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Cross-border Migration and Gender Boundaries in Central Eastern Europe – Female Perspectives

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Abstract

In post-Socialist countries, cross-border labour migration has become a common individual and family livelihood strategy. The paper is based on the analysis of semi-structured interviews conducted with two ethnic Hungarian women whose lives have been significantly reshaped by cross-border migration. Focusing on the interplay of gender and cross-border migration, our aim is to reveal how gender roles and boundaries are reinforced and repositioned by labour migration in the post-socialist context where both the socialist dual-earner model and conventional ideas of family and gender roles simultaneously prevail. We found that cross-border migration challenged these women to pursue diverse strategies to balance their roles of breadwinner, wife, and mother responsible for reproductive work. Nevertheless, the boundaries between female and male work or status were neither discursively nor in practice transgressed. Thus, the effect of cross-border migration on altering gender boundaries in post-socialist peripheries is limited.

Keywords: *cross-border migration; gender roles; gender boundaries; Central Eastern Europe; dual-earner model.*

Introduction

In the countries of the former Socialist bloc, where international mobility was strictly controlled by the state for decades,[4] cross-border migration has more recently emerged as a significant social phenomenon, a common individual and family livelihood strategy affecting almost all social strata as well as men and women. Migration continues to be highly dependent on border regimes regulating cross-border movements of people.[5] While state borders between EU states have lost their importance as barriers as a result of EU accession and especially the establishment of the Schengen border-regime system, their permeability has dramatically decreased towards non-EU states like Serbia and Ukraine (Armbruster and Meinhof, 2011; Baggio 2015), especially following the refugee movement in 2015 (Paasi et al., 2018). These border regimes result in the 'hierarchisation of mobility rights' (Zbinden et al., 2016:8.) among Central Eastern European (CEE)

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[4] When referring to strict control, we mean legislative measures as well as the geographical scope of mobility. For instance in Hungary, two different passports were introduced during the Socialism, one valid only for traveling inside the Eastern Bloc while visiting family in the western border zone bordering Austria required special documents because it was under military control. In Transcarpathia as it was the western border region of the Soviet Union, the border was thus heavily militarized and more or less sealed, which meant that cross-border migration was minimal.
[5] The term 'border (migration or mobility) regimes' refers to practices of regulation by which nation states control (restrict or facilitate) cross-border mobility of people, but also to normative and discursive orders inherent in these regimes. Border regimes (re-)produce global hierarchies of power and inequalities (see Horvath et al., 2017; Faist, 2014).

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countries. For example, citizens of Hungary have the right of free movement within the EU, are allowed to cross national borders without being controlled, and may seek employment in other EU member states whereas those who live in the westernmost region of Ukraine called Transcarpathia face restrictions and often time-consuming controls when crossing the border to any of their directly neighbouring countries. Since 2011, when Hungary introduced preferential re-naturalisation, thousands of Transcarpathians obtained Hungarian citizenship (and its passport), which guarantees them equality in accessing the EU labour market (Tátrai et al., 2017; Erőss et al., 2018).

In the present article, we introduce two ethnic Hungarian women, Ilona and Hanna, whose lives have been significantly reshaped by cross-border labour migration in diverse ways. Our aim in analysing the semi-structured interviews conducted with the two women[6] about the same age (approximately 60) is to reveal how gender roles and boundaries are reinforced and repositioned by cross-border labour migration in the post-socialist context where both the socialist dual-earner model and conventional ideas of family and gender roles simultaneously largely prevail (Palenga-Möllenbeck and Lutz 2016; Gal and Klingman 2000).

From the large pool of interviews, we chose these two specific women because they presented very strong agency in their narratives. We identify agency as a crucial factor that empowered them to actively negotiate, reposition and shift gender boundaries within their families during certain periods of their life courses.[7] Their life and labour stories share many similarities. Both live in peripheral settlements: Ilona in Knightfield,[8] a village situated in Transcarpathia, Ukraine, where autochthonous ethnic Hungarians co-exist with Ukrainians. Hanna lives in Poppyfield, a settlement in the southern border region of Hungary. Both were born and started to work during the socialist regime when inhabitants typically used to work locally or in nearby settlements. In both villages, seeking labour in foreign countries has become a locally accepted and widely practised living strategy as a result of geopolitical and economic processes, such as the collapse of the socialist economy in both countries, the economic crisis after 2008, or more recently, following the Euromaidan in Ukraine. However, the local inhabitant's cross-border migration trajectories have developed differently: In Knightfield (Transcarpathia, Ukraine), where Ilona lives, the general pattern is that males migrate to foreign countries, just as Ilona's husband does. In contrast, in Poppyfield, Hungary, mostly women, once including Hanna, are engaged in cross-border labour migration. Migration is thus an essential factor in their lives: it has forced them to rearrange their lives in order to be able to migrate on their own (Hanna) or support their family members to migrate (Ilona).

[6] In Hungary, the research project 'International Migration from Hungary and its Impacts on Rural Society' (2015-2018) was founded by NKFIH/OTKA (K111 969). Within this project, one research site was a village at the Hungarian-Serbian border where 19 interviews were conducted with women who worked as live-in migrant care workers in Austria and Germany either at the time of the research or prior to it. The research in Transcarpathia, Ukraine was carried out in the frame of 'Studying the assimilation of the Transcarpathian Hungarian Diaspora Community' supported by Bethlen Gábor Alapkezelő. The aim of the project was to map everyday socio-economic circumstances of autochthonous ethnic Hungarian diaspora communities in Transcarpathia, focusing on the processes of assimilation of the Hungarian communities. In five settlements, 85 semi-structured and expert interviews were conducted. Because the aim and scope of the two research projects were completely different, the present article only offers the analysis of the labour stories of the two selected women and the study will not reflect on more general changes and processes on gender roles in the local community that were taking shape as a consequence of cross-border migration.

[7] Unfortunately, we did not have the possibility of interviewing their husbands; thus we cannot interpret the interplay of cross-border migration and gender boundaries from a male perspective.

[8] In this article, the names of the settlements and women have been anonymised and their exact age is not specified to protect their privacy.

In our article, we argue that both male and female cross-border migration has accelerated various shifts in these families` lives. Cross-border migration challenged these women to pursue diverse strategies to balance their roles of breadwinner, wife, and mother responsible for reproductive work. To a certain extent, they managed to reposition[9] gender roles and boundaries in their families. However, these strategies are constrained by economic and social characteristics of peripheral CEE regions (i.e. limited and unequal access to a 'proper' job for women) as well as by prevailing, conventional gendered values, norms, expectations and practices which have not been questioned by these women themselves. Thus, our analysis, focusing on the *interplay of gender and cross-border migration*, points to the ambivalence of gender boundaries in the post-socialist context.

Theoretical framework: cross-border migration and gender boundaries

Migration studies have paid special attention to the question of how migration in general, and migration of women in particular, affects traditional roles and responsibilities in families as well as gender relations in the sending communities (see Lutz, 2011; Fedyuk, 2015; Parreňas, 2001, 2005, 2013). While the migration of men has only a limited structural impact on gender roles, and may even reproduce them, the migration of women has larger potential to alter them, but rather in the form of long term, inter-generational, and gradual change (see de Haas, 2009: 40-41 for an overview). The international literature on 'left-behind' women primarily analyses how male out-migration impacts women's agency and power position in their marriage, family and community (Toyota et al., 2007). It has been found that male out-migration usually 'creates space for women to renegotiate gender relationships, increases decision-making power and access to and control over resources' (Saha et al., 2018:40). Some examples show that the increased authority in decision making about their private lives or family-related finances might empower women to renegotiate their position in family and local society (Jacka, 2014). Nevertheless, when women take over traditional male work and decisions, they often face disapproval from the extended family and community, and many feel powerless or are unwilling to stretch conventional gender boundaries (Wu and Ye, 2016; de Haas and van Rooij, 2010). The importance of individual agency is crucial in this context: When women take over more responsibilities and decisions previously under the auspices of male family members, they may often not perceive this state as 'emancipation,' i.e. as making independent and conscious choices against prevailing norms on gender roles (de Haas and van Rooij, 2010: 60). Thus, their narratives may lack, or only indirectly refer to, shifts in gender power positions as a result of a conscious strategy; it is researchers who perceive and account for these shifts when they analyse the narratives.

Both male and female migration can actually engender crossing, transgressing, negotiating, and shifting gender boundaries, defined as 'complex structures – physical, social, ideological, and psychological – which establish the differences and commonalities between women and men, among women, and among men, shaping and contrasting the behaviour of each gender group' (Gerson and Peiss, 1985:318). Furthermore, gender boundaries are comprehended both as symbolic and social constructions. Symbolic boundaries refer to the fact that in their everyday lives, people perceive and categorise behaviours, actions, activities (such as different types of work) as male or female, while social boundaries are 'objectified forms of social differences manifested in unequal access to and unequal distribution of resources (material and non-material) and social opportunities'

[9] Andreas Wimmer identified repositioning as one of the possible strategies of ethnic boundary making in which 'an actor seeks to change her own position within an existing hierarchical system' (Wimmer, 2008:988).

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(Lamont and Molnár, 2002: 168). The distinction between breadwinning and domestic labour (that is, male 'job' and female 'work') is a salient gender boundary (Potuchek, 1997), implying inequalities in access to 'proper' work, salaries, recognition, and prestige. However, gender boundaries are not static social and symbolic constructions; rather, they are the 'result of a potentially reversible social process' (Wimmer 2009: 254), which vary across time and in different social contexts, and are subject to individual negotiations (Wimmer, 2008), (re-)created through 'dynamic, reciprocal and interdependent interactions between and among women and men' (Gerson and Peiss, 1985:318).

Contexts: patterns and trajectories of cross-border migration

Ukrainians today constitute one of the largest immigrant groups in Europe due to the intensive out-migration following the collapse of the USSR (Fedyuk and Kindler, 2016; IOM, 2013). The westernmost periphery of Ukraine, Transcarpathia has traditionally been characterised by a high level of migration and features characteristics rather specific to the region.[10] Migration in the region has been further boosted by the economic and political turmoil since 2014 and has been reinforced by the various policies to simplify the migration and legal employment of Ukrainian citizens by the nearby Visegrad 4 countries (Poland, Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary) (Drbhovlav and Seidlova, 2016; Tátrai et al., 2017; Jaroszewicz, 2018).

In contrast to Ukraine, Hungarian society was considered relatively 'immobile' in the two decades following the political-economic change in 1989. When the 2008 global crisis reached the country, the deteriorating economic situation and the insecurity of livelihood perspectives forced many Hungarians, EU citizens since 2004, to seek jobs and prosperity in Western European countries, mainly the UK, Germany and Austria (Hárs, 2016 a, b).

Here it is essential to note that in both Ukraine and Hungary, cross-border labour migration is highly gendered, because men and women enter different segments of the gender-segregated labour market in the target countries. Whereas most women find work in the care sector, men usually work as skilled and unskilled labourers in typically male sectors such as construction or meat processing (for the Southeast European context, see Zbinden et al., 2016: 12).

Different female perspectives on cross-border migration

Short biographies

Ilona

Ilona[11] was born and lives in Knightfield, a village in Transcarpathia with nearly 550 inhabitants where labour migration is dominated by men who engage in one-to-three month shifts and return home to spend one-to-two week breaks with their family. As Ilona recounts: 'We can say that only women are at home. Men all work…and they work abroad. Because there is no possibility here.'

[10] This includes ethnicity as a factor. For example, ethnic Hungarians and Romanians often earn their living respectively in Hungary and in Romania (see: Józwiak, 2014), whereas Ukrainians and Russians have typically sought employment elsewhere in Ukraine and Russia. In recent years, Czechia has become a favoured destination independent of ethnicity. Based on our interviews, it is important to emphasize that in peripheral, remote areas (e.g. villages in the mountains), it is primarily men who migrate for work. In some cases, this has resulted in the overrepresentation of women in the resident population, which was obvious during our field work.

[11] Ilona was almost 60 years old when the interview was conducted in 2018.

Ilona earned a degree as a librarian and used to work in the nearby town's library, so she was a member of the local elite. She married a local Hungarian man. In 1990, when she wanted to return from maternity leave, the library refused to re-employ her. Because her husband had also lost his job, the family was living in desperate conditions.[12] In 1996 to stabilise the family's situation, she and her husband saw no alternative than to go to Hungary to work as seasonal agricultural labourers and to leave behind their two sons with their grandparents. After a few months, Ilona returned,[13] but her husband remained in Hungary and has been working there ever since in construction. Their sons joined him and have been working in Hungary since 2005, while their families remained in Knightfield.

Since 1990, Ilona has been legally unemployed, but this does not mean that she is not working. Every day except Sunday, she travels to nearby settlements where she works as a housekeeper in wealthy families' homes. She also cultivates her garden and helps her daughters-in-law with their grandchildren. Additionally, she has been an elected representative of her neighbourhood in the municipal council for ten years in a row. She talks about this position with pride and perceives it as a 'proper job'[14] in that it partially rehabilitates her status as a white-collar working woman and entrusted member of the local community since she has been officially unemployed for decades.

Hanna

Hanna[15] lives in Poppyfield, a village with 1,950 inhabitants located at the Hungarian-Serbian border, where the dominant migration pattern has been the circular migration of female care workers. As one of them stated, 'Here we [the women] provide for the families, we who go abroad.'

Hanna had two children[16] when she got married to her second husband with whom they have one son. Hanna worked in a local bakery and could hardly reconcile her work with her household and child-care duties.

'I was always nervous and shouted at the children. Then at one point, my husband said, » It does not work anymore. You should stay at home! (…) The children should not grow up on the street! It is the woman's duty to stay at home! «'

Since then, about twenty years before the interview, Hanna has been officially unemployed.[17] For some time, Hanna accepted her husband's arguments that the children needed their mother`s care all day, but after a while she felt apathetic: 'I wanted to work. I desired to meet other people.' Although her husband firmly opposed her aspirations, Hanna reported for seasonal agricultural work in Germany without asking her husband's agreement. During that season, Hanna fell seriously ill because of the hard working conditions. After recovering, she started working as a care worker in a German village in four-week rotation shifts. Like most local women working in Germany, she was never legally employed; moreover, neither she nor her employers showed interest in legalising her position. Between two shifts abroad she cleaned the houses of local elderly in Poppyfield and

[12] 'There were days when I had to figure out what I could possibly feed the kids …Some days even if I had not eaten anything, but I found a way to feed them, at least.'

[13] As she recalled during the interview, she had wanted the whole family to resettle in Hungary in the 1990s to provide a better and more secure life for their sons, but her husband resisted.

[14] At one point in the interview, she even voiced her hope that this position would be added to her actively employed years and might be counted in her pension.

[15] Hanna was nearly 60 when the interview was conducted in 2017.

[16] In contrast to Ilona, Hanna did not continue her education after finishing primary school and always performed unskilled work in the labour market.

[17] She was registered as unemployed at the labour office, which provided her a minimal level of social insurance.

at the weekends, she cooked in the elderly care home in a nearby village, without being officially employed.

When we met Hanna, she had been living in the village for three years because of the serious illness of her husband and worked in a small local food plant, legally employed but for very low wages. She planned to return to care work in Germany once her husband recovered.

Attempts at repositioning gender boundaries

Analysing the two women`s life and labour stories, we highlight the importance of both women having grown up during the socialist era, when the dual-earner family – and the formal, officially supported 'equality' of men and women on the labour market – (see Gal and Kligman, 2000; Kovács and Váradi, 2000) constituted the universal model. However, we should recall that the dual-earner model of socialism has not been able to alter conventional gender roles; the image and actual life of working women have possibly had some emancipatory effects both at the societal and family levels, but in practice, it has resulted in women's two-shift workload. They worked in their workplace and at home in the household and looked after the children while the men as the main breadwinners of the family were generally reluctant to participate in tasks and responsibilities related to domestic work (see Palenga-Möllenbeck and Lutz, 2016).

As some authors have highlighted, the traditional ideal of men as breadwinners and single providers for the family has re-appeared with the post-socialist transformation, yet in reality, families are generally in need of both parents` salaries. The tension resulting from the difference between the imagined family model and everyday reality thus questions gender roles in general (see Palenga-Möllenbeck and Lutz, 2016; Gal and Kligman 2000; Kovács and Váradi, 2000).

For Ilona as well as for Hanna, it has been self-evident to work in the legal labour market (i.e. to be employed), interrupted only by the birth of their children, but neither Ilona nor Hanna could find legal wage labour when they decided to return to the labour market. One of the structural similarities revealed by the working biographies of both women is that under the conditions of global capitalism, women in these (semi-) peripheral regions have very limited access to 'proper' work, that is, to jobs with formalised, legalised employment with a valid contract and regular payment (Ferguson and Li, 2018). Both Ilona and Hanna found jobs only in the informal sector as a housekeeper, cook and care worker for the elderly in their home countries and abroad, i.e. as domestic workers, traditionally considered 'female jobs.'[18] More generally, these structural constraints also define the limits of negotiating the boundary between male and female work. The fact that women are confined to perform only undervalued traditional female work whether unpaid at home or underpaid on the (informal) labour market confirms and reinforces the gender boundary between male (breadwinning) and female (domestic) work. In the case of Ilona, this is further underscored by the objective disparity between the economic conditions in Hungary (where her husband works) and Ukraine, especially the peripheral Transcarpathia, where wages are substantially below the Hungarian average.[19] In this context, Ilona's work is both symbolically and materially of low value because it derives from undervalued 'female work' which she performs in

[18] Their position in the paid but informal labour market is vulnerable, which they narratively and symbolically mitigate by emphasizing the 'familiar relationship' (Hanna) to the elderly she cared for or the 'goodness' (Ilona) of their wealthy employer families. As Ilona illustrated, 'I do work in good places, among good people. Because even among rich, there are good people.'

[19] According to official statistics, as of 1 January 2018 in Transcarpathia, the average wage was 6,799 Hryvnia (approximately 228 EUR); the same data for Hungary is 316,268 HUF (approximately 978 EUR). Source of data for Ukraine: Держстат Головне управління статистики у Закарпатській області (http://www.uz.ukrstat.gov.ua/press/2018/expr_v262.pdf/, for Hungary: https://www.ksh.hu/docs/hun/xstadat/xstadat_evkozi/e_qli029b.htmla

the informal sector in a peripheral, poor region. In contrast, Ilona's husband earns his salary in Hungary in the relatively well-paid construction sector, where he has had a stable position for twenty years. The imbalance between the spouses' labour positions is reflected in how she talks about her work, namely that she never mentions how much she earns or how her wages contribute to the family budget, whereas she found it important to mention that her husband financed her obtaining a driver's license.[20] Nevertheless, she talks about this disparity or her multiple workload without any anxiety or complaint, suggesting that she is comfortable with the circumstances.

On the other hand, the salary Hanna earned with the typical 'female job' in Germany was hardly enough to stabilise her family's economic position in the long term. This was because first, she was engaged in it for an overall period of five years, but with longer and shorter interruptions; and second, she only could earn a salary in the four-week shift rotation system.[21] Thus, her husband's wages earned in Hungary were also necessary to improve their circumstances.

Besides their paid jobs, both women fulfilled their role as housewife, mother and spouse as was requested and partially expected by their family and husbands. Because Ilona's husband provided a modest income level for her and their two sons, she stayed at home, taking care of their children and the household and cultivating her small garden. Later, when both of their sons married, she started to teach her Ukrainian daughters-in-law and her grandchildren Hungarian.[22] When Hanna was struggling with working hard in her workplace and at the same time looking after the family, she, like Ilona, quit her job and decided to dedicate her full attention to the family for a period of time. These tasks and responsibilities as mother and housewife more or less fit the traditional conception of female work in the context of post-socialist societies (see Palenga-Möllenbeck and Lutz, 2016).

None of them felt comfortable with their position as mother and housewife, confined to only performing traditional reproductive female roles. Ilona started to work as a housekeeper in multiple households. However, her words about this work may suggest that she feels embarrassed about never having managed to regain her position in the official labour market, in a 'real' work place:

> 'I work, but … how to put it… (…) I don't have a workplace…I do have a place to work, that is what I'm trying to say, I do have a place to work, I do work every day.'

Her explanation about work and workplaces suggests that Ilona does not consider her heavy workload and multiple workplaces as a 'proper job' (Ferguson and Li, 2018). In Ilona's interpretation, her paid work is primarily important to her mental well-being because it allows her to partially regain her status as a working woman and mitigate her social isolation (see Schaer et al., 2017:1301-1302).[23]

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[20] 'I've received the driver's license. I mean I have it because of him, because he earned the money to cover its cost. And then we bought a car for me as well.'

[21] Generally in this system, one month's salary earned as a care worker abroad is sufficient to cover two months of the family budget at home. Hanna earned about 800-1000 EUR per shift in Germany, while other women in Poppyfield reported salaries between 1200 and 1500 EUR.

[22] She is convinced that knowing Hungarian is not only important for emotional reasons but also a necessity and asset in case of future migration. As she pressures both of their sons to resettle in Hungary with their families, she wishes to prepare and ease the life of their daughters-in-law and grandchildren by teaching Hungarian in case of a future move.

[23] She is still dreaming about launching their own family business, but her husband has never supported her idea. Thus, Ilona has done nothing to realize her dream. 'A long time ago, when we were newlyweds, I used to love to think of building a greenhouse for flowers. But my husband….he kept saying what if it didn't work out? He pulled me back.'

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Hanna was able to reposition her place in her family, although she never emphasised or even mentioned that she had become the 'main breadwinner' of the family for a period of time as a consequence of her cross-border migration and earnings abroad. In fact, without her earnings abroad, the family could neither have afforded some smaller investments in the house nor have supported their grandchildren. Nonetheless, her husband did not stop arguing with her, referring to 'peace in the family' which in his opinion, was violated by Hanna's leaving the household. Hanna was constantly looking for jobs and to generate more income, while her husband insisted on the traditional male and female roles in the family.[24] Working outside of the household provided Hanna the possibility to 'break free' from the boundaries set up by her husband, reinforcing the conventional vision of gender roles. As she formulated it, care work in Germany provided her the possibility to 'step out for a while.' However, she performed her tasks as housewife and mother to satisfy her husband and youngest son in addition to working outside the household as breadwinner. She repositioned gender boundaries related to male and female work, roles and tasks, but she could manage this only at the price of work overload. Aside from financial necessity and the desire for a better quality of life, working outside the household was a means of mitigating her social isolation and of struggling for more autonomy and independence in her marriage. However, her agency was limited; while she could manage to work abroad against her husband's will for a while, and thus make decisions about how to invest her earnings at home, she was not able to persuade him to leave for Germany, which was her greatest desire. And she accepted her husband's decision. [25]

Neither Ilona nor Hanna questioned traditional gender boundaries between breadwinning and male or female domestic work. They did not use or reflect on these terms at all during the interviews. They also did not interpret as 'emancipation' their efforts to have paid work and their aspiration for less isolation and more autonomy and self-determination. Our findings are in accordance with other research; left-behind women or female migrant care workers do not describe their overburdened state or their desire for 'economic independence and a self-determined life' as 'emancipation' (Saha et al., 2018:46; Lutz, 2011:152, referring to Pessar, 2003.)

Conclusion

Based on two case studies documented in Central Eastern Europe, our aim was to analyse the interplay between cross-border migration and gender boundaries from a female perspective. The added value of our analysis lies in the comparison of two cases characterised by the alternative migration trajectories of these women (one involved in cross-border migration, the other, left-behind) whose labour and life stories nevertheless share many similarities. This allowed us to evaluate the role of cross-border migration on the efforts of repositioning and shifting gender boundaries within their families.

Ilona and Hanna, two middle-aged women, live in peripheral villages, anonymised as Knightfield (Transcarpathia, Ukraine) and Poppyfield (Hungary), where both the socialist dual-earner model and traditional ideas of family and gender roles prevail. In these settlements, the trajectories of cross-border migration are highly gendered: Whereas in Knightfield, men, like Ilona's husband, migrate to work mainly in Hungary or Czechia, in Poppyfield, women, including

[24] Even during the four-week shifts when Hanna worked in Germany, it was Hanna's mother who at least partly took care of him and their son by cooking and doing the laundry.

[25] She reflected on the inter-generational reproduction of gender boundaries and the limits of her own struggles by talking about her daughter. Her daughter's husband wants her to stay at home with the children, 'but she would like to go back to work. I told her it was not good so she should go back to work. I hope my daughter will get through. She is tough enough. More than I was.'

Hanna, circulate as live-in care workers in Germany or Austria. Despite this difference, we were prompted to compare the two cases because of the numerous commonalities of their labour and life stories: Both women were socialised in the socialist dual- earner model, thus making it self-evident for them to seek paid work after shorter or longer periods of absence from labour market (e.g. due to childbirth).

The transformation to capitalism drastically changed their circumstances, and they found jobs only in the informal sector of the economy as housekeeper, cook, and care worker for the elderly at home or abroad, in sum as domestic workers, traditionally considered 'female work.' Their efforts to find work and earn money on the (informal) labour market resulted in re-producing the dual-earner model, but it also meant reinstating women's two-shift work overload. Apart from financial necessity (in particular in the case of Hanna), their struggles to reposition themselves within the family aimed at regaining their status as working women, at mitigating their social isolation, and at attaining more autonomy and self-determination in their marriage.

Notably, they also did not interpret their efforts to have paid work and their aspiration for less isolation and more autonomy and self-determination as 'emancipation.' Similarly, they neither questioned nor complained about traditional gender boundaries between breadwinning and male or female domestic work; moreover, they did not even use or reflect on these terms at all during the interviews. From an analytical point of view, the observation that these women are confined to perform only undervalued traditional female work whether unpaid at home or underpaid in the (informal) labour market confirms and reinforces the gender boundary between male (breadwinning) and female (domestic) work. Additionally, the way both women perceived and talked about their struggles within their families for more autonomy highlights how persistent gender boundaries can be in small, peripheral settlements in the post-socialist context. Our account demonstrates that although both women could 'break out' of being exclusively wives and mothers, the boundaries between female and male work or status were neither discursively nor in practice transgressed, explicitly negotiated, or even questioned by them.

In sum, we argue that the most important factors determining these women's positions are (1) the structural constraints characteristic of the post-socialist context in peripheries, (2) the ambivalence deriving from the symbolic and practical persistence of both the socialist dual-earner and traditional models of male and female roles and tasks within families, and (3) their individual agency. Furthermore, the effects of cross-border migration, whether male or female, on altering gender boundaries are limited; the struggles for repositioning boundaries might be partly successful but only at the price of reproducing work overload, which remains accepted and unquestioned by both men and women.

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