

## FEMALE MIGRANTS – THE ISSUES OF ADVANCING AGE

Monika NOVA

Charles University, Hussite Theological Faculty; monika.nova@htf.cuni.cz, ORCID: 0000-0002-0759-5997

**Purpose:** The paper addresses the subject of female migrants who are on the threshold of old age or already old, and who live in Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic. The author attempted to depict the process of aging through the eyes of the female migrants themselves, persons concerned with the migrants and the professional community as such. The effort was supposed to disclose specific features of women's life.

**Design/methodology/approach:** The background research applied the qualitative method and the relevant information was obtained using the technique of interviews. Our research was built on hypothesis that the elderly female migrants will constitute (and in fact already constitute) a fast growing group of population. This hypothesis is supported by statistical data on naturalized migrants and on their changing age patterns. Though the elderly migrants are still few in numbers when compared with the overall number of newly coming immigrants, they should be paid closer attention by government agencies and the non-profit sector and the attention should encompass both the conceptual framework and the practical aspects. Media attention, previously devoted to the elderly migrants, is now distracted by the themes of global migration and by the predicament of refugees.

**Findings:** Their advanced age disadvantages the elderly on the labor market despite the qualifications and a vast pool of professional experience that they gained during their stay in the host country. Pushed by their precarious economic situation and an inborn cast of mind, the people remain active, and even as seniors they seek new jobs, often beneath their qualifications.

**Research limitations/implications:** As the female participants in our research told us, throughout their entire stay in emigration they were feeling guilty toward the people they left back home while themselves were privileged with a life of better quality abroad. These observations testify to the importance of psychological and social assistance that should be provided by the receiving country.

**Practical implications:** Asked about their plans for returning to the home country, the women expressed worries about getting only low pensions because of the insufficient number of years worked there.

**Social implications:** Though we think it important to highlight the painful experiences of migrants, our research results by no means indicate that the women perceive themselves as "victims". On the contrary, the research painted a picture of exceptionally strong and determined ladies. We believe that the stories and reflections of our research participants can be very useful for the receiving country and more than interesting for many persons coming into contact with immigrants – employers, regional administrators and the public generally.

**Originality/value:** The situation mentioned above is influenced by the short history of migration to the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary. Making just a slight simplification we can say that the age of retirement is reached chiefly by women who arrived to the newly reestablished democracies in the early waves of immigrants after 1989. Having the opportunity of dealing with female migrants in detail, we have also tried to identify the pitfalls (long-time hidden) of the currently applied integration policies.

**Keywords:** aging, female, migration, socio-economic status.

## 1. Introduction

History suggests that, despite always being a relevant factor in migration, women have never been properly appreciated as regards their economic and social participation in the process. Some authors maintain that as recently as the 1970s women were perceived as just passive followers of their husbands who were, in contrast, seen as the prime movers of migration (Pazdera, 1991). A different situation was faced by women who waited for their emigrant husbands back home, fully dependent on money that the husband earned abroad. Past researches indicated that these women depended on their husbands both economically and socially. The roles split along the gender lines then eroded the women's traditional position of just home makers and allowed them to also seek a degree of independence in a foreign country.

No matter how young the immigrants to EU may appear when compared with the majority population, and irrespective of the fact that the elderly immigrants are still just a minority in the entire immigrant community, the situation begins to change. By 2030, the group of elderly immigrants is supposed to grow five times in Germany and ten times in Netherlands. The greater part of the elderly immigrants will consist of women 65+, whose life expectancy is longer than life expectancy of males (Hradečná, 2016). The elderly female migrants are at risk of poverty possibly caused by long-term unemployment; low wages; irregular or otherwise precarious jobs; and difficulties in claiming pensions (Eurosai, 2019)

### 1.1. Theoretical background

In the 1980s and 1990s the studies of migration were heavily influenced by the theories of feminism which perceived gender as a set of identities, behavioral patterns and power relationships molded by society and its culture. This paradigm affected the perception of gender in migration in two ways: the first way related to patriarchy, the hierarchy of power, male dominance and male control of women; the second way related to relationships between males and females and the shift that their relations to the other family members (including spouses) underwent in the process of migration. This is closely related to the position of women not only in the majority society, but also the position of women - Roma in the conditions of the Slovak Republic (Budayová, 2017). Researchers set their sights also on the participation of

migrant women in the labor market of the host country; on the impact of control over women and the distribution of power within families; on the greater share of male work in domestic chores and the care of family; and on the change in the concept of masculinity (Boyd, and Grieco, 2003).

Some authors raised the question of possible cultural incompatibility of the migrants, or another risk of their cultural reduction to a new type of "western materialism" (Polačko, 2019). Subjects of research could also have to deal with some new kinds of risks in social networks and internet communication (Budayová, Toporcer, 2019). Nonetheless, the mentioned European countries of the migrants' origin are sharing almost the same cultural background, technical level and are dealing with the same modern problems like the host countries.

In every society, regardless of its homogeneity or heterogeneity, there are minority groups that require special attention and treatment, as their social and cultural characteristics, physical appearance or other lifestyle are different from the majority group (Šul'ová, 2014).

The subject of migrants' aging that we chose to analyze has been neglected in all the previous studies of migration, the main reason being that the policies of migration are not designed to cover long periods of time – put simply, the migrants are not supposed to reach old age in their host countries. Moreover, the elderly migrants (males and females) are rather invisible, since, being "unproductive", they are absent from the local labor market.

The situation mentioned above is influenced by the short history of migration to the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary. Making just a slight simplification we can say that the age of retirement is reached chiefly by women who arrived to the newly reestablished democracies in the early waves of immigrants after 1989. As obvious, the local societies are not ready to deal with the issues of aging migrants who have been granted permanent residence, and that is what we have focused on in our qualitative research.

## 2. Methods

Paper size: Having considered the professional literature and profiting by the author's (Monika Nová's) familiarity with the subject, we decided that this type of research is best conducted using the qualitative method. With this in mind we chose to ask these questions: How do female migrants look back on their journey through life in a foreign country?; What narrative can they offer of their early experiences in a new society?; and In what way do they see their role changing with advancing age and accumulating experiences?

The qualitative method allowed, and the applied character of our research required, that the relevant data be obtained through in-depth topical interviews.

Conducting the interviews, we were interested in these subjects: history of migration; work/employment (history of jobs; accommodation to work conditions in advanced age); care for children and transnational care for parents left in the home country; preparations for retirement and strategies for spending the retired age. We have opted for what is known as the "purpose sample". To be included in the sample, the participants had to be: (1) females moving abroad without husbands, with kids or without; (2) living abroad for 20 years or longer; (3) 60 years old or older. The research was conducted in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland. The women came from a country of former Yugoslavia (i.e. Bosnia, Herzegovina, Serbia, Macedonia, Montenegro), from Armenia, Romania and Albania. The research covered six women from each host country (i.e. the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland), the overall number of participants thus being eighteen. They emigrated primarily to escape from war; from a war devastated country; from poverty and/or unemployment. Their secondary wish was to secure a better life for their children and families that they left behind.

### 3. Discussion of results

The research sample comprised exclusively females and the research question aimed mainly at the specifically female experience of migration and its unfolding in the process of aging. Surprisingly enough, the responses strongly indicated that the situation typical of migration pushes women to the central position in the families and increases their importance. Our research thus painted a comprehensive picture of family relationships, including relations between partners (and their reflection) and intergenerational relationships in both directions: towards children *and* towards parents (also the partner's parents). The relationships then exerted a profound impact on the personal strategies of our research participants.

Women who have been traumatized by war and oppression are never able to recover fully, and the traumatic memories are haunting them unabated for many years in emigration, in fact till their old age. Though their everyday struggle for dignified life in the new country may temporarily suppress the painful memories, they are relived with a vengeance when the kids are already provided for and the twilight years come. As the female participants in our research told us, throughout their entire stay in emigration they were feeling guilty toward the people they left back home while themselves were privileged with a life of better quality abroad. These observations testify to the importance of psychological and social assistance that should be provided by the receiving country.

The second most important aspect of emigration emerging from the interviews, i.e. the arrival in a new country, highlighted the insufficiency of aid offered by the receiving country. On this point, the reported experiences were diversified - the process of settling in the new country was obviously easiest for those women who could fall back on their already settled

relatives and/or acquaintances. Later on, the assistance was obtained primarily from social networks (still in existence) consisting of people who came from the same country. No matter how positive this fact may appear and how soothing it may be for the people's emotions, it may also indirectly attest to the difficulties they face in cultivating similar relationships with the local population. Ambivalent experiences reported by our participants exemplify the nature of xenophobia. Feelings of shame are evoked by the narratives of women who were kept with kids in a refugee camp for a prolonged period of time, unaware of when the situation would allow them to become independent. Women now in Hungary and the Czech Republic told us that no local lady ever came to ask whether they needed something, and the same can be said about the local clergymen, representatives of non-profit organizations and people from the local municipality. Better experiences were reported by women who have emigrated to Poland – local ladies did come to offer material assistance and Polish clergymen and parish authorities showed interest in the mental condition and spiritual needs of the immigrants.

As follows from the stories related by women included in our research, both the leaving and the coming are never-ending processes. The locals still treat immigrants as strangers and, more importantly, the authorities frequently treat the women as foreigners, irrespective of their being Czech citizens of long standing. Such approaches have been reported by women residing now in all the three countries: Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic.

The research showed that our respondents automatically assumed responsibility for the material well-being of the families, especially children, and strove to mitigate their social marginalization. Besides, they have always done their best to keep themselves neat and smart and be thus a credit to the families into which they married.

The women mostly abandoned their own career ambitions, pinning them on the children and focusing on the children's educational support. This strategy proved to be successful and the second-generation children acquired good education. Quite a few women of those we have researched, however, found a professional occupation. As regards purely economic success, the most effective way to go was establishing a family business.

The heroism of conduct that our respondents demonstrated does not lie only in the enormous professional and personal effort they invested in their children. The women themselves stressed the importance of traditions and family ties, just like that of the obligations and customs respected in their home countries. Our research indicated that back home the women, often university or at least high-school educated, were professionally active and successful. In achieving the success they also had to rely on assistance provided by their wider families, particularly as regards care for children. Some well-to-do women even hired a paid domestic help to assist with children's upbringing, but, having emigrated, their way of life underwent a dramatic change.

Several of our respondents were given help with children by their own mothers who either accompanied them on their way abroad or followed them, and in their new country they felt lost and perplexed. Some other women, in contrast, had to take care of their mothers and/or

mothers-in-law. All respondents strove to provide remote material support to their parents left behind in the home country. Currently, some of them surrender their holidays and travel back home several times a year to help their retired parents. Taken all in all, the women had in many respects sacrificed (and have still been sacrificing) themselves for others, but they maintain it was their free decision that they are proud of and do not consider a sacrifice.

With this in mind, it may seem rather paradoxical that our respondents, when envisaging their retired life, did not wish to depend on their children. This attitude antagonizes the declared tradition according to which the family is expected to help and the children are supposed to support their retired parents. This strange shift in attitudes can be in fact perceived as consistency: the women thus only perpetuate the strategy of investing everything in the next generation. If the children had to assume responsibility for the maintenance of their parents, the effort would diminish their prospects and, by allowing this, the women would damage their previous "investment".

Since their pensions are meager, the women plan to live as economically as achievable and, more importantly, to work as long as possible. In point of fact, pensions paid to 58% of the women are not adequate to fill their basic needs, as was confirmed by the already retired women included in our sample.

The age of retirement is inevitably a critical period in the life of immigrants, when the people encounter even more and new forms of discrimination related not only to the age but also to the ethnicity (i.e. the stigma of a foreigner) and social position.

Their advanced age disadvantages the elderly on the labor market despite the qualifications and a vast pool of professional experience that they gained during their stay in the host country. Pushed by their precarious economic situation and an inborn cast of mind, the people remain active, and even as seniors they seek new jobs, often beneath their qualifications. Our respondents thus go on struggling to keep the social status that they had already achieved in emigration. Once again they find themselves in a position in which they are grateful for just any job, but, at the same time, feel ashamed by the indignity of their lowly status after lifelong excellence at work and in upbringing children. The women made every effort to prepare their kids for the labor market and to give them education they needed to smoothly integrate into the majority population, in fact into its elite. And once again they alluded to the prejudiced attitude of institutions because of their foreign origin.

Asked about their plans for returning to the home country, the women expressed worries about getting only low pensions because of the insufficient number of years worked there. Forced thus to remain in emigration, they had to develop new strategies of economic survival. In the process of aging they find it increasingly difficult to organize "caring" visits to their own parents and, in point of fact, they have to shoulder a double burden: on the one hand they must try to keep their work so as to boost their chances of getting a decent pension and on the other hand they must meet the traditional and normative commitments of providing transnational care for the elderly in the home country (as expected particularly of women). As follows from our

research, only a comprehensive inquiry into the identity and social standing of the women, as affected by their sex, age and foreign origin, allows us to fully appreciate the plight of their social situation and the moving stories of their lives.

#### **4. Discussion**

If the receiving country wishes success in the process of integration, than its givers of help will have to expand their own helping capability by developing a greater empathy for the traumas suffered by the newcomers; for the difficulties they had to face in adjusting themselves to their new environment; and for their old-age limitations.

It is also worth mentioning that the receiving countries could miss out on some potential benefits. The immigrants included in our sample were middle-class persons, in fact more upper-middle than lower-middle. They were educated, qualified, and in their home country well-to-do people (that is why they could "afford" to emigrate). Apparently, this social status should be a precursor of a trouble-free integration - the women were independent, industrious, did not expect any substantial assistance from government and invested their earnings and time to children. Society should learn how to tap the unfulfilled potential of the women, their cultural and social capital (a concept framed by Pierre Bourdieu), and help them take on a qualified work, for example in services and/or culture - this applies also to the elderly, males and females. As regards the language barrier, our research participants admitted their limited language skills, early or still existing, but the problem is not so serious as to prevent the first generation of immigrants from doing professional work and it cannot justify any discrimination on the grounds of their advanced age.

Though we think it important to highlight the painful experiences of migrants, our research results by no means indicate that the women perceive themselves as "victims". On the contrary, the research painted a picture of exceptionally strong and determined ladies.

We believe that the stories and reflections of our research participants can be very useful for the receiving country and more than interesting for many persons coming into contact with immigrants - employers, regional administrators and the public generally. We should remember that every person has its own identity based on the unique life story (Vaňková, 2017). Especially in a culture characterized by the prevailing phenomenons of globalization and fragmentation of the personal experience (Vaňková, 2013). Such social inequality could even endanger value of peace in Europe. On the other hand, mutual solidarity has the potential to rebuild the trust (Polačko. 2012).

## Acknowledgements

The theme and research of this paper „Female migrants – the issues of advancing age“ was realized from the project: Právni a spoločenské aspekty migrácie a problémy postavení menšín – Progres Q05.

## References

1. Boyd, M., Grieco, E. (2003). *Women and migration: Incorporating gender into international migration theory*. Migration Policy Institute.
2. Budayová, Z. (2017). *Social exclusion of the Roma ethnic group in the interest of social work*. Warszawa: Fundacja Art przeciw przemocy, p. 107. ISBN 978-83-949225-0-.
3. Budayová, Z., Topocer, R. (2019). Sociálne siete, ich využitie a riziká v internetovej komunikácii. In: D. Hrehová, J. Mičko (eds.), *Vysokoškolská edukácia pre digitálnu spoločnosť a v informačnej spoločnosti. Vzdelávanie, zručnosti a trh práce* (pp. 18-22). Košice: Technická univerzita.
4. Eurostat (2019). *Migration statistics and migrating populations*. Available online [http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Migration\\_and\\_migrant\\_population\\_statistics/cs](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Migration_and_migrant_population_statistics/cs), 21.05.2020.
5. Hradečná, P. (2016). *Analýza postavení a situace migrantek a žen s migračním původem ve vyšším středním a seniorském věku*. Praha: Sdružení pro integraci a migraci. ISBN 978-80-906488-1-4.
6. Pedraza, S. (1991). Women and migration: The social consequences of gender. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 17, pp. 303-325.
7. Polačko, J. (2012): Hodnoty a ich (de)formácia v európskom civilizačnom priestore. In: M. Kmec (ed.), *Multilaterálne aspekty života spoločnosti, No 6* (pp. 116-125). Vysoká škola medzinárodného podnikania ISM Slovakia v Prešove.
8. Polačko, J. (2019). Christian Culture as Antagonism of Relativism and Byzantine singularity. In: E. Pribišová, J. Polačko (eds.), *New dimensions in the quality of life. Interdisciplinary research* (pp. 129-140). York University.
9. Šuľová, M. (2014). *Komunitné centrum ako nástroj na podporu rómskej kultúry. Rómske komunitné centrum Zbudské Dlhé – okres Humenné*. Ružomberok: Verbum, p. 74. ISBN 978-80-561-0196-4.
10. Vaňková, I. (2013). Človek-čas-jazyk, Naratívny pohľad na filozoficko-antropologický problém osobnej identity človeka. In: O. Sisáková (ed.), *Človek v pluralite perspektív súčasnej filozofie* (pp. 71-150). Filozofická fakulta Prešovskej university.
11. Vaňková, I. (2017). *Život ako story – Ja ako text*. Prešovská univerzita v Prešove.