

Women's Migration from Post-Soviet Moldova: Performing Transnational Motherhood

By
Cristina Onica

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Supervisor: Dr. habil. Andrea Peto

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Abstract

The topic of transnational motherhood in the post-Soviet context has been rarely studied by scholars. Using the oral history method for my research, I am concentrating on Moldovan women migrants' justifications and meaning constructions around such debatable topics as motherhood and its transnational performances. The feminist scholarship dedicated to this topic, has mostly reflected the idea that migrant women, through their transnational practices, redefine "motherhood." Based on the fieldwork I have done in Italy, I contend that women migrants, instead of redefining, try to find ways to adjust to the hegemonic social perceptions of "good motherhood." They do so by employing the discourse of "good parenting," which entails narratives on "mothers-heroes," "suffering mothers," and "children-heroes." On the practical level, they do shift certain normative constructions of the social order and find alternative ways of performing motherhood, which helps them justify against the discourses of "child-abandoning." I find that these alternative techniques consist in negotiating citizenships, challenging the post-communist gender order and building transnational communication as sites for performing motherhood. In a broader context, my research reflects hidden aspects of globalization in the post-Soviet space, such as the debates over the performances of human relationships, including affection and care.

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Introduction

In one of its information bulletins, the IOM Mission to Moldova has commented:

About 177 thousand Moldovan children suffer from the fact that their parents leave them to earn money abroad. During the last years the number of children, who are being brought up without both of their parents doubled and constituted 1/3 of the minors. [...] In the majority of cases women leave their children and the education without mothers has a worse effect than without fathers (IOM Mission to Moldova, October, 2007).

This news comment reflects the general public opinion on Moldovan mothers who migrate abroad in search for opportunities to support their households, leaving their children in Moldova. The discourse of “bad motherhood,” applied to women migrants, is not rare among the people remained in the country¹ and the national mass media, and is shaped by the patriarchal gender constructions persistent in the Moldovan society. Despite the tension created by the national media around the massive flows of the population abroad, there has been little scholarly research performed in this post-Soviet region that would concentrate on the gender aspect of the issue (Keough, 2006). Migration, in the Moldovan context, has been mostly discussed from the perspective of human trafficking, exploitation of Moldovan skilled labor force, and the role of remittances (Crăciun, 2006; Cuc & Ruggiero, 2005; ILO Moldova, November, 2007; IOM Report, May, 2007; Red Cross for Central Europe, 2005; UNFPA, March, 2007), however the process has been often gender-blind, thus women’s experiences, the meanings they construct around certain categories and their motivations have been often ignored (Keough, 2006).

In fact, feminist scholars (Keough, 2006; Lutz, 2007; Passerini, Lyon, Capussotti, & Laliotou, 2007; Sassen 2000; Zimmerman, Litt & Bose, 2006; Waylen, 2004) widely complained

¹ As reflected in Keough’s (2006) interviews with people from southern villages and towns in Moldova, and in the interviews I have done with women migrants in Italy.

about the gender-blind nature of the mainstream works on globalization processes and the massive migration flows they foster. They argue that it is important to make sense of the emotional and the gendered implications of these processes, to include such hidden aspects as carework and the issue of the gendered division of labor in the mainstream studies. Another important gap in the literature is related to the fact that most feminist studies on women and the global market have concentrated on the North American context. Lutz (2007) writes that “in many countries of continental Europe, the phenomenon is not (yet) an issue of public and academic (gender studies) discussion” (p. 189).

In the light of these heated debates, my focus on the post-Soviet context appears to be novel. I argue that it is important to include it in studies on globalization and migration, as it helps scrutinizing the gendered impacts of the post-communist transition period and the changing household relations peculiar to this region, factors that have influenced the massive flows of women from this region to other parts of Europe. Focusing on the gender aspects of these processes, I am paying special attention to women migrants’ own constructions of meanings around socially debated topics, such as motherhood. My study concentrates on transnational motherhood and women migrants’ justifications related to the ways they perform it. Some feminist scholarship has been dedicated to this delicate topic, yet most of it has reflected the idea that migrant women, through their transnational practices, redefine ‘motherhood’ (Anderson, 2000; Hochschild, 2000; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2003; Lan, 2003; Parrenas, 2001; 2005; Raijman, Schammah-Gesser & Kemp, 2003). Based on the fieldwork I have done in Italy, interviewing Moldovan women domestic workers, I contend that women migrants, instead of redefining, try to find *alternative* ways to adjust to the hegemonic social perceptions of motherhood (which, besides envisioning them being physically present by their children, also considers mothers’

affection, support, and communication) while at the same time, through their practices, countering the discourse of “bad motherhood.” They do so by employing various adjusting techniques, such as the *citizenship negotiation*, constructing an alternative gender order for their households and building transnational communication as sites for performing cross-border motherhood.

I start by discussing the ways in which globalization processes and the restructuring policies affect the post-Soviet household rationales and Moldovan women migrants’ decisions and actions related to migration and the performances of motherhood. I also compare the Italian and Moldovan contexts in terms of how global restructuring affects the gendered division of labor within the households of both countries and what is the value of the female labor in this context. Furthermore, I include the discussion on the gender order within the post-Soviet households and argue that women migrants, trying to adjust to neoliberal principles, propose new breadwinning models to support their children. Finally, I look at what meanings these women give to the relationship with their children and what discourses help them justify their practices and build their image as “good mothers.” I also suggest that transnational communication (including various *caring* practices, such as sending remittances, packages, text messages, and phone calls) serves at creating virtual spaces where transnational women migrants perform their motherhood.

This complex discussion reflects hidden aspects of globalization, which, according to Zimmerman et al. (2006), “involves considerably more than labor markets and economic factors” (p. 19). In this way, the present paper shows how global processes influence directly the performances of human relationships, including affection and care.

Chapter 1 - Methodological Concerns: From a Linear to an Integrative Approach

The present research on transnational motherhood focuses on Moldovan women who migrate to Italy for work.² In order to understand the limitations and opportunities that foster the mass migration of these women, the post-communist context needs to be analyzed and explained. Female migration, associated in the feminist literature with the “feminization of survival” (Hess, 2005), must be explained through a comprehensive study on the nature of the household relations within the post-communist countries, because these relations explain the gendered hierarchy and aspects within the Moldovan family and the negotiations of power and meanings. An *integrative approach* is thus indispensable for a successful study on women’s migration, as it considers the historical framework, the complex contemporary processes, such as globalization, the spread of a ‘western’ model of market economy, all viewed from a gender-sensitive lens.

1.1 Theoretical Frameworks: Migration through the Feminist Lens

There are a few theoretical frameworks that help conceptualize the aspects and concepts of my research. The *feminist post-structuralist framework* will be useful in questioning the structures that create *push and pull* factors in the female migration context, i.e. factors that create opportunities and limitations for women. It also allows explaining the “experiences” and meanings migrant mothers construct discursively around their performances of transnational parenting. This framework enables the explanation of how transnationalism constructs women’s identities and affects their definition of motherhood; how motherhood is perceived culturally and

² According to IOM Report (May, 2007) and ILO Report (November, 2007), most transnational migrants who prefer Italy are women (64 per cent), because there is an increasing demand for domestic workers (performing childcare, elderly care and also household work). According to L. J. Keough (2006), most Moldavian men go to Russia to work, while women prefer more Italy, “where ethnic-Romanians find high wages and a similar language”.

contested or internalized individually, and what factors influence this construction and create meanings. The post-structuralist feminist framework is important because it allows making subjects visible by challenging the normative discourses and without essentialising categories (subjects that were previously ‘unseen,’ because their experiences have not been analyzed from the point of view of their complexity). By making experiences visible, we break silence about them and challenge prevailing notions (Cheng, 1999; DeLaet, 1999; Phizacklea, 1998). Another important issue within the post-structuralist feminist framework, is related to my position as a researcher in the context of the study I have conducted. It is important to keep in mind not only the experiences of the subjects of study (migrant women, mothers, married or divorced, middle class, white, from Moldova), but also my experiences as a researcher (young, female, middle class, white, with a higher education, from Moldova).

I also find useful *intersectionality* as an important analytical tool for my research. Categories like class, gender, race, sexuality, education, geographical location, etc. influence the way migrant women from the “Eastern Europe” are perceived in the “West” and how they perceive the cultural framework of the “West” as opposed to the “East”.³ The construction of meanings (such as motherhood, gender order, citizenship) depends on the intra-action⁴ of all these categories, because there is no one fixed identity; it is fluid in time and space. Thus, as Scott (1999) mentions, parallel narratives that construct a certain narrative (of transnational mothers in the case of my research) need to be taken into account. Indeed, when analyzing migrant women and how they perform parenting in the context of migration, it becomes

³ I am aware of the fact that using such categories as ‘East’ and ‘West’ is simplistic and essentialising; however, it helps me highlight cultural differences and inequalities that derive from these constructed categorizations.

⁴ I prefer to use the term ‘intra-action’ rather than ‘inter-action’ in order to emphasize that the categories influence each other while interacting, changing each other, altering and building new sites. For further explanation look for N. Lykke (2005).

important to scrutinize how the *identities* of these women are constructed from a complex point of view, taking into account the intertwining of several factors, such as the gender of the studied subjects, their class, their status as migrants, the “whiteness” of their skin, their ethnic origin, etc. A deeper account on intersectionality and its importance is offered in Dill and Zambrana’s article, which contends for the need to introduce intersectionality as an analytical tool in researches on inequality and on oppression. According to them, inequality and oppression cause disparities in income, wealth, education, housing, occupation, and social benefits. These inequalities occur along such paradigms as gender, class, sexuality, nationality, ability (Dill & Zambrana, forthcoming, p. 1.). The authors further argue that if we, as researches or scholars, take these categories apart, then the experiences of entire groups are veiled, misinterpreted, and ignored. Indeed, intersectionality provides a useful critical and analytical tool to investigate and explain social and economical disparities women face, constraints and demands of various social structures that influence their options and opportunities, at the same time taking into account several contexts within which these women find themselves. Moreover, it challenges traditional ways of conducting a complex social analysis of migration and motherhood. In this track of thought, intersectionality helps explaining women migrants’ decisions related to migration strategies and what circumstances influence their ‘choices.’

Furthermore, I find useful to apply several migration theories from a feminist perspective, such as the *rational choice theory* (it is gender-blind, however it explains the economical reasons of migration and how it is possible for individuals, as agents, to make ‘choices’ (Harzig, 2001; Phizacklea, 1998)). I will further use the *structuration theory* to explain how ‘disadvantaged’ individuals “carve out spaces of control for themselves” (Phizacklea, 1998, p. 28). The *network theory* examines the interconnections between migrants, the networks they create in order to

survive and keep ‘national and transnational ties’; however it can also be accused of being gender-blind (Oishi, 2005; Rudolph & Hillmann, 1998). The *theory of migration systems*, as compared to the previous ones, contextualizes these networks historically, culturally and politically (ibid.). Introduced by gender studies, this theory considers migrant movements not as linear, but as complex ones, where people are perceived as multiple movers in more than one direction, “being part of a larger and more complex structural relationships than the push-pull paradigm implies” (Harzig, 2001, p. 16). Migration systems theory also explains how personal experiences of movers serve as information for other potential migrants, which helps them construct “mental maps” of migration, leading to “comparatively fewer constraints and increased opportunities at the destination” (ibid., p. 17). In the framework of my research, it helps investigating the ways certain factors and resources, including their transnational gendered networks, influence women migrants constructions of migration strategies and therefore, performances of motherhood. The *new economics theory*, “incorporates a micro-level context by examining household strategies” (Oishi, 2005, p. 9). Household strategies reflect the power relations within households and societies, therefore the “traditional” gender division of labor, the decision-making factors and the meanings the family member construct vis-à-vis certain concepts. The theory explains how households decide which of their members will migrate, on what basis and with what specific purposes. It has certain advantages, however, it fails in taking into account such factors as the marital status and the life stages of women (Cheng, 1999; Oishi, 2005). Situating these theories in analytical realms, the following structures emerge: theories on rational choice and new economics belong to the micro-level of analysis, the structuration theory belongs to the meso-level, and finally, the network theory and the theory of migration systems are situated on the macro-level. As Harzig (2001) argues, the meso-level proves to be

specifically important for scrutinizing the female migration patterns, because it links individual motivations and the larger socio-economic and political picture.

Analyzing the broader social, political and economic frames and linking them to the individual one, implies looking at *theories on globalization* and the neoliberal discourses globalization processes entail. “Globalization” processes and their impacts on local and global landscapes have gained international interest during the late 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s. This interest has been linked with the processes of democratization of former socialist states, nationalistic wars for independence, and the introduction of SAPs from the part of the International Monetary Fund (further referred as IMF), that have led to the division of states into “post-socialist,” “post-welfare,” “third world,” “first world”, and “postcolonial” (Keough, 2006). Various scholars have debated over the definitions of *globalization* and what meanings the global reforming processes have generated. Globalization has been generally defined as internationalization, liberalization, universalization, westernization and deterritorialization (Scholte, 2000, p. 15-17). The feminist attempt to include “people” in studying global restructuring processes, and to explain how global processes give legitimacy to certain sexual and racial inequalities, help explaining how gendered actors/subjects interact with global and local structures in order to construct and regulate the processes (Sassen, 2000; Waylen, 2004). In the framework of my research, it is important to consider these processes from a feminist perspective, in order to understand how changes in capitalist trade and production patterns have generated gendered patterns of migration. Several feminist scholars (Akalin, 2007; Enloe, 2006; Hess, 2005; Hill Maher, 2003; Keough, 2006; Lutz, 2007; Parrenas, 2001; 2005; Sassen, 2006; Sharpe, 2001; Waylen, 2004; Zimmerman et al., 2006; Passerini et al., 2007) argue that globalization processes marked by post-Fordist modes of production and the emergence of

transnational spaces have opened up new rhetoric and spaces that lead to the gradual feminization of transnational labor.

Indeed, one of the basic human reactions to global restructuring lies in people's mass migration (Zimmerman et al., 2006), or it has been preferred by certain scholars to name it - transmigration (Hess, 2005). Hess (2005) points out that "transmigrants are immigrants, whose daily lives depend on multiple and constant interconnections across international borders, and whose public identities are configured in relationship to more than one nation-state" (p. 229). The contemporary era is marked by transnational migrations, and women play a significant, yet non-acknowledged role in this sense. As Zimmerman et al. (2006) put it, globalization depends a great deal not only on the capital and information, but also on the participation, recruitment and the exploitation of women. In the context of the post-socialist countries, the post 1990s period could be called "the age of women's creativity," as Hess (2005) suggests (I would call it "forced creativity," because women are constrained by certain economical and political circumstances to be "creative"), when women (due to high economical instability) look for alternative (informal) ways of supporting themselves and their families (migration perspectives included). Migrant women's labor serves as support not only for their own households, but also for their sending country's national economy, as well as that of the receiving one. A significant amount of feminist literature on migration and globalization has discussed the role of remittances sent by women migrants in sustaining both the developed and the developing countries' economic landscapes (Enloe, 2006; Hill Maher, 2003; Lutz, 2007; Sharpe, 2001).

Feminist scholarship on global restructuring and female transmigration encompasses a broad range of topics related to reconceptualizing citizenship within transnational contexts, women's legal, social and economic status, reconceptualizing carework as a political act, and so

on. All these studies stress on the importance of including such dimensions as the “cultural and emotional underpinnings of the mobility” (Passerini et al., 2007, p. 3), in order to understand the subjective motives behind migrants’ decisions and their search for personal, economic or political freedom. Several feminist works have concentrated on transnational motherhood (Anderson, 2000; Hochschild, 2000; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2003; Lan, 2003; Parrenas, 2001; Raijman et al., 2003; Zimmerman et al., 2006), scrutinizing the way migrant mothers construct cross-border emotional ties with their children, through such practices as care. Raijman et al. (2003) point out that the US feminist researchers were the first ones to contest the essentialising view on “motherhood” that presupposes that mothers “share a universal and natural set of values and experiences” (p. 196). Agreeing with this track of thought, I am approaching “motherhood” as a relationship between women and their offspring, constructed through the interaction and the changing nature of three main social resources: the family, national communities and the market. This definition helps understanding the reasons and the ways in which the performances of motherhood are changing and fitting certain contexts, including the transnational ones.

The phenomenon of *transnational motherhood* has been approached from different angles by these scholars, however they all agree that both motherhood and carework “are very much tied to global migration, state resources, and labor practices in both developing and economically prosperous nations”(Raijman et al., 2003, p. 195). Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila’s (1997) analysis of Mexican immigrant women’s performances of transnational motherhood is limited to the study of the virginity and sexuality issue. Keough (2006) looks in her study on “mobile mothers” from Găgăuzia,⁵ at “how narratives about the mobility of mothers reveal anxiety about a gendered social order and how these anxieties are expressed and contested by

⁵ Autonomous region in Moldova. “The Gagauz are a predominantly rural population of Orthodox Christian Turkic-speaking peoples.” (Keough, 2006).

migrant women themselves.” Raijman et al. (2003) include in their study on Latina female migrants in Israel an important point, stating that “transnational motherhood openly subverts traditional conceptions of mother-child bonds nurtured daily within the home and conventional and conventional views that employment and motherhood are mutually exclusive” (p. 146). They go on explaining that through transnational practices, the meanings of “motherhood” shifts, as migrant women “redefine” their roles and reconceptualize “mothering.” This is a shared view among feminist scholars (Anderson, 2000; Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997; Keough, 2006; Parrenas, 2001), which I would like to challenge in this thesis. There is no doubt that transnational practices lead to the subversion of certain traditional concepts and perceptions of the social order, however I am not convinced that women migrants “redefine” and construct new forms of motherhood, at least not in the post-Soviet context. I contend that female migrants from this region try to adjust to social norms of their communities that prescribe the ways mothering should be performed. In their quest for alternative ways of performances, these women also counter discourses of “bad motherhood,” by adapting certain methods, such as negotiating with citizenships, constructing virtual spites for the performances of transnational motherhood through the trans-border communication, and building an alternative gender order for their households. Thus, within the confines of my research, transnational motherhood is analyzed through the intersection of these methods.

1.2 Oral history: Let Women Tell Their Stories

Given the fact that my research focuses on constructions of beliefs and meanings (motherhood, interpersonal networks, family relations and responsibilities); I find *qualitative research methods* suitable. As Denzin (2003) mentions, it is important to question the biased link between me, the researcher, with certain experiences and backgrounds, and the women I

interview, as gendered subjects of my research, with their own backgrounds and experiences. I find it important to include verisimilitude, emotionality, and multivoiced texts into my research, in order to examine the varieties of “experiences.” The *oral history method*, defended mostly by feminist scholars, appears to be extremely helpful in making women’s voices heard, penetrating the depth of their own thoughts and feelings. As Portelli (1998) and Fontana & Frey (2003) point out, oral histories open up new possibilities for studying the intentions and motivations of non-hegemonic classes (in the case of my research, non-hegemonic classes would be the transnational mothers). Reinharz (1992) also contends that the feminist oral history, in-depth interviews, and case studies are useful methods in explaining how the “experiences” of others are translated through our own experiences as researchers, how inter-personal networks are rooted in the past and are transmuted into the present.

All in all, I have conducted nine in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Moldovan women, aged between 20 and 50, who have migrated to Italy in search for employment opportunities (see the Table in the Appendix). They are all mothers, five of them are married, two are widowed and other two are divorced. They all belong to the middle class, as migrating needs a certain starting capital, or relatives and connections that can provide this capital, therefore the class of these migrant women matters in this sense. Seven of these women have university degrees and had white-collar jobs in Moldova, other two do not have higher education or working experience. All of them are employed as domestic workers in Italian households, taking care of old people and managing the chores (cleaning and cooking).

For my fieldwork, I have chosen two Italian cities: Bologna and Turin,⁶ where I have two trusted sources. To get in touch with other informants, I have used the snowball sampling method: my two basic informants referred to their friends and acquaintances willing to discuss

⁶ Upon the request of my informants, the names of the cities are changed.

with me about their transnational practices. I have also attended several dinners with Moldovan migrants, where I took part in informal discussions related to migrants' personal problems and issues related to their work, their expectations, successes, and future plans. For the interviews conducted with women migrants, I have used fieldnotes and a digital voice recorder. All the interviews have been later transcribed and the most appealing parts have been translated from Romanian to English. In my analysis of the transcriptions, I have used the method of *narrative analysis* to investigate migrant women's positions, the motivations behind their thoughts and actions and how they contest or support dominant discourses. Basically, the questions were related to women migrants' perspectives, views and emotions regarding their performances of motherhood, the meanings they construct around transnational relationships with their children and families, their expectations and motivations regarding the strategies they have chosen to adjust to or challenge certain cultural beliefs and categories. During my entire fieldwork, I kept in mind the importance of following ethical considerations, such as the right to privacy of my informants. I have asked their permission to record their voices during the interviews, and I have changed their names and location. I have obtained their permission to use the interviews for the purposes of my research, informing them that they could later see my interpretation of their words.

Relating *my position as a researcher* to that of my interviewees, I am aware of the fact that the results and interpretations I have produced (after having analyzed the oral histories of migrant women) have been affected to a certain extent by my own familial, social and cultural backgrounds. The fact that I am a Moldovan woman, just like the subjects of my research, puts me in a privileged position to a certain extent, because we share the same sex, language, cultural and historical backgrounds. The fact that I have higher education has placed me in an unequal

position with some of the women I have talked to, as not all of them have a university degree. Due to this circumstance, they felt a bit reluctant to open up and speak frankly at the beginning. Another obstacle I found is related to the fact that I have no experience in mothering or being married, fact that may have prevented me from understanding some of the subtleties related to the relationship between these mothers and their children. However, reading relevant feminist scholarship has helped me in my further analysis. One of the advantages relates to the fact that I am a middle class woman, just like the women I have interviewed, however my position (and role in this project) is that of a researcher, circumstance that immediately creates unequal power relations between me and the subjects of my study. Their social status as (un- or documented) migrants and domestic workers may have caused feelings of frustration in them, especially in the case when their present labor in Italy does not reflect their education and social status in Moldova. In certain cases, my position as a researcher has helped me gain sympathy and therefore trust of some of my informants, especially when they could find similarities between me and their own children studying in Moldova or other countries. Another factor that has influenced the outcome of my research is my age. In some cases, it constituted an obstacle and on other cases - an advantage, which either helped me find ways to relate to the women I have interviewed, or has placed me in an inferior position (due to my lack of experiences in certain contexts).

Chapter 2 - Contextualizing Globalization Effects in Moldova and Italy

This chapter explains the reasons why Italy has become such a popular destination country for women migrants, and what makes Moldova a popular sending country. The comparative analysis of both Moldovan and Italian contexts allows investigating the impacts of globalization processes on the gender order and division of labor within the households of these countries.

Both Moldova and Italy have long histories of migration: Italy has been the main provider of migrant labor force to the New World in the nineteenth century, and today it has become the receiving country for many Moldovan migrants, especially women. Keough (2006) recounts how global economic restructuring policies affect Moldovan state policies in a way that constantly loaning and being indebted, it has to shift its policy priorities from providing employment and social services to supporting migration as a route to development. Various development organizations have advised Moldovan state to build a system of “capturing remittances” (Bloch, 2006; ILO Moldova, November, 2007; Keough, 2006) benefiting thus from the migrant labor. The development of the Moldovan state depends heavily on migrant labor, managing flows abroad, even illegal ones, becoming not in the state’s interest.⁷ In this context, women’s transnational flows constitute an important support for the country’s economical growth and help stabilize the crisis. The IOM (May, 2007) and ILO Reports (November, 2007) reveal that 64 per cent of Moldovan migrants in Italy are women, because there is an increasing

⁷ IOM Report (May, 2007): “Around one third of the gross domestic product of Moldova is constituted by remittances migrants send home.” ILO Moldova (November, 2007): „Remittances have a significant potential for generating economic growth. In countries such as Moldova with a large diaspora the value of remittances exceed both that of FDI and development assistance.”

demand for domestic workers in this country and because there are language similarities between Italian and Romanian languages, which makes assimilation easier.⁸

Degiuli (2007) writes that the need for eldercare assistance in post-industrial societies, such as Italy, is growing and migrant women are increasingly required to offer this assistance. Lutz (2007) points out that “the re-evaluation of the asymmetrical relation between care work and gainful employment has never been on the agenda of the EU or national state policies” (p. 188). Due to this situation, as various female scholars studying transnationalism in a globalized age contend, cutting off social services in post-welfare states, such as Italy, creates deficit in public care assistance, thus placing the responsibility of care work back into families, and more specifically to women within families (Akalin, 2007; Degiuli, 2007; Lutz, 2007; Passerini et al., 2007). Lutz (2007) notes that “all in all, care work has remained a female domain, reflecting the fact that many states now discuss the *compatibility* of gainful employment and family work as women’s problem” (p. 188). It becomes evident that neoliberal market strategies have had a strong gendered impact not only in the sending states, but in the receiving ones as well. Thus, households from these post-welfare states, Italy included, have several options when it comes to elderly, home and childcare: they can pay a large sum of money to a private institution, they can address to a public institution (however it is not always guaranteed that there are enough places for elders or children, for example), or they can hire a person to perform care work. Most convenient, and therefore most often, the labor of migrant women is preferred to all the other options described above. This phenomenon, based on *historical gender assumptions* on household labor, has played a crucial role in generating female mass flows from the post-Soviet

⁸ Today, the official language of the Republic is Moldovan (an official designation for otherwise Romanian), however Russian remains the second widely spoken language in this region. Moldova was a part of Romania attached to the Tsarist Empire in 1812. After the dissolution (1917-1918), it joined Romania again. In 1940, Moldova was again attached to the Soviet Union as a result of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, and parts of it were attached to Ukraine (today, the Chernivtsi oblast and Budjak).

countries to Italy. In gender terms, both the sending and the receiving states need female labor in order to adjust to neoliberal rationales.

Capussotti et al. (2007) argue that in Italy traditional gender relations predominate in the division of domestic labor, and that the presence of migrant domestic and care workers within homes is not something unusual. Women have access to paid jobs and benefit by a more or less stable and high income, however this participation does not bring changes in the organization of domestic labor between native men and women. In these conditions, domestic work and care work are handed over to the “marginalized sections of the population” (Degiuli, 2007, p. 193), who are in most cases migrant women. Degiuli’s (2007) work on female migrant domestic workers in Italy offers an interesting account the reasons why Italian middle class households are increasingly in need of migrant women’s labor. She argues that Italy, along with having a “longstanding negative growth rate,” also provides “inadequate state policies to respond to a progressively older population” (p. 193). She also provides information on the fact that today, 20 per cent of Italian population is over 60 years old, which means that around 14.7 million people would require care services at some stage of their lives. This factor, in combination with others that are no less important (growing lack of caretakers within native families, because of the growing process of native women entering the labor market⁹; low birth rate, also resulting in the reduction of caretakers within Italian families; shortages in the Italian public health service; traditional gender expectations persisting within Italian households, namely that women are in charge of the domestic sphere; the reluctance of native women to institutionalize elders, due to the high costs of private care institutions or the limited space in the public ones), have led in

⁹ In 2006, 46.7 percent of Italian women were participating in the labor market (ISTAT, 2007). In F. Degiuli (2007), p. 193.

recent years to a growing demand for home eldercare assistants. In these conditions, migrant women are welcome to fill the position the native women once filled in the domestic sphere.

Chapter 3 - Migrant Mothers Negotiating Citizenship in a Globalized World

“Who would have thought I’d end up living this kind of life...I was born in Moldova, then I struggled to gain Romanian citizenship and now I’m in Italy...” (Aliona)

The feminist outlook on global restructuring and women’s mass migration brings into the arena of debate the issue of transnational motherhood and the various meanings attached to it. Numerous feminist scholars (Anderson, 2000; Hochschild, 2000; Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997; Lan, 2003; Parrenas, 2001; Raijman et al., 2003; Sharpe, 2001; Zimmerman et al., 2006) point out that today, the transnational way of living is not a new phenomenon and thousands of women experience it. The latter include migrant mothers, who in order to support financially their households, work abroad as maids, housekeepers, personal care assistants. Through their transnational labor, these women also support the economies of both the receiving and the sending states. Working mothers become thus pivotal forces for the social and economic security through the carework they provide in countries that have deficit in such facilities, and the remittances they send to their families.

As it has been previously suggested, the concept of *transnational motherhood* includes the intra-action between the family, national communities and the market. Most of the works on female migration and its impacts on the social order conclude that this intra-action conditions migrant women’s reconceptualizations of motherhood (Anderson, 2000; Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997; Keough, 2006; Parrenas, 2001; Raijman et al., 2003). Despite agreeing that certain hegemonic constructions of the social order are being shifted through female migrants’ practices (such as the “cult of domesticity” (Raijman et al., 2003, p. 154)), I argue that, on a rhetorical level, these women try to adjust to the socially prescribed norms of mothering without redefining

them. However, their adapting techniques include alternative practices of performing trans-border parenting. Thus, they do not counter the perception of mothers as primary caretakers for their children, yet, their transnational lifestyles do not allow them to be physically present by their offspring. As this chapter proves, in order to compensate this ‘non-traditional’ distance, female migrants perform motherly care and affection through the *citizenship negotiation*, which also serves as self-justification against discourses on “bad motherhood.”

For the purposes of this chapter, I use Glenn’s (2002) definition of *formal citizenship*: being created through law and policy, “it defines rights and responsibilities, and it creates a legal structure that legitimates the recognition (or denial) of individuals as citizens” (p. 109). I also count in the less rigid approach to defining citizenship: “[it] is not just a matter of formal legal status; it is a matter of belonging, including recognition by other members of the community” (ibid., p. 123). Deriving from these conceptions, I contend that migrant women from Moldova, through their transnational practices (which include trans-migration, migrant networks, trans-border carework), employ strategic *citizenship negotiations*. By these techniques, I mean migrants’ sophisticated methods of adjustment to neoliberal discourses in a globalized world. Thus, through inventiveness, which is conditioned by certain economical and political circumstances (the collapse of the Soviet Union, the following economical crisis in Russia in 1994 and in the entire post-Soviet space, poverty, political instability), migrants are dragged into strategic arrangements. These consist of planning carefully movements throughout geographical spaces, building certain networks that help them legalize their stay in certain countries, gaining citizenships (most often the Romanian one), residence permits (in Italy or other receiving countries) or other documents that ease their life conditions.

Transnational networks play a crucial role in women migrants' calculations and decisions related to citizenship arrangements, and their performances of family support and motherhood. Rudolph & Hillmann (1998) define *networks*, in the context of migration, as “[p]eople, objects and events [that] are conceptualized as nodes or actors in the network which are related through ‘ties’ or ‘links’” (as cited in Koser & Lutz (eds.), 1998, p. 65). Feminist scholars (Lalioitou, 2007; Lutz, 2007; Passerini, 2007) have long pointed out that the social capital of migrants (i.e. networks) dictates their movements, linking the physical and subjective aspects of mobility. Lalioitou (2007) notes that “[r]elationships that are created prior to migration have an impact on the decision to move, whereas other relationships become important after the relocation to a new place, where they facilitate changes in the conditions of one’s life and outlook” (as cited in Passerini, 2007 ; p. 59). Thus, through networks, women migrants gain a certain social capital that facilitates their calculations and helps them find ways to arrange their citizenship negotiations.

3.1 *Transnational mothers as ‘global agents’*

The discussion on women migrants and the citizenship negotiation they engage in relates to the question of *agency*. Regarding this issue, feminist scholars are divided into two basic camps: the ones who conceptualize women migrants as “victims” of the global restructuring processes (such as Sassen, 2006, and Chang, 2000), and the ones who define them as global agents (such as Sharpe, 2001). Those who employ the “victim” discourse consider female migrant work as exploitative, thus devaluing women. They argue that women’s decisions to migrate are not “voluntary,” but rather conditioned by the demands of the affluent countries’ households. Those who defend the “agency” discourse consider female migrants as engaged actors in their own lives.

In the light of these debates, I am inclined to position Moldovan women migrants as agents, or as Sharpe (2001) names them, “well-informed global players.” If the mass migration of women from developing countries is fostered by the poverty crisis, then the demands of the affluent countries’ households are also based on a different kind of crisis, and namely on the care deficit. Migrant women are agents in as far as they build plans and calculate their own transnational moves and very often, those of their children. Making use of their transnational networks (friends, employers, family, kin, neighbors), they plan carefully their transnational wanderings, the steps to be followed by the members of their family, especially their children.

As my fieldwork shows, the citizenship negotiation is the most evident example of migrant women’s agency. Finding themselves in a difficult economical and political situation (after the 1990s), being unable to support their families (in many cases neither they, nor their male partners) and to move freely throughout the geographical space (due to visa restrictions) in search for means of earning money, transnational mothers are constrained to come up with sophisticated methods in order to adjust to these post-communist conditions. The interviewed women recount how after the collapse of the social support system after the 1990s, lacking the support of the state in raising their children, they were compelled to find new ways to combine work and mothering, while continuing to preserve the role of the housekeeper within their own households. Very few of the interviewed women enjoy the support of their male partners in raising their children and keeping the households. The divorced women complain that after the separation, their partners refused to support their children, women who are still married complain that it is hard for men (especially with aging) to find a well-paid job anywhere, be it in Moldova or in other countries. Resulting from these conditions, Moldovan women see themselves compelled to take on the role of the breadwinner, the searcher of options in order to survive.

Negotiating with citizenships became one of the basic means of survival for them after the 1990s. Three of my interviewees have gained Romanian citizenship after the 1990s, four of them have obtained legal residence permit in Italy and other two are still undocumented, yet searching for the networks' support to help them legalize their status within Italy (see the Table in the Appendix):

What do you think? That they will stay illegal forever? [smiles] Most of our Moldovan women, who come illegally to Italy and look for jobs, wait for two or three years until somebody helps them legalize their stay. Usually, an Italian family for whom they work, or Moldovan relatives, who already have a legal status here, help them obtain the residence permit. For me it was easier ... I was born in Moldova, then I struggled to gain Romanian citizenship and now I am in Italy...and I have no regrets. (Aliona)

Owning two citizenships serves as a comfort for Aliona, both because it offers her flexibility to move “legally” throughout space and because she can “choose” to raise her son beside her. She positions herself against undocumented migrant mothers, perceiving herself as more “resourceful,” because she managed to plan better her citizenship negotiation (by gaining the Romanian passport). She also emphasizes in her narrative how the passport becomes a serious matter of concern for women migrants in general. Legalizing their status in Italy (by gaining residence permit) becomes an important goal for undocumented women, through which they can arrange better their affairs. Planning negotiations also entails for transnational mothers planning the moves to be followed by their children and relatives. Rina, mother of two, works in Italy for 7 years. Born in Moldova, she has lived during most of her youth years in the western part of Ukraine, where she worked and married. Having divorced her husband, she has moved back to Moldova with her children. After the divorce, the husband did not show any concern about his children's welfare, therefore Rina has decided to migrate to Italy to work. She first came illegally and later, in three years, with the help of her Italian employers, has succeeded in

legalizing her residence within this country. Having obtained a residence permit in Italy, she has started preparing the documents for her daughter to join her (her son being reluctant to come to work there):

My boy has studied at university in Romania, now he looks there for a job, and my girl is finally with me in Italy. She also studies at university in Moldova: it is a long distance learning program. Perhaps this is *the realization of my initial plan*. At the beginning, I thought we would integrate together either in Moldova, or in Italy. It was not determined. But, we saw that in Moldova we do not have chances, and the perspectives are low, to our biggest disappointment. This is the reality of our country. We work, we lead an honest life, but it is difficult. That's why this integrity [of the family] is possible on the territory of the European Union. [my emphasis]

Being a single woman, with two children, having no support from the part of her husband after the divorce, Rina constructs a transnational citizenship 'plan' through which she is able to support her children and offer them higher education, performing thus, what she considers to be her motherly duties towards her offspring.

Elena constructs through her narrative an entire household's active participation in arranging future moves. She has migrated together with her husband to Italy. They both were born in Moldova, and after graduating from university, they were both sent to western Ukraine to work,¹⁰ where they married and lived for a long period. Their children were born in Ukraine, where they studied at a Russian school. Later, the entire family gained the Romanian citizenship, and the children moved to Romania (Galati) to study at high school and later at university. Before the children moved to Romania to study (at the beginning of the 1990s), the mother traveled for work purposes occasionally (once in three months) to Poland, Bulgaria, Turkey, while the father remained in Ukraine. Later, being supported by their elder daughter, who was (in

¹⁰ This often happened in Soviet times: young people were sent in various Soviet regions after they graduated from university. Western Ukraine was a popular place among youth, because people in that region also speak Romanian as their native language. The western part of Ukraine once belonged to Romania (before the Second World War), and was given to Ukraine by the Soviets. Migrant women from that region still call it Bucovina (the original name of that former part of Romania), and speak the Romanian language fluently.

Elena's words) "responsible enough to take care of her two smaller brothers," she and her husband have decided to come to Italy to work together. Elena recounts how all her efforts and struggle with citizenships were motivated by the desire to offer her children a better future and the possibility to develop not only financially, but also culturally:

It was hard to plan all this stuff...it consumes a lot of energy. My whole life was built around my family and these constant moves. I wanted to give them a better future, to let them see the world, the culture, to see how the European Union is developing.

Transnational mothers often describe the process of constant arranging as an unpleasant one, yet they resort to it not only for the purpose of surviving and supporting materially their households, but also, which is equally important, in order to have the feeling that they, and their children, are witnessing the development of such an important global institution and public as the EU. The feeling of being in the middle of this process is something transnational migrant women mention as being exciting and important, because they perceive the development of the EU as the general global development, the access to which would be denied to them and their families if not for the sophisticated negotiation of citizenships. The latter is indispensable thus for escaping a total isolation from the global development.

Summing up, this chapter has argued that women migrants are agents for their own lives, taking active participation in their various transnational arrangements. One of the most interesting examples of their agency is the citizenship negotiations they engage in, in order to be able to perform motherhood in transnational spaces. Arranging sophisticated movements for themselves and their children, strategically legalizing their status in certain countries, these women find alternative ways to perform motherhood, nevertheless preserving the hegemonic perception of themselves as primary caretakers for their children.

Chapter 4 - “Crawling” Mothers Building an Alternative Gender Order

*“And now I am a housekeeper!
Who would have thought I’d end up like this?”
(Vera)*

As it follows from the previous chapter, the citizenship negotiations women migrants involve in, in order to adjust to the socially prescribed norms of mothering, are constructed according to certain household expectations and calculations. Therefore, the trans-border networks, comprising the extended families of migrants, dictate the performances of transnational motherhood. Understanding the gender order within the post-communist households is crucial in order to make sense of what Moldovan female migrants’ decisions are built upon and how these women construct motherhood across borders.

In this context, I argue that Moldovan women migrants, though their narratives, construct the image of the *heroic mother*, which, to a certain extent, is based on a continuity with the communist gender order (that encouraged women to enter the paid labor market and become one of the breadwinners of the two-parent households). However, as my fieldwork reveals, this image goes beyond the communist gendered constructions. Transnational mothers disclose through their accounts certain expectations in which they perceive themselves not just as providers for their households, they often become the main or the only breadwinners (due to several factors, such as divorce, or because women are more likely than men to be employed abroad, even if they are old). The husband (or male partner) is no longer expected to support the household. Through this understanding of the gender order, migrant women construct (in narratives on their fantasies and anticipations) alternative ways of perceiving and performing familial responsibilities, which includes motherhood within transnational realms.

As my fieldwork further suggests, Moldovan women migrants very often refer in their accounts to these alternative ways of constructing household relationships as performances of *good motherhood*. This kind of narrative serves a two-fold aim. On the one hand, it helps women counter the discourses on “bad motherhood” (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997; Keough, 2006; Zimmerman et al., 2006) (caused by social concerns related to changes in the familial order), and on the other, it allows female migrants to justify their transnational practices by adjusting the narrative to the *mother-hero* discourse. As it follows from my interviews, building these justifying discourses also entails constructing narratives on engaging in the deskilling process and the sacrifices that women have to make in terms of their own ambitions, and creating virtual sites for performances of motherhood through transnational communication.

4.1 Gender Order in the Post-Communist Households

4.1.1 Incorporating Gender into Migration Studies

Gender plays a crucial role in discussions on transnationalism and globalization, dictating migration flows and the foreign demand for a *specific* labor (Cheng, 1999; Hill Maher, 2003). Women’s migration is shaped by the social constructions of femininity and masculinity and the power relations lying at the basis of this differentiation in both the sending and the receiving states. In the framework of this paper, I call these constructions the *gender order*. Hill Maher (2003) explains that gender shapes the conditions for women’s migration; it defines the range of visas available for travel and dictates the kinds of jobs available for them in the receiving country’s labor market. The demand for a *specific type* of women in the receiving states is built on historical gender assumptions on what the female labor is (primarily in the private domain, taking care of the household, the elderly, babysitting), what its economical value is (which affects the low salaries paid for the domestic work performed), social status (migrant women’s

social vulnerability) and visibility (the construction of migrant women as ‘the others’, unwanted migrants, on whom actually the local and global economy depends to a great extent). International policies of employment are thus designed on patriarchal assumptions on gendered labor, and that affects the lives of men and women in a gendered way. Through this gendered lens, the increasing need of the post-communist households to send their women abroad to work can be explained.

4.1.2 The Post-Communist Household Relations

Oishi (2005) considers *household* “not only [as] a space for collective well-being but also a locus of struggle in which its members’ interests clash within the web of power relations” (p. 9). The gendered nature of these power relations dictates in a different way the positions and expectations for men and women.

Women in the Soviet Union, including the Moldovan SSR, experienced the emergence of the communist “superwoman,” formally equal with her man both in the political and public spheres and within the family. The Soviet integration gave Moldovan women several privileges. One of the main achievements of the communist regime consisted in the fact that the “woman question” discourse encouraged Soviet women to enter the labor market and become one of the two breadwinners within the nuclear family. This economical independence has been debated over the years by various feminists studying post-socialism (Einhorn & Sever, 2005; Hess, 2005; Hill Maher, 2003; Keough, 2006; Remennick, 1999; Waylen, 2004), who basically agreed upon one common issue: this economical independence was relative and did not eliminate patriarchal power relations within Soviet households. Men were still considered to be the heads of their families, while the domestic tasks, including childrearing, still belonged traditionally to the women’s domain. Patriarchal relations did persist within Soviet families, however, due to

women's growing participation in the paid labor market, and their responsibilities and active participation in the life of their households (as opposed to the legitimized passivity of men in this realm), they gradually gained considerable power within the private domain. Remennick (1999) points out that "reflecting their continuous and harsh 'training', [Soviet] women generally managed better than men under tense and unstable conditions of the daily micro-economy" (cited in Kelson & DeLaet, p. 166). Despite the official discourse, they were the actual heads of the family, the key decision-makers, while their husbands gradually acquired the role of dependents (on women's labor) inside and outside the private domain (ibid.). I would call this process the "infantilization of men." Remennick (1999) touches upon another interesting issue regarding the growing phenomenon of *single motherhood* during communism. She explains that this phenomenon has always been common in the Soviet societies (due to the liberalization of laws on divorce and various social problems), and there has always been a tolerant social climate towards it.

The post-communist period brought economical, political and social crises. After gaining independence in 1991, Moldova experienced massive unemployment (both for men and for women), an increasing process of women's deskilling, who, due to the unstable situation on the labor market (lack of jobs and extremely low salaries, often paid with delay (Keough, 2006)) were compelled to take on two or more jobs to sustain their households. Despite some feminist scholars' claims that after the fall of the communism, women were pushed back into the household, and themselves supported many times this "return to the home" (Einhorn & Sever, 2005, p. 30), I contend that women in the post-Soviet Moldova did not return to their homes, abandoning their jobs. It would be a luxury in times of crisis, when neither the husband nor the wife could support their households if one of them did not work. Women's invisibility on the

official labor market could be explained by the fact that women took on informal jobs in order to be able to feed their children and families.¹¹ Besides the multiple jobs, women continued to be the heads of their households, having the primary responsibility to raise children and perform domestic chores, being forced to take decisions on the family's micro-economy. The double or triple burden women experienced pushed a large number of them to migrate in search for better paid jobs. As a result of the crisis, and the mass migration of spouses (often to distinct destinations), the rate of divorce got higher¹² and the number of single-parent families grew. Since the patriarchal gender order still persisted in the post-communist context, children within single-parent families remained traditionally with the mother. Single motherhood and the growing neo-liberal values within the society as a whole have favored the perception of single mothers, and breadwinning women in general, capable of supporting their families and taking decisions. Therefore, when extended families discuss and take decisions concerning who will migrate to support the household, the option of women migrating for labor purposes is not an unusual one.

It is interesting, however to notice how, while encouraging women from the post-communist households to migrate to work, the social discourses on familial order also blame these women, for violating traditional gender expectations. The discourses on "bad motherhood" are quite common among the national media and NGOs.¹³

¹¹ The process of migrant women's deskilling is described by various feminist scholars on globalization and women's migration: R. S. Parrenas (2001), P. Sharpe (2001), K. Hill Maher (2003), R. Raijman et al. (2003), S. Hess (2005); L. Keough (2006), M. K. Zimmerman, et al. (2006), S. Sassen (2006).

¹² More on divorce in Moldova: http://www.mdi.gov.md/statist_gugs_md_2007/#10 (2008).

¹³ Such as IOM Mission to Moldova (October, 2007); *Ziarul liber (The Free Newspaper)* (January, 2007).

4.2 Transnational Mothers – ‘Crawling Heroes’

In order to counter the discourses on “bad motherhood,” transnational mothers draw through their narratives a certain continuity with the Soviet image of the *mother-hero*, depicting a woman who, having a paid job, taking care of the household chores and giving birth to (many) children, has to “suffer” (or as one of my informants metaphorically expressed it, “to crawl”) because of all these burdens. My informants considered it important to include in their justifications related to practicing trans-border motherhood stories on suffering (due to the “painful” distance and the economical crisis they had to overcome by themselves) and being able to succeed heroically in supporting their households and building a secure future for their children. They often link the image of the *good mother* to *the suffering/crawling one* in order to argue against the social criticism on mothers who, working abroad for several years, ‘abandon’ their children in Moldova.

The *abandoning* motif is central in debates on *good vs. bad motherhood*. Zimmerman et al. (2006) write that migrant mothers “interpret their migration not as an act of abandoning but as an extension of caring” (p. 207). Transnational mothers’ discourses of “non-abandoning,” which aim at justifying their practices, often construct the image of the *crawling mother* – the one who would do anything for her offspring. The trope of the *crawling mother-hero* is not a new one in the (post-) Soviet context. Keough (2006) points out that the “cult of motherhood,” popular throughout the entire Soviet space, has its roots in the Stalinist era, when the image of *the good worker-mother* was largely promoted, as well as the myth of the *suffering woman*. Ries (1994) also finds that complaining about suffering among Russian (I would add post-Soviet) women has become “the dominant mode of public discourse” after the collapse of Communism (p. 47). As Ries (1994) notices, and as the results of my fieldwork with women migrants in Italy reveal,

(post-Soviet) women often involve in their complaints “poetic inventories of suffering, sacrifice, and loss” (p. 259) in order to describe the burdens they experience within their households (including the relationship with their husband and children) and their economic problems. Employing this discourse of lamenting, transnational mothers romanticize their situation thus legitimizing their practices (both for themselves and for their children). Parrenas (2005) suggests that women migrants’ discourses of “sacrifice” also help children adapt to their mothers’ (physical) absence. In this track of thought, Moldovan women migrants justify through this representation their employment status and their transnational strategies.

4.2.1 The Gender Dilemma

“Whose abandon is bigger?”(Rina)

Moldovan women migrants’ stories often construct the image of a woman, who despite all the hardships that life circumstances put her through, has managed to succeed on her own, both financially (she is able to send remittances home, has resources to support herself and her family) and personally (established ties with various people she encountered during her transnational movements, succeeded in establishing friendly ties with her children). While recounting their life stories, the way they planned their migration strategies, the way they construct future plans for their families (first of all for their children), transnational mothers often use justifications inspired by the post-Soviet gender order. Through their narratives, they build their children’s gender identities in accordance with the normative view on gender differentiation. However, when it comes to describing themselves and their practices, women migrants most often construct their identities as *resourceful mothers*, and as women who are able to support their own households without any male partner’s help. It is interesting to delve into this contradiction

analyzing transnational mothers' accounts and justifications. Sveta recounts how hard it was for her, being a widow, to decide to move on and migrate for the sake of her two daughters.

To raise two children, and to raise them in a way that...you can offer them good education, stable economical background...it is very hard. *For a woman* it is very hard. But, step by step I succeeded, I am satisfied with what I have. There are a lot of problems, but they can be solved. *I have tried on my own to be a mother, a father, a sister and a grandmother* for them." [my emphasis]

Sveta's story reveals a gender order contradiction: at the beginning she points out that she is a *woman*, fact that, in her words, makes her situation harder, because a woman stereotypically is weak and less fit to fight for the survival of an entire household. However, she proudly notes that, despite her "natural weakness," she has succeeded in supporting her children. Her story constructs her as a satisfied woman, morally and physically strong enough to embody for her children "a mother, a father and a grandmother." Being a widow, she finds in herself the potential to build a future for her family without a male partner. Then, she goes on describing her situation as a single mother of two daughters again bringing justifications related to the gender order, claiming that girls in general need more protection and care than boys:

To give birth to a boy...to raise a boy...a boy is a strong being, he is courageous, he is more vigorous, in general he is a being that is different from a girl. And you take into account that she is more fragile, weaker. And so, I tried to be a mother in the first place, in the second a father, in the third a friend, and then all the rest. And I think I succeeded, because [she starts to cry] they are both mothers now.

Several hegemonic gender assumptions can be traced from this interview excerpt. First, it is culturally assumed that a male being is naturally stronger than a female one; therefore, raising a girl requires more effort and care. Second, it is culturally presumed that a woman is ultimately "an accomplished" one through motherhood: both Sveta's daughters are mothers, and that is the primary reason why she feels like she has succeeded in being a "good mother" for both of them.

The same culturally constructed expectations related to gender identities is found in Nastia's account, where she talks about the fact that it is harder to raise a girl than a boy:

I have to work hard for her, especially that she is a girl. A girl needs... know what a girl needs...she has many whims...she will want everything when she grows up. I need to have something and be able to give her what she wants without borrowing from others.

On a narrative level, her story conforms to traditional gender constructions, building the image of female beings as materially oriented, having more “whims” (needs, desires) than male beings.

Changing the focus of the story from children to parents, transnational mothers begin revealing contradictions in their perceptions of what “gender roles” are and how they are performed. These contradictions derive from the *conflict* between their beliefs (which are also products of the hegemonic social perceptions on gender order) and attempts, on a rhetorical level, to adjust to the normative social order, and their practices, that result from the circumstances they are put through after the fall of communism. When Sveta changes the focus of her account on herself, describing the way she perceives herself as a mother in relation to her daughters, her story again builds contradictions across gender lines: while perceiving her daughters as fragile beings (due to their sex), she considers herself as a strong and independent human being (despite her sex):

My astrological sign is Leo, so I am strong...I was strong. I feel that my forces begin to leave me. However, I have succeeded in doing enough things for my children. I said I am a Leo, but I am also sensitive. Especially when it comes to my children, my grandchildren, my mother...my tears fall down involuntarily. I think *it is natural*. [my emphasis]

Another contradiction she builds through her account resides within her self-perception: the feelings she expresses related to her performance of motherhood are mixed. They both create continuity with the hegemonic perceptions of motherhood and go beyond stereotypes, proving

that mothers, besides being “emotional” and “sensitive” (as the post-Soviet society would expect them to be), are also able to cope financially and psychologically even if they lack the support of their male partners. Thus, on the one hand, she claims that she prefers to perceive herself as a “strong mother,” because she was able to make “the right” life choices, as she believes it, and was able to offer her children the support they needed to grow up “good people.” On the other hand, she prefers to see herself as a sensitive and emotional one, because, as she puts it, it is “natural” to display the sensitive side while performing motherhood.

Rina’s narrative is also based on a gender order contradiction: on the one hand, she is emotional when it comes to her children (which conforms perfectly with the social perception of her identity as a mother); on the other, she chooses to put reason above emotions (which stereotypically is a male trait) when it comes to plan survival strategies for her family. Displaying altruistic feelings for others (her Italian employers), she is aware of the fact that her emotions should not prevail over her reason, because the responsibility to raise her children comes above all other thoughts and feelings:

It [deciding to migrate] was a difficult step, but let us come back to what the majority of mothers say, and I hope fathers as well...the ones who leave abroad...because not only mothers leave their children. Children are dear to both the mother and the father, in an equal manner. However, *it is natural* that the man has to leave, and the woman should remain at home. And I left after the divorce. *You cannot have success without fighting*. Nothing comes for free. Moreover, if you think at the children’s future, at what you want to give them, you have to fight with your hands, legs, brain, heart, everything. *You have to go against your emotions* to secure a financial basis, because you work in a difficult environment, so you overcome the feeling of pity, because if you work with an old person who suffers, or with a disabled who doesn’t see, you feel pity. But this pity has a limit, because you think that there are others on the other side [the family, children] who hurt even more. And so that [children’s pain] was the impulse for me to come here, and the results are satisfying. I am satisfied, although it is hard for anyone to satisfy me [laughs]. [my emphasis]

Again, several hegemonic gender assumptions can be traced at the beginning of this account. First, Rina explains that both mothers and fathers care (or at least should care) about

their common children. Further, she claims with a self-assured tone that it is “natural” (i.e. socially accepted) for a man, rather than for a woman, to leave his home in order to work abroad. However, in the second part of this story, Rina positions herself as a single woman, who is aware of the fact that she is not performing motherhood in a “traditional” manner (because, as she puts it, it is not “natural” for women to leave their homes in order to support their households). Her further account contains certain points that echo other women migrants’ narratives, which challenge hegemonic gender expectations. Becoming the only provider for her household, Rina constructs herself as an utterly strong being, who despite her sex, is able to use all her incentives to go beyond what is socially accepted: she claims that she does not need a male partner to be successful. This idea is further developed in her following narratives, where she explains that due to her divorce and her former husband’s indifference towards their children, she was able to see in herself the potential of transgressing social boundaries and become a transnational mother:

I am happily divorced [laughs]. I was in the process of divorcing, and that probably was an impulse for me to leave, and also because I saw that the situation in the country got worse. Financially, I didn’t have any hope for building my children’s future. And that was the impulse. I left abroad to realize something I would realize with pleasure in my own country. But times have changed.

To my question whether the husband helps her raise the children, Rina answers with an ironical tone:

No, no! He lives very well, he works...satisfied with his life and everything. But from his point of view he has less than he wants. This actually was the reason of our divorce, and now, *of course* it makes no sense to resort to his help. It is a painful case, regrettable... [my emphasis]

It is interesting to note the way her previous statement about both mothers and fathers caring about their children in an equal manner, contradicts entirely with her further comments about her personal experiences in marriage and divorce. She constructs her former husband as an irresponsible grown up, who prefers to retract himself from caring and financial responsibilities.

In this excerpt, Rina summarizes the basic reasons that inspired her to migrate: the post-Soviet transition period that brought significant financial problems, rendered even harder by the changes within her household situation (the divorce). Rina constructs through her narrative a striking opposition between her husband, whom she perceives as an irresponsible adult, and herself, as a “mature woman,” who is able and willing to fight for her needs and dreams. Rina’s story builds her as a transnational mother, who, disillusioned with her post-Soviet households’ arrangements, discovers that, practically, she does not need a male partner to make her own calculations and plans for supporting financially her family. This idea is strengthened by her statement “*of course* it makes no sense to resort to his help.” Her anger grows bigger as she goes on telling her story:

We are often blamed in our country [Moldova] for abandoning our children. But how does society perceive fathers who abandon? I am taking my personal example: I am abroad, 3000 kilometers away from my children, and I can hear them, talk to them, this is our relationship, our bond. But what about the situation when a father, who stayed in the country with the children, never visits them, being only 200 kilometers away from them. A father, who knows that one his children is studying in Romania and in 6 years he never bothers to pay a visit to him. He know the child has to pay for everything, his meals and his housing. And he [the father] doesn’t even have the responsibility to pay at least from time to time for his child’s expenses. This question has always upset me a lot. And so, it is worth thinking what is the real problem of our country, who needs to be cured: our women, who go abroad out of mere necessity, or our men, who don’t do anything, neither within the marriage, nor after the divorce. Whose abandon is bigger? Whose fault is it and who should have more responsibility? Who represents the core of the family? Who is the unhealthy seed of the society? It must be within men. The majority of women here, mothers, are complaining that their husbands remain in the country and do not have any responsibility, no obligation. He [the husband] may call the child once, may ask ‘how are you’, and that’s it. ‘Your mother will send you money, your mother will take care of you!’ The disease of our society is in our men. Changes should start from them. I am for my children not only a mother, I am also a friend and a partner. And we can talk on any topic. And so I tell them: ‘today we accuse your father, but you, how will you be in times of crises, what will be your responsibility? You have to be able to draw conclusions.’ We hope the new generation will be more responsible.

[...] How can a father be totally indifferent? This hurts the most. Everyone was raised in a *normal family*, was surrounded with love, respect. Where does indifference come from? How can one develop in himself selfishness? I never seem to find the answer for this question. It is very easy for my husband to say ‘my son has graduated from university, my son has high education. My daughter has graduated from high school, her major was economics. She studied on a contract. Now she studies at the university.’ Where is your [father’s] contribution in this?

How can you say ‘he does, she has obtained’, where is your minimal contribution for these kids? How can you be glad for their success if it comes from the sacrifice of their mother? And only of their mother! It is painful.” [my emphasis]

Rina’s emotional speech delineates several daring challenges to post-Soviet stereotypical gender-related assumptions. According to transnational women’s accounts,¹⁴ they are depicted by the local media, their neighbors and some relatives remaining in Moldova as *irresponsible mothers*, who abandon their children in Moldova. Sometimes the abandon is not described as a literal one; however, due to transnational mothers’ physical absence during several years in the lives of their children, it is believed that this absence destabilizes the social order, causing high criminality among teenagers, the promotion of “unhealthy values” regarding family life (IOM Moldova, October, 2007). Rina tries through her narrative to justify her transnational practices, in order to prove that she is a “good mother.” Basing her arguments on her own experiences and expectations related to marriage and mothering, she opens up a fierce debate on gender order. Her story constructs her as a “resourceful mother” by presenting her husband as a “bad father.” The anger deriving from her personal experiences (the divorce and the life after the split) allows her openly question and challenge the normative views on “motherhood” and “fatherhood,” the position of men and women within the family, the distribution of responsibilities within the household. Rina’s account creates her image of a divorced woman and a transnational mother, who becomes the core of her family, and not only the head of her household, but *its only* head. From this perspective, she perceives the post-Soviet men as “the unhealthy seed of the society” as opposed to responsible and resourceful women, who migrate to support their families. Her narrative pleads for a radical social change within the values related to gender positions. It also questions the causes of the male indifference towards his children and in doing so, it opens up

¹⁴ Point that L. J. Keough (2006) also mentions in her study on Moldovan women migrants to Turkey.

the discussion on the role of education in propagating certain gender-related values. In her interview, Rina talks about her fear that her children, especially her son, might follow their father's steps.

A rather distinct view on the male partner's contribution to the household's prosperity derives from Iulia's account. It constructs her husband as a "responsible father," who, however, does not have the opportunity to support financially his family as much as his wife can:

My husband has worked illegally in Moscow for several years and then he came back. We had a family reunion and we took the decision that I would migrate. You can ask me: why didn't the man leave? It is harder for men to find jobs now, and my husband is old. It is harder for men to be employed than for women, because a woman can work inside a house, perform domestic work. Even when it comes to problems with the police, a woman stays hidden inside the house. It is hard for men.

Iulia's story builds the image of a "misfortunate husband," because, as she recounts, women in general are advantaged on the Italian labor market due to their sex and despite their age.¹⁵ Iulia calls her marriage as a "happy one" and her husband "a good father," therefore she cannot debate as fiercely as Rina about the gender order within her household. Despite the differences between Iulia's and Rina's experiences and therefore gender-related views, both women's narratives agree upon the fact that today, in the post-Soviet context, women have become heads of their households. As a promising conclusion to the topic of "irresponsible" or "disadvantaged" fathers, Sveta, who is both Rina's and Iulia's close friend, adds that:

Maybe good times will return in Moldova, when families were united. Families will consist of a father, a mother, and the children. Children will grow up near their fathers and mothers. The situation has to change, because the pain of separation is too strong.

Sveta's conclusion is drawn on the same hegemonic gender logic that pictures the ideal and complete nuclear family as the basis of a healthy society.

¹⁵ C. Enloe (2006) also mentions that "overseas jobs are not available for men" (p. 109).

There are two basic points following from these narratives. On the one hand, based on certain gender arrangements within their post-Soviet households and their transnational practices, women migrants construct certain gender expectations concerning their children. For example, having daughters makes them feel more responsible for their protection, they feel the need to display more care and affection, judgments that derive from hegemonic constructions of girls as weak and capricious beings. On the other hand, these women engage in a discourse of *non-abandonment*, in order to justify their non-traditional practices of mothering. They often oppose their image of a *good mother* against that of a *bad* or *misfortunate father*, thus constructing themselves as resourceful mothers and strong beings, despite their sex and against traditional gender expectations.

4.2.2 From Mothers to Heroes through Deskilling and Transnational Communication

*“And I said to myself that I will crawl for as long as
God gives me strength, and do the impossible
to give them a better future...” (Elena)*

As it follows from my fieldwork, the discourse on *good motherhood* is also sustained through narratives on the deskilling process women go through and the sacrifices they make in their own professional aspirations. The results of my fieldwork reveal that transnational women migrants perceive the performances of *good motherhood* as adjusting (though justifications) to the traditional Soviet image of a *heroic mother*, and also extending it (through practices) to the non-traditional image of a mother constantly negotiating with citizenships and challenging the gender order of their households. Thus, *motherhood* entails for these women not just having children, and being physically close to them. It also involves a much broader spectrum of actions, calculations and expectations. Trans-border mothers suggest through their accounts deep considerations about what transnational spaces mean for them and for their children. In this

context, women migrants' narratives on employment strategies and the ways of justifying these, transnational communication and the virtual spaces it creates for performing motherhood, construct the image of the *good mother*.

4.2.2.1 Employment Stories

“*Our future collapsed with the Perestroika...*” (Rina)

Transnational mothers' sacrifice for the sake of their children begins, as they claim in their stories, with the 'imposed' choice they have to make in the field of employment. They change their career paths, leave their jobs in Moldova, which may offer them comfort or moral satisfaction, yet limited financial benefits. In return, they 'choose' to migrate in search for jobs that do not reflect their professional qualifications (if they have any), however these new employment opportunities offer financial incentives Moldovan jobs lack. Several of my informants, who before migrating to Italy have been employed in such fields like teaching, public administration, education, point out that their new employment status reflects a general trend of Moldovan women's deskilling on the foreign labor market. Not being able to work according to their professional qualifications, women migrants perform domestic tasks within Italian households, fact that is perceived by them as sacrifice in the name of their own households. Through this shift in the employment status, which is viewed both as sacrifice (they lose their jobs that offered them moral satisfaction and a certain social status) and success (through their new jobs, they are able to support their families), transnational women migrants construct themselves as *resourceful mothers*.

As the results of my fieldwork reveal, transnational mothers use a conflicting discourse in their self-justifications, which depicts them as both victims and winners in the deskilling process. It is namely through this contradiction that these women construct their performances of

transnational motherhood. Rina recounts what the transition period meant for her and what sacrifices she had to resort to in order to be able to survive and support her children:

I have higher education. After graduating, I worked in the social assistance. I had changed a few work places. I have dedicated myself to work. I have dedicated myself to a higher level of life. Everyone should tend to prosper, regardless of the life conditions we have now [in Moldova]. And I do not feel sorry I came here [to Italy], because I have succeeded. Every person has its own place in society. [...] What hurts me is that I cannot materialize my own dreams, because we also fought for something. And when that something is not achieved, it hurts. We also had a beautiful dream, a future. *Our future collapsed with the Perestroika*. Our children's future remained, and so, our dreams came on the second place. We do what we can for our children. And we are satisfied. People who care about culture, souls, studies, and who achieve their goals, know how to get what they want out of their children, and this is pleasant, regardless of the fact that the sacrifice is big. [my emphasis]

Rina points out that despite her desire and aspirations during her youth to achieve a high social status, her ideals failed with the Perestroika. The transition period proved to be a traumatic experience for her, because it meant giving up her dreams and sacrificing entirely for her children. It is interesting to observe the connection between the meanings Rina gives to the post 1990s period and the events that happened simultaneously in her private life, her divorce and disappointment in her former husband. She links in her narrative the hardships related to the transition period and the economic and psychological problems that resulted from the refusal of the husband to support their children. Deriving from these circumstances at the macro- and micro-level, Rina constructs herself as a victim of the post 1990s reforms, due to which she had to prioritize her children's future over her own. However, when talking about her experiences after migrating, she perceives herself as a winner (i.e. a *good mother*), because she has succeeded in materializing her plans for her children, to support them despite her professional and personal sacrifices.

For Vera, the transition period also meant financial instability and problems in her personal life. She worked as Head of Department at a wine factory in Calarasi,¹⁶ gaining a salary of around 250 Euros:

That is a good salary for that region... you know? For a woman especially. [nodding for my approval] I liked the job, a lot of people knew me. If I lived alone, than ok: I could cope with this money, but since I have children to think of...I had to go abroad. And now I am just a housekeeper! Who would have thought I'd end up like this?

Vera's narrative reflects several important points related to the job market in the post 1990s Moldova. First, from the gender perspective, the market is more gender-biased, because even having the same responsibilities on the workplace, women still get paid less than men. This situation derives from the hegemonic gender constructions of the man as the basic breadwinner of the family, arrangement that women migrants challenge through their practices. Vera also constructs the meanings of the transition period as a traumatic experience for her both in her professional and personal life. She does that by describing the high social status, and therefore the moral satisfaction, that her Moldovan job offered her, as opposed to the psychological difficulty that resulted from losing these incentives. The distress cause by her downward mobility in terms of employment is reflected in her narrative even by choosing the term "just a housekeeper" to name herself. The situation in her personal life, as in Rina's case, added to the burden. Her silence about her divorce and her husband's unwillingness to support the family¹⁷ is her strategy to build her image as a strong and independent *hero mother*:

My elder daughter wanted to study medicine, and you know how much you have to pay for the contract there. I had to think of ways to help her [the daughter]. I had a good life in Moldova, I just needed money for my daughter. I can't leave her alone!

¹⁶ Region in the central part of Moldova.

¹⁷ I found out about her divorce from her friends in Italy.

Vera perceives her performances of motherhood through the sacrifices she had to make related to her career and comfort at the work place. She creates the image of a loyal mother, whose present care-taking job in Italy, despite depriving her of moral satisfaction, offers her financial means to offer her children higher education. As Oishi (2005) mentions, and my fieldwork reveals, married, or divorced mothers often migrate to finance their children's education. I found that transnational mothers consider their offspring's education as a guarantee for their future stability, success, and feeling of accomplishment: something that they lacked during their youth. In this track of thought, investing in education is perceived as crucial by most of these women.

Stories of self-sacrifice in terms of employment are common not only among the divorced women, who do not enjoy their former partners' support in raising their children. They also prevail in the narratives of married women, whose husbands, due to certain reasons, are not able to provide for the family. Iulia's story is representative in this case. She begins her account with details from her youth, pointing out that she grew up in a family of nine children. In order to highlight what the transition period meant for her and her family, Iulia finds it important to emphasize that out of nine children, seven have higher education. Out of these seven, four were compelled to migrate in search of jobs. Recounting these facts, she stresses how painful the post-communist consequences were for her and her siblings:

I worked as a primary school teacher, then I worked for many years with children who have speech problems. And it was so interesting, I had pleasure from my job, but I was compelled to leave because I thought that if I didn't, I can't help my children. [...] Today, the professional qualifications are not appreciated in Moldova, and the low salaries of doctors and teachers prove it. And this is why they [her siblings] left their jobs in Moldova and went abroad. This is the situation in our country. This is the problem of economists, politicians... We do not wish to do politics. We want to live a modest life and enjoy the minimum comfort. [...] I didn't come here [Italy] because I was not satisfied with my husband. We have a happy marriage. But he is over 50 years old now, and it is

hard for him to find a job at this age. He has tried in Moscow, many times, but...we decided I should leave.

Iulia's accounts on her interesting job in Moldova, her "happy marriage" and her husband's unsuccessful attempts to find a job that would allow him support the entire family, reveals an entire post-communist household's negotiation:

One day we had a family reunion and we decided that I should be the one sacrificing...it was easier for me.

Iulia is not the first one to point out that Moldovan women are advantaged on the foreign labor market compared to men, because the domestic sphere of labor, that is rapidly expanding in Italy, welcomes more women than men. Considering both the gender-biased opportunities on the international labor market, and her household's needs and situation, Iulia was the one who had to sacrifice her career and social status for the sake of the entire family.

Transnational mothers often suggest that their "happiness" and the feeling of self-realization can be a matter of concern only if their children's feeling of self-sufficiency is satisfied. The *selfless sacrifice* motif prevails in their stories as the core reason for their self-perception as *good mothers*. Elena narrates that she has migrated in order to be able to offer her children the opportunity to study, to help them build a bright future, to offer them the possibility to travel and develop culturally. She opposes her understanding of her motherhood practices to the practices of those women who have chosen to stay in Moldova despite the economical crisis their household is witnessing:

If I didn't come to Italy, I wouldn't be able to offer my children the possibility to study, to have a better future, to see the world, the culture, to see how the European Union is developing. I have a neighbor, a woman, who told her children that she doesn't have the money to pay for their studies. And when I heard her talk like that, my heart broke into pieces. *And I said to myself that I will crawl for as long as God gives me strength, and do the impossible to give them a better future. [...]* I don't think about myself now. I think to give them everything. I can't rest until I

see them settled, then I will think about myself. They need to marry, to find a job. It's extremely difficult... [my emphasis]

The metaphor of the *crawling mother* in Elena's account creates a powerful image of a mother selflessly sacrificing for her children. It also build a strong opposition between her, a *good mother*, and her neighbor, constructed as a *bad, irresponsible, or indifferent* mother that does not or cannot sacrifice for the sake of her children. This type of heroic discourse helps Elena legitimize her transnational lifestyle, which she views as a means of performing *good*, even if long distance motherhood. She further recounts what transnational spaces mean for her in relation to her perception of motherhood:

For me it doesn't matter if they are near me, I want them to settle. I will be peaceful when I know they are ok. If I see them near me, but I know they always lack something, it is very painful. Wherever they are, if I know they are well, I am peaceful.

Space (between her and her children) is constructed as a painful experience, yet a necessary one for the survival and development of the household. Elena's perception of space makes her transcend the boundaries of the Soviet women's traditional image: despite their active participation in the labor market, Soviet women's primary role was still within the household, physically close to their children. Elena constructs herself as a strong woman, her calculations prevailing over her motherly emotions, thus perceiving physical separation from her children and transnational spaces as prerequisites for the performance of motherhood in non-traditional circumstances.

As follows from my interviews, transnational mothers often construct their children as *heroes* as well, who have had the strength to carry on with the long distance relationship and have succeeded in maintaining order within the households in their parents' absence. The children are often depicted by their mothers as *good people*, well educated and with "high" moral

standards (which means, as women migrants express it, being honest and respectful towards their parents). Coming back to Rina's story, it is interesting to follow how her discourse of the *sacrificing mother* links to the discourse of the *suffering children*:

I would not have chosen this path if it weren't strictly necessary. Changes in my country made us leave our homeland, our ideals, because every one of us had an ideal, studying at a school, you have a future plan ahead of you, a future plan for your family, your children. And, it is regrettable that you arrive at a point where you see all your ideals fade away, maybe not totally, but anyway, you don't end up where you wanted. Therefore, you are forced to leave your country. And *I was one of those unhappy mothers*, who, with my heart frozen, left my children crying, poor, they were crying so that I couldn't see another image in my head on my way from Chisinau to Italy. I didn't see any other image, except my girls with their eyes in tears, and this feeling of pity, this break seemed to last an eternity. I didn't see anything else; I didn't see any way back. I only saw a way ahead, a path to follow, a plan to materialize. And my children were small back then. [my emphasis]

Rina sees the post-Soviet period as a traumatic experience not only for her but also for her children. Her discourse of the *unhappy mother* gradually evolves into the one on the *unhappy children*. Narrating on their experiences of the painful split, she constructs them as suffering, yet brave children, who could endure the separation for the sake of their mother's transnational plan. The discourse of *children heroes* gradually comes into the picture, serving as justification for the transnational practices of motherhood.

Sveta talks about her two daughters with great affection and respect, emphasizing how hard it was for them to grow up *good people* without a father (who died) and in their mother's physical absence. Working in an Italian family, she makes comparison between the employer's granddaughter and her own, both being of the same age:

Look: two girls, same age, one in Italy and another in Moldova. Same age and yet such a big difference! My elder daughter is a mother, a sister, a friend, a wife, and an extraordinary teacher. How many advantages she has over the old man's granddaughter, and how she copes with everything! The old man's granddaughter is also 25, and her mother still tells her to bring her clothes to wash. She [the Italian girl] says she has to study, and they [the family] always take our women to clean their houses, to cook them food. The

education of our children [Moldovan] is so different! [...] We are *heroes* on this land, and they [the children] are *heroes* in the homeland.

Sveta is proud to be *good* enough as a mother to raise two *good* daughters. In order to justify her transnational mothering practices, she constructs a strong opposition between the Italian household mores and the Moldovan ones. She criticizes the habits of the Italian girl in order to praise her own and prove that she, as a mother, did not fail when she chose to migrate for work. The opposition she makes through her narrative, helps her construct her own image and the image of her daughters as *heroes*, able to cope with the gaps the long distance communication creates.

Elena recounts how she could not leave her children without parental supervision for a long time when they were small.

After Adela [her eldest daughter] went to high school in Romania, she encouraged me and her dad to go to Italy and work. When they were little I couldn't allow myself to go abroad for a long time. But after Adela went to Romanian, and then later the other two kids joined her there, she told me: 'Mom, don't worry, I'll take care of Denis and Alex. You go with dad and do what you feel you have to do. I am grown-up, I'll supervise them.' Can you imagine, she told me that. And after these words, I felt so relieved.

Elena constructs her elder daughter as a *hero*, because despite her young age, she took on herself the responsibility to take care and educate the younger brothers in a foreign country, without close parental supervision. All these discourses on the heroic character of mothers and children, the ability and willingness to endlessly sacrifice resulted from certain constraints, the sufferings and potentials the transnational lifestyle provides, aim at justifying the "successfulness" of the transnational motherhood plan against the traditional social constructions related to motherhood and gender order (that do not consider mothers as primary household providers, and do not envision mothers away from their children, performing a long distance motherhood).

4.2.2.2 Creating Virtual Spaces through Transnational Communication

“They need me there, but I am here...but I can still give them long distance advice...” (Iulia)

The image of the *good mother* is also perpetuated through women migrants’ accounts on long distance communication between them and their children. Transnational mothers prefer to construct through their narratives and expectations both themselves and their children as suffering beings, who despite the long distance lying between them, are capable of appreciating each other’s sacrifices. In this context, transnational communication (letters, short messages, phone calls) serves as a proof of the still existing bond between the parent and the offspring and helps mothers defend themselves against social accusations of *bad motherhood* or mistrust. I also contend that transnational communication creates virtual spaces for a ‘pseudo-presence’ of migrant women in their children’s lives, constructing thus alternative sites for the performances of long distance motherhood.

In some cases, my informants read trans-border communication as symbols of affection and mutual respect. Sveta tells me about a box she keeps at home, full of telephone cards to call to Moldova:

When I walk along the river Arno, I think ‘God! I want to hear their voices.’ And I think ‘two minutes, just to say hi to them, to hear their voices.’ And when I look [at the phone] – 15-20 minutes; 5, 6, 10 euros ... and my line breaks, I understand I have used my entire credit, yet they haven’t finished telling me their stories. How can I not recharge my phone? [...] *The short telephone messages help us survive*, because you might forget the things you talked over the phone, but when you receive messages from your children, you read and re-read them when you feel down, and you become happier after you read the messages. [my emphasis]

As her story proves it, Sveta perceives the cross-border communication as a realm where she feels important in her children’s live. The telephone helps her constructs thus the feeling of presence at important events of her children and grandchildren.

The virtual spaces transnational communication creates are also perceived by migrant mothers as proofs that their children love them back and appreciate the sacrifices done for their sake. Willing to prove that her daughters understand her sufferings and are grateful, Sveta reads another short message on her phone:

‘We want to thank you for everything you taught us. You are the one who loves us unconditionally, without asking anything in return.’ These are only 2 or 3 messages out of hundreds I have received from my children in the last 4 years. This is our [mothers’] salvation, to read them, re-read them, to know them by heart. In the evening, when I go to sleep, I hear these words of gratefulness and support in my mind. Their [children’s] words for me have always been ‘dear mommy.’ [she reads another message] ‘Dear mommy, how are you? How are you copying with the black foreign land? We miss you very much. Without you, dear, we are lost in this world. We love you and wait for your return.’ [...] They [children] understand and appreciate and this makes me happy. *My children have souls*, they have a heart and know how to appreciate the things I could do for them. [my emphasis]

Messages, letters, and phone calls serve as a motivation for transnational mothers to go on with the fighting and negotiating. They also serve as justifications for the practices of these women, constructing the feeling of satisfaction with what they have accomplished both in terms of their employment and motherhood.

Besides creating virtual realms where transnational mothers’ pseudo-presence is performed, long distance communication also constructs the feeling of being in control with the situation. Iulia is convinced she can help her children even if the distance between them is big:

They [the children] tell me about the changes that take place, the news, their problems. They need me there, but I am here...but I can still give them long distance advice.

Besides giving advice, performing transnational motherhood also entails keeping things under control. Rina is convinced that being away from her children for a long time has helped her being more aware of their problems and needs:

We talk over the phone all our issues. When I am at home, I see them and I have the impression everything is under control. When I go abroad, this distance enlarges my anxiety, my concerns, and I want to give them everything. I recount them things, prepare packages, see if they did what I told them to do. Perhaps while being at home many things got out of my control. Here it is different. I feel like in front of a display, I press on buttons and I direct. Maybe I exaggerate, perhaps the good I want for them is immense. It has no limits. [...] Our children grow physically and psychologically and they become aware of how important a parent is in their lives. [...] When we are down, what do we do? Besides complaining to each other, we have our children to support us. When we are in pain, when we are sad, we call them and tell them. And our poor children try to understand us.

Talking with her children over the phone, and exchanging information, Rina builds for herself an ample image of what is going on in her household. Controlling things, including her children seems crucial for her, given the fact that the distance between her and her children is significantly big. However, as her narrative proves it, she perceives her authority as protection and a sign of motherly affection towards her children. Through it, she is able to perform care for her own household. As she further mentions, her children pay back with the same respect and affection, offering moral support when she needs it. Transnational communication proves to be also a site where trans-border mothers can get affection and a feeling of being in control, in return for the financial support they provide.

As it has been argued at the beginning of the chapter and proved all throughout it, transnational women migrants construct their identities as *good mothers* in order to justify their transnational practices. They do so by challenging the gender order within their households, in order to fit the neoliberal rationales of the transition period. They also employ the contradictory discourses of the *suffering* and the *heroic mother*, perceiving the sacrifices they make in the field of employment as prerequisites for their successful performances of *good motherhood*. Another important role in women migrants' justifications against the discourses of *bad parenting* plays

the transnational communication, which creates virtual realms for the mothers' feeling of a pseudo-presence in her children's life.

Conclusion

The present paper has focused specifically on the post-Soviet context, providing thus a novel empirical framework for studying the meanings of globalization, transnationalism, and women's labor in a globalized world. My research has concentrated on the gender aspects of global transformation processes and women's experiences related to these processes. In this track of thought, I have paid special attention to Moldovan women migrants' narratives and rhetorical strategies concerning their performances of long distance motherhood.

In the framework of my research, I have considered female migrants as "well-informed global players." They are agents in a globalized world who, using transnational networks and basing on their experiences, plan and calculate their and their households' trans-border movements.

As the results of my fieldwork in Italy have revealed, Moldovan women migrants engage in a dual discourse in order to justify their practices. On a rhetorical level, these women try to adjust to the socially prescribed norms of motherhood without redefining them. They do so by employing the discourse of *good motherhood*, which entails narratives on "mothers-heroes," "suffering mothers," and "children-heroes," who are able to find compromises in terms of their employment and physical or emotional comfort. On the practical level, they do shift certain normative constructions of the social order and find alternative ways of performing motherhood, which helps them justify against the discourses of "bad parenting" and "child-abandoning." As it has been proved throughout my thesis, Moldovan women migrants engage in citizenship negotiations in order to be able to plan their movements throughout the geographical space and therefore their mothering practices. They also challenge the gender order within their own households by becoming the *only* breadwinners, which allows them to justify their 'choices.' By

constructing transnational communication as non-traditional sites for performing parenting, they build spaces for a pseudo-presence in their children's lives, thus arguing against discourses of "bad" and "irresponsible" motherhood.

In a broader context, this thesis has opened up the possibility for a further discussion on the direct impacts of the global restructuring processes on social institutions and the lives of people, as well as their performances of care and affection in a globalized world.

Appendix

Table reflecting the interviews with Moldovan women migrants in Italy: personal data/family; professional qualifications; issues related to migration (2008)

ISSUES RELATED TO MIGRATION				
Reasons for migrating	Legal status in Italy	Networks (Friends, members of family who migrated)	FUTURE PLANS	
Economical	legal	Brother, husband, friends.	IN ITALY	
Economical, children's education	illegal	Friends	IN ITALY (TEMPORARILY), THEN IN MOLDOVA	
Economical, children's education	Legal	Mother, sister, brother, husband	UNDECIDED, YET IN ITALY (TEMPORARILY), THEN IN MOLDOVA	
Economical	illegal	Sister	BRING HER GIRL TO ITALY, THEN COME BACK TO MOLDOVA	
Economical	Legal	Two sisters	IN ITALY (TEMPORARILY), THEN IN MOLDOVA	
Economical, personal (the divorce)	Legal	Friends	IN ITALY	
Economical, children's education	Legal	Friends	IN ITALY (TEMPORARILY), THEN IN MOLDOVA	
Economical, children's education	Legal	Husband	UNDECIDED	
Economical, children's education	Legal	Husband	UNDECIDED	

Personal data/ Family	Professional qualifications		Citizenships/Residence permits
	Educational background	Previous employment	
Number of children, their age and sex			
1, male (around 5 years old)	Higher education	Statistical centre	Romanian, Moldovan
2, a girl (19 years old), a boy (teenager)	Higher education	Head of Department at a wine factory	Moldovan
1, girl (10 years old)	Secondary school graduate	Unemployed, housewife	Moldovan Residence in Italy
2, a boy (university graduate), a girl (high school graduate)	Higher education	Primary school teacher, specialist working with children with speech deficiency	Moldovan
1, a girl (10 months)	Secondary school graduate	Unemployed, housewife	Moldovan Residence in Italy
2, ,a boy (25 years old) and a girl (22 years old)	Higher education	Social assistant	Moldovan , Ukrainian, Residence in Italy
2 girls (one is 26, the other 23 years old)	Higher education	University teacher of French language	Moldovan Residence in Italy
3, two boys (both 22years old), a girl (26 years old)	Higher education	Educator in the kindergarten	Romanian, Ukrainian, (disclaimed Moldovan)
1, girl (23 years old)	Higher education	Unknown	Romanian, Ukrainian, (disclaimed Moldovan)

Name of the interviewee	Age	Marital status
1. Aliona	26	Married
2. Vera	45	Divorced
3. Irina	30	Married
4. Iulia	50	Married
5. Nastia	20	Widowed
6. Rina	45	Divorced
7. Sveta	48	Widowed
8. Elena	45	Married
9. Maria	42	Married

Glossary of Terms

IOM – International Organization for Migration

ILO – International Labour Organization

UNFPA - United Nations Fund for Population Activities

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