

Ukrainian migrant women's social remittances: Contents and effects on families left behind

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Abstract

This article examines different forms of Ukrainian migrant women's social remittances, articulating some results of two ethnographic studies: one focused on the migration of Ukrainian women to Italy, and the other on the social impact of emigration in Ukraine. First, the paper illustrates the patterns of monetary remittance management, which will be defined as a specific form of social remittance, since they are practices shaped by systems of norms challenged by migration. In the second part, the article moves on to discuss other types of social remittances transferred by migrant women to their families left behind: the right of self-care and self-realisation; the recognition of alternative and more women-friendly life-course patterns; consumption styles and ideas on economic education. Therefore, I will explore the contents of social remittances, but also the gender and intergenerational conflicts that characterise these flows of cultural resources.

Keywords: Social remittances, migrant women, gender, Ukraine.

Introduction

The present article examines different kinds of Ukrainian migrant women's social remittances. This work can be situated within the field of remittance studies, which in recent years has shifted from a mainly economic approach to a new framework, thus becoming more concerned with the cultural/immaterial aspects of this phenomenon (Levitt, 1998; Levitt, Lamba-Nieves, 2010). Moreover, my analysis of the social implications of monetary remittances draws from some researches on the social meanings of money (Zelizer, 1993, 1997) and on the different patterns of management, allocation and sharing of financial resources within households (Hunt, 1978; Gambardella, 1998; Pahl, 1988, 1995, 2004). Even if these studies examine various groups of people located in different places and historical contexts, I believe that some of their interpretative categories can be fruitfully applied to the case of Ukrainian migrant women's social remittances. Therefore, during my discussion I will try to navigate safely between Scylla and Charybdis, namely the risk of gender essentialism and that of cultural essentialism (Narayan, 2000).

This work presents some results of two fieldwork studies on the topic: one regarding the flow of Ukrainian migrant women to Italy (Vianello, 2009, 2011), the other on the social impact of emigration in three Eastern European countries, among which Ukraine (Sacchetto, 2011). Both studies were based

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on in-depth interviews with migrants, returnees and children left behind and on several informative interviews¹.

According to Levitt (1998) social remittances are ideas, behaviours, identities, systems of practice and social capital that flow from receiving to sending societies. Nevertheless, social remittances should not be viewed as a cultural colonization, because they are developed – and not passively learned – by migrants through their work experiences, their life events and the interaction with different cultures.

I will first examine Ukrainian migrant women's practices of remitting money. I will start from the assumption that these practices, too, can be considered as a form of social remittance, since the systems of resources allocation within the family are based on ideologies of gender and age appropriateness that are challenged by the migratory experience. Secondly, I will analyse other forms of social remittances that are transferred by migrant women both in implicit and explicit ways: the idea that women have a right for self-care and self-realisation; the recognition of alternative and more women-friendly life-course patterns; consumption styles and ideas on economic education. They fall within the category of social remittances identified by Levitt (1998) as "normative structures", namely ideas, values and beliefs on e.g. interpersonal behaviour, notions of intra-family responsibility and aspirations for social mobility.

Patterns of monetary remittances management

Remittances are a way to remain present in the country of origin (Sayad, 1999). As many studies have shown, the act of remitting money is often represented by migrant women as a symbol of love and faithfulness towards their families left behind (Mills, 1997; Parreñas, 2005; Kraler, *et al.*, 2011; Volodko, 2011; Carling *et al.*, 2012). Migrant women try to avoid the risk of commodification and de-personalisation of social relations by controlling and imposing limits to the spending of money and by charging it with heavy "symbolic meaning" (Zelizer, 1997).

As my empirical study suggests, Ukrainian migrant women want their families to enjoy a standard of living that is adequate, at least, to the class to which they originally belonged: the lower middle class². This means a balanced diet, a warm and comfortable home, specialist medical care, and access to uni-

¹ Both studies focused on a specific segment of international Ukrainian migration – coming from the Western regions of the country and moving to Central and Southern Europe – which is characterised by a prevalent presence of women. The analysis did not consider the predominantly male migratory flow that moves from Southern and Eastern Ukraine to the Russian Federation (Malynovska, 2004).

² The migrants I interviewed belong to a social group that became rapidly poor after the dissolution of the USSR, even though they had previously enjoyed access to higher education and a certain level of socio-economic wealth. Migration, for this group, is therefore a strategy to react to a process of downward social mobility.

versity studies. In addition to this, migrant women also wish to offer their families some extra comforts that they have come to know in the Italian families for whom they work³. Lastly, part of the money they have earned abroad is often invested in the renovation of houses and in new homes for their children and for themselves (Fedyuk, 2012).

Depending on the intended purpose of the remittances, some migrant women send a consistent portion of their salary back to Ukraine on a monthly basis, withholding only a small amount to meet their everyday needs. Others remit only what is necessary to ensure the support of their families left behind and to provide for specific expenditures; they personally make decisions regarding the money to be sent and deposit what is left in a private bank account. This last arrangement is adopted when migrants are planning on buying a house or wish to save part of their money to provide for themselves once they are back in Ukraine.

The interviews I conducted with different members of transnational families have not shown one dominant pattern of remittance management, mainly because of the presence of many variables at work, like the family composition, the gender contract, the amount of money that is remitted, the method and frequency of transfer, the referents who are responsible for the management of money, and the types of expenditures supported by the remittances. However, it is possible to identify three patterns that recur among migrants who remit to Ukraine⁴.

The first, which I believe to be the most significant, is a system of independent management of remittances. Partners are excluded from the administration of remittances, which are directly controlled by the adult children or by an adult woman, often the migrant's mother or sister⁵ (Banfi and Boccagni, 2011). The reason why partners are excluded has to do with the alteration of the social order caused by the migration of women, as well as with men and women's expectations about their idea of family and of reciprocal obligations. Conjugal relationships are precarious because the gender contract has been

³ Such comforts include domestic appliances, fashionable clothes, access to new technologies, but also Italian food products (e.g. Parmesan cheese, olive oil, coffee) and cleaning products. Thus, we might refer to a transformation of the cultural construction of needs as a result of migration.

⁴ Not all of the migrant women interviewed are remitters. Generally, women who stop remitting are single mothers who have dependent reunited children, and whose social and personal identity in Ukraine has become progressively weaker. Therefore, they often decide to invest in their future in Italy (Vianello, 2009).

⁵ The fact that migrants only trust other women to manage their money can be ascribed both to a form of female solidarity and to the typical working-class model of family management, where women are usually in charge of the family finances (Zelizer, 1989). A better understanding of this phenomenon would require further investigation – historical, sociological and anthropological – of the patterns of financial management among Ukrainian families. We might not be in presence here of a radical transformation, but rather of a new version of an old model, similar to the one typical of the working class: if the woman temporarily leaves the household, the money is managed by the woman closest to her.

broken (Bimbi, 2009). Women accuse their husbands of being incapable of fulfilling their responsibilities as head of the household, and portray them as selfish. Thus they feel legitimated in excluding men from the financial benefits coming from migration, devoting their income only to the children's needs. On the other hand, husbands defend their gender role as heads of the household by defining remittances as pin money and refusing to spend it on themselves.

A second pattern can be identified in a system of inter-spouse shared management. Money is sent to partners, who usually have prestigious but low-paid jobs in the country of origin. Remittances are added to the household finances and husbands have the responsibility of managing the entire income. Spending priorities are usually arranged between the spouses over the phone, but husbands are free to choose how to spend the amount of money destined to everyday necessities. Ukrainian migrant women relinquish the opportunity to demand a greater decisional power for themselves and represent the family as an equity-based economic unit, since the increase of their financial resources could risk undermining the established patriarchal gender order, thus affecting their marital relationship. By doing so, wives defend their husbands' honour (Hankivsky, Salnykova, 2012) and protect conjugal relationships, but at the same time they impose a more equal gender contract.

Lastly, a third pattern, which is typical of single mothers⁶, is a system of intergenerational shared management. It consists of remitting directly to children, if they are deemed mature enough to be in charge of money, or to the women who look after them. This seems to reveal that mothers deeply trust their children's ability to manage large amounts of money. The use of remittances is generally arranged between mothers and children, and when mothers return to the country of origin during their holidays they personally monitor how the money has been spent.

Normative social remittances

As Pahl has showed in her studies on the British case (1988, 2004), many women do not perceive money as a reward for their work, but as a way to fulfil their responsibilities, like maintaining the household's standards of living, the family's respectability, or guaranteeing the children's well-being. As my interviews reveal, Ukrainian women, coherently with the Ukrainian hegemonic public discourse, also represent and justify emigration as a strategy to gather money not for themselves, but for their families (Solari, 2010). In fact, these women's narratives show the same anxiety about the challenge to the gender order posed by migration, and about the risk to be represented as irresponsible mothers, immoral wives, and selfish consumers, described by Keough (2006) in her work on Moldovan migrant women:

⁶ This third case is particularly common among my interviewees, because divorced women and widows are quite numerous among Ukrainian migrant women (Ambrosini, Bonizzoni, Caneva, 2010).

I left my child when she was 7 years old. I emigrated for the future of my baby, to guarantee her the possibility to study, because in Ukraine the cost of living is like the Italian one. One year of university costs 1.000€. There weren't any other reasons to come here. Migration used to be political, now it is economic. [...] Now men live women's lives, and women have become the strongest sex, because they are the primary providers of their families. There are families that can manage, so women can stay home, other families are poor, so women must emigrate (Olesia, Padua 11-06-06, 37 years old, in Italy since 2002).

According to Morokvasic (2004), emigration is a part of Eastern European women's caring role for the family. However, during their migratory experience, the women I interviewed tend to live poised between the centrality of the family and self-realisation, and they have to mediate between the pressure to earn for their families and the idea of self-care as a newly established right. For instance, Elena⁷ recounts her family's constant need for larger sums of money, which eventually lead them to believe that she was withholding some of her earnings: "I didn't have any money, because I sent it all back home, but they thought that I was keeping most of it... they have gotten used to having money that doesn't smell like sweat". Another woman, Maria⁸, a widow with two adult children, decided to stop sending remittances in order to buy an apartment for herself, but her children still call her every month demanding money for their needs.

The ability of migrant women to negotiate between the expected model of behaviour and their own will is fundamental for them to perform successfully as "good mothers" in front of their "community of countrywomen", which is at the same time a resource and a system of social control (Decimo, 2005). Indeed, Fedyuk (2011) shows that even women that have intimate relationships with Italian men justify these relationships as such that do not prevent and even enhance economic gain for their children.

During their stay in Italy, the migrant women's self-perception changes: they progressively achieve a considerable economic power and also become familiar with a sociocultural organization of the life course that structures individual biographies in a very different way from the Ukrainian one⁹. Julia¹⁰, for example, claims that "Everything in the house has been bought with my money", while Oxana desires to start a new professional career:

I'd like to open a design studio. I like it very much, I rediscovered myself. But... here I

⁷ Venice 26-07-06, 40 years old, in Italy since 1997.

⁸ Venice 03-09-09, 55 years old, in Italy since 2000.

⁹ If we assume the average age at marriage as a marker of the transition to adulthood, we can observe that Italian women marry at a later age than Ukrainian women: in 2009, the largest age group among brides in Italy was from 25 to 29 years old, while in Ukraine the majority of brides were between 20 and 24 years old (Istat, 2009; Deržavnij Komitet Statistiki Ukrajin, 2009).

¹⁰ Lviv 02-09-06, 61 years old, in Italy from 1997 to 2005.

am not young, in Ukraine it is very difficult. If I was in Italy.... my employer Nicoletta was 12 years older than me and had several projects, another woman in her sixties had the project to open a shop and her daughter had her first child at age 32. Here women work very hard (Oxana, Sambir 18-08-06, 35 years old, in Italy from 1998 to 2003).

With the achievement of financial independence, self-confidence and the experience of an alternative and more women-friendly life-course pattern, Ukrainian migrant women become aware that they could still have the opportunity to focus on their self-realisation, regardless of their age, gender norms, education, etc. In fact, many women embark on new love relationships, start studying to learn new skills and discover unknown passions.

It is important to stress that both the process of empowerment experienced by these Ukrainian women and their new awareness about their self-care rights and new life course, can be considered to be forms of social remittance. A new set of values emerging from these experiences is transmitted – even if slowly – to friends, relatives and, above all, to the migrants' daughters, thus progressively affecting the Ukrainian hegemonic norms regarding gender and women's life-course patterns. For instance, Alexandra recounts:

My daughter isn't married. No, no, she doesn't want to. I understand her, here in Italy it is quite common. She is independent, she is fine. I got married when I was 23, I was considered already old. If the marriage didn't work you had to stay together anyway. Now nobody wants to suffer (Alexandra, Venice 30-04-2009, 53 years old, in Italy since 2000).

Finally, another problematic aspect of the regular inflow of remittances is how remitted money is perceived and spent by children and relatives, as well as the meaning and values they attach to money earned abroad. Migrant women, perhaps influenced by the mass media and teachers¹¹, express concern regarding the ability of children to understand the value of money. Again, the acknowledgement that the core of the problem lies in the educational models and in the patterns of management and use of money within the family can be considered another form of social remittance (Schmalzbauer, 2008). In this case, women are remitting a specific idea of economic education based on work ethics and on the distinction between moral and immoral consumption:

¹¹ Some of the interviews conducted with key informants revealed an increasing concern with the risk of young people becoming fascinated with consumerism and consequently adopt forms of deviant behaviour. These experts argue that not only the growing wealth of families offers an insufficient counterweight to the social costs of out-migration, but that it also negatively affects the socially shared set of values. According to some teachers, children prefer seeing friends to studying, and spend their parents' money in a compulsive manner, especially when they are the primary receivers of the remittances.

I have never sent money to my children, they won't understand what it means to have money if they don't understand where it comes from. I have sent it to my husband, and he knew that the money was for the university, for food and for the rent, we didn't want to spoil our kids. They never ask for money, when they need some, they earn it. (Daria, Ivano Frankivsk 14-08-06, 45 years old, in Italy since 2000 to 2003).

My daughter is very good, because she invested it all in the restoration of the house, she changed the windows, she fixed the roof and bought new furniture. My kids never spent it in bars, they only spent it on useful things (Maria, Sambir 18-08-06, 60 years old, in Italy since 2000 to 2004).

According to the women interviewed, when parents succeed in describing the origin of the money clearly to their children, the latter recognise its value and manage to spend it in a responsible way; on the contrary, when the remittances are managed without any guidance, children tend to spend them irresponsibly. Besides, Maria's words reveal that consumption is considered moral whenever it is “useful” and invested for the common good, like the renovation of one's house, whereas it becomes immoral when money is wasted on useless and deviant practices, like buying alcohol in bars¹².

However, these mothers' concerns seem to lose some of their urgency when we analyse the perspective of children left behind. Nadia, for instance, claims to reject the consumerist style of consumption that she attributes to her mother and to aspire to a more restrained, sober and affectively richer life:

To be honest, I'm not really sure what my mother lives for, because women who work in Italy are obsessed with money and shopping: “There are jeans on sale, there are shoes on sale, I have to buy some for my daughter”. When I went to Italy I saw it, they are constantly buying things, wherever there's a sale they buy, they don't care for quality, they'll buy anything. That's all they can do, but I think it would be better if they all just stayed together, because when a woman leaves, there is no longer a family. [...] I say to her: “You have to come back home and accept life the way it is”. But every year she decides she needs to buy something new. I don't want to live like my mother, I accept life the way it is, even if I have lots of problems, I don't have much money, but I'm happy. I wouldn't want to change my life (Nadia, Lviv 25-08-06, 25 years old, child left behind since 1998).

Some children show a critical attitude towards money, since they identify it as the main reason why their mothers had to leave, although they do not protest when the migrants pay for their university tuition fees or for a vacation abroad. They struggle between the awareness of being part of the Ukrainian “remittance bourgeoisie” (Smith, 2006) and the desire to have their mothers

¹² The literature on the meanings that Ukrainian society associates with alcohol consumption is very limited, but there might be many similarities between that national context and the Russian culture. Regarding this, see: Murney, 2007 on Ukraine; Christian, 1990 and Ries, 1997 on Russia.

back home. Therefore, these children often develop a strong savings ethic in order to facilitate their parents' return, and invest in education to prove to them that the money they earned has not been wasted.

Conclusions

This article has examined some atypical kinds of social remittances that are transferred by Ukrainian migrant women to their families left behind: new models of circulation and administration of money within migrants' families; the rise of women's right to self-care and self-realisation; alternative patterns of women's life-courses; different styles of consumption and economic education.

The social remittances identified in the article show the potentially transformative power of migration on different cultural aspects of the local society of origin. However, the transmission of these forms of remittance is not automatic and immediate, because of migrants' gendered stigmatisation. Often, as we have seen, conflicts ensue among the actors involved, since senders and recipients have different opinions and interests. Women always play a key role in the management of money, a fact which has repercussions on the underlying gender contract. In some families, husbands are excluded or voluntarily exclude themselves from the benefits that come from this new type of wealth. In other families, women's money is functional to maintaining the established patriarchal gender contract, allowing husbands to keep their social positions and occupations, even when the man's income is not sufficient for the family's financial support.

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Furthermore, migrants and their kin left behind in Ukraine do not always agree on the management of remittances and on the appropriate consumption styles to be adopted. Mothers try to impose their style and pose limitations to the family's spending. They also worry about their children's ability to manage significant amounts of money, and therefore adopt educational strategies aimed at transmitting their work ethic and the importance of education. On the other hand, while recognizing their mothers' sacrifice, children left behind express some criticism regarding their styles of consumption.

Finally, judging from my fieldwork, migrant women become more powerful and independent, and remit a new version of gender identity and womanhood which is a little less family-oriented. Even if this new self-perception is not immediately visible in their discourses, because they have to defend their reputation, it is de facto performed and somehow remitted. On the contrary, alternative life-course patterns are not always directly practicable by migrant women, but they are transmitted to their children or grandchildren.

To conclude, I believe that a better understanding of migrant women's social remittances impact on the society of origin would require further investigation in Ukraine among recipients (i.e. husbands, children, grandchildren, relatives, friends and acquaintances), with particular attention on gender implications.

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