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**THE NARRATIVES ABOUT HOME AND FAMILY AMONG
GEORGIAN LABOUR MIGRANT WOMEN IN ITALY****Narracje gruzińskich migrantek w północnych Włoszech
dotyczące domu i rodziny**

Abstract: The paper investigates the narratives about family and home among the first generation Georgian labour migrant women in Italy's Emilia-Romagna province. It examines the narratives by low-skilled Georgian migrant women that work as domestic workers. The fieldwork, carried out in November 2018 and May 2019 in the city of Reggio-Emilia shows that Georgian migrants do often feel alienated from their families that they leave back in Georgia. They feel largely alienated from their Georgian neighbours, relatives, society and nation as well. Georgian migrant women's narratives show contradictory emotional discourses of attachment and alienation to their families. Based on in-depth interviews with 12 women between 43 to 69 and participant observation, the paper highlights importance of the families. Despite experiencing "lost place" in Georgia, migrant women still aim at returning to their families and "homes" there. They feel to "return" and to perform their roles as wives, daughters, mothers, grandmas, aunts, etc. in Georgia. Considering economic hardships of their families in Georgia, however, they prolong staying in Italy for indefinite amount of time.

Key words: migrant women; labour migration; Georgia; Italy; alienation.

Streszczenie: Artykuł przedstawia narracje pierwszej generacji gruzińskich migrantek zarobkowych we włoskiej prowincji Emilia-Romagna, które dotyczą rodziny oraz domu. Skupia się na narracjach nisko wykwalifikowanych migrantek z Gruzji, zatrudnionych jako pracowni-

ce domowe. Badania terenowe przeprowadzone w listopadzie 2018 r. oraz maju 2019 r. w mieście Reggio-Emilia pokazują, że wspomniane migrantki czują się wyobcowane z rodzin, które pozostawiają w Gruzji. Odczuwają alienację zarówno od swoich gruzińskich sąsiadów, krewnych, społeczeństwa, a także narodu. Analizowane narracje pokazują sprzeczne emocjonalnie dyskursy przywiązania i wyobcowania. W oparciu o wywiady z udziałem 12 kobiet w wieku od 43 do 69 lat oraz obserwacje uczestniczącą, artykuł podkreśla znaczenie rodziny. Pomimo doświadczenia „zagubionego miejsca” w Gruzji, migrujące kobiety nadal dążą do powrotu do swoich rodzin i „domów”. Pragną „wrócić” i wypełniać role żon, córek, matek, babć, ciotek w Gruzji. Jednakże ze względu na trudności ekonomiczne swoich rodzin, przedłużają pobyt we Włoszech na czas nieokreślony.

Słowa kluczowe: migracja kobiet; migracja zarobkowa; Gruzja; Włochy; alienacja.

Introduction

Following regaining its independence in 1991 from the USSR, over one million Georgian citizens left the country, making Georgia a country of emigration. According to the 2014 census Georgia's population is at 3,7 million, a significant drop from 5,4 million in 1989 (National Statistics Office of Georgia 2016). Economic hardships, ethno-political conflicts and civil wars that ravaged the country after the Soviet collapse forced hundreds of thousands of Georgians to leave the country. Georgia's gross domestic product (GDP) fell by around three-quarters between 1989-1994, with inflation standing at 15,600 percent (The World Bank 2009).

In the 1990s, Georgian migrants preferred post-Soviet states, in particular Russia and Ukraine, as the countries of destination. Since 2000s, however, the trend changed, with Western and Southern European countries becoming more sought after. According to the 2014 census, Russia, Greece, Turkey and Italy were top 4 destination countries for Georgian citizens, with 21,7%, 15,9%, 11,2% and 10,9% respectively. As Russia introduced visa-regime with Georgian citizens in 2000 and political tensions with Russia and Georgia further intensified, Georgian migrants started to seek to emigrate to other destinations.

Interestingly, while male migrants dominate Georgian emigration to the former Soviet countries, women migrants represent dominant migration actors to the Southern Europe. In this context, Italy emerged as one of the most common destinations for Georgian migrant women. The 2014 census shows that women represent 85,7% of all Georgian migrants in Italy, where Georgian women typically perform care work. Over the recent years, Italy has become one of the top countries from where left-behind Georgians receive remittances. Remittances from Italy in 2016 stood at over USD 121 million making it Georgia's fourth remittance-sender country (State Commission On Migration Issues 2017).

Feminization of care drain in transnational context has been widely addressed in academia. Scholars noted about increasing global as well as intra-national inequalities that facilitates, as Hochschild called it "brain drain" and "care drain" (Ehrenreich, Hochschild, Kay 2003: 17). Significant body of literature has emerged in recent years that examine effects of migration on the families and family separation phenomenon itself. Georgian female migration, however, that made thousands of women leaving their families behind in order to seek care work elsewhere in Southern and Western Europe, has attracted little scholarly interest from social sciences or humanities so far. In the context of Georgian migration, there have been number of valuable studies carried out on migration, yet they do rather focus on the people left-behind, in particular children and elderly, rather than on the migrants themselves (Cebotari, Siegel, Mazzucato 2018; Vanore, Siegel 2015; Vanore, Mazzucato, Siegel 2015; Svintradze, Ubiria 2007; Zurabishvili, Zurabishvili, 2010).

The present research aims at studying the narratives of the migrant women themselves. It puts migrant women and the stories at the center of scholarly interest. The research aims to explore the narratives of home and family of Georgian low-skilled labour migrant women in Northern Italian province of Emilia-Romagna, that represents one of the major destinations for Georgian migrants in Italy. This work-in-progress study focused on women that live and work in the city of Reggio Emilia and its environs.

Although Italy represents a peculiar case for Georgian out-migration, it has attracted little scholarly interest from Georgian and international scholars. It does, to the best of my knowledge, represents one of the very first study attempts of this kind. The present study and work-in-progress of mine has been inspired by my family members being Georgian migrants themselves and my own experience of being a migrant (although

for rather a short amount of time) as I pursued my studies abroad, apart from being an internal migrant in Georgian context. Growing up in Western Georgian region of Imereti, characterized by one of the highest out-migration rates from Georgia, the phenomenon of emigration has attracted my interest since early childhood.

The paper is based on two fieldworks (work-in-progress) carried out in the city of Reggio-Emilia in November 2018 and in May 2019. Erasmus+ exchange semesters in Université catholique de Louvain in Belgium made these fieldworks and study possible.

Data Collection Procedures

The present paper, as mentioned above, is based on two fieldworks carried out in the city of Reggio-Emilia in Northern Italy's Emilia-Romagna region. According to the official Italian Statistical data, Emilia-Romagna region is among the top 3 destination regions of Italy's 20 regions. As of January 2019, there are 2005 registered Georgians in Emilia-Romagna.¹ I have visited Reggio-Emilia number of times for family reasons since 2013. The decision to choose Reggio-Emilia as the fieldwork site for the research was largely determined by my own close personal connection to this place.

I visited Reggio-Emilia for my fieldwork first in November 2018 and then again in May 2019. In both cases, during my stay in the city I lived in a shared flat of Georgian migrants, that further helped me better comprehend Georgian migrants' way of life in Northern Italy. It also facilitated for me as a researcher to enjoy rich informal exchanges and conversations with the migrants I lived with, as well as with their Georgian guests.

First, I have accessed few respondents through the gatekeepers. In total, I interviewed 12 women during two of my fieldwork. Later, snowball sampling was also used to recruit the participants. Besides, during my fieldwork I enjoyed casual conversations with Georgian migrants in different settings in Reggio-Emilia, that offered me deeper nuances and details of the migrant life stories.

The interviews were typically done during Sundays and Wednesday, the days the Georgian migrant women take to rest. The interview locations were usually chosen by the respondents themselves. In several cases,

¹ There are 3513 Georgians in Tuscany region and 3407 Georgians in Southern region of Puglia. Lombardy comes 4th with 1706 Georgians.

interview sites were advised and arranged by the gatekeepers. All persons gave consent and agreed on audio-taping, after being explained that their confidentiality would be protected.

The average interview lasted for 45 minutes. The participants of the study were between 43 to 69. The women I interviewed have spent from 9 to 18 years in migration in total. On average, the respondents have spent 13 years as migrants in Italy. All of the interviews were conducted in Georgian, in a native language for interviewer, as well as respondents. I have transcribed and translated interviews myself, and made best effort to offer translation that would reflect linguistic subtleties.

Findings

Each woman interviewed in Italy works as a servant in Italian families, typically taking care of the elderly, and/or do cleaning. They do the work of *badantes* as they call it in Italian, meaning “caregiver.” Supporting families and improving their social-economic conditions were the primary motivating factors for the Georgian *badantes* to seek jobs in Italy. Natalia, a woman in her mid-60s works as *badante* for almost 20 years in Italy. Prior to migration, she spent most of her life in Kutaisi, western Georgian city where she moved from a nearby village as she got married. Natalia has a husband, son, daughter in law and grandchildren left behind, living as one household in Kutaisi. Natalia explains her main motivation of moving to Italy to work:

We, as women, are for families, grandchildren, a child, for when spouse will need surgery–this is why we are sacrificing ourselves, this is why we are here... This is what my ideology is and this is why others are here too, probably.

Assuming her role as a breadwinner in the family and moving abroad to perform her gender-conforming role of a mother, wife and grandma, cost Natalia “losing her place in Georgia.” “Loosing a place” for Natalia means loosing her own place at home in the first place, hinting about alienation between her and her family that happened throughout all those years:

In the house there is no chair.. no cup [of yours]... you become a guest in your own house.. Years took away our role as woman... this was our mentality... our places got lost. As some writer said, “I am neither on earth, nor in heaven...”

She believes that as she will age, there will be no one to take care of her. “Relations between mothers and children got cold, this is what I see,” she told me, with some sorrow and regret in her voice. “I also say, neither I will have a care-giver [when I grow older]...” And then my grandchild tells me: “you are shaming me... but this is how it is...,” she added.

Alienation

As migrants speak of their families and their experiences of migration, alienation appears as the most frequently mentioned feeling. This has been the case for Tamara too, 55, at the time of interview in November 2018. Prior to her Italian life of *badante*, Tamara worked as a teacher in Kutaisi until early 2000s. By leaving Georgia to Italy, she left her teenager children—daughter, 15 and son, 11—behind. Having the issue with the documents, she could not manage visiting her family for almost five years. Tamara recalls story of seeing her children for the first time after those years:

I had an absolute alienation. When I first went back to Georgia [in 2008, after 5-6 years] I said: “these are not my children.” They were grown up. That time there were no computers available and I could not see them [in skype], how they were growing up. And I could not recognize them. Especially the boy [my son], he was in his teenage years. I told him: “how beautiful were you when I left, why did you change?” A mom is not supposed to tell this, but.. he really changed...[and I could not recognize him]... My husband yelled at me then: “what are you seriously telling to the kid?” It seemed everyone, absolutely, was *an other*—relatives, spouse—everyone seemed old and aged.

Meri, another Georgian migrant in her late 60s, had a somewhat similar experience. She left her teenager son behind. She recalled the story of her first arrival to Georgia. Meri did not hide her emotions as she described her experience of meeting her son in airport after the years of separation:

When my son has come to see me in the airport, I almost could not recognize him. That time there were not skype and all these. So, as my son had beard, it was hard to recognize him... That time, at first meeting in Georgia Italy, there was no alienation. He wanted me [to be with him]. But he was alone.

For some, however, not children, but the relations with their spouses were the major indicators of alienation with the family. Maya, 54, from Georgia's capital city Tbilisi went back to Georgia in 2011 after four years of uninterrupted stay in Italy. She then observed major estrangement in the family happened with her husband:

Alienation... My husband did not believe, I have been living an honest life here. She always suspected I had some man [lover] here. The only major thing I kept lying him about was that.. I started smoking [cigarette] here. And.. he would ask me "are you smoking?" "No, of course, not" I would reply. This big lie... poor man died... and this lie breaks my heart... but cigarette helped me to cope with everything. Sorrow... Longing... For a while, I thought, I will quit. I did, but then I started having depression, crying senselessly, longing... And then I started [smoking] again and the depression was gone.

Maya's husband's socially conservative behavior determined her zigzagging journey of migration to Italy, that largely shaped the future of the entire family. Maya first arrived to Italy in 2004 to work, yet she had to go back to Georgia in 2006 "as the situation in the family got messier." Maya recalls that three children that she left behind had hard time of staying with their dad. "My daughter told me "I cannot bear here anymore, I do not want to live anymore, my father is controlling us, I will commit suicide if you are not back". Thus, Maya went to back Georgia, but as economic hardship hit the family harder, she migrated to Italy again.

In 2007, as she moved to Italy for work for the second time, daughters were 16 and 17 and the son, the youngest of the siblings, was 13. "Imagine, leaving 13 year old kid, when he needs mom the most... since 13... He was making his father angry, he was not obedient," Maya told me. As time passes, you get used to it, she said. Maya had four grandchildren as of 2018 November. Her daughters got married soon after she left to Italy. And her husband stayed with the son in the family.

"My husband was nervous and could not survive me being here," Maya said about her husband who passed away back in 2012. But for Maya, it was not her husband's death itself, but rather her reaction to that event made her restless:

I went back to Georgia for first time a year before his death, after five years [of being in Italy]. But as my husband died, I did not cry. I do not know, his death did

not get close to my heart. I have not gone mad. Perhaps, it was not much time, but one or two years [of physical separation] are enough. I did not have that feeling of “o, husband died”, or “longing”. My husband was the best human being. I cannot recall anything negative [about him]. He has always been good. But it was as if some of your close relative died. Perhaps it is me like that. I stayed in Georgia for two months after his death. I had a feeling then that I was in Italy and he was in Georgia, I did not have sorrow. I blame distance and separation. It happened this way to me, may God help everyone to have their husbands well, but I did not have sorrow about my husband’s death. I did even start laughing soon after his death. I was not crying. I was not pull out my hair... I blame time [for this]. Why would that happen to me otherwise? It felt like as if some of my close relative passed away. I should not be saying this, but...

Maya says she prefers to be in Georgia with her family, however, economic hardships and a major reason that I will further discuss below, keeps her in Italy to work. “I am here now, right... well I prefer being with my family, but by being here, I am the hope of my family. I will be their hope, in case they need it...”

Coping with alienation, stress and anxiety

Migrant women reported that alienation that they experience brings them considerable psychological stress and anxiety. As they experience negative feelings and emotions, they start seeking for coping mechanisms. Tamara, disturbed by her family’s continuous dependence on her told me:

I realized that if you earn 1000, they will spend 1000, if you earn 2000, they will spend 2000, so I realized if I wanted to survive here, so I could keep working here, I needed to go home more often. And, In fact, I go to [Georgia] twice a year... For a month, or two, I even went back there for three months...

“We are lost people,” she added, emphasizing that “we are strangers for Italians, does not matter what kind of family you work for...” she added. But family that gave her most anxieties was her own. Tamara expressed her anxiety about her children not living up to her expectations. She says all her work and achievements so far, can fall apart as neither her son nor her daughter managed to get decent jobs that would sustain them.

“I bought flats for both of my children and bought cars for them, this is sham... if they do not get economically strong, they will loose everything you have built,” Tamara said.

Tamara recalled the story of bringing her son to Italy to study that she thought was an opportunity for him to get a well payed job later. Tamara hoped it would help her son arrange his life independently from her. Tamara told me:

I made documents for my child, brought him here... he was in such an age, he did not wish to study... I helped him enroll at university here [in Italy] to do tourism studies, but he did not show any interest in studying.

Thus, as the son was not eager to study and make career in Italy, Tamara had to send him back to Georgia.

Following the dashed dreams of the son pursuing his career in Italy, Tamara addressed patriotism to cope with the stress of her child not living up to her expectations:

I see that there are many Georgians here, they have started their families here, their kids were born here. This is a big problem for Georgia. None of them [kids] are Georgians. None of these children that are born here, will [manage] to be Georgian.

For others, like Meri, alienation is still there, however, she now feels “safer” as her “son got married.” “When I go back to Georgia now, I am more relaxed. Now he has got a patron... Imagine, you come home and the food is ready,” she told me about her son. Meri, believing in a rather traditional gendered role, feels relaxed as her son “has a patron.” Moreover, Meri compared family life in Georgia and that of in Italy and expressed her discontent with the latter.

This is terrible. The most terrible... everyone is so busy [here in Italy]. Everyone is running. Children see their parents “ciao, ciao, ciao” and running away after several seconds. Everything is fake. They do not have warmth we do. I do not know where they are running. They have money but cannot enjoy life.

Different strategies for the future

Despite experiencing family alienations and separation anxieties, all of the women I interviewed see themselves returning to Georgia. Natalia, 64, believed that she will be “back to Georgia” when she dies. She said no one in the family will let her sit and relax back home in Georgia, as the family requires financial support from her. Thus, she assumes she will keep working in Italy as long as she is alive.

Others are more optimistic, however. Keto, originally coming from a small town of Khoni in western Georgian region of Imereti, had been working in Italy for almost 20 years. She has never been married, but she still aims at going back to Georgia to live with her family, that is living with her nephew. Keto attempted to return back to Georgia, started farming business in her native land, but as the harvest turned out to be unsuccessful, she returned back to Italy, engaging in care work. In her interview, Keto often felt regretting:

Of course, you feel home there cause it is yours. That feels different. That [Georgia] is yours. My place will be at my home, family [in Georgia]. And do whatever will be supposed to be done there... In two years I will go home. Everything has the boundary. Years are passing. In June I lost my brother. I realized I lost all these years to spend around him. I do not want something similar to happen again.

Another woman from Kutaisi, Liza, who is in her late 60s, is looking forward to turn 70 soon, that would allow her to have Italian pension appointed. Liza's son lives with her wife and children in Kutaisi; her married daughter lives in Tbilisi. Liza, like many Georgians, sees multigenerational family to make an appropriate family model. Upon returning to Georgia, she plans to live with the family, with her son and daughter-in-law and grandchildren in Kutaisi:

We live with the hope... everything will be as God would like it.. I plan to live with my child, in my family, in my house, my family is in Kutaisi... of course I can be in Tbilisi too [with my daughter and son in law]... but I plan to be with my children, of course, without children, grandchildren.. This period of being without grandchildren is enough already.

Maya also told me she would like to be around her family too, but nevertheless, she chose a somewhat different idea for future life. She aims at buying a separate flat for herself, to live alone, so that she can freely host her grandchildren home and so that she does not disturb her daughter-in-law. Maya's son, who got married recently is still financially depended on Maya, that makes her further extend her stay in Italy. Nevertheless, Maya says her son studies craftsmanship and that he promised her that he will earn "lots of money" and "will return [Maya] back [to Georgia]."

I really would like to be with my family, my children, grandchildren, my son got wife... We got a small flat. [Now] this is my plan. I really want a small flat in [Tbilisi] for myself, so I can have my own shelter, so that I do not live with my daughter-in-law. I want my grandchildren to visit me [freely], cause [what if] my daughter-in-law does like it... I want to [keep] working, get EUR 25 000, so I [can buy] average flat [in Tbilisi], then renovate it, if God's will is there, of course, and then to return.... I will do something there too, take care of a kid... My daughter has a babysitter now [for her kid]... Can't I do that too?

Nene from Rustavi, in her 50s, who works in Reggio Emilia for over 11 years, told me she would like to return to Georgia, however, she said economic hardships, as well as alienated families, that have diverging lifestyles from her, make it impossible for her to return to Georgia. Her future looked uncertain to her:

I would love to be back to Georgia. But if I do, I know I will stay without food there. There are no jobs neither for youngsters nor for people at our age. Every second Georgian thinks this way, would love to be back, but... We go back to Georgia and there we face alienated families. You face something totally different. You have lost physical closeness and warmth. You become like a robot. The attitude, warmth changed... Those kids got used to being without you. You want calmness... Here you get used to working with an elder person in a calm environment, where you are alone. And there [in Georgia] those habits become different to you... cause here you have different lifestyle.

Alienation from family constitutes a major experience for a Georgian migrant woman during her stay abroad. The role of the family in this process is significant. Although there are similarities, this paper acknowledges that there are important differences between the experiences

the migrant women have, that are primarily shaped by the nature of their unique relations with their families. These differences result in different strategies for the future. As a common pattern, however, all women interviewed for this study aim at returning back home to their families, to live with their children, their nieces or nephews, or to live alone yet in a close contact with their family members.

Conclusion

Based on the two fieldworks in November 2018 and May 2019 this work-in-progress study depicts Reggio-Emilia based Georgian labour migrant women's narratives about families. It demonstrates that alienation is a major experience Georgian badantes living in Italy feel with their families. The study affirms that migrant women pay high emotional cost, that to a large degree is a stress connected to family separation, families' economic hardship and to longing for the people left behind.

Georgian migrant women studied in this research share rather traditional roles and assumptions about their families and affirm their gendered roles as mothers, wives, daughters, aunts, etc. Economic hardships were primary motivations behind their decisions to migrate to Italy, that migrants see as a duty of a kind to help their families and themselves.

The findings of this study contribute to emerging stream of research about Georgian female migration, that looks into this growing phenomenon from social sciences and humanities perspective. Unlike many previous studies, the present project puts migrants themselves into focus, rather than focusing on those who are left behind. As the number of Georgian female migrant constantly grows, especially that in Italy, it becomes crucially important to show the lives, the narratives, the feelings of Georgian migrant women, as their lives were typically presented as statistical data before.

In-depth interviews carried out with the migrant women show that they become resilient and adapt to changes, as well as discover the mechanisms to cope with stress and alienation connected to rapidly changing family relations. Discussing their difficulties with families, Georgian migrant women see the challenges as the opportunities to strengthen themselves. Taking a step of emigration required from migrant women to be already independent and strong enough, yet the process of migration further

affirmed their strengthened roles as the breadwinners in their families. As a side effect however, this also in number of cases made their families more depended on them, meaning that migrant women are bound to work in Italy for a lot more years than initially expected to sustain their families.

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