhenite-badante-ili-kakvo-se-sluchva-s-blgarskoto-semeistvo?tid=13&tid_1, last accessed on 12. 4. 2017.

³ http://www.capital.bg/politika_i_ikonomika/obshtestvo/2008/02/08/456812_lavoro_come_badante/ last accessed on 12. 4. 2017

Ethnographic data: elderly women take care of other elderly women and men

My ethnographic study is based on conversations and interviews (biographical and in-depth) with fifteen women from a small town in Western Bulgaria. All of them are retired and began working as carers shortly before retirement and/or after retirement; at the time of the interview they were between fifty five and seventy one years of age. Their previous professions are: teachers, a midwife, low or middle management positions in tourism services, an employee in a textile enterprise. Everyone has secondary education, i.e., high school. Some of them have also completed a technical school, college or higher education: philology, history, mathematics, economics, tourism. During the period of migration, they had different family statuses: married, divorced, widowed with grown-up children (students, or working). Here I will present more closely two of them:

Nina⁴: at the time of the interview (2016) she was seventy years old. Between her fifty-fifth and sixty-fifth birthday, she was a caregiver of elderly people in Italy. After her departure for Italy she retired as a high school teacher. Divorced, she raised her two sons alone. The most frequently repeated words in her interview were: "I had a mission." Nadya: at the time of the interview (2016) she was seventy-seven years old. Between sixty-five and seventy-one, she was a caregiver of elderly people in Italy. She left for Italy after her husband's death to temporarily replace her daughter who worked there. Previously, after retiring from a textile factory, she had taken care of an elderly woman in the town, cleaned for a short period, washed and ironed tablecloths at a restaurant. She cared for her granddaughter after the mother's departure to Italy. In her interview, the phrase "They were very pleased with me" was often repeated.

In 2015 and 2016, when I started meeting women who had worked abroad, it turned out that all of them – except for one – were in retirement. Their common profile also took shape: all of them had left for Italy a short while before or after retirement. Life course has thus emerged as an important time frame for fitting in the migrant experience. Life course influences the decision of migration, the social skills and the field of women's experience, their family role and their coping strategies in emigration.

These are women born in the early 1940s, thus belonging to the first "socialist" generation that was socialized under the conditions of the new public order. The majority of their active professional paths was placed in the period of socialism. Its end coincided with the end of the regime and the beginning of the economic reforms: privatization of enterprises, cuts, uncertainty, high rates of

⁴ The names of the women are changed.

inflation (until 1997 when a currency board was introduced). They all have the experience of the "socialist woman".

Context: macro perspective in Bulgaria

The active work role of women is a characteristic of the gender order in the period of socialism. Then, the gender contract of the working mother was imposed (Luleva 2005). Bulgarian women achieved full employment, and in parallel with their work duties, they took care of the home and domestic chores, the household economy (necessary to provide vegetables and home-made food in small towns and villages). They also took care of children and elderly parents. The socialist welfare state declared that raising children was a priority, and that social services must be provided accordingly, but the family – grandparents in particular – remained the mothers' basic assistants in raising children. The care for sick elderly parents was also the responsibility of the family and, respectively, of the women (daughters-in-law or daughters).

Thus, in practice, a familialistic model was introduced in which the ethics of caring for children and elderly was imputed as a norm for women; it became part of the normative concept of motherhood and femininity. Since the 1980s, the changes in the Labour Code allowed maternity leave for babies up to two years to be transferred from the mother to the grandmother (in case she is not retired or unemployed). This possibility exists even today, and the legislator has also provided for the mother to be replaced by the grandfather or the father. The substitution of the mother by the grandmother in the care of children strengthens the patriarchal model in the division of labour in the family.

The familialistic model proves to be convenient for the state and also functions in post-socialism. Then, in an emerging neoliberal market economy, the state withdrew from the sphere of social services. Indeed, the maternity leave in Bulgaria is one of the longest in the European Union, but access to kindergartens is becoming difficult and expensive for average Bulgarian families. Although many of today's parents have the attitude of raising their own children, the help of grandparents is still needed (Luleva 2016a, 2016b). In recent years, the popularity of women's caring services has increased. They are usually elderly women, retired women who work part-time and take care of children whose mothers are employed on the labour market. Family networks are mobilized to take care of young children (including transnational families), along with hiring baby-sitters. Recognizing childcare during maternity leave as work experience is also in the direction of recognizing care as a job and not just as the moral duty of the mother. The family also cares for the elderly parents. For mentally ill patients, the services of women who take care of them in their homes are used,

or the patients are placed in hardly accessible municipal and private homes for the elderly. In Bulgaria, care for children and adults is slowly monetarizing as a service that is mainly done by retired older women and continues to fit into the moral order according to which this care is the duty and responsibility of the women and the family.

Women's labour migration from Bulgaria as well as from other East European countries is also related to certain gender and care regimes and, in particular, to the social construction of maternity and family care by women. This traditional role was not shattered by the socialist system and its ideology of gender equality. Moreover, it helped women play an active role in family maintenance – a role that they have at present under the new market conditions. The notion of women's family responsibilities as mothers is the basis of their decision when it is necessary, regardless of advanced age, to take the decisive step of migration.

The decision of women in retirement to work as caregivers – in the country or abroad – has also another important structural reason, namely the extremely low level of old-age pensions in Bulgaria. Without engaging in extra work, Bulgarian pensioners can not reach the subsistence minimum and live below the poverty threshold. Surveys of women in the pension system have shown that they are more disadvantaged than men (cf. Lukanova 2004). Retired women are poorer than men; their average pension is lower than that of men. This ratio is continues to be due to the lower average wage of women and the way pensions are calculated. Secondly, the relatively early age of retirement in the 1990s must be noted: it began from fifty years for teachers, for other professions fifty-five years, and it increased over the next two decades. Today, the retirement age for women is sixty one, for men sixty four. In addition, women tend to have more precarious employment; they are the first to be dismissed by employers during cuts. In the transition years, there was a picture of high female employment, a lower average income than men, and their greater flexibility in finding additional work and sources of income. Women are willing to accept any job that would help the family budget, as opposed to men who find it harder to accept a lower-paid job or work non-conforming to their social status. Women more often than men work without a job contract, combining formal and informal employment. Their share in the informal economy is greater (Luleva 2010). This socio-economic context plus structural factors push Bulgarian women in retirement age into looking for a job abroad. What will be the destination of their migration depends on the labour market and the migration regime of the host country.

Structural conditions of host countries

Globally, female migration has grown since the 1960s. Until then, men were the main agents of migration, and women were part of family migration. Feminization of migration begins to be talked about when women leave alone and their families stay at home or join them later in the host country (Lutz 2008, 2011; Kofman, Raghuram 2009). In a global perspective, this process of labour migration of female caregivers to children and adults is described as the movement of women from the poor South to the rich North in the global care market (Ehrenreich, Hochschild 2002).

It is well known that there are various migratory regimes in Europe. While Austria and Germany are restrictive countries that favour highly skilled migrants but exclude domestic care workers, other countries such as Spain, Italy and, until recently, the United Kingdom have policies to attract such workers. Countries with a conservative familistic gender and welfare regime, among them Italy, are distinguished by the lack of public social services for the elderly (Anthias, Lazaridis 2000; Dawn 2006). Care work is considered as an unpaid obligation and a sphere of the housewife. Nowadays, as more and more women enter the paid labour market and the proportion of the aging population increases, there is a need for the care of the elderly to be taken by paid workers.

In the countries of the European Union there is a general tendency towards an increase in the share of domestic work done by migrant women. There are differences between the different Western European countries regarding the structure and regulation of the domestic sector. While in South Europe the domestic sector is recognized as a sphere of employment, and Spain and Italy, for example, allow for regulation of this work, in Northern Europe the regimes are more restrictive and, as a result, in Germany and France, about 70–80 percent of labour in this sector are undeclared. The largest is the share of the domestic services sector in southern Europe, which is also the main labour niche for female immigrants. Over the past two decades, there has been a strong tendency to ethnicize domestic work and care for the elderly. In Spain, 65 percent of all immigrant women are employed in it. In Italy, about 50 percent of immigrant women work in households. There, since the 1970s Filipina and Latino Americans have been care workers, but since the 1990s women from Eastern Europe as well: Polish, Albanians, Ukrainians, Romanians, and Bulgarians (Anthias, Lazaridis 2000: 1–15; Anthias et al. 2013: 32). In the South, the cheaper workforce of foreigners is preferred to local women who have traditionally done this job in previous times.

For further discussion, it is necessary to clarify the concepts of domestic and care work. Bridget Anderson assigned domestic work with the three C's – cleaning, cooking, caring (Anderson 2001: 25–33; Shutes, Anderson 2014: 1–11).

Other researchers prefer the term “care work”, which is defined as “multifaceted labour that produces the daily living conditions that make basic human health and well-being possible” (Zimmerman et al. 2006: 3–4). The broad understanding of care work includes physical, practical activities, emotional relationships such as support, expression of affection, kindness, and love – in other words, personalized relationships between employer and worker, which are generally characterized by intimacy, trust and responsibility. In my study, I use both concepts “domestic work” and “care work” and I agree that they both overlap. In the care of elderly people in Italy women *badante* have the obligation to clean their home, cook, shop (not always), wash, iron – i.e., to support the household, and to care for the elderly by feeding, changing, maintaining their hygiene and communicating with them, thus giving them physical and emotional support.

In Italy, as well as in Greece, the model of living in the home of the elderly recipients of care is adopted. This means that a woman-caregiver is available twenty four hours to her employer and the degree of informality of relationships is much greater than in the usual worker-employer relationship. Informality is described in the literature as a characteristic of the so-called Mediterranean model of labour immigration (Ambrosini 2013). I will return to this question later when I discuss the concept of the moral economy of care. Here, I will just note that there are also differences in the work relations between migrant women and employers in Italy itself. While in Northern and Central Italy they more often work with an employment contract, in the South it is rather an exception, there the parties agree orally, informally (Ambrosini 2013).

It has been established that the direct payments (*assegni di cura*) to the elderly by municipalities that do not seek to formalize the care of the elderly and the easy and cheap labour of foreigners make it possible for the lower social strata to afford to hire a woman to take care of the elderly parents and revoke this (moral) duty of the daughter-in-law or the daughter. The cultural aspect must also be added to the economic aspect: namely, the specific culture of caring and housekeeping in Italy. There the good care of the adults implies that they are being cared for at home. It is socially unacceptable to send them to a public institution, to an elderly home (as is the case in Northern Europe). It can be summed up that the migration regime, the gender regime and the welfare regime are the factors that create the conditions for the existence and maintenance of an informal organization of care work in Italy (Näre 2011: 398).

A brief review of the studies on female care work migration

Women's labour migration is a relatively new but very fast growing field of research (Anthias, Lazaridis 2000; Ehrenreich, Hochschild 2002; Pessar 2003;

Lutz 2008, 2011; Klarer et al. 2011; Baldassar, Merla 2013; Baldassar 2015). The very influential literature on care chains focusses on commodification and the political economy of care in the global migration flow from South to North. In the book "The global women", Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Hochschild (2002) develop a neo-Marxist interpretation of care as work/job, including emotional work done by women from the global South in the rich North – a migrant flow described with the concept of "the global care chains". According to them, the global care chains produce not only a deficit of care, but also "care drains" from the sending countries. According to Hochschild, this is a manifestation of global injustice, while love and care are the new gold, extracted from the Third World by the First World. Recently, this theory has been criticized as "methodological sexism" (Dimitru 2014). The "care drain" metaphor is forged in similarity to the "brain drain" idea. Both belong to the discourse on human capital. But the concept that migration is understood as a drain sees emigration as a loss. And as with brain drain, the result for the sending party is an economic loss, so in care drain there is the idea of losing maternal care for children left home. This thesis is criticized as methodologically sexist by Speranta Dimitru, because she thinks it is based on sexist stereotypes, underestimates and reverses care work and misses the possibility of new theorizing and analysis of women's skills in a migratory context (2014: 203–212). The hypothesis of care drain emphasizes maternal lack as a reason for lack of care for her children. The critics of the care drain theory see sexism even in the expressed regret that women cannot fulfil their traditional family roles.

There are some difficulties with defining the notion of care. As Ruddick writes, three distinct but overlapping meanings of care have emerged in recent years: as ethics, defined in opposition to justice, as a type of work and as a definite attitude (1998: 4). In the literature of ethics of care, it is most often defined as practice, value, disposition, virtue, and is presented as an overlapping set of concepts. According to feminist writers, care is a practice that has characteristics such as paid or unpaid, interpersonal, and also involves caring for self and emotions. Sociologists Loretta Baldassar and Laura Merla (2013: 3–19), who examine transnational migration and the circulation of care in migrant families, consider care as a type of resource or form of social capital that is unequally distributed among families and is a subject of cultural understanding of gender and roles associated with rights and care responsibilities that intersect with and interact with historically formed care regimes in the different countries where families reside. Their definition of care-giving involves a wide range of care exchanges: from direct support described as *caring for*, which can only be given when people are physically close, to more emotional support – *caring about*. In the anthropological perspective, care is explored as work, as kinship and during the life course (Alber, Drotbohm 2015).

In my study, I will try to consider *care as work* and the *moral economy of care* based on the migrant experience of women caregivers. The latter is understood in the general theoretical framework of the concept of transnationalism. It treats migration not as a one-way process, but as a state of mobility where migrants reside simultaneously and connect the two spaces – the place of origin and the place of emigration. Some authors characterize the connections that migrants create as "social fields" in which people take action, make decisions, feel feelings, and develop affiliation to social networks that connect them simultaneously to two or more societies (Glick Schiller et al. 1992).

Considered under the perspective of transnationalism, women caregivers expand their field of experience across borders, translate it into the translocal, transnational (Pries 2001), take advantage of the opportunities for better paid work abroad, apply different tactics to maximize their income and improve their lives back at home. Some of them are leaving and returning several times, expecting a job proposal, others return home for medical treatment and then return to Italy.

The study of the work done by women caregivers gravitates towards the idea of moral economy and in this case it could be defined as a moral economy of care. In the phrase moral economy "moral" refers to purposes other than economic gain. These may be maintaining social status and prestige, acquiring social and cultural capital, maintaining the group. Didier Fassin extends the classical definition of Thompson and Scott in defining moral economy as "the economy of moral values and norms of a given group in a given moment" (Fassin 2005: 365). Generally, anthropologists have defined the moral economy as an alternative to the market economy, such as economy of the pre-modern society, household economy, of the oppressed classes, of those striving for fair distribution, etc. In recent years, however, the concept of moral economy expanded and also marked economic fields in modern societies. Thus, the moral economy can be seen as co-existing, parallel to the market economy, wherever a moral aspect of modern economic activities can be found (Hann 2003). This is the understanding shared by classical economists who consider economic processes as embedded in the social world and cannot be understood without taking into account the morals and norms of society (see Götz 2015). According to the definition of Andrew Sayer, the study of moral economy is "the study of how economic activities of all kinds are influenced and structured by moral dispositions and norms, and how in turn those norms may be compromised, overridden or reinforced by economic pressures" (Sayer 2004: 2). This generally means to consider formal and informal economic relations as built into culture, to cover their relationship with certain cultural norms and values. Näre argues that because of the character of care in the domestic sphere and intimate space, the work of caregivers is difficult to separate from the moral notions of altruism and

dependence. According to her, the work contract is always accompanied by a moral treaty based on the normative ideas of good, evil, justice, plus interweaving with gender, age, culture and language (Näre 2011).

Anthias (2010: 12–48) emphasizes another important aspect of understanding the nature of care as labour. This is the way the family is involved in caring for their elderly member. It also forms the context, the migrant's working conditions. The migrant woman has relationships with the recipient of care, the elderly person, but also with the younger family members: the son or daughter who recruits her. These are the employers who define the conditions with which women negotiate and enter into market and moral relations. Many researchers of migrant women's work in the domestic sphere note that very personalized relationships between employer and employee are being established, including reciprocity, mutual obligations and the creation of quasi-family, informal relationships (Lutz 2008, Ambrosini 2013). In all cases, both economic utility and moral economy are evident.

In my understanding, the moral economy of care encompasses the field of labour interaction, such as economic behaviour (carrying out a particular job in order to receive salary) and as moral behaviour (motivated by certain values, moral norms, ideas of right and wrong, good and evil; they have a connection with gender and life course).

Ethnographic study

All women pointed to the need to support their family financially as a cause of migration. For one, there was a need for funds to buy housing for the family, for another – to provide funds for the education of children students, to preserve social status and living standards. The case of Nina is indicative of the situation in which many Bulgarian families fall under the new market conditions. After her divorce she lived with her two children in her father's apartment. Her two parents had died early and the dwelling was inherited by her and her brother. In the early 1990s, her brother started a private business and mortgaged the apartment. But his business turned out to be unsuccessful, he could not pay his credit, and the bank took the apartment. Nina and her children received a minimum amount of compensation and remained without their own home. Their standard of living collapsed; the small amount received from the dwelling was used to support the elder son who became a student. The three of them lived in miserable quarters and the dream of having their house seemed unattainable. Nina was considering going abroad to solve the financial problems. The last impetus in this direction were the problems in her workplace. Faced with the risk of being cut short in the next school year due to lack of classes for her in high school,

she went to Italy. She was impressed by the thought of having a mission: building a house for her and her sons. This thought motivated her all the time: "I was saying to myself: You have a mission! You have a mission, and when the house is finished, you will be free."

Women talked openly about the financial needs that had prompted them to look for better paid jobs abroad: "the goal was to raise money for housing", "we went there for one thing: one to fix the house, another to furnish it, to fix a roof that runs, to send money to student children". With or without spouses, women migrants spoke as independent entities responsible for the maintenance of their family. An additional and important factor in their decision to go abroad is age – on the eve of retirement, or as young pensioners, they felt not only responsible, but still able to work, physically well and able to take the new and unfamiliar job. "I went to Italy at the age of fifty-five, this is the perfect age. Neither you count as an old woman, nor you care about bringing up children, they've already grown up."

For *traveling to Italy and finding work*, women relied entirely on informal networks. Through acquaintances Nina fell into the "Vidin Channel": a network that mediates in finding jobs for migrants from Vidin and Northwest Bulgaria.

"A friend who knew I was looking for a job called me. I took sick leave. And I left. All I knew was that the bus driver would take me and leave me at the address. I went with another woman from S. Mine was an adventure! They drove us there. You have no claims. You know what you're looking for – grooming elderly people or some younger ill person, dependents. You do not know a language; you cannot make Italian cuisine. My first job was with a grandmother. I did not dare to think forwards. Day by day. You do not think it. You have arrived."

None of the women shared the feeling of being humiliated by offering her work skills and not always being able to find a job. "If they like you, you go. If they do not like you, they say they do not need it" (Eva). Once established, women create new contacts on the spot, exchange information about potential clients, contact job agencies and search for jobs through them. In Southern Italy, women from Ukraine and Romania also work at homes. The Bulgarians meet with them in the church, in public places when they have free hours on Saturdays or Sundays, but there is a distance between them: "We are friends, we communicate, but what concerns the work and the prospects, they keep it secret. Do not say it." Buses that regularly travel between Italy and Bulgaria are also part of the network of intermediaries. They transfer luggage to relatives in Bulgaria, transport women when they return home for a short time.

The women I talked with had different work strategies. Some of them preferred not to change the employer as much as possible. Others, as in Nina's case, strove to maximize profits by seeking better financial conditions, and did not stay long in one place. Nina started working in Southern Italy (Basilicata), but she set out to leave the Southern Italy region, where she worked for a lower wage per hour, and move to Central or Northern Italy. "This is possible if you do not settle for the momentary situation, you do not get attached to the person you care for, and you get into the network." Pursuing the goal of moving to Central Italy, she left consecutively three employers. After five years, Nina managed to get a job at a mansion near Perugia after a successful job interview. She was in competition with two other women – a Bulgarian ("much younger") and a Romanian ("young and blond"). The memory of the four years of work in this manor house filled her with a sense of pride and satisfaction.

Women go with the preconceived attitude of taking care of elderly and sick people. They often cite the famous Bulgarian proverb that "*there is no shameful work*" and add: "It is not the work itself that is humiliating, but the attitude of the employer." As I said, women caregivers live in the home of the people they care for. They must serve them, clean the house, cook and shop. The hardest thing is when the person is bedridden. "You clean, you wash, you find a way to dry it, not to hurt ... I kept it clean. It's a very hard job. The woman is easier to clean up than a man ... hard work ... and you have to have the will to be strong to handle the situation", said Nadya. She consecutively took care of a man and a woman who were bedridden, but that did not make her look for another job. Nina, however, could not handle "her" grandfather alone and begged his daughter to hire extra help – a Romanian woman for giving him baths. The daughter refused and Nina left.

Many women said it was hardest for them to accept the condition of not leaving the home where they worked. They felt suppressed and repressed. The younger women find a solution by renting a home with other immigrants and clean up homes and offices, although they cannot earn as good money as if they were in a house ("I love freedom, I could not stand being in a house"). However, the older caregivers accept this condition and try to cope with the situation.

"I had decided here, I would not be traumatized by not being able to go out. Because this is the condition – you're available twenty four hours, and if you have two free hours per day – that's it, but otherwise – you stay put. But, no matter how hard it is, everyone accepts all the conditions. There is no room for disputes; there is no room for bargaining. Especially in Southern Italy ... I ended up in Potenza. With an elderly woman who had an initial Alzheimer. I learned the language with her. For six months I had not left the apartment. She did not let me go. There are no rules in

Southern Italy. 'My mother needs a woman 24 hours. You will do what my mother wants. No day off. At home there is everything.'" (Nina).

Women are hired by the children of the sick and elderly people they will take care of. Women migrants speak openly about how much they received, how the service was calculated, how they negotiated for extra pay for extra work. In this relationship, women learn to defend themselves, assert their rights (become managers of themselves). The monthly wage rates are known. Extra pay may be agreed upon for working during the free hours on Saturday afternoons and Sundays.

"So in Southern Italy, the *badante* starts with 500 Euros. If you do not go out on a Sunday – another 50 Euros; if you do not go out in the afternoon on Saturday – 25 Euros. This is the ceiling of 700 Euros per month. But the compensations are calculated by the 'decent' employers, others pretend not to notice them".

Nina was reluctant to make compromises and work during free hours for free. This was the reason she left many times: "I take a job, then another job. Others sit in one place! One friend has worked thirteen and a half years for a sick woman! Thirteen and a half years! I can not understand it!"

The salary that comes is far above what women can get in Bulgaria for such work. This motivates them.

"I was tired of nostalgia and that I could not come. For a year and a half I had not come. But I worked for my elderly man without coming, to get extra salary. Here the house was not finished. I have sent the money for this. To fix it ... I paid for it. I'm telling to myself: let's work a little longer. Then, the next year, when I had a contract, they paid for my leave" (Nadya).

"On the other hand, it was the easiest money I made in my life. 500 Euros are close to 1000 leva. Without doing anything in particular. It keeps you to endure day after day until your salary comes ... You have to have some motivation. You have a mission! It mobilizes you" (Nina).

"But under these conditions you make € 1000 – that's a big boost. This is a precondition to feel as a human being. This is a guarantee that you can send home. For the last four years, I also had the thirteenth salary and liquidation. That's 20000 for the Italian women, but also for us – when it's on paper" (Nina).

Everyone said they had preferred to have an employment contract, but this was only happening in the last years of their stay, when the Italian state was trying to bring that economy to light. On the contrary, employers, especially in Southern Italy, preferred not to legalize this work relationship.

"I worked for the mother of the head of their NRA [National Revenue Agency] in Potenza. And I asked him: will you legalize my papers? – 'I'll fix them, but why throw money in the wind, to the Italian state?' And he did not fix me. He paid me under the table, and I remained in the shadow economy. We, the foreigners, fit very well into the Italian model" (Nina).

As also other studies have found, behind the informal, friendly, quasi-family relationships sometimes there is an attempt to exploit women migrants. Nadya agreed to perform additional work against which she received praise, approval, respect (*"they were very pleased with me"*). Nina was sensitive to such attempts and prevented exploitation. Employers' approval was also important to her, but she was not willing to work for free or to spend her pay on food, contrary to the agreement.

"He was a man with good manners, despite sclerosis. His breakfast had first, second, and third course. Lunch had first, second and third course. Dinner – the same. I had 200 Euros for meals for the whole month. I combined prices to fit into the budget. But she would not increase it. I told her I was spending my money on food, but she did not reimburse it and I said to myself – you will not let go of a penny, because you will go down."

At the same time, with the same old man, Nina started to grow tomatoes and spices in the yard at her own initiative, which provoked the admiration of the locals and the approval of her employer. A manifestation of a moral economy is the gift-gift relationship on this occasion:

"Finally, when I picked the tomatoes, I gave them to the boss. There was no way she could not be satisfied. When I handed her a bag of these tomatoes, she could not be unsatisfied. There was no way! Because she took them to Potenza. Took them away. She did not leave any for us. At the same time, at Easter she brought us the entire Easter menu. For me and the old man, to stay calm."

In all the stories there are a lot of examples of moral choices and actions in the relationships with employers. They show that in everyday life there are often

cases in which economic usability is exceeded, and women are recognized as good caregivers, good women. Nina was flattered that all of her "clients" felt good with her and wanted her to come back (*"I attached them to myself"*). The old man Nadya cared for was also disturbed by her departure. Because she behaved well with him, she persisted, she gave more than she was expected, and she was happy that her employers appreciated it (*"They saw that I was a good person"*). Such recognition she had also received from her previous employer, who was otherwise bad, and Nadya left her. On a farewell, the old Italian woman told her: "Nadya, if you want, you can leave. You did a great job. I am very pleased. My door is always open for you." "Well, I made great efforts, I did many good things for her, and she was pleased and that's why she told me so. But I left anyway."

The following example testifies to the importance of the moral economy as part of care. When Nadya left, because she had a health issue and decided to finally return home, her employers insisted she found them "the same" woman.

„Well, I was not supposed to know that this woman was not like me. She was not clean, orderly, she did not shave him. And they let her go after three weeks. She was my acquaintance, but I was not supposed to know how she worked. And they expelled her after three weeks. When they came, the old man told them she did not take good care of him. And another woman came afterwards, and after fifteen months the old man passed away and he all the time cried: 'Nadya, when will Nadya come?' He felt good with me. Do you want this? Do you want that? How are you? The attitude is very important. I am this kind of person, I have this nature. Not every person is qualified to do this job. It is very important to behave well and do your job well – to clean, fix, arrange ... a person have to be able to handle the situation."

The moral economy of care is manifested as inseparable part of the work obligation.

Conclusion

My ethnographic study has shown that women caregivers of elderly people in Italy do not fit in either the victimizing media discourse about women migrants or the one about irresponsible mothers and wives. All of them have undertaken labour migration in an older age, guided by the ethics of caring for their family which they had internalized as part of their female and maternal identity in the period of socialism. In emigration, they had received recognition of their labour

and skills, and that empowers them, gives them self-esteem, and the sense that they have achieved success in their lives. Upon their return to Bulgaria, these women live with the thought of an accomplished duty to their family, an improved standard of living. As much as the informal care of the elderly and children by adult women in Bulgaria is invisible, the care women caregivers abroad had taken for their families remains publicly unrecognized. In doing the moral economy of care – at home and abroad – they are doing gender and kinship.

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Bulgarian Migrant Women and their Life Courses The Case of Care Workers from Bulgaria to Italy and Greece

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Abstract

After the collapse of state socialism in Eastern Europe in the 1990s, the migration of women from this region has sharply increased. In particular, a number of women (mainly middle-aged mothers with teenage children) from the Lovech district of northern Bulgaria have travelled to Italy and Greece in order to work as live-in caregivers or domestic helpers. Drawing on long-standing fieldwork in Bulgaria and on short-term fieldwork in Italy, this study examines the impact of migration on Bulgarian women and their life courses. Based on the interviews with women from two Bulgarian villages, the most important reason for their migration was that it was “for their children”. The idea that mothers must make money, as part of their role in the household, may represent the continuation of the socialist worker-mother ideology. At the same time, these migrant mothers were expected to be caregivers in their own homes, despite the fact that they were working abroad. Although the women's migration may not have had a significant impact on changing gender roles in Bulgaria, working abroad enabled these “single” women (in this case, divorced or widowed) to live independently, while providing financial support to their children. The implication of this finding is that migration may create new possibilities for women's life courses to be “single” in Bulgarian villages.

1. Introduction

After the collapse of state socialism in Eastern Europe in 1989/90, the migration of women from this area has dramatically increased. From the villages in the Lovech district of northern Bulgaria as well (where I have conducted fieldwork since the late 1990s), a number of women have migrated to Italy and Greece in order to work as live-in caregivers or domestic helpers. Although some men from these villages have also made the choice to work abroad, the migration of women is a “new” phenomenon (*nešto novo* in Bulgarian) that marks a change in post-socialist Bulgarian villages. For example, some of the villagers state the following: “Recently, women seem to play the role of men. Especially, when the wives are working abroad, they make more money than their husbands”, and “These days, it seems that the wives (or women) have become the husbands (or