12 Transnational family life and female migration in Italy: One or multiple patterns?

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12.1 Introduction[1]

Research on transnational family life – that is, the manifold ongoing interactions between migrants, especially women, and the family members left behind – has resulted in a growing body of empirical studies over the last decade. Seldom, however, have they been conducted in a comparative perspective and much less so with respect to European Union receiving countries. The chapter draws on original empirical data to provide a novel comparison between transnational family attitudes, practices and perspectives in three migration flows, linking Italy to such diverse areas as Poland, Ukraine and Ecuador.

The three sending countries basically share some relevant traits in terms of time of immigration, gender balance and niches of employment in the receiving labour market. Each of them has produced, over the last decade or so, mostly female migrant flows to Western Europe – involving temporary or longer-term emigration to Russia, Poland, Germany and Mediterranean countries – from Ukraine; to Germany, Belgium and later France and Italy from Poland; to Spain and Italy from Ecuador.

The original data upon which the chapter builds come from different research sites. In relation to Ukrainian and Polish immigration, we rely on a national non-representative sample of interviews from 2003 to 2005 conducted with immigrant women working in the domestic sector in Italy.[2] Most were Eastern European women, silently 'colonising' the domestic labour market in the country. This source has been complemented with a period of ethnography and in-depth interviews of Ukrainian women working in Italy, conducted by Ludovica Banfi, and participant observation following some interviewees in their summer journeys back home (Chernovtsi Oblast). As for Ecuadorian immigration, the chapter relies first of all on an in-depth study conducted through ethnography and biographical interviewing in a local area in Northern Italy (in the Trento province) and, to a lesser extent, in a local sending community in Ecuador (Pasaje in the El Oro province). This original source has been supplemented with preliminary field research on Ecuadorians' transnational attitudes and social practices, which built on the unique opportunity provided by immigrants' involvement, from a distance, in 2006 national elections.[3]

After an overview of the literature on the familial dimension of transnational immigrant processes, we will analyse the main commonalities and differences among the three cases in relation to their socio-demographic profile, their driving forces, the role of factors such as networks, migration and immigrant policies, and the relevance of distance to the homeland. We will then focus on the domain of transnational family life, framing it from a threefold viewpoint: the evolution of intergenerational relationships at a distance and the adaptations they produce on the life course of those involved; the after-effects of familial separation, provisional or not, on gender and couple relationships; and the other side of transnational family life – that is, the impact of remittances on social and community structures in the receiving countries.

12.2 On transnationalism and family life at a distance in migration studies

The concept of transnationalism[4] has appeared high on the agenda of recent migration studies debate and is by now common to a wide body of literature. It basically shares the assumption that more and more immigrants continue in numerous ways to exert influence at a distance on the social life back home. One of the areas where the transnational approach has proved more helpful, in recent years, has to do with immigrant families, namely, with the impact of migration on family structures. This chapter provides an empirical, comparative case study on the social functioning of transnational families. It looks at the transnational social life that can be inferred in the everyday life experience of family members living at a distance as an effect of labour migration, displacing many of them – increasingly, mothers – from their own country. This approach has resulted over the last decade in mostly qualitative and multi-sited (Marcus 1995) empirical studies concerned with two principal topics. The first regards the development of intergenerational and conjugal relationships at a distance, notably the personal experiences of transnational motherhood (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila 1997; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001). Research here focuses on the influence exerted by migration on the representations and practices of motherhood – that is, how mother-child relationships are adapted and modified, once they can no longer rely (for a shorter or longer time) on physical proximity. On the other hand, it may also deal with transnational childhood (Parreñas 2005) or the consequences of women's migration on children left behind, concerning their upbringing, affective needs, inclusion in education and peer groups, and future life expectations (see Bonizzoni this volume). A second central topic, complementary to the first, is related to ways of managing and reproducing familial (and generally social) ties at a distance over time

(Bryceson & Vuorela 2003). The assumption here is that transnational family life may result in a new familial arrangement, not necessarily ending up in family disruption, nor set to vanish immediately once family reunion has taken place.

Altogether the very notion of transnational family still seems in itself little more than a heuristic device, given the huge diversity of underlying family structures and, even more so, migration systems (Landolt & Wei Da 2005). Through our exploratory field-work in three cases, we nevertheless wonder if any relevant commonality may be detected concerning ways of living family life at a distance. We wonder whether such commonalities – if any – are due more to the social and economic features of the three inflows, or to their interaction with Italian migration policies and the local structures of opportunities (especially in the domestic labour market), or with any other social factor to be empirically analysed. To what extent and why may we detect one pattern in family life at a distance of immigrants from Ukraine, Poland and Ecuador? In what respects should we rather expect three different patterns, or maybe many patterns or as many patterns as the families involved (i.e. no common pattern at all)?

12.3 Three women-led immigrant flows to Italy: commonalities and differences

All three immigration flows are relatively new in the context of Italy. While Polish immigration had reached a certain level by the end of the 1980s, large-scale Ukrainian and Ecuadorian flows to Italy started in the mid-1990s. A common turning point was marked by the 2002 national regularisation. Those who regularised at the time accounted for more than half the Ecuadorians and the Ukrainians being documented, as of 2006 (ISTAT 2006).

In Ukraine, the opening up of borders in 1991, after national independence, enabled citizens' access to the international and, in particular, EU labour markets. Open borders provided a novel opportunity to improve the standard of living by means of temporary labour stays (Malinowska 2004). According to a 2001 survey by the Institute of Sociology of NAS Ukraine, 10.2 per cent of Ukrainian households members have some experience of temporary labour migration. In fact, the number of labour migrants is even larger, since each household may include several persons involved. Further estimates, however, exceed such data by far. Some economists claim there may be up to 5 million people abroad. Until 1998, women dominated Ukrainian emigration. Only in the last few years have men started to increase among new immigrants abroad (Pirozhkov, Malinovskaya & Homra 2003).

Despite being a relatively recent destination country, Italy seems to be characterised by a trend towards long-term residence. Alongside Spain, the country has indeed turned out to be one of the most popular receiving countries since the mid-1990s. Documented migrants from Ukraine now amount to some 115,000 persons, thus ranking as the fourth-largest immigrant group in Italy (ISTAT 2006). Overall, it is the inflow where women (some 83 per cent) most outnumber men and are overrepresented in the domestic sector.

As for Polish immigration to Italy, the first women arrived in the 1980s, thanks to religious-based networks that enabled finding a job in the domestic sector (Andall 2000). However, available data suggests that the Polish inflow has undergone – at least in terms of documented migration – a process of stabilisation, unlike most other Eastern European ones (Weber 2004). This may be due to the prevailing orientation towards a circulatory migration pattern, thus avoiding any regularisation altogether. Documented migrants from Poland now number over 73,000 (ISTAT 2006), ranking as the seventh-largest immigrant group in Italy. Seventy-two per cent are women. While Germany was once the most common destination for Ukrainians, Italy emerged in the 1990s as a long-term destination country (Wallace & Stola 2001). As for gender differences, the Polish case basically mirrors the Ukrainian one, albeit with relevant variations in the single receiving countries. With respect to changes in European migration patterns post-enlargement, the Italian case – where Polish immigration is still highly feminised – is quite different than the United Kingdom, where there is higher male migration and Poles fill a wider range of occupational niches.[5] In part this is due to the fact that in May 2004 the UK, Ireland and Sweden were the only countries granting workers from new EU member states free access to their labour markets. The majority of individuals registering in the UK Worker Registration Scheme since May 2004 have been Polish (62 per cent, male accounting for 58 per cent of them) (Ruhs 2006).

In the Ecuadorian context, international emigration dates back to the early 1960s, with a male-led flow that gradually settled in the United States. This involved mostly peasant communities from a few Andean areas (Kyle 2000). Only as an effect of the crisis culminating in the late 1990s, however, has emigration turned into a national phenomenon, increasingly directed to European countries such as Spain and, to a lesser extent, Italy (Herrera, Carrillo & Torres 2005). Both countries turned out to be privileged destinations of the migration explosion originating in 1999, sweeping all components of the local population in terms of social classes and sending regions (FLACSO 2008). Documented immigrants from Ecuador in Italy currently amount to some 70,000 persons, 61per cent of whom are female (ISTAT 2007), most having begun arriving in the late 1990s, probably as tourists. While most undocumented immigrants at

the time gained access to the 2002 amnesty, a formal visa requirement was introduced in 2003. Ever since, new Ecuadorian immigration to Europe has resulted mostly from family reunions, leading to a relative increase in flows of males.

Immigrant women working in Italy from each of the three countries are strongly segregated in the domestic sector.[6] As such, literature on the feminisation of migration in Italy has tended to focus on domestic work.[7] In all three cases, the 'start-up' of massive emigration seems marked by a tacit, grass-roots process of gender self-selection.[8] While in Eastern European flows, this gender imbalance apparently increased after the collapse of Communism, in the case of Ecuador, some argue that such a gender pattern may be regarded as little less than a peculiarity in migration history (Gratton 2007). Whatever the actual novelty of this gender distribution, factors accounting for it include:

- firstly, a widespread demand for care-related (and typically female) labour in receiving Southern European countries with a traditionally 'familialist' welfare regime (Ferrera 1996);
- secondly, the widespread reliance on information and contacts provided by (mainly female) acquiantances compared to 'stronger ties' (relatives and close friends) in the country of destination;
- finally, the opportunity for many women to move away from familial arrangements imbued with male-chauvinistic ways of life – or even broken up by divorce or separation – without abdicating their responsibilities to the families (especially to their children) at home.

Overall, family disruption is commonly regarded as an issue preceding emigration. The latter serves as a turning point, which affects already weak familial relationships, rather than being the only cause of their widespread crisis (Herrera 2005; Pedone 2006).

12.4 Why leave? Driving forces, subjective aims and chain migration

In the Ecuadorian case, multiple causes were behind the late 1990s' sudden emigration increase (FLACSO 2008). The fundamental one lies in the sudden impoverishment triggered by 1999's severe economic crisis, which culminated in a defaulting to external debt and the collapse of several banks (despite a contentious 'freezing' of bank deposits), until the formal dollarisation of the national economy (World Bank 2004). In this gloomy scenario marked by intense political distrust and an apparent lack of any future prospects, migration is increasingly perceived by an increasing share of the population – not necessarily the more indigent or the unemployed – as a viable (or arguably as the only) option to earn a decent

livelihood for one's family and possibly improve one's position or, as Ecuadorians put it, *para salir adelante* ('to get ahead').

As far as Poland and Ukraine are concerned, a clear driving force of westward female emigration lies in high levels of job loss and unemployment, the result of the last fifteen years' economic restructuring into a market economy (Morokvasic 2003; Coyle 2003) (though Ukraine being in a much earlier phase of the transition period). Although the end of Communism did not exert the same effects everywhere, all the countries involved experienced a dramatic shift from a state economy to a market economy whose main features were privatisation of state-owned productive assets, structural adjustment policies, price and wage liberalisation, real wage decline and price increases. The overall result was high unemployment, poverty and dramatic new levels of social inequality (Bunce 1999; UNIFEM 2006).

A common characteristic can also be highlighted in nearly all the narratives of the women we interviewed: before leaving home they were rarely living in conditions of utter deprivation. As some of our Ecuadorian immigrants would probably contend, 'no one would ever starve there' due to an abundance of natural resources in the country. On the other hand, in rural areas in Eastern European countries, the viable tradition of cultivating land allowed for a decent family livelihood. While, generally speaking, economic reasons account for growing emigration, the major aim underlying most migration projects – making them especially relevant in a transnational perspective – has to do specifically with supporting children at home and building a better future for them.

Another common trait lies in the undetermined yet generally high rate of divorced, separated or widowed women. The absence of a husband and hence of a second, or even first, income to support the family deeply influences women's decisions. Divorced and separated women generally report that their ex-husband provides no economic help in sustaining children. Furthermore, Eastern European countries have undertaken a restructuring of social security programmes. State policies no longer try to assist women in balancing work and family. Instead, they have reinforced the tradition of women's sole responsibility for reproductive work and have cut (or allowed the devaluation of) state subsidies for child-care institutions, maternity leave and parental sick leave (UNIFEM 2006).

Ukrainian and Ecuadorian women's decision to leave seems aimed, firstly, at providing for children's livelihood (including education and health expenses) as well as to pay children's university fees, and, secondly, at building (or renovating) a new house in the motherland.[9] Often emigration is compelled by emergency circumstances such as the illness of a family member, resulting in the need for expensive drugs no longer provided by the national health systems. In the case of Polish women, our interviewees revealed other motivations: while some younger women

departed because of unemployment, others did in order to sustain children or to pay their university fees. In Polish respondents' accounts, migration often still sounds as though it's a strategy aiming to improve consumption: new furniture, fancy clothes, etc. Among older Polish women, migration seems instead like a way to supplement their own pensions. As Morawska (2000) suggests, migrants from Eastern Europe can rely on some relevant, albeit non-determinant, welfare benefits. While this seems to hold true for Poland, it is not really the case for Ukraine, and much less so for Ecuador.

In all three cases, migration processes generally do not seem to enable savings relevant enough to start a new business back home – though this may emerge as a future wish, indefinitely postponed after more urgent objectives have been realised. Remittances, in other words, maintain a crucial familial function, but hardly ever, for the time being, are they used for investment (Goldring 2004).[11]

Most women leave having supposedly only temporary migration projects. The feasibility of such expectations, however, significantly differs from one country to the other. A short-term orientation is especially apparent in the accounts of Polish women, who often leave to take the place of a relative or a friend already working in Italy and expect an extremely brief initial stay. Instead, in the Ecuadorian and Ukrainian cases, the initial expectation of a brief emigration ('some years, no more' was a common refrain) is met with the everyday experience of hard work, slow savings and even slower progress. All this makes going back home a still cherished option, but viable only in the middle term; being done in the short term mostly suggests a straightforward failure in one's migration.

It is also worth comparing the three cases from the viewpoint of the social capital they rely on, this crucial meso-level of analysis (Faist 2000). Polish women have been at the forefront of the new paradigm of cross-border mobility and work in Europe (Wallace & Stola 2001; Morokvasic 2003), i.e. commuting migration. As a matter of fact, they can rely on strong pre-existing social networks in Italy, as well as the greater viability of their circular migration. As our interviews indicate, when leaving as well as later on, they can mostly get easily access to a workplace, thanks to an extended ethnic network providing for it. These networks comprising mostly of weak ties may produce different forms of support: most of all finding a job and some accommodation. The two usually coincide; when arriving in Italy, migrant women usually end up working as live-in caregivers. This enables them to gain access to a basic livelihood, besides being protected from controls should they be undocumented. If they become unemployed (elderly caregivers usually lose their jobs when the assisted person dies), immigrant women can go back to Poland and wait there for a new job offer in Italy. As one respondent told us, this also allows better comparison of job proposals and to avoid 'job-buying', a last resort

for women who cannot draw on effective social networks. It is worth noting that Polish women's priority to return whenever they like may necessarily result in their choice to not become documented in Italy. Women with younger children at home preferred, even after spending some years abroad, not to become legal because regularity – in concrete terms, having a regular contract – would allow them only one month's leave (Banfi 2008).

For Ukrainian migrant women, social networks seem to play a much weaker role. This is partly due to a more recent and unstructured migration system. Unlike Polish women, most Ukrainians resort to travel agencies or other intermediaries to provide their visa and organise their journey. Rarely do they have relatives or friends waiting for them in Italy; or possibly, they rely on weak ties that do not provide much support. Many of the women we interviewed did not actually know what their final destination would be when leaving, and the first information about the destination country was provided by women travelling on the same bus to Italy. At the end of their journey, many of our interviewees ended up in some square of a metropolitan city that served as a meeting place for migrants of various ethnic background, where jobs in the domestic sector and accommodations (i.e. one bed in mixed, overcrowded apartments) were 'sold' by migrants of various nationalities (including Italian). Job-selling in the domestic sector seems quite frequent among workers from Eastern Europe, but it is in the Ukrainian community where it seems more widespread. The lack of resources (house and job, above all) could be the main reason for this. Indeed, its origin could be traced back to the institutionalised practice of *blat* under socialism, i.e. a non-monetary and reciprocal exchange enabling access to consumer goods in shortage (Mazzacurati 2004).

In the Ecuadorian case, too, the relevance of parental networks at a distance has been widely emphasised, at least insofar as they may direct new immigrants to a one particular local context, depending on compatriots' informal contacts (Lagomarsino 2006; Boccagni 2009). The role of a notoriously unequal and fragmented resource, such as immigrants' social capital, even increased paradoxically after 2003's enforcement of an EU visa. This resulted in family reunions and 'nominal summons' as nearly the only viable channels to Europe for would-be Ecuadorian immigrants. When leaving the country, the role of family networks is furthermore critical in supporting emigrants, to varying extents, in the debts they mostly have to contract.

12.5 Family life at a distance: On the scope and functioning of transnational social fields

What happens to conjugal and affective relationships, after a mother and wife leaves her family? Building a life space including no less than two distinct places and separated by juridical and geographical borders means both introducing strangeness in a familial world and creating familiarity (or even intimacy) in order to relieve the consequences of that very strangeness (Weber 2004; Baldassar, Baldock & Wilding 2007). As a result of migration, one's family space (and structure) may undergo manifold transformations.

The overall picture of family life at a distance in the three cases analysed is a highly differentiated one. Rather than all-encompassing transnational social fields (Levitt & Glick Schiller 2004), most women's narratives reflect a set of fragmented, highly particularistic relationships that are not always predictable in terms of how solid or persistent they prove. As significant as crossborder contacts may turn out to be, especially in the affective realm, only to some extent and given certain conditions can they somehow act as a surrogate for physical proximity.

12.5.1 Evolving intergenerational relationships

The age structure of women in the three streams is reflected in the age of the children left behind at the time of emigration. Polish and Ukrainian respondents usually left home when their children were teenagers or adults (i.e. already parents) themselves. In Ecuador the practice of leaving infants behind – though officially stigmatised, whatever the underlying reasons or constraints – is quite widespread (Pedone 2006). In fact, over the last decade this practice seems to have gained some unwritten, grassroots legitimation.

When a woman emigrates her children are left in the charge of some relative, often a woman herself, as other studies confirm (Parreñas 2001, 2005; Balsamo 2006). Women left behind in the country of origin bear the main responsibility of the caring and social reproduction work. Even in the case of married women, rarely is a husband the only and/or principal caregiver of his children. Often children are raised by grandmothers, sisters, daughters-in-law and, though less frequently, neighbours or paid caregivers.

Our field-work suggests that in Ukrainian transnational families especially, children in the country of origin are raised by relatives other than fathers. Usually migrant women send remittances to the children's carer, thus assuring the children's (and often the carer's) welfare. Economic remittances, however, are by no means the only resource they may exchange. When a migrant mother leaves behind adolescent children, the

children are often left to care for themselves. In this case, the elder daughter (or a daughter-in-law) may have to look after younger siblings and often after fathers.

The separation between a mother and her children, above all when they are very young, is an obvious source of pain and guilt. While commuting Polish women are able to return home often, Ukrainians and Ecuadorians rarely see their families for several years, at least until they have a residence permit. In the Ecuadorian case most of all, the extent and depth of communication at a distance, even in family relationships, seems constantly jeopardised by the sending country's remoteness, which obviously impacts the feasibility of visits back home. This might only lose relevance on the grounds of communication technology, which for all the women's groups we happened to study still remains much less widespread and more 'socially selective' than one would expect. Most migrants we met were clearly committed to keeping in touch with their families back home. Yet, among Ecuadorian women, the frequency of return trips to the motherland – whether sometimes once a year, if even ever – should not be assumed to indicate different degrees of attachment to one's family, nor one's unease in the receiving society, but rather the actual 'success' of one's migration process.

Migrant women leaving infant children behind express the most painful aspects of transnational motherhood as they miss out on key moments such as birthdays, First Communions, etc. However close one may feel, physical distance remains an objective constraint, more much so when it cannot be bridged by frequent, circular migration. This applies most obviously to critical events such as the serious illness or the death of a family member.

> [You can participate] only with your own thoughts... as I know from the experience of my mother's death. [...] We are accustomed, there [in Ecuador], to hold a wake at the dead person's home [...]. That day they did so, then they carried her to the cemetery... [Here in Italy] we had a mass, the priest prayed for my mother's soul too. [...] But at the funeral's time [night in Italy] I was alone. I was calling my daughter all the time, and she was telling me: 'We are almost at the cemetery now', 'We are praying'... it was awful. (R., Ecuador, 45 years old, in Italy for five years)

> [Since I have been in Italy] everything has changed, life has changed... some things in good ways, some things in bad ways... this has changed: that I have earned money and I have sent some of it home... life has changed because here I have gained this money, but I lost my husband.... and so it's more what I have lost than what I've gained... I always feel guilty, I always feel that it is my

> fault he died... (A., Ukraine, 48 years old, in Italy for five years)

Also very painful for transnational migrants is the experience of not being recognised as mother by their own children.

> I call him [the child left behind] every day, I speak to him, I tell him I love him, also the other day... But he calls my mother 'Mummy', he says that he has a second mother and that's me. I am not the first mother, I am the second one... and this happened after seven months that I was here. He lives with my mother. (I., Poland, 50 years old, in Italy for three years)

> My daughters... it is not easy. They were happy for me but they suffered a lot, they missed me a lot. For them it was like I was dead. And now that they have settled in Italy, we have realised that this void... all the time we spent apart will never be filled, there is always a gap between us... our ties were broken, we had to restart from the beginning. They had changed, they were different. Something terrible. From when she was fourteen to eighteen years old, I was not there. And my eldest daughter... she came to Italy, leaving her two-year-old boy... It seems like there is a war, without shootings, but there is a war, this is the feeling. (O., Ukraine, 53 years old, in Italy for nine years)

According to the popular wisdom of many Ecuadorian women we interviewed, leaving one's children in their infancy, albeit painful and regrettable, is supposed to be relatively safe – provided grandfathers, sometimes fathers or even elder brothers, take care of them. But leaving adolescent children may be much worse. Indeed, it may imply losing any control on them. Many young mothers we met apparently expected to be able to reunite with their children in Italy before that critical phase. This somehow holds true also among Ukrainian parents. A proverb cited by a few respondents went: 'Young children, small problems; older children, bigger problems'.

> When your daughter is seventeen, she falls in love, in this very moment it's hard and I was so scared for her... I was scared also for my son, that he would follow bad ways, but thank God I am happy about the persons they became, because they are good. I brought them up by the phone, as I happened to call them ten times a day. (O., Ukraine, 50 years old, in Italy for six years)

Providing for children's livelihood stands out. It is the only stated, self-conscious mission of the new life after leaving children behind, suppos-

edly for a short time. Emphasis on the material gains that emigration should accrue somewhat softens the relevance, let alone the suffering, of their actual affective loss.

> You feel stronger as you say: 'Well, I'm working for them... that's all!' Stronger, I mean that... you think: 'Who am I here for?' I think: 'If I was alone, what's the point of staying here? Why do I stay here, making sacrifices, staying alone... why?' It wouldn't make sense. (M., Ecuador, 25 years old, in Italy for five years)

Women retain ties with children left behind by sending remittances, communicating at a distance and visiting home. As for the relevance and feasibility of communication at a distance, all the transnational mothers we interviewed were accustomed to keeping regularly in contact with their families (especially with the children themselves and their carers), mostly by phone, from every day to once a week. While communicating with their families, most mothers seem intentionally to leave out, or even disguise, any detailed reference to their own life conditions, including the difficulties and troubles they may be facing.

> Whenever I call them up, they tell me what happens there, what they're doing, or how's my child doing – what about school, what he did, what he didn't... and anything more about him. All about my family: what's happening, what will happen... all about them. If they ask me how do I do here, fine? And I – even when I feel bad – I always tell them I feel well. 'Cause I – I don't want them to suffer. So, I'd never... tell them how I do really feel. (Y., Ecuador, 27 years old, in Italy for four years)

Visits home may represent a way to try to rebuild the earlier relationship. Also, the length of time spent at home is important. Some women, however, remember returning home as a painful experience; both they and their kids stay together for a few weeks and then split up again.

12.5.2 Evolving couple and gender relationships

In this section we consider the effects of lasting spatial distance on the relationship between the members of a couple. What perception do immigrant women retain about the possibility of preserving their marriage despite physical separation? Does female migration necessarily end up splitting a couple? In the transnational family does a woman's departure represent a reaction to an already troublesome conjugal life? Or is it a new form of family arrangement? Or even a new transnational type of female and family identity (Colombo 2003; Balsamo 2006)? The relationship

between migration and family disruption is hardly straightforward. A precarious or even broken partnership seems to trigger a woman's decision to leave, maybe more often being the case than decisions reflecting a common, household alternative. This seems true for all three national groups.

Among the married women we interviewed, there is widespread perception that one's conjugal relationship is seriously jeopardised by extended physical separation. Despite this, the relationship at a distance with their partners, even when it does endure, generally seems to occupy a lower rung of the 'affection hierarchy' than their relationship with children. Many women report communicating longer with their children (especially the younger ones) than with their husbands.

At the root of a couple's split supposedly lies, in our interviewees' words, one's husband's unfaithfulness. Interestingly, in the Ukrainian respondents' perception, the eventual separation is strongly framed as the husband's incapability of staying alone 'for a few years'.

> I wouldn't say that we feel more apart with the children, no, because we often call, they tell me their lives... of course you always feel a sort of... distance. But concerning my husband [left at home] you never know what to think... To tell the truth, our relationship gets colder and colder... yeah, because nowadays here we [she and her female friends] spend our spare time together, we go out together, et cetera – and they [Ukrainian husbands left behind], too, live with each other... and we always need to close one eye, try not to say bad words on the phone...
>
> (Interviewer): Not all goes smooth... I understand... you feel more the distance with your husband...
>
> (Respondent): Yes, more with my husband. Of course, I will never let my husband leave me... I will definitely run home before because children need both parents, the mother and the father. But it is really difficult, you know... I know many families that divorced after she migrated. Because in Ukraine men always find other women to live with and, unfortunately, a wife in Italy can't do anything from here. (L., Ukraine, 39 years old, in Italy for four years)

Whilst men are often blamed for the end of the relationship, other Ukrainian interviewees refer to women's responsibility, too. Whoever is to be blamed, the end of a relationship is always framed as a matter of unfaithfulness, due to the partners' living far apart. There is a general consensus among Ukrainian women, however, that the greater risk of a definitive rutpure applies to relatively younger couples.[10]

In much the same way, an Ecuadorian interviewee frames the troubles in couples living apart as a result of 'cultural imprinting', rather than of

the apparent and objective obstacles created by physical remoteness. In this perspective, many problems are supposed to derive from their common, self-blaming collective representation as Latinos. This label, while being a potential source of proud self-identification, is instead constructed by most women we interviewed as a natural source of irresponsibility, applying especially to men:

> When one leaves... I don't know, it seems that love is like a seed: wherever you go, it's going to grow... to take root elsewhere... so, it's inevitable, as your life is right there, and I must admit that, unfortunately, we are – as Latinos – a little irresponsible, aren't we? Our man, above all, he is very masculine, you know? Very macho and irresponsible... we know that a woman there [in Ecuador] has children, has a family... while a man cares only for himself, no more... that is, generally speaking, Latino people are like this: men are irresponsible... and even, in some cases, even women... (R., Ecuador, 44 years old, in Italy for four years)

Women's emphasis on their own partners' irresponsibility (often ending in a comprehensively stereotypical, negative representation of men) is paralleled by a proud celebration of their own role as the actual 'pillars of the family'. This may relieve their pain and possibly guilt for leaving their children behind.

> How is it that one leaves, disappears, even forgets one's children... one's family? You can't do that... still, that's what happens so often. Men do go away and forget everything... That's why you can see more women than men, right here... women keep helping their children to go forward, that's what happens most, you know? It's women who are in charge of the family... it's a mother who gives birth to her child, so it's she who is more... (R., Ecuador, 44 years old, in Italy for four years)

Even when both partners agree that women should leave first, the very experience of common migration, once the male partner has also left and rejoined his wife, may result either in preserving the earlier relationship or in splitting up. Much depends on men's chances and skills in adjusting to a labour market and on the social context, arguably more difficult for them than their female counterparts. In the medium term, however, it seems that unless a partner reunification takes place (or is expected to), keeping on with a steady conjugal relationship at distance – or *aprender a convivir* ('learning to live together'), as Pribilsky (2004) puts it – will get more and more difficult. This holds particularly true in the case of Ecuadorian women.

Among Ukrainian women, we have found instances of failed reunifications that did not result in a couple's definitive separation. Some partners of the women we interviewed, after joining them in Italy, eventually ended up working in the domestic sector as well, especially when not young and healthy enough to find a job in construction. Such 'women's work', however, could be perceived as demeaning. If unable to find any other job, a man could decide to give up and return home.

> My family... what can I say?! I have been married for seven years and I have been in Italy five years! So I spent just two years with my husband. Well, he came to Italy and stayed here with me for two years. I was working as a caregiver for the elderly, right? And he, too, worked as a caregiver. We managed to see each other every day because we both had a two-hour break, from 2 pm to 4 pm. Then my employers gradually got used to letting me go out during the evening as well... we were doing good. But at one moment my husband got tired. He said: 'You stay here, since you have a job, and I go home and care for our [six-year-old] child,' and so he went back home. (O., Ukraine, 29 years old, in Italy for six years)

As for Polish women, female migration can lead to the same multiple transformations in familial arrangements: a marriage preservation, a divorce following migration, a new family life in Italy or some 'intermediate solution'. However, women's migration does not seem to end so often in a couple's separation. The key point is rather the frequency with which a woman can return home, at least in the initial period of migration. Furthermore, her relatives can and do often visit her in Italy. Even before entering the EU, Polish citizens enjoyed special-access status, allowing for frequent mutual visits between family members. As a matter of fact, in our sample no women sponsored their husbands.

> Where I accept a job, I immediately explain to the employers that I am married, I love my husband, and that we can't stay apart one year, two years, three years. All these years without a husband I love?!
>
> And, thus, every three or four months I go home to visit him, also for short, maybe just two weeks, but I go. I didn't come to Italy in order to destroy my life, I came in order to help the family, and I don't want to lose my husband. When he tells me, for instance, 'Tomorrow you come back because I can't stand it anymore,' I go back home. (A., Poland, 47 years old, in Italy for eight years)

In the Polish case, commuting migration may even become a way to put a strained marriage to test: the easy reversibility of the migration process prevents it from turning into a definitive break-up. As EU citizens, whose

homeland is not so remote from Italy, Polish migrants can rely on relatively frequent visits to Italy by their children and husband. These relatives usually stay some weeks or, for schoolchildren in the summer, some months. For children, holidays in Italy may be a first step, potentially ending up in a permanent settlement. Our interviews suggest, anyway, that children tend to visit their mothers in Italy much more often than husbands do, arguably because the spouses, as some women put it, are unused to moving. They may even feel that Italy has 'stolen' their wives. Furthermore, the scope for circular migration, the general orientation towards going back for good once migration aims have been reached and the difficulty of migrant men's placement into the Italian labour market are all reasons that discourage Polish married women from sponsoring their husbands.

12.6 The other side of transnational family life: remittances and their impact back home

Transnational circuits of affection and care at a distance also include, and indeed are fuelled, by remittances. Most women we interviewed in all three countries are accustomed to sending home remittances on a regular basis – at least as long as dependent children are left behind and provided they are not temporarily unemployed, considering the precarious domestic labour market. 'That's why we are here,' any of them would contend. Apart from the money flows ordinarily sent back to families, our field-work revealed a few cases in Ecuadorian and Ukrainian immigrant networks of spontaneous, even if sporadic and scarcely organised, collective remittances – that is, fundraising initiatives to benefit communities of origin (Goldring 2004).11 Apparently, this is not so common for the Polish case.

While in an earlier phase remittances are primarily used to pay back one's debts in the sending country (whether those contracted for leaving or the pre-existing ones that may have led to migration itself), generally speaking, remittances provide one's family daily livelihood. Apart from that, they may cover expenses for housing (buying, reconstucting or furnishing a home), child education, health care, special feasts and events, to support some family member's migration or possibly as a loan to further would-be migrants. Very seldom, however, are moneys put into any productive activities resembling the logic of Goldring (2004)'s investment remittances. This may hold true beyond the empirical cases we studied, where most migrants are women in Italy for only a relatively few years, with low or no experience in communal initiatives.

The amount of the remittances a woman sends back seems to vary according to some key factors. These include the number of people

(especially children) maintained at home, her specific job conditions, mostly in the domain of domestic work (whether in a live-in or a daily arrangement) and even the local area where she is settled in Italy. Once close family members are reunited in Italy, however, remittances tend to rapidly decrease if not altogether cease. Should this happen, exceptions would include spontaneous or episodic presents or donations given on grounds other than the logic of reciprocity informing remittances.

It is difficult to estimate the overall relative proportion of money sent back and thus the prevailing patterns of saving and consumption in the cases we analysed.12 The ongoing presence of (dependent) children at home, however, seems to be the key variable accounting for the amount and the evolution over time of remittance flows. Apart from that, ethnographic evidence suggests that many Ukrainian women show a peculiarly strong 'ethics of remittances' even several years after leaving. This may induce them – by means of further informal, daily 'menial jobs' – to sacrifice most of their spare time while in Italy. Their consumption in Italy, on the other hand, seems to involve mostly the basic 'toolkit' for transnational family relations: telephone cards to communicate back home. At least within the immigrant profile we studied, rarely was the internet regarded as a viable alternative.

The women's accounts suggest a higher degree of remittance-dependence on the part of those left behind in Ukrainian and Ecuadorian migration, compared with the Polish case. Of crucial relevance here are the diverse life and professional opportunities accessible to the second generations at home. While Poland is now a full member of the EU labour market, emigrant mothers from Ukraine and Ecuador may be forced to keep sending back money even after the end of their children's educational career.

Another significant difference has to do with the channels for sending remittances. Unlike the other groups, Polish women may be in more direct control of the money they remit, thanks to their more frequent journeys back home. Ukrainians must instead send remittances through some intermediary informal Ukrainian-managed agency. A distrust of formal credit institutions is shared both by Ukrainians and Ecuadorians, due to the severe financial crises that helped trigger emigration in their respective countries. For Ecuadorian immigrants, however, utterly informal remittance channels are simply unviable. While grass-roots money transfers still seem more common, most women interviewed were aware of the higher costs involved as compared to banking services. Arguably, banks are gaining increasing relevance the longer immigrants are settling in a locality.

A few remarks need to be made with respect to those receiving remittances. Among our interviewees, while most Polish women reported sending money to their partners back home, Ukrainians tended to focus

directly on the children left behind or, in the case of minors, those taking care of them (mostly grandparents). The same applies to Ecuadorians. Recurrent in women's narratives are complaints about the bad ways in which their husbands supposedly spend the money received from overseas as well as, more generally, the collective myths on 'easy gains' emerging in their communities of origin.

When an actual remittance dependency emerges, immigrant women tend to frame (and stigmatise) it as a sort of exploitation towards their own hard labour. However, they see it as something that cannot by any means be prevented.

> The only thing I always suggest to the others is that they should never send all the money home – the whole wage... [it's] better to send a half, and leave the rest in a bank here. I saw many situations where the money you send seems really 'heavensent'. They don't understand, they can't appreciate your valuable support, they don't even realise their mother – step by step, little by little – sends them all her life, her health. And they waste it like that... so keep some money for yourself. (O., Ukraine, 53 years old, in Italy for nine years)

12.7 Conclusion

By comparing transnational family life in three women-led migration flows to Italy, we have found that transnational families may be constituted in manifold ways. By focusing on their ways of retaining relations at a distance with partners and children left behind, our comparative analysis has highlighted some common elements. On the one hand, migration is mostly driven by women's responsibility (in economic and moral terms) to their family members at home, with particular respect to children. However, the different age structures in the three groups are related, generally speaking, with divergent age patterns in children left behind. While Ecuadorian women may tend to leave children behind even in their infancy, this is less the case among Ukrainian immigrants who leave mostly as young grandmothers (known as babuschke), supporting through remittances even more than one generation in the communities of origin.

Judging from the biographical accounts we analysed, migration may represent a way out of already strained couplehood. Many women, driven by concern for a better future life for their children, leave after a failed marriage or possibly after their partners have left them alone. Given the premise, at least in the cases we studied, female emigration may stem from the necessity to find further income sources on behalf of families that in fact were already often female-headed. As to the evolution of con-

jugal relationships, after the turning point marked by migration, a high differentiation in familial arrangements appears. Reunification (whether in sending or receiving country) and disruption cover the range of endpoints, though these circumstances are not the only ones or necessarily the most widespread. Within such a continuum we may focus on some relatively congruent patterns (and on the most frequent factors accounting for them).

The main distinction seems to lie in how migrants' agency – in terms of the aims, expectations and resources moving their initial projects and evolving over time – is able to interact with structural factors. These include the legal frameworks in the receiving countries, the evolving labour demand and the differential impact of geographical distance and its related costs (whether allowing for circular migration or not).

Actually existing transnational couples who maintain conjugal relationships at a distance over time (in contrast to a conventional, proximate, daily interactions-based family view) can be detected to some extent within the Polish case. This has obviously to do with Poles' far easier access to the EU labour market even before the 2004 enlargement. A Polish migrant family may qualify as transnational insofar as it practices a circular migration pattern. This entails easily allowing visits back home and family members' visits to Italy. Moreover, the relative proximity to the sending country and the declining scope of remittances after the end of children's education are two other elements singling out a transnational family pattern in Polish migration flows. Easy mobility between the two countries is perceived by the women as a way to retain their unity over time. Some women even intentionally opt for irregular work (renouncing the advantages accruing from a full legal status), as doing otherwise might limit their autonomy to return home whenever they like. Relatively seldom do Polish women feel the need to reunite with their husbands in Italy. More often than not, they retain a substantive home-return orientation. In their own case, a return perspective, albeit contentious and systematically postponed, relies on a solid basis.

Conjugal disruption as the result of migration seems much more widespread among Ukrainian families. In immigrants' experience, initial expectations for a short emigration process are mostly disappointed, thus contributing to family crisis. This may occur for several potential reasons including lack of a legal status, obstacles to partners' reunification (related to 'adverse selectivity' concerning gender and age in the receiving labour market) and an ongoing dependence on remittances by family members left behind. It is as though Ukrainian women were living in an apnoea-like state, being prevented from planning their own future life. Still, this attitude may reflect a renegotiation, while abroad, of a woman's own private sphere – allowing her to 'think for herself', while still sending remittances – that she could never enjoy in her own country. Many

women's accounts suggest also a perceived, supposed inability to 'resist distance' in one's affective life; hence, the experience of new affective relationships on both sides (albeit mostly involving their partners at home).

As to the Ecuadorian case, our analysis suggests two possible scenarios. The first involves family reunion in the short to medium term. This is facilitated by a relatively low age profile, though men's and children's integration may be less smooth than females' as the first migrants. The second is conjugal disruption, which often reflects pre-existing frailties and inherent tensions in local family arrangements. Comparatively few are instances of transborder conjugal relationships that are kept alive after a few years' separation, without any viable, short-term perspective on a new family arrangement constituted through physical proximity. Most women we interviewed do express, even when relatively 'well integrated' in Italy, a future return expectation. While being a relevant symbolic and identification device, this may turn out to be a poor basis for projecting future life together unless it is somehow substantiated. From this viewpoint, any instrument of communication at a distance – although powerful for keeping in touch and even influencing social life back home – is likely to be inadequate in terms of affective relationships.

In the domain of conjugal relationships, transnational family life shows an extremely diverse pattern both in scope and intensity. Yet in the field of intergenerational relationships, the overall picture reveals far more common traits. The label 'transnational family' can be usefully deployed to the extent that parents – increasingly, mothers – in immigration do provide and in many respects care for children left at home in supposedly temporary (but often longer-than-expected) terms. In the realm of conjugal relationships, on the other hand, the notion concerns a multifaceted set of familial arrangements that is vague and indeterminate, unless empirically specified. Summing up, in response to our beginning question, transnational families may indeed be framed under one pattern that involves general traits, at least regarding intergenerational relationships. And they may be framed under many different patterns, according to the migration flow and with some diversity found within every single case concerning the evolution of conjugal relationships at a distance.

Notes

1 The chapter is the result of its authors' collective effort. Nevertheless, sections 12.2, 12.4 and 12.5.2 should be attributed to Ludovica Banfi and sections 12.3, 12.5.1 and 12.5.3 to Paolo Boccagni. The introduction and conclusion were co-written by the authors.

2 Seven hundred biographical narrative interviews with female and male migrants, working as caregivers, nannies and houseworkers, were collected all over the country. They were contacted by snowball sampling (which also accounts also for some key sociodemographic variables). Of those interviewed, 60 were from Poland and 70 from Ukraine (Banfi 2008).

3 The qualitative field-work source involved some 35 in-depth interviews of Ecuadorian immigrants in Italy and 23 of their relatives in the local Ecuadorian sending community (Boccagni 2009). The survey resulted in 432 questionnaires simultaneously collected in Milan, Genoa and Rome (Boccagni 2007).

4 Among the many theoretical contributions underlying this approach, some key texts are the following: Portes, Guarnizo & Landolt (1999), Faist (2000), Kivisto (2001), Levitt (2001), Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004) and Vertovec (2004). In a gender perspective, see also Gamburd (2000), Salih (2003), Pessar and Mahler (2003) and Sorensen (2005). On transnational family life, see inter alia, Ambrosini (2008) and Boccagni (2010).

5 But most of these migrants are working in relatively low-skilled jobs: the top three occupations of Eastern European workers registered in the Worker Registration Scheme during May 2004 – June 2006 were process operatives, warehouse operatives and packers (Ruhs 2006).

6 Regularisation figures for 2002 show that 84 per cent of Ukrainian women and 54 per cent of Polish women work as houseworkers, elderly caregivers and babysitters (De Marco 2004). Polish women thus seem to have been more successful in accessing other occupational sectors. Ecuadorian workers, especially the women among them, generally have a role that could also be framed in 'niche' terms, as suggested by Gratton (2007) with respect to their distribution in the Spanish labour market. In Italy, data gathered on a non-representative national sample of over 400 Ecuadorian workers indicate dramatic gender differences: for women, domestic work (including home help, residential or daily carework and baby-sitting) covers nearly 66 per cent of the sample; for men, factory (40 per cent) and construction jobs (13 per cent) prevail, with a less striking niche effect than their female counterparts (Boccagni 2007).

7 See e.g. Andall (2000) and Parreñas (2001).

8 The same commonality does not apply, however, to processes of family reunification, which over the last years has had a somewhat greater impact on inflows from Ecuador (at least as far as children are concerned) and possibly also Ukraine, though being much less relevant for Poland. This basically has to do with the different age structures (hence, generationally different migration projects) detected among the three groups (ISTAT 2007).

9 Although buying a house may be regarded as a response to a basic need, it is also a matter of social status and emulation. In Ukraine, Ecuador and many traditional emigration countries, some areas – especially along the countryside – are dotted with luxurious houses (at least as their facades would suggest) that mimic prestigious architectural styles in the immigration country, if not the very features of an employer's house.

10 The average age of Ukrainian women in our sample was approximately 40, while Ecuadorians were far younger. In the Ukrainian case, it seems that the babushka ('grandmother') is expected to make sacrifices for the well-being of her adult children and grandchildren. This selective process is legitimised – in our female interviewees' words – by the greater risk for divorce faced by a young married couple forced to live apart from each other.

11 In the case of Ukraine, collective remittances are the more widespread practice, with money being sent to individuals and groups to build churches in what seems to be a religious revival. At the time of the 2004 elections, we also found instances of people financing pro-Yushchenko political upheavals. As to Ecuadorians, we documented a few local solidarity initiatives that were promoted spontaneously by single groups or individual migrants; they involved money or aid transfers to deprived people, were meant to promote community projects or funded feasts, public works, church-buildings, sports events, etc. Generally speaking, such initiatives combined aims for creating solidarity with status-related reputation maintenance.

12 With respect to Ecuadorian immigrants, the aforementioned national pilot survey (Boccagni 2007) reports that some 30 per cent of adult women remit more than €300 a month and a further 21 per cent remit between €150 and €300 a month. In the case of people with children left behind, the €300+ rate rises to 54 per cent. Overall, those remitting money on a monthly basis amount to two out of every three interviewees, with insignificant gender differences. Ukrainian and Polish immigrants are characterised by lower rates of family reunification, as a result of their age structure (at least as far as children are concerned; see ISTAT 2007). Polish women with children left behind seem to send home between €300 and €400 a month, usually bringing or sending the money every three to four months. Most Ukrainian women with children left behind seem to remit between €400 and €600 a month.

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