

Mothering in Migration: Transnational Strategies of Polish Women in Italy

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Polish women have established a long-standing and steady migratory flow in Italy that has mainly, but not only, met the demand for care and domestic workers in the country. While providing support mostly for the elderly, numerous migrant working mothers have to leave their children in Poland in order to find employment as care workers. Therefore, it is significant to analyse East-West European female mobility in order to understand its specific patterns, and how they modify mothering arrangements and their perception in emigration and immigration societies.

This article is based on qualitative research conducted between 2003 and 2005. It analyses the strategies of mothering in migration adopted by Polish care workers, and it explores intergenerational relationships in the household, articulating a theory concerning a double international presence of transnational migrant mothers.

International Transfer of Caretaking and Intra-European Migration during the EU-Enlargement Process

Migratory patterns have been developing steadily and rapidly in post-cold war Europe, shaping new and diverse pathways capable of triggering crucial social phenomena. In the last twenty years, the balance between the sexes in labour migration has shifted decisively towards women. Empirical studies have challenged the idea of a predominantly male migration associated with labour in a booming industrial sector during the 1950s and the 1960s. Sociological literature analysed the growth of a predominantly female migration especially from Central-Eastern European Countries (cf. Morokvasic 1983, 1984, 1991, 1992, 2004; Phizacklea 1983, 2003; Anthias/Lazaridis 2000; Friese 1995; Kofman et al. 2000). The ser-

vice economy of the “global cities” (cf. Sassen 1998, 2002) has attracted and absorbed those migratory flows. Recently, this phenomenon has also become noticeable in towns, villages, and non-urban areas. This is especially true in Southern-European states (cf. King/Zontini 2000) where welfare policies are chronically inadequate to meet the increasing rate of women’s participation in the labour market, and where household arrangements between the sexes have not modified the unequal burden of domestic chores shared between men and women. In a system marked by social and gender inequalities, polarisation processes are growing between an upper or middle-class in need of household assistance, and a migrant class that is willing to accept low income, time consuming, and emotionally demanding jobs. Moreover, ongoing intra-European migrations are adjusting the demographic balance in sending and receiving migrants’ societies, and are increasingly connecting those areas by means of transnational mobility strategies. These are “occupations and activities that require regular and sustained social contacts over time across national borders for their implementation” (Portes et al. 1999: 219).

Eastern and Western Europe were separated but not definitely divided by the so-called “Iron Curtain”. Therefore, new relations between areas previously unconnected fuelled an era of mass transportation on wheels. During the fall of the Soviet regime and in the post-1989 private business rush, many companies were been created to meet the cheap transport demand which is typical of a growing *migratory industry* (cf. Castles/Miller 1998) that brought thousands new economical opportunities in Western Europe (Okólski/Stola 1999; Okólski 2001; Wallace/Stola 2001; Wallace 2002). Political processes also are influencing the composition and direction of these migratory flows. The enlargement of the European Union (EU) is a contradictory process of which the long-term effects are still unknown. In the short term, citizens of the new member States¹ of Central Eastern Europe were granted the right to move freely across European borders. Nevertheless, the governments of many ‘old’ EU members have been concerned with the impact of workers’ mobility on national social welfares systems and employment rates, to such an extent that EU institutions approved a discipline of transitory regimes, which divided the enlarged Union into three main areas.²

In Italy, among so-called neo-communitarian citizens, only tourists and autonomous workers have achieved a real freedom of movement, as it is still necessary to be included in the national quota system to have a salaried job.³ The government decides every year how many people for each State or group of

1 In 2004 Poland, Czech Republic, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Hungary, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Malta and Cyprus; in 2007 Romania, Bulgaria.

2 It is a free movement zone, extending over Great Britain, Ireland, Sweden; a two years restricted zone, extending over Italy, France, Spain, Portugal, Greece, Norway; finally, a seven years restricted zone, extending over Germany, Austria, Belgium, Holland, Luxembourg, and Denmark. For more info: Accession Treaty signed on 16 April 2003 “Freedom of movement for workers after enlargement”, July 29, 2007 (<http://europa.eu/scadplus/leg/en/cha/c10524.htm>).

States are able to work legally in the country and in what occupations they are entitled to work. Among those occupations, care and domestic work have been assigned an important share. In 2002 an amnesty law,⁴ that paved the way for the new immigration regulations, showed the professional niche to which Polish migrants are confined: 75,8 per cent out of 25,002 requests were related to domestic labour (INPS 2004), a job that is mostly feminised, and where private families are employers. In 2003, Polish migrants were granted 34.980 residence permits, 25.282 to women and 9.698 to men.⁵ The same year, 10.905 women and 6.453 men were entitled to work legally in Italy (ISTAT 2007). Despite the amnesty, the incidence of informal jobs is still very high, also because according to the last immigration law, only people with a contract can receive a residence permit; undocumented migrants therefore represent high numbers.⁶

This article focuses on circular migratory projects of Polish care workers who find new arrangements for mothering and who negotiate new meanings, and identities in the context of the international division of labour. The increasing demand for migrant women to help alleviate the reproductive labour of the growing number of working women in post-industrial nations provokes the formation of an international division of reproductive labour (Parreñas 2001a: 369) that is shaped by “[...] global capitalism, gender inequalities in the sending country, and gender inequalities in the receiving country.” (Parreñas 2000: 569).

The international transfer of caretaking is a facet of the division of reproductive labour, and it refers to three groups of women in two different nations: middle-class women in receiving countries, migrant care workers, and other women (relatives or local domestics) in the sending country too poor to migrate.

In Central-European countries, as was stressed for the Philippines (Lindio-McGovernor 2003: 513), the economical measures imposed on the governments by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund affected local communities in the form of more austere social policies (cf. Deacon/Hulse 1997). This

3 “Documento programmatico relativo alla politica dell’immigrazione e degli stranieri nel territorio dello Stato per il 2004-2006”, July 29, 2007 (http://www.governo.it/Presidenza/DICA/docprogrammatico_immigrazione.html).

4 Decreto-Legge 9 settembre 2002, n. 195 “Disposizioni urgenti in materia di legalizzazione del lavoro irregolare di extracomunitari” (issued after the immigration law L. 189/2002, so-called “Bossi-Fini”, July 29, 2007 (http://www.stranieri.it/attualita/dl_migr/dl02_195/dl02_195.htm)).

5 In 2001, Italian government issued 1.379.749 residence permits, 745.836 to men and 633.913 to women; Polish people received 30.419 residence permits, specifically 8.844 to men and 21.575 to women; working permits were 11.092 for women and 5.917 for men (ISTAT 2007).

6 Since the EU enlargement process, Eastern and Central European citizens cannot be considered undocumented migrants anymore, since a valid identity document is sufficient for internal border-crossing; however, the working permits are granted only to a limited number of people, thus the combination of documented legal status and employment in the informal sectors create new tensions and disadvantages for newcomers.

triggered new mobility flows. Women have emigrated from economical peripheries to the cores, contributing to a “global care chain” this means

[...] a series of personal links between people across the globe based on the paid or unpaid work of caring. A typical global care chain might work something like this: an older daughter from a poor family in a third World country cares for her siblings (the first link in the chain) while her mother works as a nanny caring for the children of a nanny migrating to a first world country (the second link) who, in turn, cares for the child of a family in a rich country (the final link). Each kind of chain expresses an invisible human *ecology of care*, one care worker depending on another and so on. A global care chain might start in a poor country and end in a rich one, or it might link rural and urban areas within the same poor country. More complex versions start in one poor country and extend to another slightly less poor country and then link to a rich country (Hochschild 2000:32).

However, the present study discloses a different aspect of the transnational transfer of care taking since the core’s strategy is a continuous pattern of emigration, immigration, return, and re-immigration, wherein women attend to two households and two families in an alternate way. Therefore, the present study reveals how Polish women tend to be in “two places at the same time”.

Why are those strategies necessary, and how are they organised? In the present case study, women in Poland seldom rely on paid care givers to attend to their families. In most case it is responsibility of other household members. Therefore, we analyse only two of the links forming the care chain model.

Moreover, many women are unable to migrate with their children because care and domestic workers face enormous difficulties in the host country living together with their sons and daughters, especially in the early years. This is because of intense working hours, lack of public or affordable social services, difficulty in finding accommodation, poor economic conditions, weak or nonexistent familiar social networks. As a result, other members of their families (mostly female) will attend to transnational domestic workers’ children. A research on Latino migrants in Los Angeles (Hondagneu-Sotelo/Avila 1997) shows that also Latino immigrant domestic workers are transforming their own meanings of motherhood to accommodate spatial and temporal separations: “[...] many of these domestic workers care for the homes and children of American families while their children remain ‘back home’ in their societies of origin. This latter arrangement, which I call transnational motherhood, signals new international inequalities of social reproduction.” (ibid: 24).

Mothering in Migration

We can define mothering in migration as a set of possible arrangements taking place whenever a mother lives in a different country than her child or children; it

refers also to connotations associated to *places* where she is present or absent, to *meanings* attached to her identity, to *representations* related to her role.

Mothering is a historically and culturally variable relationship, in which one individual nurtures and cares for another. It occurs within specific social contexts that vary in terms of material and cultural resources and constraints. “[...] Mothering is constructed through men’s and women’s actions within specific historical circumstances. Thus agency is central to understanding of mothering as a social, rather than biological, construct.” (Glenn et al.1994: 3).

Therefore, we can draw a distinction between mothering and motherhood where the latter, as Adrienne Rich (1995) wrote, refers to an institution in a male-defined site of oppression. On the other hand, mothering represents a form of maternity that can be a possible source of empowerment.

The transnational arrangements of mothering are rooted in what Helma Lutz calls “a jointly operated informal commuter network” (2002: 91). The existence and endurance of these networks allows migrant mothers to alternate their presence between two households, where they attend to both the productive and reproductive role. They exchange job information in a restricted network, usually formed by close relatives (mothers, sisters, cousins, aunts, sisters-in-law) and friends, as to alternate their presence in two places by means of long and exhausting travels by bus and, more recently, by plane. In Italy, they are often responsible for the seriously ill, the handicapped, or elderly who need an accompanying person. They do domestic chores, frequently also in some neighbours’ houses; they buy food and prepare the meals. The vast majority of the women met during the research share a house with the person they take care of. While they are in Italy, their mothering role is temporarily transferred to another woman, usually their own mother, sisters, mother-in-law, and sometimes to the husband or the children’s father. The present study stresses the importance of special arrangements between female cohabitating relatives that allow both women to have their work abroad, providing material resources for maintaining the household, at the same time guaranteeing a constant care for their children. From the interviewees’ point of view, the choice to rear sons and daughters in Poland refers to practical exigencies, such as being able to live in a peaceful and healthy environment, especially when homes are located in rural or semi-rural areas. Indeed, the mothers are very concerned about the education and freedom of movement their children will have, and also about the language and the transmission of their own culture.

In the Field: Methodological Approach

The present study is based on qualitative research that took place in Italy and in Poland from February 2003 to October 2004, and it was initially not aimed at analyzing mothering in migration. Instead, the topic emerged as relevant during the interviews and fieldwork. Following a grounded theory approach, I started

the field research in central Italy in the provinces of Chieti and Teramo (Italy) where the presence of informal care workers is significant, since demand for their work is high not only in metropolitan areas, but also in provincial towns and in non-urban areas.

The research is composed of twenty-four interviews with Polish household members; the interviews were conducted in Italian and in Polish, then fully transcribed and translated with the help of a research assistant; their length span is from one hour to three hours. I applied an unsystematic sampling using a snow-ball process, starting with an acquaintance of mine in the city of Chieti. To diversify the sample I have been travelling regularly between Italy and Poland (around 350 hours in six months) on the buses used habitually by Polish commuters. Altogether, I gathered twenty-five background questionnaires and did a period of observant participation.

Ten women were interviewed in-depth; they are from non-urban areas of the Sub Carpathian and Little Poland voivodeships⁷; three of them are in their twenties, three in their thirties, four in their forties and fifties. The majority received secondary education (five), while three went to high school and two were completing their university studies. Only two among them were not married and one is a widow. Eight out of ten have their sons and daughters in Poland; in one case, the daughters are working in Italy as well. Subsequently I have interviewed three sons and three daughters of migrant care workers, age 22 to 24, and all of them are attending university. Two are working students. Finally, I interviewed other cohabitants (mother, father, sister, brother-in-law, daughter-in-law) of migrant women in order to have a wider perception of their household arrangements.

“I’m My Grandma’s Son”: Strategies of Transnational Mothering and Shared Mothering

In narratives about maternity, I have rarely encountered any positive aspects of simultaneously managing parental duties and care work. Not only live-in workers, but also women who have their own (shared) apartment and who work on an hourly basis recounted these difficulties. In fact, one of the main conditions of having and maintaining a job in the care sector is to be free from family responsibilities. Sometimes, fearing unemployment, live-in care workers decide to terminate a pregnancy, while others who do become mothers have to face a number of difficulties, especially in the early years. Efficient public services that are able to provide continuous support to mothers of young children are difficult to find, therefore the absence of a wide social and familiar network is not compensated by affordable private care. Frequently the only viable option for these mothers is to entrust the care of the children to a member of their family, usually to their own mothers. As a matter of fact mothering in migration is deeply influenced by

7 This is an administrative division of the State similar to a region.

the condition in which it takes place, for instance whether the woman is a single mother, has a working contract, or has valid residence papers. It is therefore important to also analyse the children's father's position, which may be difficult because of a number of factors: whether he knows about the pregnancy, if he agrees to it, his civil status, his nationality, his occupation, and his relationship to the children's mother.

The present study, which focuses on care and domestic informal workers, observed a major strategy⁸ that allows women to manage maternity transnationally. Care workers who are already mothers themselves when going to work abroad usually decide to leave their children in care of their own kin, or with the husband and his relatives, or less often with friends. Women who become pregnant in Italy, especially single mothers or who are in relationship with a Polish man, entrust their baby to the care of relatives or friends in Poland. In those cases, it is relevant to analyze the role of commuting strategies between Italy and Poland in the work and life arrangements of migrant mothers. Before Poland joined the EU in 2004, circular migration usually took place every three months, since informal care workers used to request a tourist permit which is only valid for three months. On the other hand, women working with a regular contract were able to visit their family only once or twice a year, usually for a period of one month. For this reason many migrant care-workers, I met during the fieldwork, rejected regular employment opportunities. They preferred to work illegally because they have more flexibility in their movements and work arrangements via an informal system of job exchange.

In Germany, domestic migrant workers use a similar system of rotation to exchange work information and to organise transnational households:

“Polish women have themselves set up a system of rotation so that they can go home at regular intervals, while their female substitute assume their cleaning or other jobs in Germany in the meantime. They are usually a group of 4-5 women sharing both employers and housing. This reduces the costs incurred by double residence. The regularity of their commuting seems to be determined by their care for the family remaining in Poland. In the case of the males whom I interviewed, working mainly in construction or in agriculture, commuting takes place at less regular intervals and is determined by the seasonal nature of their jobs and by the needs of the employer. Women engaged in ‘self managed rotation’ also avoid being captured in an institutionalised form of dependency. Not only they are not dependent on one employer, but their employers become dependent on their ‘self-managed’ rotation system. Their constant mobility also enables them to avoid illegal status” (Lutz 2002: 6).

8 The present research did not consider cases of family reunion since before the entry of Poland in the EU, in May 2004, a minority of migrant workers were able to obtain it.

Malina's⁹ migratory experience will help us understand how these migratory strategies and social networks are organised. She is a grandmother of two and both mother and daughters are working in Italy. In their household they established a rotation system that allows the three women to work in Italy, while at the same time the children can grow up in Poland. Her daughters are domestic workers, while Malina takes care of an old man. In Poland they all live in the outskirts of a small town, in a big house that symbolises an important knot in a network linking two mountain areas in Poland and in Italy. For the women who live in the neighbourhood and are looking for a job, their house telephone is a precious means of connection with people in Italy who need assistance for a close relative and who will often accept care workers with little or no knowledge of the language. Although she knows women who are exploiting these *weak ties* (cf. Granovetter 1983) to earn money by selling job information (D'Ottavio 2005), she deplores doing it for profit. She expresses a proactive stance in a form of empowerment associated with her role as an informal community leader. She is a widow and the two other members of her household are her son and her partner. She is over fifty and achieved economical independence and autonomy for her and her children by means of her migratory work. After her husband died, she had to work in Italy during the summer holidays in order to sustain her family, as her salary was insufficient. She received job information via her sister-in-law. Her grandparents looked after the children, and afterwards she went to different Italian cities more and more often. As a result, she has been able to renovate her house and afford the cost of education for her children. At present, she cohabitates with her partner who is younger than she is and in a traditional country such as rural Poland, to be tolerated by the local community is highly significant.

One of her daughters alternates her presence in the household. At irregular intervals, every six months or more, she enjoys her life in Italy, finding the life in Poland too quiet for her. But she also enjoys living with her daughter, who is nearly a teenager, preparing preserves for the winter and sewing. The daughter's husband also works abroad and they rarely see each other. The other daughter, who is a single mother, gave birth to a baby in Italy, but she could not arrange mothering and a steady cleaning job at the same time, although her sister and friends supported her. She was living with three flatmates in a small apartment where the space was inadequate. Working on an hourly basis, as house-cleaner, she had to rely on a local kindergarten to look after her baby.¹⁰ Her child was often ill, and she was under emotional pressure since she could not cope with working full-time and taking care of the baby at the same time. Finally, she decided to bring the child to Poland, to Malina's place, where he could live with his cousin and uncle. In this peaceful environment, the child regained his health and a

9 I used pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of my informants.

10 According to the previous national category contract, a working mother does not have any special rights or protection after the baby's third month of life.

strong bond developed between the boy and his grandmother; indeed, he used to say: "I am my grandma's son".

The Ideology of Mothering and Emotional Distress

For the mothers, the need to leave their children "back home" in other people's care can cause great emotional distress. Also a source of distress is a public discourse that tends to criticise women who choose or have to emigrate. The loss and grief the women deplore in their interviews are often related to what Rachel Salazar Parreñas called the ideology of mothering (2001a: 381).

In Poland, Catholicism and the Marian cult have deeply influenced the representation of the mother's role, especially in relation to the importance of women's domesticity. The nationalistic myth of *Matka Polka* (Hauser/Heyns/Mansbridge 1993; Delsol et al. 2002; Heinen 1995; Marody/Giza-Poleszczuk 2000), popular in nineteenth century Poland and still present nowadays, is germane to the cult of St. Mary. It gives power to women as the protector and reproducer of the nation but, at the same time, it demotes the woman's role to that of a powerless mother devoted to self-sacrifice and martyrdom for the sake of the nation's children.

Social transformations taking place during post-communism deeply challenged these processes of de-individualisation. A study of women's magazines published in Poland from 1974 to 1994 (Marody/Giza-Poleszczuk 2000) analysed a change in the representation of women and the stereotypes associated with the idea of femininity. This new idea implies a persuasive emphasis on individualism, on consumerism and on the image of a "self-investing" woman who has esthetical and physical features to be attractive to men. Nevertheless, the stereotypical idea of the "winning woman" is appealing only to the tiny elite who have been able to exploit new possibilities in the free market economy (Baer 2003).

In a society suspended between traditional and progressive values, the ideas of good and bad mothering are also linked to these conflicting ideas of femininity. Dominant ideologies of the family stress the importance of the mother-child dyad (Zontini 2004: 1118) and this privatised, intensive idea of motherhood contrasts with the reality of migrant mothers who opt for a shared and extensive form of mothering. The following interview was recorded with a 43-year-old mother of a care worker who has been in Italy since 2002. She is taking care of her nephew, who was four years old at the time of the interview:

"The first time she came back she was so scared...I remember it was after she stayed away for ten months, a very long time. The child was already three years old. He is now four. I told her that I was telling to the baby that his parents were not with him because they had to earn some money and that afterward they would come back...but she was

scared that he wouldn't recognise her as his mother anymore. I always told the child that I was his grandma. One day [when his mother was back] he suddenly woke up staring at the couch where we were sitting, and he was looking at my daughter and at me. He didn't know what to do, so I told him: "Look, mommy is here" and he said: "Ooh!" and he ran to hug her. [...] Now everyone is saying that it is bad to leave little babies, but he managed. Now it's getting worst. Recently, his father came back in December and my daughter in January, then they left together... He suffered a lot, because now he understands more."

Economic necessities are the main discourse that women choose to legitimise their decision to migrate. This is because in times of need mothers are expected to find a way to insure economic security for their children. The conflicting interests between a mother as nurturer or as breadwinner provoke great emotional distress. Rumianek is a 46-year-old mother of three children who are already in their twenties. She has been a circular migrant care and domestic worker since 1996. She said:

"When I am here [in Poland] already after one month I start to think that we need more money... The girls are already grown-up, they can manage without me, they are very good in taking care of the house... But then I realise that I am not aware of many things, like...if the girls are in trouble, or if something happens, I am not with them, and I feel sorry about this. But you cannot have everything."

The last sentence highlights what an interviewee called "a dilemma between brain and hearth". This is a central dimension influencing the decision to migrate, especially for young mothers, since it entails a difficult choice between the pain of an immediate separation or a life in poverty for her and her children. It means, indeed, to renounce to the rearing of her children intensively and trying to assure them a better future with better chances for education. An alternative is to choose a traditional model of motherhood, which guarantees a stable mother's presence, but is lacking in the material means for social mobility. In periods of economic hardship, Polish women have arranged a different way of mothering in order to be able to overcome this dilemma. They do this by means of circular migratory projects and close-knit social networks aimed at job sharing.

Intergenerational Relations in the Household and Shifting Meanings of Maternity: Mothers as Breadwinners

In Poland, fathers do not commonly look after their children, since mothers are usually expected to do so. Whenever the woman works abroad, however, the couple has to rearrange the division of household labour, a process that is often marked by conflict. During fieldwork it emerged that Polish fathers, mostly those

who are unemployed, take care of the children, often helped by their own mothers or by other close kin (sisters or brothers). Nevertheless, some of them cope poorly with domesticity, and often get depressed or develop alcohol problems.

Grandparents on both sides of the family are frequently responsible for their grandchildren's care, as it is unusual to hire local domestic workers in a Polish household, especially in rural areas. Moreover, fathers appeared less active and in some cases simply unable to positively modify their behaviour towards the children, and acquire those attributes considered conventionally female. These attributes include willingness to listen, compassion, and understanding. As a result, they struggle to invent a new model of fatherhood able to provide support to their family in modified circumstances. These processes are transforming household roles and are posing fresh challenges to the new generation. The following is from an interview with a 22-year-old male university student, son of a woman who has been migrant care worker since 2000:

"The most important thing for me is that mother is able to create a cosy atmosphere. You know, with two men around, me in one room, father in the other...when mother is home, she understands immediately when I have a problem...when I go home [and I am worried] she notices it as soon as I step into the house. She comes to hug me and I [say to her]: "Mom, I'm twenty years old now!" [annoyed] and she says: "What's wrong?" [sadly], and so she starts tickling me and she says to me: "Tell me about your problem"...it's obvious that I miss such an atmosphere, it really affects me. When mother is not at home, first thing I do when I come back home is to switch on the TV set or the stereo, and I do different things to avoid thinking. I want to hear sounds, like if someone is in the house."

In this interview it was possible to also analyse his perception of his mother's role in sustaining potential pathways for social mobility:

"The first time mom went to work abroad, I was living with my father and I did not suffer too much since we were living apart, she was already living in another city [in Poland]. During that period, I was attending the third class in high school, and I didn't feel the consequences of it, but only later...it became important only later, since my mother changed a lot after the divorce, she became more a friend to me than a mother, she took me more seriously. Then, when she left again, I had really a good relationship with her. But when I was in the first year at the university, the situation was awful, and I have suffered from her absence a lot. Now since I moved and I'm not living with my father anymore, if it was not for her I wouldn't know how to survive. She sent me money for six months, while my father didn't give me even "half grosz" [nothing]."

Interviews with migrant care workers' sons and daughters are valuable for investigating the perception of their mothers' migratory pathways through a generational lens. Such interviews are important in order to understand how transnational mothering strategies reflect upon the perception of the mother's role. A 24-

year-old daughter of a woman who has been working in Italy since 1998 said in an interview:

“When someone is missing so suddenly, afterward you realise many small details that normally you don’t take into account, but that later you miss...yes, it’s like that...

– What details do you mean? –

Chatting, listening to the music, having a homemade meal...you could go out together, talk, ask for an advice...things like that, normal ones, that you miss afterward...little details even hard to recall.”

Migrant care workers’ children are suspended between a traditional idea of motherhood, like “the angel of the fireside”, and a “pro-active” idea of maternity where mothers’ material support for their children is able to create greater spaces of autonomy and more opportunity for their sustenance and social mobility, as expressed by this 23-years-old daughter:

“My mother went to Italy because we have a big house, and we had to renew a part of it, since we didn’t want to sell it. In addition, we had to pay for our university studies and even though in the past we had a good financial situation, lately it was not like that. So it was important for us to pursue our university degrees and now my brother and I live in the centre of the city, I cannot complain...but this has a cost. Finally, I think it is worth it since the education is important. You have more possibilities guaranteed for the future.”

Opinions about the decision taken by their mothers to migrate have been generally positive and they refer to important developments taking place in the household. In first place, it is important to underline that the willingness to challenge assumptions and conventions their mothers showed, represent for them a constructive encouragement. They do not consider their mothers as passive victims of unemployment and/or of unhappy marriages, but as brave women who are able to improve their lives and social condition. Therefore, their mothers’ proactive stance often provided daughters and sons with a source of strength and self-esteem.

We can analyse a sense of discovery of hidden resources expressed by a 24-years-old daughter who communicates her amazement in relation to her mother’s deeds:

“At the beginning, I was very emotional about it, I was sad. Maybe my father and my sister they spoke more often about it, but practically nobody mentioned it to me when I was back home for Easter [she studies in another city]. I was really astonished when she left...for me it has been shocking. I thought she could not manage there, since she did not know the language, but then I went to Italy to visit her I was really impressed...I went in September, and she was already able to speak Italian! I was really surprised.”

From an interview with a 24-years-old man who was eighteen when his mother went to Italy for the first time:

“First time she left, it was like “Ooh!” [a surprise]...I was feeling kind of weird, because she was going somewhere else, and we didn’t know how it was over there, and so I was feeling anxious, but now it is ok, I feel more calm. Actually, she is more spirited, she has more energy; maybe doing a physical job is better for her, it has to be different from the one she used to have here, an office job. When she comes back, she just wants to go out, to do something together...to live. It has influenced her outfit also. Before she used to wear suits, high heels, and jackets, now she wears jeans and training shoes.”

Communication media are also transforming mothers’ moral and emotional support. The availability of new technologies allows migrant mothers, while they are abroad, to redefine their role by means of strategies of virtual mobility that allow the carrying on of an intimate relationship “from a distance” and which are able to provide support, guidance and assistance to their children in Poland.¹¹ These strategies are possible given a set of conditions in emigration and immigration areas, like the availability of a computer and the ability to use it, an Internet connection, and sufficient free time. Especially younger mothers use these means to keep up a constant relationship with their sons and daughters, for instance organizing virtual rendezvous on the net among two or more people in order to “chat” via text messages or VOIP¹² to discuss daily activities, in particular about school, friends and family.

Conclusion

Mothering in migration refers to *places* where mothers are present or absent, to *meanings* attached to their identity, to *representations* related to their roles.

Circular migration connects two places, creating a mother’s double presence and absence in two different households where they perform a productive and reproductive role in the international division of caretaking typical of global capitalism and post-industrial societies. The process of European Union enlargement modified those migratory paths since family reunions are now less troublesome; moreover, a new law on domestic workers in Italy¹³ allows job sharing thus allowing the emergence from informal work.

As to the meanings, it has been stressed how transnational mothers construct “new measures to gauge the quality of mothering” (Hondageu-Sotelo/Avila 1997: 26). The “commodification of love” occurs whenever providing children with material goods, in the attempt to substitute for mothers’ presence, is an im-

11 This analysis refers to teenagers and adult sons and daughters.

12 Voice On Internet Protocol.

13 Cfr. Contratto Collettivo Nazionale Di Lavoro Sulla Disciplina Del Rapporto Di Lavoro Domestico 13 Febbraio 2007 (valid from 1/03/2007 to 28/02/2011)

portant aspect of our narratives. Nevertheless it is important to underline that is mostly education and social mobility that migrant mothers strive for.

Therefore, the representation of a domestic maternity is increasingly challenged by a positive representation of breadwinner mothers who are able to fulfil their parental role even when the household arrangements break up, and the family is scattered.

Migration can turn into a painful process because of work exploitation, social isolation and demotion of social status. On the other hand, it is important to underline the agency and role of women in migration who are catalysts for important changes.

In Poland, gender relations inside the household are in a state of tension as a direct consequence of migratory experience and, indirectly, as result of social processes connected to the economic transition. Moreover, life conditions in the context of immigration are deeply influencing the extent and the intensity of those modifications inside the household. Young women who have been interviewed are not willing to accept the traditional lifetime phases composed of rigid temporal ladders stipulating that at a certain age it is appropriate to study, to have a job, to marry and to have children. These steps correspond to *passage rites* towards adulthood that an increasing number of women are rejecting. Thus, the possibility to emigrate represents a way of decreasing tension and of lowering the pressure to conform, coming especially from rural areas. Migration allows women to achieve economic independence and, therefore, to emancipate themselves from the family. As a result, they can avoid strict social control and can gain emotional autonomy. Some of them mostly spend what they earn on commodities and trips abroad, while others prefer saving in order to buy a house in Poland, with the intention of going back one day. In this framework, new familiar models are arising in the transnational space; for instance, cohabitation of unmarried couples is a widespread condition, or multiple families in emigration and immigration areas are (silently) tolerated since in many cases divorce is not accepted and it is preferred to maintain the legal married status, even if the spouses are managing different lives. This context might create difficult situations for transnational children living in a complex setting but, on the other hand, the possibility to receive support socially and economically by a “pro-active” mother might imply several benefits.

The present case study is based in the Polish-Italian migration system typical of a transition period that took place during the European enlargement process in 2004. It analyses transnational motherhood arrangements as deeply interconnected to continuing commuting movements, which imply “going and coming back” between societies, spaces, networks and households, and it therefore underlines how migrant women are inventing for themselves a condition of *double presence*.

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