

Comment on the paper *Grandmothers migrating, working and caring: Latvian women between survival and self-realisation* by Russell King and Aija Lulle

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Economic forces are probably the most commonly discussed causes of migration from Eastern European countries in the last two decades. They are also the most important factors explaining migration in other regions in world, e.g. from African, Caribbean or Pacific regions (ACP Observatory of Migration, 2012). However, the article by King & Lulle goes beyond the analysis of economic benefits and instead invites the reader to explore the complexity of the fluctuations of gender identity, thus gender-theoretical issues are also the focus of our commentary. The results of the study show that a majority of women, having taken the decision to move to Western countries, experience a rise in their income levels, making them comparable to those of the local population. The active participation in the labour market has been shown beyond doubt to be related to positive identity and self-esteem (Jahoda, 1981; Ross et al., 1995; Rodriguez, 1997), facilitating a sense of empowerment and freedom. As many employment studies show, having a job is as important for women as it is for men (Reine et al., 2013).

The article by King & Lulle highlights the fact that changing the country of living does not lead to much change with regard to the traditional role of women as carers. Perhaps the transnational nature of continuous caring responsibilities adds more stress and tension for women, as they need to combine these responsibilities with paid work duties. Their employment has been analysed using social role theories. The gender roles, linking females to “caretaker” roles seem to be strong in Latvia. The traditional masculine “breadwinner” role middle-aged women inhabit in the new home country challenges the gender system they are used to complying with, thus empowering them. Several studies and statistical data (Colombo et al., 2011) show higher proportions of women are responsible for caring – for children, parents, partners, etc. Women’s presumed care-taking roles, both paid and unpaid, derive from their historical, symbolic role as home-makers. As recent gender studies show, women, in contrast to men, are more prone to align with new, challenging identities (Kray et al., 2017). While it could be argued that women gen-

erally are lower in the social hierarchy than men, it could equally be argued that women occupy a more privileged position by being able to support their family and relatives economically. This positively challenges the identity and self-esteem of women. The fixed role beliefs, however, may hinder the change of occupational sphere even after migration. The horizontal segregation on the labour market may lead to similar jobs in the new home country, meaning that the caretaker role remains strong as these sectors are women-dominated even elsewhere.

King & Lulle mention that there are growing labour-market segments, especially in the care sector, that are not only open to, but prefer, women who are not young any more. The growing needs for care provision represent a challenge to any society by increasing demand for resources – both human and financial. Debates about the recognition of women’s roles as domestic workers and carers are ongoing in the EU on different political levels, as are discussions about policies aimed at supporting a good work-life balance e.g. reconciliation of competing demands from work and home. There are limited up-to-date data in Latvia on the current distribution of caring responsibilities among citizens. The European research project SHARE has shown that various forms of intergenerational support, e.g. financial transfers, practical help and care exist among Europeans (Brandt et al., 2009). This year, for first time, Latvia will participate in the 7th wave of SHARE project and the results should be valuable for exploring the patterns of intergenerational support in Latvia and comparing the situation with other European countries.

The article addresses power aspects, in the first place through the access to resources (subjective perception of having it). The question is: how long will this perception last? Longitudinal studies could be suggested to test a hypothesis if the economic well-being effect of migration becomes weaker as years pass. Especially, if the economic situation in Latvia becomes equal to that in the new home country? Also, the article by King & Lulle points out some kind of respondents idealistic perception of future, mainly in relation to plans to return to Latvia.

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Control is related to power, and in the case of transnational caregivers, the former societal and economic subordination in Latvia, i.e. double disadvantage of being a woman and having limited possibilities to control their life make them feel inferior to their countrymen, but not necessarily in the new home country. The literature describes social effects of migration illustrating a wide range of impacts related to feelings of freedom vs. obligations, dependence vs. independence, etc. (ACP Observatory of Migration, 2012).

Migration and relationships from a distance may make the networks simpler by putting less pressure on women as unquestioned care-givers and networkers. Even though multiple care relationships are maintained they might be more strictly defined and based on the premises of women.

As shown by the study of King & Lulle, health enhancement through healthy life-style is another factor that could be related to the complexity of change of identity and self-esteem. While having care-giving responsibilities, middle-aged women may find it difficult to take care of their own health and well-being. Furthermore, some activities could be stigmatised, like middle-aged women being involved in sports activities in the Latvian countryside. Well-being aspects are rarely discussed in terms of changed health habits which is undoubtedly an important issue for public health professionals.

New transnational gender identities arising from different social regimes related to the institutional organisation of social security, resource distribution and policies involve changing masculinities and femininities through the shift of the traditional breadwinner role.

To sum up, migration studies clearly show how gender regimes can alter the self-perception of middle-aged women in changed settings and environ-

ments. It would be also interesting to study if similar patterns can be found with regard to the masculinities of migrated men with the same background.

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