

# Employability, gender and migration : the case of Eastern European circular carers in Italy

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Sabrina Marchetti

## **Employability, gender and migration. The case of Eastern European circular carers in Italy**

### **Abstract**

This paper examines the phenomena of circular migration of Eastern European women to Italy both theoretically and empirically. Using interview material from migrant women working in Italy, in temporary positions, it exposes the changing nature of gender roles and the precarious nature of women's employment whereby, in order to maintain gendered care commitments, this type of employment is sometimes in fact chosen. The respondents in this study give vivid expression to the complex way in which this selection of migrant women made decisions around balancing their work life and their caring life.

### **Introduction**

Since the EU Luxembourg Summit of 1997, the European labor market has changed substantially due to the emergence of new approaches to the meaning of work and to the experience of laborers. These new paradigms have rapidly become hegemonic in the way we understand the reasons behind employment vs. unemployment, labor mobility and different forms of labor participation. They increasingly emphasize the necessity for the workforce to be "competitive" as a necessity for individual workers to acquire better chances to sell themselves in the "labor market." Being more competitive means being more flexible, more adaptable, and offering a better price than others. It is ultimately up to workers to be, in this sense, "employable" for a specific sector and/or improve their position inside it (see Crouch 2008; Burroni/Keune 2011).

The subjective acceptance of the need to take on (more) precarious work is crucial. People resist the risk of unemployment and consequent impoverishment by putting forward those capacities that make them fit for precarious work opportunities. In this view, temporary precarious work is not only something that is imposed on workers by force, but (also) some-

thing that workers might actively seek. The focus of this article is on the way social and cultural expectations shape migrant women workers' motivations to enter specific jobs and, in particular, their "becoming employable" for them.

From this perspective, this article focuses on the importance of gender, age, nationality and ethnicity when considering the increased "employability" of migrant women in specific sectors of the European labor markets that are characterised by precarious working conditions. For example, I have shown elsewhere how in the 1960s and 1970s migrant women from former colonies had better chances to insert themselves into the expanding ethnic niche of domestic work and home-based elderly care (see Marchetti 2014). In this article I am exploring the gendered and ethnicized expectations on Eastern European women working as home-carers for older persons in Italy in their capacity to balance mothering and caring commitments in their countries with labor commitments in Italy. I am here suggesting that these conflicting commitments might be the reason for these migrant women workers to develop a "proactive" attitude and actively seek more temporary, long-distance and low-paid jobs, within the home-based care sector, in the form of what I have called "circular care" (Marchetti 2014).

The article is based on a discourse-analysis of the in-depth interviews conducted between 2012 and 2013 with 36 women from Ukraine, Georgia, Russia and Poland working in a small size city of Northern Italy<sup>1</sup>. All of them were or had been employed as private home-carers, in some cases on a circular basis<sup>2</sup>. Their age at the time of the interviews ranged from 35 to 65 years, and they had very diverse family, educational and class backgrounds. Nevertheless, the great majority of the interviewees were transnational breadwinning mothers or even grandmothers aged 50+, whose earnings are crucial to their families.

In the following pages, I will firstly provide the background context of migration of Eastern European women towards Western Europe, the connection between gender and circular migration, and the features of the Italian private market for migrant home-care work. Secondly, I will explore the debate on employability and illustrate how the "language of employability" can describe the attitudes and the decisions taken by migrant women who step into home-care work on temporary rather than permanent contracts. In the third section, the tensions and difficulties behind this decision will be discussed with reference to the research findings. These shed light on the interconnection between the configuration of gender roles in

post-soviet times, the precarization of women's labor (especially in the case of transnational women breadwinners), and the reduction of social security rights. The discussion will highlight how these features come together to influence the interviewees' desires and decisions, and thus promote specific migratory and employment patterns.

### **East to west migration and home-care work in Italy**

Eastern Europeans are increasingly participating in all levels of the western European job market, from highly skilled to unskilled jobs, in various EU countries. Gender, class, age and education shape their participation and opportunities differently. While young, upper-middle class and well-educated eastern Europeans are heading towards professional and academic job positions, lower-middle class women, especially of mature age, tend to mainly entered the health and care sector (Favell 2008).

Circular movements of women between Eastern and Western Europe are not new. They have been widely described by scholars with reference to Polish and Ukrainian women in particular.<sup>3</sup>

The gendered dimension of circular movement has been considered by scholars to find a specific explanation for the fact that in some contexts more women than men engage in circular migration. Scholars have thus referred to unequal distributions of care commitments in the households of origin, which would require women to regularly go back home to accomplish their "domestic obligations" more often than men (Ellis et al. 1996, p. 41). To fully appreciate the issues for women migrating from post-soviet countries, it is important to consider how the general transformations taking place in the country in question have affected gender roles and women's decision to emigrate (Ashwin 2000; LaFont 2001; True 2003; Verdery 1996). Research suggests that those who leave are predominantly aged 50+, they are mothers and even grandmothers, often widowed or divorced, who have decided to work abroad for a few years in order to financially support their children in getting higher education and starting their own family life. In Ukraine, as well other post-soviet countries, the economic crisis and collapse of the welfare service have left many 50+ women without good jobs, nor with a pension. At the same time, the cost of education, housing and medical care has increased due to the privatization of public services and the marketization of the economy. Having been raised under the socialist ideal of the "working woman," equally responsible for waged work and for family care, women of this generation find their current marginal position particularly distressing in economy and society. Therefore, the

sending of remittances from abroad allows them to recuperate their central role as mothers and grandmothers (Marchetti /Venturini 2014; Boccagni/Ambrosini 2012; Vianello 2009; Vietti 2010 and Solari 2010).

On the other side, the Italian lack of welfare services creates a strong reason of attraction for this type of women. Despite the rapid ageing of its population, the Italian public sector is not able to provide state-based or institutionalized forms of personal care for dependent older persons. Households need to find their own resources to cope with these necessities by assigning the care work to family members and/or a paid worker. In fact, more than 2 million Italian families currently hire a private home-care or domestic worker. This is an important working opportunity for migrants, women especially, since no specific education is needed to enter the sector. It is usually easy to find employment also for undocumented and recently arrived migrants. From official statistics, the number of foreigners employed in this sector in 2013 amounted to 748 777, which is 80% of the total workers. Eastern Europeans are more than half of them, with 424 803 registered workers (406 321 women and 18 482 men)<sup>4</sup>. The type of employment may differ from one case to another. While full time living in is most common, part-time or full-time work within cohabitation is a choice for others. Temporary employment on a circular basis is definitely not the predominant pattern, but it seems to be increasing as an option especially for workers who need to move freely between borders, because they do not need a visa (like Poles and Romanians), or because after years of steady work in Italy they now have a long-term residence permit (for Ukrainians, Russians, etc.).

In fact, the various national groups which I have broadly defined as “Eastern Europeans” or “from post-soviet countries” are also different in many respects such as language, socio-economic realities, current political situation, national history, religion, tradition, and so forth. For the purpose of this paper, it is particularly important to consider the different access that citizens from these countries have to free mobility towards and within the European Union. In fact, if some of these countries are now included in the Schengen area (Poland, Romania and Bulgaria), and some women can profit from mobility facilitation, as their countries are partners in the European Neighbourhood Policy (especially important in the case of Moldova, but also for Ukraine, Byelorussia and Georgia), others are not involved in any of this (as in the case of Russia). Although in the next pages I cannot attend to this in depth due to space constraints, it is important to bear in mind that the individual interviewees have found different opportuni-



ties and obstacles in their migrations to Italy depending on these political arrangements and on how they have changed through time.

### **Women's employability: the case of circular care**

Employability has been widely discussed and defined. One of the well-accepted definitions is from Jim Hillage and Emma Pollard, who understand employability as “the capability to move self-sufficiently within the labor market to realize potential through sustainable employment” (Hillage/Pollard 1998, p. 12). They add, “for the individual, employability depends on the knowledge, skills and attitudes they possess, the way they use those assets and present them to employers and the context (e.g. personal circumstances and labor market environment) within which they seek work” (ibid). From this perspective, when a person is not able, for various possible reasons, to take a job and remains unemployed, it is said that this person “is not employable” for that specific job role. In other words, given a specific field of employment, employability relates to the ability of individuals to step into it or to change their role within it. As a consequence, policies on employability focus on the factors that “allow or prevent” people from moving into suitable work.

My argument in these pages finds support in a more expanded view of employability, namely the “holistic approach to employability” (McQuaid/Lindsay 2005). Such a “holistic approach” is key, in my view, to making sense of the specific form of temporary circular labor migration that takes place in the Italian home-care sector. This combination of labor and migration pattern is the solution through which two (or more) women working in shifts are able to balance their emotional attachment to their families back home, their caring commitments towards them, and the persistent financial dependency of these same people on their work abroad. By alternating at the workplace in Italy, for periods of 3–4 months each, they are able to earn enough to financially support their households without having to be separated from them on a permanent basis<sup>5</sup>. However, during this period they do not pay full taxes and social security contributions neither in Italy nor in the country they work in, thus they end up not being a full-citizen “here nor there” which is typical of circular migrants<sup>6</sup>. In Marchetti (2013) I have offered concrete examples of how workers organize their rotation in a way which resembles a job-sharing<sup>7</sup> arrangement at an international level.

Taking an employability perspective, we could say that it is only possible to “become employable” as a circular carer when one possesses

certain “personal attributes.” First of all, one needs to be a “proactive” worker: to have a strong sense of initiative both in searching out a co-worker and an employer who will accept this arrangement. The ability to successfully couple with another woman is especially crucial. In an “employability language,” circular carers need to be able to manage possible tensions with their co-workers, meet shared commitments, keep up the calendar of arrivals and departures, illustrate tasks to the worker replacing them, etc. Secondly, they need to have enough skills to manage work schedules and tasks. They will have an advantage in this labor market if they are able to organize all of this, even from a distance, in the smoothest possible way for their employers and the care-receiver. They are able to use the telephone and internet in order to keep in touch with employers and co-workers during their absence, and also to solve unexpected problems and adapt to sudden needs. Fundamentally, they need to have “enhanced geographical mobility” to be at ease with travelling long distances and crossing international borders.

As mentioned, next to such “personal attributes,” McQuaid and Lindsay also consider it important to focus on “personal circumstances” to assess whether a worker is suitable for a specific job. “Personal circumstances” are often aspects of workers’ personal lives that reduce their capacity to work, typically for women, as well as care and family commitments. However, a “personal circumstance” that instead increases the employability of workers is related to their specific cultural background and the value that work has in it. In the following section, I offer the case of Eastern European women who have entered circular care to discuss the role played by gendered ideologies centred around family values and notions of wife/mother commitment to examine the impact of personal circumstances in people’s working (and in this case also migratory) decisions.

### **Gender as pushing women into temporary work? Some examples**

Working mothers are a very heterogeneous category which may deal with the tensions, strategies and conflicting demands, relating to their double role as mother and worker, in different ways, depending on the context and their personal inclinations (e.g. Walsh 1999; Thornthwaite 2004; Correll et al. 2007). For example, from an age perspective, demands can change through time and thus be heavier for women in some life stages than others: for young women with new-born babies, or for older women with elderly dependent parents and grandchildren. This is also influenced of course by what are the shared expectations around gendered roles and family values

in each specific context. In some cases, gendered expectations in relation to women's commitment towards their families are an *obstacle* to women's labor participation.

A contrasting example comes from the case of three Ukrainian, one Polish and one Russian circular carer that I am illustrating in these pages. Their narratives, in my view, exemplify how gendered expectations about mothering and caring can also work as *propellers* for women to increase their employability in temporary and long-distance jobs. The first example is offered by Edyta Zuchowski<sup>8</sup>, who is Polish and was 46 years old at the time of the interview. She is now settled in Italy for good with all of her family (husband and two daughters). When her children were still young, she used to work in Italy on a temporary basis. For a total of five years, she rotated on a 3-monthly basis with other women from her extended family. She immediately puts to the forefront her innate resourcefulness, which helped her to be the international breadwinner for the family, by saying:

*I am a very independent person. I am always finding my way to cope with situations, even when it is difficult. I don't rely on others. How could I?*

And she continues by describing her temporary work arrangement:

*I was rotating with my sister-in-law, depending on who needed it most. Then another cousin and a niece also started to rotate with us. It went like that for five years. [At one point] I had to stay seven months to pay for some very expensive injections that my husband had to have.*

Edyta also poignantly illustrates how temporary migration serves the function of maintaining the structure of the household without disrupting family life:

*The most important thing for me is my family. That we are united. This is my strength to go on. You need to keep your connection alive, that you don't break your ties. [...] You see that there are not many Polish women that marry Italian men. This is because we can come and go for these three months.*

*Q: Are you saying that working in rotation allows Polish women to keep their families, their marriages, united, otherwise they may risk breaking them up? Yes. Because we as Poles have a different mentality, we are very much into family values. (Interview with Edyta Zuchowski, from Poland, former home-care worker, 46 years old)*



For young women, keeping the family united refers to their own capacity to fulfil the needs of their children and husbands, avoiding long-term separations that could hinder the marital and parental relationship. This is different in the case of older women. Older women like Margarita Pavliv – who is widowed and has adult children – project their desire for unity and solidity on their children's families. The financial and emotional solidity of her son's family becomes the centre of Margarita's attention and commitment feelings as a mother and grandmother. In her words:

*My wish is to be able to help my son. For example, he wants to buy a house that he has found, but he cannot afford it. [...]*

*Q: Has your son thought about going abroad for work?*

*He would like to. [...] He asked me to keep an ear open for vacancies here [in Italy]. But I keep telling him: "You've no idea of what it means to work here! If you want to do it, you need to go together [with your wife]. The two of you. By yourself, don't do it." [...]*

*Q: But does the wife of your son want to go abroad for work?*

*No, because she's very attached to her little babies. I don't want that either. It's better if she stays home. (Interview with Margarita Pavliv, from Ukraine, home-care worker, 49 years old)*

What I found striking in these lines of Margarita's is the fact that she speaks as if she is the strongest person in her whole family. Although she has gone through the experience of working in Italy, leaving her children behind and withstanding the distance from her husband, she is now afraid that her son and her daughter-in-law would not be able to do the same as she did.

This excerpt from the interview with Margarita is a good example of the expectations attached to the idea of motherhood as a commitment to provide economic and financial security to children, which is particularly strong amongst Ukrainian women of her generation<sup>9</sup>. Interestingly, this same gendered culture does not seem to apply to younger Ukrainian women, as in the case of Margarita's daughter in law. Cinzia Solari elaborates on this issue by showing the relevance of contemporary Ukrainian national discourses that do not support the emigration of young women, the separation (and probable reunification abroad) of young couples, or the leaving behind of children. This would go against the attempt to create a new positive representation of the country, promoting instead an image of Ukraine as a country exposed to depopulation and plagued with the problem of children "abandoned" by their parents (Solari 2010).

It is against the same background that women like Yeva Balenko, already in her late 60s, continue to travel back and forth to Italy as circular home-care workers to support the families of their children. This is the way Yeva summarises her story:

*I've two children who are married and a grandchild. I've all of that. I work here every three months to get a little bit of money in order to help my kids. For me I don't need anything. [...]*

*Q: How long do you want to keep doing this job – three months here, three months there? For how many more years?*

*I don't know. I really don't know. Only God knows. To tell you the truth, there is always some need of money. (Interview with Yeva Balenko, Ukrainian, home-care worker, 67 years old)*

The intersection between gender and age typifies the story of mature women like Yeva. Her engagement in migration and circular care is motivated by her commitments towards both children and grandchildren. The unpredictability of her family's needs leaves her in a suspended condition, with her not knowing how long she will have to keep working in Italy.

Moreover, the importance of ageing also enters the picture in relation to the issue of retirement and the functioning of social security in the interviewees' countries of origin. The money that they receive from their state as pensioners is not enough to support themselves (and their children's families). Nor are they in a condition to find part-time jobs, already being too old to be "competitive" in the labor markets of their countries – while mature women are widely employed in Italy as home-carers. An example comes from Elizaveta Mordinov, a Russian woman who works on a four-monthly basis caring for an elderly woman in Italy. Although she says she is tired of working abroad, she briefly explains her necessity of continuing to do so by saying:

*I need this money. 'Cause my [Russian] pension is not enough. It is too little for me, 120 Euros. [...] What else should I do? Another friend of mine, older than I am, is also working every day.*

Also in Elizaveta's case, her commitments as breadwinner and remitter<sup>10</sup> are projected onto securing economic resources for her children's families, as she further explains:

*I always helped my children. Laryssa especially, my daughter, she doesn't work and has five kids. They need food, clothes, shoes, everything. And it is expensive! I need to help them. All parents need to help their children.* (Interview with Elizaveta Mordinov, from Russia, home-care worker, 59 years old)

For a last hint on this topic, let us quote an excerpt from the interview with Olena Zherdev, who circulates as a co-worker with Margarita Pavliv. Before coming to Italy, she was employed in a bank, but she left her job to head for Italy. However, she does not want to stay in Italy on a permanent basis because she wants to be close to her husband, children and grandchildren and, especially, to her own ageing parents. The medical expenses for her parents and her husband are one of the main reasons for her to keep working in Italy. Through this quite long excerpt, Olena describes the tensions that animate her life as a circular carer:

*It is now three or four years that I have been going back and forth every three months. With what I earn here in three months I can live for three months at home. Nothing is left for savings, 'cause there is always something that happens, someone gets sick, or we have to pay for something. [...]*

*Q: But are you content with this solution or not?*

*I am happy. But what I want to say is that when I was younger it was a little bit easier to make the journey. Every year the trip gets heavier for me.*

*Q: Can't you settle down back in Ukraine? I mean, find a job in Ukraine?*

*When you start looking for a job, they tell you: "No, madam, we need younger people, maximum 40–45 years old." I am 53, instead. [...]*

*Q: And when are you going to receive a pension?*

*Eh, I should have got it two years ago, but now I have to wait some years longer! [...] With the new law, it will be when I am 57. And while before 25 years of contributions where enough, now with the new law you need 30 years!* (Interview with Olena Zherdev, from Ukraine, home-care worker, 53 years old)

From this excerpt, it emerges how the path that women like Olena have undertaken is constrained by several factors, such as personal desires and family expectations, but also by features which are independent from her will, such as the transformations taking place in her country's national welfare system with the postponement of retirement age due to cutbacks in the pension system. The minimum number of years of contributions has also been raised during the time she has been abroad. This adds to her

age-based disadvantage in the Ukrainian labor market, as has already been illustrated by the cases of the other interviewees.

In conclusion, in finding work as home-carers in countries like Italy, Olena and the others have endured de-skilling, heavy workloads and emotional challenges. It is incredible to think how their life has changed from that of permanent regular workers (they had all worked in the same factory or office for years) into that of mobile transnational precarious workers, which is so much dependent on their proactive, almost entrepreneurial, skills and attitudes. These women are today the quintessential examples of mobile precarious workers, not knowing how long they will hold their current jobs, and for how many years they will continue crossing the borders across western Europe.

## Conclusion

It is from this perspective that talking about gender and employability in migration contributes to a critical view of the emancipatory potentiality of mobility for women. Migration, and circular migration in particular, come into sight less as being a win-win situation (for host countries and for migrants) but rather as the result of the gendered ideals in relation to mothering and family care that – and this is my point – temporary migration allows to be maintained unchanged.

This is a process that demands numerous negotiations and does not go without contradictions. Nevertheless, these examples destabilize, in my view, the common understanding of the impact of gender on people's employability and labor participation as precarious workers. In fact, the case of eastern European women seeking circular work requires us to further interrogate the meaning of gendered care-commitments, when women take on more precarious working situations in order to be able to balance work and family. What I am suggesting here is that women do not always just "accept" precarious labor positions, but that – because of the gendered constructions that shape their decisions and desires – they might even "promote" this type of employment.

However, it is important to underline that in this article I have not tried to show the different outcome of an alternative view of women's disadvantage in labor markets with the purpose of coming up with a post-feminist stance which blames women for being "responsible for their own problems." On the contrary, I believe that an intersectional approach to the case of circular carers can help understand how age, gender, and national

backgrounds together shape individual decisions that replicate conservative views of women's role in society.

In other words, I am suggesting that in cases like these it might be stimulating, in the light of future research and politics, to identify the influence of capitalist marketplace values on women's tendency to adopt a behaviour which actively promotes the normative framework which is responsible for their overall disadvantage. In this sense, it is quite powerful to see how the logic behind the transformations in the European labor markets towards increasing flexibility have been actively taken up and applied by individual workers to the specific realm of private home-care, thanks to the introduction of circulatory migration.

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## Annotations

- 1 This research has been carried out thanks to the support of a Marie Curie Intra European Fellowship within the 7th European Community Framework Programme.
- 2 Circular workers make up almost half of the 12 Polish women interviewed, while they comprise one third of the 13 Ukrainians. No case of circularity is present among the ten Georgians I spoke with, although many would like to start working this way one day. The one Russian woman I interviewed works in alternating shifts with a Ukrainian care worker, whose employer I also interviewed.
- 3 See for example: Morokvasic (1994) and Lutz (2011) research on Polish women in Germany; Kindler (2008) and Iglicka et al. (2011) focus on Ukrainians in Poland; by Caglar et al. (2011) study of Ukrainians in Hungary; Pool (2003) for research on Polish women in the Netherlands; and Vianello (2013) and Solari (2010) for studies of Ukrainians in Italy.
- 4 On the basis on INPS data available at <http://www.inps.it/webidentity/banche-datistatistiche/menu/domestici/main.html>
- 5 On transnational motherhood and separated families, see, amongst others, Geraldine Pratt (2012).
- 6 On this see the special issue edited by Anna Triandafyllidou and Sabrina Marchetti (2013) on circular migration in paid domestic work, and in particular the article by Manuel Abrantes on double-presence (Abrantes 2013). On circular migration see also Triandafyllidou (2013), Cassarino (2013), Mai (2011), Rigo (2009), Parreñas (2010), and for Italy EMN (2010) and Marchetti, S., Piazalunga, D., & Venturini, A. (2013).
- 7 This finds a corresponding hiring modality in the 2007 *National agreement for domestic and care work* which introduced job-sharing also for this category of workers. This contracting modality allows employers to make only one contract but with two people. Most employers, however, still prefer traditional full-time contracts, by hiring the two workers separately, and by alternatively putting the one who is away on “stand-by.”
- 8 All names are pseudonyms.
- 9 See also Rachel Parreñas (2008) on this, for the case of Filipino women. See Castagnone et al (2007) and Vianello (2009) for eastern Europeans in Italy.
- 10 On the impact of gender on the remitting behaviours of men and women migrants, see Laura Oso and Natalia Ribas-Mateos (2013). Indeed, generally speaking, women seem to remit larger amounts than their co-national men, and with more regularity.