

Moldovan Women and Transnational Migration: Being Nowhere

E. Zeynep Güler

Are you happy to be here?

Lily¹: I don't know. Roots are over there; that is, you don't belong here, you are not a human being here; you are a foreigner; that you can not exist. Then I went there and I felt that I don't belong there either. There is something missing here and there. I don't belong here, something missing there. It's too hard. (Interview)

Globalization and other factors in progress since the 1990s have made social relations much more international. Transnational migration, as a part of this change, has been discussed in the related literature as a way to link diverse countries, humans and groups, as a fact that brings remote regions of the world closer to each other, and also from the point of view of new opportunities arising from global economic restructuring. Global problems and troubled regions accelerate migration movements and bring certain changes within the migration itself to the agenda. Regional disparities, economic crises, wars and resulting poverty have pushed a massive population to relocate in search of a better life, which also creates highly profitable traffic and a new sector in world trade. With its underestimated density, contemporary international migration has an increasing rate of fluidity regional and long distance in character and takes on various forms. As a result, transnational relations and other transnational fields have become subjects of interest to many social scientists working on migration.

Transnationalism itself has been a concept under discussion for a long time. Since the early 1990s the term is defined as “the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement. We call these processes transnationalism to emphasize that many immigrants today build social fields that cross geographic, cultural, and political borders” (Basch *et al.* 1994: 7). Transnationalism has been dealt with not only as a multi-country fact but also a form of consciousness, a mode of social and cultural being and reproduction, a channel of capital accumulation, a ground of political engagement, or it is viewed in the context of the reconstruction of space. Many social scientists define transnationalism with regard to the multiple ties and interactions it brings, linking people or institutions across the borders of nation-states (Vertovec 1999: 449). The multiple relationships created by this globalized world are long distance. New communication technologies

¹ In order to protect the privacy of the interviewees, I use fictional names in this paper.

and technical advances that overcome the barriers of time and distance and thus weaken the hold of the nation-state are referenced with positive connotations.

New technologies, ways or networks that help migrant people connect to people they have left in their native land, are somewhat developed forms of those that have existed for a long period of time. There are new zones and ways of migration, and the traffic is accelerated on the old ones. Critics point out, however, that while traditional citizenship rights and social protection provided by the nation-state are weakening, new protective barriers hampering cultural fluidity and exchange are emerging in the form of restrictive and exclusionary immigration laws and practices. Economic downturns contribute to the intensification of obstacles to cross-border movements; within the context of the recent global recession, traditional routes have rapidly become less accessible. While this is the legal situation, the amount of illegal migration and human trafficking is increasing while migrant rights and possibilities of gaining citizenship and social rights are decreasing. As a matter of fact innumerable incidents of exclusionary practices point to a rising trend of xenophobia, nationalism and neo-fascism in many regions of the world.

Transnational fields show that immigrant links and positions are not fixed but very dynamic and changeable. In some instances old links and belongings are dissolved and replaced by global relations and identities. We can see that decisions of migration and remigration have a transient nature; indecisiveness rather than permanence is the case, making transnational strategies a tool for basic survival or life improvement (Faist 2003: 271). All of these are to be considered in their own context of migration.

In a discussion of transnational migration and 'being nowhere', Bauman (1989) argues that globalization of the past quarter century has caused a series of contradictory effects. With the globalization of economic activities, the internationalization of finance and the contribution of new technologies have created possibilities for a flexible approach to investment and trade. A geographical reorganization of economies and consumer markets is also taking place. On the other hand, global companies feel no responsibility for workers as 'locals', 'invalids' or other 'human refuse'. Nor is there any pursuit of justice and equality even for any kind of social security and protection that the welfare state has provided for decades. New global relations create new fortunes for capital while keeping more and more people trapped in localities, whereas wide transnational areas without full citizenship rights become transient, unsafe cavities for workers in this world.

The literature on migration to Turkey spans a large spectrum from macro to micro perspectives, covering a range of topics, such as legal and illegal ways of border crossing, human trafficking and 'suitcase trade' with tourist visas, migration experiences in ex-socialist societies, feminization of migration, and the lost motherhood of the migrant women (Toktaş-İçduygu 2002; Erder-Kaşka 2003;

Kaşka 2006; Keough 2006). In the case of Eastern Europe, the effect of the dissolution of the old system with the collapse of the public sphere has led to loss of economic security as well as erosion of well-established cultural and political concepts whereby new and shifting forms of social relations have emerged. Moldovan women migrating to Istanbul for cleaning and caregiving work constitute an interesting example of this experience.

Until the collapse of the Soviet Union and most of the Eastern European countries, people were living in a socialist system that covered a vast geography. After 1989 the system fell apart, and with the economic crisis and increasing globalization many people had move other places of the world, mainly central Russia and western European countries. Turkey and especially Istanbul became one of the target places for Eastern Europeans and ex-Soviet citizens. In this project, my aim is to collect the memories of socialism of Moldovan women who work as domestics in Istanbul. I would like to examine the narratives of Moldovan women with respect to memoirs of socialism in a transnational migration context, and the politics of remembering and forgetting. My aim is to focus on the Moldovan women workers who came to Turkey during the 1990s and especially after 1999 and who work as domestic servants, nannies and caregivers to the elderly in upper class households in Turkey.

Radical changes in international relations after 1990 especially affecting Eastern European countries, overturned the cultural definition framework. Furthermore, basic components of a new framework have not been brought about yet. As for the method I have chosen for this study, I prefer a qualitative analysis that is more effective for evaluating and interpreting daily life contexts and narratives, and I use oral history to collect life story narratives. Toward this aim I made face-to-face interviews using a semi-structured analysis method.

These narratives, focusing on gender, social class and migration, present examples of the memories of the homeland, Moldova, a country with a considerably different cultural context, and social and economic conditions than Turkey. I have attempted to discuss the views of Moldovan women workers, who live and work in Turkey, particularly on cultural differences, reasons that forced them to migrate, and the changing conditions of their life style and social stratum. A temporary conclusion may be the following: irregular migration is a favorable process for the functioning of the capitalist economy, and for the state, legislative and executive authority. The state does not hinder the passage but accommodates it at the ground level; foreign and illegal workers are tolerated as long as they are economically useful for the system. When a foreign worker becomes old, tired or just not tolerable any longer, he/she may be dismissed and unemployed forever. Thus, this situation provides new living and earning conditions but at the same time creates ontological problems as the migrants feel they are nowhere.

From Moldova to Istanbul

My own personal experience with Moldova prior to 1990s was very limited; I could identify it as a member of the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics, but could not name its capital or any other facts related to the country. I had never met a person from Moldova before the 1990s. Since the end of the 1990s, Moldovans have become an integral part of our daily lives and cultural world. Upper class Turkish families in Istanbul either know a Moldovan personally, or know someone who got divorced in order to marry a Moldovan; even TV sitcoms have Moldovan characters. In short, our lives were touched by the Moldovan women as we got to know them and they got to know us. My project, which is still in progress, is on Moldovan migrant women who have come to Istanbul since the 1990s and mainly after 1999, and who work full time as housekeepers or live-in caregivers for children, the elderly and the sick. The study aims to identify the fracture in their cultural self-conception, their strategies for self-redefinition, attitudes toward political developments in Turkey and in their home country, and their recollections of the socialist system. This paper came out of interviews and narratives I collected as a part of this project. Turkey is a country of passage that both receives and sends out migrants. Istanbul, the city I have taken as the focal point, is a major metropolis with a force of attraction and specific transnational fields, which make it quite an important research object.²

As part of the study, I collected life stories within the framework of globalization and transnational migration. I made use of the qualitative method, preferred mainly by ethnographers, and collected data about the cultural atmosphere in which the Moldovan female workers grew up and their opinions on the socialist system that shaped their educational and work experiences. I tried to discover how they perceived opportunities of the new period and how they dealt with the impoverishment, unemployment, reformation of class positions, discrimination and humiliation they experienced and how they developed strategies for survival and resistance after the collapse of the Soviet system. The original aspect of my research is, I believe, the attempt to evaluate the women's stories from their own point of view. I am interested mainly in identifying cultural and perceptual transformations rather than commenting on physical international migration or labor processes. I tried to clarify how the women's lives were impacted physically and psychologically by the migration experience. I made use of a semi-structured interrogative format. Interviews were made in houses where Moldovan women worked, and, with a few exceptions, outside, in teahouses or in the women's

² Two cities, Edirne (Adrianapolis) and Istanbul have special connotations for the people of Moldova, especially the Gagauz. Women in Gagauz villages remember their grandparents telling stories about Edirne and Istanbul. Their mothers or grandmothers, when they got angry, reacted to their husbands and children as follows: "I will leave you all and go to Edirne/Istanbul."

houses. The sample set was formed through the “snowball” method. This article is a collection of statements and observations, and may rather be considered as early sketches of an unfinished research.

Moldova is the poorest country in Europe. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and other socialist countries in the early 1990s, economic and social crises emerged in Eastern Europe, triggering a general trend toward nationalism. The large-scale systemic change in 1989–1991 triggered new economic and social crises and nationalist movements. Moldova’s system of public welfare has been effectively destroyed, and the remaining economic basis is limited to minor agricultural production and trade. More than half of the population lives on a daily income of two US-Dollars, and life expectancy has declined sharply, especially among middle-aged men, owing to the stresses they have been subject to since 1991. A lack of security and prevailing uncertainty are the characteristics of ordinary life. While the changing conditions over the past fifteen years may have presented opportunities for improvement for a small section of society, for the majority, meeting the basic necessities for survival has become a challenge. A survey conducted in Moldova and Belarus in 2001 shows that the majority takes a negative view of the transformation after 1991 (Abbott 2007). Respondents in my research say that they have less control over their lives despite improved freedom of expression and travel, that they mistrust others more, and that the economy and health care system have declined and social solidarity had been replaced by familial support. As a result, a significant part of the Moldovan population has left the country looking for a job and other opportunities (http://www.iom.int/jahia/webdav/shared/shared/mainsite/activities/countries/docs/moldova_factsheet.pdf).

The situation of post-socialist societies coupled with conditions of global restructuring caused a large flow of poorly paid laborers from peripheral countries to global centers, especially into the service sector. In the case of Moldova, while many women would have chosen to migrate to Western Europe, tight EU border controls have stopped them in most cases, leading them instead to the margins of Fortress Europe, i.e. to countries like Russia or Turkey, where multiple ways of more flexible semi-legal, or illegal means of entry and work are possible (Culic 2008). Moldova, a former Soviet Republic which gained independence on 27 August 1991, is a typical case in point. Moldova adopted a free market economy, which resulted in a sharp increase in prices. The national currency was sharply devalued because of high inflation, and in the process individual savings were reduced to almost nothing. Prices of basic commodities such as natural gas multiplied, exports decreased sharply. Factories and major companies closed down while the size of establishments both in industry and agriculture diminished. Privatization accompanied all these events. As a result, many Moldovans had to find new trade opportunities and jobs in countries like Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Greece, Italy, Spain, even Israel, and Turkey. This was the relatively young and courageous

part of the population, who left home in order to make money for those left behind. In the Moldovan-Turkish context, the feminization of migration was notable as, because of the characteristics of the Turkish job market, it was mostly women workers who migrated to Turkey (Faist 2003 for the decision making processes in migration). The migration of Moldovan women can be viewed in the context of the movement of labor specific to the neo-liberal globalization era. The same tendency is pertinent today as state and civil society are still very weak and the political system unstable in Moldova. For example, gross national income in 2006 was less than half of its 1989 level. According to 2008 figures, 64.7% of the population live below the poverty line and life expectancy decreased to 68.4 (<http://www.iom.int/jahia/Jahia/pid/810>). According to 2007 data, from one-fourth to one-third of the population, in other words half of the working population, live and work abroad. An International Organization for Migration (IOM) survey on the impact of remittances on households and communities reveals that more than 35% of families benefit from remittances sent by family members abroad, and those remittances continue to be used to fund basic household consumption, consumer durables, purchase of housing, and debt repayment (IOM). The current movement was part of a newly emerging trend, the incorporation of women into global migration. The migration of Moldovans may be placed in the specific context as a labor movement coming out of the globalization tendency of the neo-liberal era. Because of the long-lasting economic crisis, some villages, towns and cities in Moldova are nearly deserted. This is reflected in the narratives of the women I interviewed:

“My father died many years ago. My mother lives there alone. For example, there was a building, a building with five floors and three apartments on each floor. Before, all the apartments were full, but now there are few people. On the first floor, people come rarely. On the second floor, there is only my mother who stays there; on the third floor only one other woman. She goes to Italy to work. She goes and comes back from time to time. On the fourth floor, there are only some elderly people. And the fifth floor is empty. All are abroad. This is just an example. That’s all. This is from Cimislui. Empty. A friend of mine, who is now in Romania, told me that he was in Cimislui recently. He says, streets are deserted even at two o’clock in the afternoon. He says, I walk alone, and nobody’s around. Only in the evening you can see some young people. But, really, only a few. And you know, this is a small town. Not to mention villages! In villages only old people and children are left. Houses are all empty because there is no money to manage these houses. People don’t come. They work and will not come back any more. For example, first the woman goes to find a job. Her husband drinks, he becomes an alcoholic. And the woman meets other men. She thinks, why should I go back? To pay for the drink! Then she marries another man and later brings her children. This happened to a lot of families. In some cases, first it was the man who went. And then he brought his wife and children and left behind the house. An empty house. Very bad, very bad...” (Lily).

The Moldovan migrants in Istanbul spent their formative years, their childhood and a good part of their early adulthood during the socialist period; they

worked, married, bore and brought up children within the framework of a socialist economy. One may suggest that the meeting of people with such diverse backgrounds is a great and enriching opportunity we owe to globalization and view it as a positive experience. From a host country perspective, that may be true; however the immigrants themselves face major problems in a foreign environment. Migrants are in a vulnerable position because they are unable to survive economically in their native country, and their precarious legal and employment status render them defenseless and politically ineffective in the host country. It is true that with time the migrants establish a kind of continuity between their lives in their native and host countries; they go back and forth, go back for a while to attend to an ailing husband or simply to visit a husband they miss, or even to pick up homemade pickles. Relatives and children may come to visit from time to time; friends may drop by for petty trading activities. With the money they earn, some start businesses for their children in their home country. There are even those who fall in love, get married and begin Turkish lives. Yet, under the prevailing life and work conditions, one can hardly view the migrant-host relationship as a fair and equal exchange.

Personal experiences in Istanbul: Being there

The migration of Moldovan women may be classified as “irregular migration”; however, when the economic conditions in Moldova in the 1990s are taken into account, we may detect a structure, and this movement may be reclassified as “forced migration”. In reality, Moldovan women have almost no choice but to look beyond their countries for a livelihood. Moldovan people have been on the move since the 1990s, and they weave lines and networks between their country and Russia, Italy and Turkey. As Kaşka indicates, “When we asked about the number of Moldovan passengers who traveled to Turkey in a year, their estimates varied between 15,000 and 75,000. According to the travel agents, most of the passengers traveled to Turkey in order to work, mainly in the entertainment sector, implying sex work, although there are women passengers who come to work in domestic work. They come to Turkey to earn money. They are educated women. According to their estimate the percentage of Gagauz³ passengers varied between 40 % and 80 %” (Kaşka 2009: 83).

The economic crisis in Moldova during the 1990s caused massive financial crisis, business closures in urban areas, and the disruption of agricultural struc-

³ There are many theories about who the Gagauz are. Gagauz are referred to either as Turkicized Orthodox Bulgarians or as descendants of medieval Turks converted to Christianity after 864 and who have assimilated elements of Slavic culture (Karlsson 2006: 33). The Gagauz are believed to have fled from northeastern Bulgaria to Russia during and after the Russo-Ottoman war of 1806–12. Today, the Gagauz live mainly in the southern part of Moldova. They make up 3.5 % of the Moldovan Republic's population.

tures in rural areas where land was divided into small plots and privatized. These changes led to the relocation of a large number of people. Narratives by Marina, Liliana, Elena, Nadja, Olga, Zinaida, Lena, Maria and others, who all came to Istanbul, reveal many common points on the issues of transnational migration and newly created transnational fields. I want to emphasize once more that, for today's transnational migration movements, reality is not being here and there at the same time, but being nowhere, lost somewhere in between.

While the phenomenon may seem to be simply a combination of economic rationales at the macro level and personal preferences at the micro level, communication networks among the migrants have contributed to converting the experience into migration in groups, thereby facilitating the emergence of common stories (Faist 2003: 82; Haug 2008). An example of a personal story is that of Marina (born 1963). Marina had received technical training and during the 1990s worked as a personnel manager on a collective farm that employed one thousand workers. Workers collected the grapes grown on the farm, and the collective distributed them to processing units. It was a modern workplace frequently visited by international delegations. In the early 1990s, the land was privatized and divided into smaller plots, and as a result, agricultural output decreased sharply. In the same workplace in 1999 only one hundred workers were left.

In 1990 travel limitations were abolished and borders were opened for citizens to leave the country. Marina was sure that she would go back home when she first came to Istanbul in 1993 for suitcase trade. She wanted to try and see how it would work out for a while, so she took a leave of absence from her job instead of quitting it. This practice shows that migration is a multi-dimensional, partial process with flashbacks and trials, but not a decisive one. She went back and forth to Istanbul several times until 1999, engaging in suitcase trade, a semi-legal petty trade activity. During the 1990s suitcase trade was centered in the Laleli district of Istanbul, where many people from Eastern Europe flocked to buy merchandise they would take back to their countries in suitcases to resell there. Thus, a type of undocumented transnational trade activity was created in which women played a dominant role (Yenal 1999; Yüксеker 2003). At that time, Marina was selling goods she bought in Laleli at the Sunday market in Chisinau, a city of six-hundred-thousand. She also traveled to other countries for the same purpose; in 1994 she was in the Circassian market of Moscow to buy Chinese, Turkish, Indian and Taiwanese goods; she sold those she bought from Istanbul in Belgrade; or she bought from Warsaw and sold at Chisinau.

In the meantime, she maintained her belief that her life would normalize one day and that she would stay in her country permanently. She tried to keep formal contact with the factory where she was employed; taking leaves of absence, working abroad during her free time. This type of migration, comprising irregular travels, is called circular migration or shuttle migration. Finally the factory closed down, and Marina decided not to go back to her country and to stay more per-

manently in Istanbul. She found work in the home of an elderly woman whom she took care of for three years and where she learned Turkish. When her employer died, she found a new job, thanks to the help of the family, and began to work as a domestic servant. She found a house that she would share with Moldovan and Ukrainian colleagues. Since then she returned to her country twice. She had to be on tourist visas while she stayed in Turkey, and in order to be able to reenter Turkey, she once changed her surname and passport. Once she was expelled by Turkish authorities because her visa had expired. Her son, Andrei, despite his meager means, also came to Turkey a number of times to visit his mother. The last time he arrived, he came on money he had made himself and surprised Marina on her birthday!

Studies on Eastern Europe mainly deal with the period after 1990. However, one should take into account that the changes had in fact started in the 1980s. If we consider life span analysis, these changes were reflected in individual experiences of a generation too. In the early eighties Marina had married a Russian man, and their son was born in 1982. In the late 1980s, nationalism and anti-Russian sentiments began to rise in Moldova. Marina's husband felt pressured, and upon his proposition the family moved to Siberia and lived there together with the grandmother for more than a year. For Marina Siberia was too cold and culturally remote from Moldova. "I am European," she says, "I could not deal with Siberia". She ended up getting divorced and returning to Moldova with her son.

Moldovan women in Turkey mostly work in house cleaning and caregiving, in health centers, in the entertainment sector and as sex workers. They are of different ages, ranging from 20 to 60. There is a general impression that Moldovan women in Turkey are Gagauz. This is not always true; there are both Gagauz and Moldovan women working in Turkey. In my research I met people from diverse regions of Moldova, such as Chisinau, Comrat, Volkanesi, Cismichioi and other villages near the Ukrainian border, which means that they are not of Turkish descent. I also talked with Moldovan and Gagauz women who were neighbors in Chisinau and now in Istanbul share the same house and speak Russian at home. They have a long history of a common past together despite political and military conflicts that did not directly affect the lives of ordinary people. Being neighbors and sharing a common culture seems more important.

How do Moldovan women workers in Istanbul conceive traumatic experiences that led to migration? The Moldovan example proves that migration is not a one-step process. Most women arrived first in Turkey in the early 1990s for shuttle trade. This petty commercial activity means multiple journeys to different countries such as Russia, Romania, and even as far as Germany or Italy. In the meantime, the number of people engaged in this kind of trading activity increased and individual profits began to diminish. Finally, with the Russian economic crisis of 1998–1999, which had a shocking effect on the Moldovan economy, the situation worsened radically. People who couldn't even pay their natu-

ral gas bills first began selling off their personal belongings and furniture, TV sets, carpets, etc. The next step was migration. Those who already had come to know Turkey in recent years tended to look for permanent jobs in Istanbul. The average monthly salary for caregiving and cleaning jobs was approximately USD500, which was a considerable amount and attracted many women to Istanbul by 1999. In Moldova average pensions were around 50 US-Dollars, and the minimum cost of living was about 500 US-Dollars a month. Consequently, everyone was suffering under accumulated debts of gas, electricity, water, etc. Lists of debtors were displayed in the entrance of apartment buildings.

In Eastern European countries men and women developed separate strategies in terms of migration and labor relations to cope with the crisis of the early 1990s. In Turkey jobs were mostly for women, but men found jobs mostly in Russia in the construction sector. However, after 1998 Moldovan men working in Russia were adversely affected by the Russian economic crisis; many lost their jobs or had to take salary cuts and some lost several months of accumulated salary along with the jobs they lost. Even before the crisis, foreign workers were already low paid and generally had problems with employers paying them late and less than the agreed salary. Another point underlined in the narratives is that men had difficulty handling these problems and tended mostly to alcoholism. Interviewees cited several examples:

“Mostly women come here. Men stay home turning generally to alcoholism. Women save money, but men pay to drink. Couples get divorced because of this. A woman may easily find a job, as she can do different things such as house cleaning or caring for children or old people. But men can only go to Russia to work in construction. Some of them work illegally there, but the police notice them easily. I’ve heard many stories. For example, you walk on the street; a policeman may ask you for your passport. They recognize us from our sad faces; we look tired, we wear different clothes. We are strangers everywhere. Even in ex-Soviet countries. Our men are easily recognized. In Spain or in Israel, it doesn’t matter. They go to Italy by the mountains, or as tourists. I have a friend, a university graduate, an educated person, I mean. But she lost her job. Oh, I can’t tell how sad her story was! She wanted to go to Italy. You cannot imagine what she experienced crossing the mountains. Then she was put in prison. Lots of stories. No job, so you have to try again and again.”

A transnational field at home, here and there

Migration is not a new phenomenon; however, contemporary waves of migration merit renewed attention not only because of their massive scales, but also because of the emerging concept of transnationalism. The term “transnational migration” is used to signify migration movements and social, economic and cultural networks that pass over national borders and in certain aspects trivialize them. To quote Steven Vertovec, transnational migration is a form of multiple relationships on a global scale (Vertovec 1999). These multiple relationships are facilitated to a

large extent by technological advancements in communication and transportation, such as the internet, mobile phones, airplanes, etc.; however they cannot be simply reduced to the availability of better technology. What is emerging is nothing less than a new kind of consciousness, a way of cultural reproduction, a large channel of capital accumulation, an enlarged ground of political engagement, or the reconstruction of space and locality. Contrary to the common assertion that the migrant women are “both here and there”, I argue in this study that they are “neither here nor there”. They are not exiles per se, as there are no wars, political pressures, etc. that force them to leave their countries; however, they leave voluntarily because they are unable to make a living in their home country. “Willingly; it is hard to use this word to qualify their decisions, if one considers the reasons of migration, events that accompanied them when moving, information about the conditions they left behind. On the other hand ‘obligation’ does not explain every case at all (...) It is not easy to state which migration was decided voluntarily and which one was an obligation” (Kümbetoğlu 2003: 274).

Transnational relations are strong enough to change all other relations here and in the country of origin. Women’s changing position via migration, becoming the primary providers of the family is part of a radical transformation. Society changes its perception of the place of the woman, her economic and social status, in the family and in society (Keough 2006). Parents, children, family members and husbands are left behind, and they rely on the money sent by the migrant women for their livelihood. Some family members may work, but the money they can make is far below subsistence level. There are school age children, and in the new system in Moldova schools charge fees on a per course basis. Therefore, the education of children can only be financed if there is a parent who works abroad. The situation is so precarious that any length of time the migrant spends in the home country incurs a cost. In one instance, a migrant woman had to go back because her husband became sick, and the loss of her income meant greater debts for the family. In short, it is essential that someone in the family should work abroad so that others may live in Moldova. Time spent in Moldova is secondary; one should return to Turkey and work to earn money.

In Turkey, traditionally a market for domestic servants was already in existence (Bora 2005; Özyegin 2000; Kalaycıoğlu and Rittersberger-Tılıç 2001). The arrival of migrant women diversified the ethnic composition of the workers, and a rather segmented structure emerged with women from Bulgaria, Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Armenia and Azerbaijan as well as Moldovan women, who constitute a major part. Most of them are live-in workers and do not spend money at all so that they are able to send all they earn to relatives or children in Moldova. Some work in daily housecleaning; most, however, prefer live-in arrangements at least initially because they save money and are able to learn Turkish quickly when they first arrive. After establishing themselves for a while with live-in work, adjusting to the environment, improving their language

skills and making contacts, they move on to daily housecleaning jobs. Those who work in daytime jobs usually share an apartment with other migrant women in order to minimize expenses, socialize and for reasons of security.

The migration of female workers from Moldova and other ex-Soviet republics to Turkey is a relatively new phenomenon which took place mostly after 1999. While there was a previous inflow from Bulgaria around 1989, it had quite a different context as it was mostly Bulgarian citizens of Turkish origin who came with their families to settle down permanently (Parla 2007). After ten years of experience, Moldovan women have accumulated a significant amount of observations about the middle and upper middle class families they have worked with. In fact there is a cultural interaction between the employers and live-in caregivers/live-in workers (Akalın 2007).

How do the Moldovan women look at subjects like home, family, motherhood, cultural patterns and class, in relation and comparison with the radical transformations their native societies went through (Keough 2006)? Accordingly, what kind of a cognitive map do they create; how do they understand the cultural changes and differences; what do they think about religion and politics? All of them are conscious about their work-related self-discipline, gained from the previous educational system and family experience. On the other hand, Turkish middle class employers seem to them lazy and ignorant about certain subjects. They perceive Turkish female employers as lacking in health awareness and ignorant of basic information. Moldovan workers do not understand why these middle class women do not work outside at all. These workers are all literate; all have some first aid education and think that there is a considerable difference between Moldova and Turkey with respect to education and culture.

The cultural disparity is revealed once again in the context of their employment, by the fact that middle class housewives who do not work outside at all have domestic servants, sometimes full-time live-in workers at home (Geniş 2007: 786). In fact, according to my interviews, Moldovan domestic workers view middle class Turkish women as “childish, not mature, like an insect still living inside its cocoon”. The Moldovan women, on the other hand, are hardworking, have a high adaptive capacity, and quickly learn a foreign language. The magnitude of their transformation is as impressive as it is difficult: going from a well-educated, active economic and social life to one in which they are socially and culturally invisible, do not have any basic legal or economic rights, and have to work very hard. As part of their struggle for survival, they have to adopt various short-term strategies. They tell interesting stories about cultural contacts and confrontations: A group of women holding tourist visas on their passports wait at the Turkish border for entrance formalities, but time passes without any progress. Then one of them, a middle-aged woman, approaches an official to ask what is happening and to express their desire to go. The official just points to a young Moldovan girl and says “I want her to dance for me now”. Helplessly, she asks the girl to obey. The latter

does not understand and replies: “How should I dance? Should I dance ballet?” At any rate, she tries, and the officials let them go.

Moldovan women are preferred by Turkish employers because they are modern, well educated, punctual, and skilled using technical tools and have basic health knowledge. Their skills are especially appreciated in caring for children, the sick and elderly and in housekeeping. Another obvious reason for the preference is that they are “cheap labor”; a Turkish woman with similar skills would demand more money. Moldovan women engaged in caring for children or elderly also perform general housekeeping tasks, including some more complex ones. Such intense integration into all household activities leads to their being accepted as a family member, as indicated by Akalın (2007): “The migrant domestic is, as a result, made merely the laborer of all the daily tasks of the middle-class home, not through mechanisms of classic exploitation by which she would be turned into ‘the other’ in relation to her employer family but by accepting her as ‘one of them’”. Employers make a distinction between heavy cleaning work that is carried out by a local domestic servant and the daily chores of a middle class family house that is demanded of a Moldovan caregiver (Akalın 2007: 223). While the Moldovan domestic worker seems to have a distinctive status, the reality is that she is the provider of a high quality service in exchange for a low salary with no social or job security.

In contrast with traditional domestic workers composed of peasant, Anatolian or suburban poor women, generally illiterate and culturally distant, Moldovan workers pose no problem to their employers (Bora 2005). The Turkish women who employ Moldovans may experience a new way to compare their own identity with someone else and to establish a new type of communication; they have the chance to form their identity with reference to another female identity. In short, Moldovan women are preferred not only because of their low pay, but also thanks to their urbane, modern outlook and cultural attributes that facilitate living together. This is a different mode of business relation between employer and employee. Generally Moldovan women adapt well and do not disturb their employer. There is no need to talk about personal stories, to share problems, if not asked. The Moldovan woman generally keeps to herself and acts only within professional limits. This professional attitude frees the employer from a sense of moral responsibility. The fact that the relationship is viewed as temporary is an added advantage for the employer. Everybody feels that the Moldovan worker can easily switch to jobs that are better paid, or that she will go back to her country once her conditions improve – although real life experience shows just the opposite as the women continue to stay. Although they are poorly paid in Turkey, they still earn incomparably higher wages than they would make in Moldova. While they are clearly overqualified for the type of work in which they are engaged, they have no other alternative that would make it possible for them to meet the needs of their families at home.

The vulnerable position of Moldovan laborers, their precarious legal and social status, is a tool for their exploitation. They cannot be politically active to defend their rights as they are not citizens, and they live and work in Turkey illegally with expired tourist visas. They are intimidated by the police and try not to be visible and open to harassment. It is common for the police to arrest them near phone booths when they are talking to their relatives at home in their native language. The police very rarely take extreme measures such as deportation, but more commonly take them “on a ride” in the police car to extort a bribe, which is usually the 20 TL pocket money provided by their employer on their day off.

In addition to the legal problems during their stay, Moldovan women face risks as they cross the border to return to their country. They come into contact with authorities through the Police Department’s Foreign Office and have to pay a penalty for overstaying their visas. The penalty is standard procedure, and the women need to save part of their earnings to pay for it; it can practically be considered an indirect tax collected by the Turkish government. Notably, the employer bears no responsibility for such expenses; the burden is entirely on the worker.

Cross border transfer of people, money and cargo are handled by intermediaries, shuttle companies established in the Beyazıt and Laleli districts of Istanbul. As bank transfers are out of the question, the companies carry money as well as packages in return for a commission fee. The intermediaries also help with passport and visa formalities and job placement. There are also employment agencies; however, none of my interviewees was placed via such agencies. Rather, they find jobs through personal contacts; a solidarity network of small groups has emerged where women help place each other and tend to work in neighboring quarters to easily find each other and spend free time together. Some writers interpret this situation in a positive light, arguing that being female and far from home may be a comparative advantage for them (Keough 2004). While the solidarity network facilitates the lives of the migrant women, the social life it provides should not be exaggerated; in reality the women are very constrained in all their social interactions and rarely go out to socialize together for fear of being visible to the authorities. The existing social solidarity system among migrant women keeps them fixed in the city, and they do not want to move to places other than Istanbul. Those living in the employer’s home, go on working in the same house for a long time, but those working on a daily basis have permanent trouble finding a job. The support provided by the network is constrained by the general powerlessness of the women, be it as individuals or in a group. There are stories of sexual, physical and emotional harassment. There was one narrative about a worker not having sufficient food to eat in the house where she worked. Marina once broke her leg while going to work, but still went to work; she was afraid to go to the hospital by herself. Luckily another employer of hers helped her find a doctor. During the period of time she had to stay home with a broken leg, she suffered severe depression and only could be helped by a friendly employer again.

There was no sex worker among my interviewees though they said they knew women, some from the same village, who had to earn money that way (Özgen 2006: Altman 2003). In many instances the relatives in Moldova were either unaware or maybe pretended not to know about the situation. Those who were domestic workers did not blame the women who had to resort to prostitution, but rather viewed them as helpless victims. Nevertheless, they all stressed that they themselves would not do the same thing. Many were exasperated with Turkish stereotypes of women from ex-socialist countries portraying them as easy women with “free” sexual attitudes. In fact, Moldovan women think that Turkish men tend to be womanizers while Moldovan men are attached to their home and family, helping with cooking and housework. Traditionally, virginity was valued in Gagauz villages as it is in Turkey, including the same old custom of showing the bloody sheets to elderly family members after the wedding night. To be sure such narratives belong to the early years of my interviewees’ lives and mainly to village life. Those living in big cities are mostly free of such prejudices; however, a love-based monogamous relationship seems to be the norm. Moldovan female workers I talked to deplored the situation of young girls in their cities or villages nowadays, offering their bodies to unknown businessmen in return for small things. When asked to compare the socialist regime they had experienced to today’s conditions, the interviewees observed:

“Everybody had a job at that time. We had our own house and we could go to school as we liked to. (However in Moldova now, [Zeynep Güler]) if you are lucky enough to have a job, you are paid very low. If you don’t have a house, and you need to pay for rent, it is very expensive. For example, if you work in Chisinau, if you don’t own your apartment, your salary will not be enough to cover the rent. Rents are very high, like in Turkey. My mother says that even food is very expensive now, but salaries are very low. How can a student live? The only way is that parents work abroad and send money to the child. I know young girls who have a scholarship and a room in a student hostel. That’s OK, but there is no money to live. So, come foreigners. A young girl has to try to get a foreign man because he has money. He can take you out, to have dinner together, he will buy you a mobile phone, a laptop maybe, you will go to a disco, have fun... that’s all and everybody wants to live like that. I heard that foreign men are interested nowadays in girls of fourteen. I got to know a lot of Turks here, we can identify them. But, those going to Moldova are disgusting. Turks, Arabs from Syria for example. They come for young girls. Sometimes they even marry them. A friend of mine went to Syria with a man. Surprisingly she accepted to be veiled. It’s too bad, the degeneration is so grave. Sometimes such girls may have nice clothes, ride in fancy cars. I don’t know how they can do that. But in fact, it has nothing to do with our culture; it’s just the reality of life...”

Moldovan women compare the two countries with respect to culture:

“For us, it is something to be ashamed of if there is no bookcase in an apartment. If you have a house, first thing you’ll have a bookcase. Everybody reads. My father was a simple worker, but he had lots of books. So was my mother. Students were all on scholarships and could buy themselves books, go to movies and theaters. There was a cultural

house in every village. Now they are all closed or turned into discos or bars. No more cultural activity. In Chisinau we have theaters. Teachers organize cultural trips; they take students with a minibus and go together to a theater. There are classical and modern theaters. Tickets are very cheap.”

Moldovan female workers in Turkey cannot go out at night to a theater or a movie; they stay at home watching television. Based on ethnic and linguistic narratives, a woman’s ethnic origin (being Moldovan or Gagauz) seems to have no effect on her decision to migrate to Turkey. Some interviewees said that Gagauz language played a certain role in their coming to Turkey, as the two languages are similar. However, this is not a reliable statement as all of them also said they learned Turkish after they arrived; in the beginning their knowledge of Turkish did not go beyond a few words. Their primary language is Russian, and their ties to Russian culture are strong. Politically, as well, many of them tend to align themselves with Russia. Historical or cultural ties with Turkey are weak or nonexistent.

Conclusion

Explaining the economic dimension of the migration from Moldova to Turkey is relatively simple while understanding the political and socio-cultural implications and interactions is more complex. The difficulty arises from the fact that most immigrant groups conceal themselves as “communities without identity” and abstain from manifesting themselves as a community. Especially in the context of the Eastern European experience, the discontinuity with their cultural and political background must be taken into account. In most cases there is a lack of proper political and public spheres in their own countries.⁴ Even worse is the situation in the host country, where they have no legal status and they are exploited by existing social and labor relations. Moldovan women are politically isolated and removed from the failing political mechanisms of their country. Most of them think that things are not going well, in the right direction, in favor of the people. Furthermore, the exploitative system is taking advantage of the irregular migration on both sides in all senses. An interviewee told me the following about political and economic life in Moldova: “Nobody thinks much there.

⁴ The political system in Moldova is messy and open to discussion as seen in the 2009 April 5th elections. There are nationalist and divisive and wedge issues concerning all the major political and economic problems of the country, such as movements defending unity with Romania, or the Transnistria region, which claims independence but is only recognized by Russia. It is interesting to examine the positions and programmes of the parties. The Communist Party of the Republic of Moldova (reinstated after 1993) won elections twice in the first decade of the 21st century; although it is a pro-Russian party, it wants to develop relations with the EU and NATO. In brief, the political system is overdetermined by political competition between Romania, the Ukraine, Russia and the EU. One could say that the political sphere is tied into knots.

People are too sad to think about politics. The problem is simple: What'll I eat tomorrow.”

Some migrant workers try to live and survive alone in Turkey; others return home after a while, and still others find Turkish lovers or partners whom they may marry. Even as the length of stay of Moldovan migrant women in Turkey is nearing a decade, the uncertainty of their situation persists. They have no precise idea about the future, about what will happen some day when they are too old to work. They are not sure whether they will stay or go back to their country. They are not part of a social security system, and their only investment for the future is their children living at home. With the effects of the global crisis worsening, the migrant workers' situation is described by World Bank sources under the headline “Potential return of migrants”: “More than 25% of the economically active population has left the country in search for better economic opportunities abroad. (...) Since the beginning of the crisis it has been more difficult for them to retain a job in receiving countries and continue to send money home. Moreover, current economic conditions in receiving countries may force them to come back to Moldova” (World Bank Country Brief 2009). Such uncertainties, of course, are not limited to migrant workers alone, but rather constitute part of a universal aspect of our time. One can only be certain that the future is indeed uncertain, and, as has been said since the 1990s, that nothing will be the same from now on.

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