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# Experiences of Migration as a Space for Reflection

## Renegotiating Gender Roles in Family Relationships

### **Abstract:**

Based on biographical narrative interviews with three migrant women, the article discusses how migration experiences can lead to a reflection of gender roles. In the three cases, there are various motivations for migration, different family arrangements and work experiences throughout the migration process, and also a change of roles of the women within their families. For the interview partners, the access to material resources achieved partly under great sacrifice and the possibility to compare different life contexts and gender regimes triggered an ambivalent process of reflection on gender relations. Their reorganization of gender relations can be rather incomplete or require strong legitimization upon return; it can also be transmitted as a project for the next generation to complete.

**Key words:** migration, gender relations, agency, biographical analysis, biographical narrative interview

## 1 Introduction

The fact that women are migrating much the same as men has long been ignored by mainstream migration research. Until the 1980s migration had been linked to young male workers seeking employment and women were either seen as staying at home with their children and waiting for their husbands, or as silent and passive followers (Lutz 2010). Today, the “feminisation of migration” (Castles/Miller 1993) has not only resulted in women outnumbering men in international migration processes, but has also displayed the fact that they might have very different reasons to leave their country of birth. Nowadays, many women are migrating alone and voluntarily (Yinger 2006).

In order to understand the specific situation of female migrants, a gender-sensitive approach to migration is necessary. The gender bias structures the entire field of migration, ranging from the socialization of female migrants in their countries of origin, their motivations and possibilities of migration (such as na-

tion-state migration policies) to gender segregated labour markets (Karakayali 2010; Phizacklea 2003).

Focusing on three different case studies, we will discuss the development and shift of family structures, gender relations and gender roles regarding female migration, in relation to the effects of the gender regimes the women have to face in their countries of destination. We are focusing on women heading to western countries, in which the decline of the traditional breadwinner model and the simultaneous public recourse to family support structures in the organization of reproduction tasks have produced a supply gap, creating a large demand for paid care work at low prices. This gap is filled with an increasing employment of transnational female migrants, also due to the wage-price gap between sending and receiving countries (Guarnizo/Smith 1998, p. 18). Thus, women from the countries of the South and East migrate to industrialised countries, where the private household and other feminized areas of work become one of the largest fields of employment. The specific conditions of this migration are dependent on the state practices of the sending and the destination countries, which structure living conditions in a fundamental way.

## 2 How we proceeded in our research

In order to grasp female migrants' shifting experiences, we used the method of biographical narrative interviews (Schütze 1983; 1987) as one of the most appropriate research instruments to discover social processes and long-range experiences (Riemann 2006) as well as the conditions and mechanisms that produce them. By initializing 'biographical work' (Strauss 1993) as a reflection of one's own patterns of interpretation and action, a biographical narrative can lead to understand the interviewee's principles and orientations for action. Doing comparative biographical analysis therefore "aims at revealing structures of personal and social processes of action and of suffering as well as possible resources for coping and change" (Gültekin/Inowlocki/Lutz 2006, p. 51).

The biographical analytical research approach is particularly suitable for interviews in the context of migration and irregular employment because "telling one's life story from one's own perspective is an opportunity to present one's own biography; it can become visible and important. For the interviewee, it might be a unique opportunity to present him- or herself as a whole person" (Inowlocki/Mangione/Satola 2010, p. 288). We chose the three female migrants as cases for our comparison for two main reasons: Firstly, we easily detected the great similarity that during migration, all three women started to develop new perspectives on gender roles and gender relations within their family. Secondly, we quickly noticed that the circumstances in which this happened are rather diverse, which particularly inspired us to compare these cases. Furthermore, neither did they come from the same country, migrate at the same historical and biographical times nor do they currently live in the same city, or even country. However, from a qualitative research perspective the biographies of all three protagonists share a lot of similarities: concerning their initial situation in the home country, their experiences of being strangers in the country of destination, as well as with regard

to processes of becoming autonomous and of developing new biographical perspectives.

The first case study deals with Agata, a Polish woman working irregularly as care and domestic worker in Germany. This case points out two important aspects of labour migration, with regard to care work and to an irregular work status. It exemplifies biographical processes of suffering and how an increase of autonomy and agency came about. It is an example of how new experiences and the distance from home can stimulate processes of self-reflection and, as a consequence, enhance the development of a new perspective on one's own resources and gender role.

The second case study deals with Malina, a female migrant in her late thirties who migrated to Italy as a live-in domestic worker from a rural area in Romania. During migration, she started questioning the gender relations she experienced in her marriage and finally asked for divorce.

The third case study deals with a Senegalese woman named Hawa, who first migrated to France due to the right of family reunion before migrating a second time alone. As was the case for Agata and Malina, the experiences of migration and of living in new contexts of life triggered Hawa's reflexivity, especially on gender roles. That reflexivity led to new but also ambivalent practices and ways of thinking concerning gender identity and gender relations.

### 3 The case studies

#### 3.1 Agata: processes of suffering versus an increase of autonomy

Agata<sup>1</sup> is 36 years old and a mother of three: her son Amar (17), her daughters Kaja (16) and Amina (10 years old) live in Zielona Góra in Poland. She is a professional midwife and worked in a hospital in Poland.

She has been irregularly employed as a care and domestic worker in a German house for two years at the time of the interview. She takes care of a 90-year-old man who is bedridden and suffers from dementia. Agata works together with another Polish woman named Nina, and they commute between Poland and Germany in rotating intervals. They work in a 'tandem-system' and are replaced by two other women from Poland.

Agata's migration to Germany provides her with the possibility to get out of a debt trap in Poland. At the backdrop of her decision for labour migration is also a need to find a way out of an exploitative relationship; she is thus looking for more financial and emotional independence. The work situation in Germany (and the situation of the interview itself) gave her the distance and opportunity to think about her past and present situation. In her narrative it becomes apparent that she is trying to order her chaotic life situation; her desire for emancipation is implicitly addressed.

The disorder in the narrative starts at the beginning of her interview, when she makes multiple attempts to tell her life story: "*Should I start from the beginning*

or from the end” or “there is so much that has happened, I do not know, what I should tell first”. During her childhood, Agata lived in Zielona Góra with her parents, and she visited primary school and economic grammar school.

The normative institutional career<sup>2</sup> at school is disrupted by her untimely motherhood at the age of 18. At that moment, her life is dominated by the biographical process structure of the trajectory of suffering (Schütze 1981, 1995) and she is forced to change from day school to evening school. The language indicator of the biographical trajectory is a suprasegmental marker: “and there the problems started”. She did not receive any support from her parents or her teachers, nor from Rachid, the father of her child (and later of two more children), who is a refugee from Algeria. One year later, after the birth of her second child she still lacked any kind of support and suffered from the multiple demands on her everyday life: she had to combine her maternal duties with her educational goals and with supporting her family. During her second pregnancy and with part-time jobs, she was nonetheless able to graduate from evening school. She studied medicine at the department of obstetrics for two years and then took up employment in a hospital in Zielona Góra.

Instead of continuing to work in the hospital to improve her standard of living, Agata decided to quit this job after three months to go to Italy with her children and to start working there as a waitress. The journey to Italy presents an important biographical action scheme of labour migration, since it was undertaken with the objective of improving her financial conditions and towards bringing the whole family together:

“I just risked my neck with careless talk, because of, holy God, how can I tell, so many things happened ... Maybe I’m going to start like this, my children’s father; he’s a foreigner from Algeria. Well, right here, the problems arose, partly because he should have come to visit me when I was in Italy. Then it turned out that he didn’t come, because he still had no Polish citizenship, nor a visa. One year later I decided to go back to Poland, because he was there.”

This background construction<sup>3</sup> sheds light on the link between the trip to Italy and the return to Poland; in contrast to Agata’s anticipation, Rachid was not able to join her in Italy. Consequently her migration plan failed and her hopes were dashed. In retrospect she regrets her decision of going back to Poland and passing on the opportunity of having a more comfortable life in Italy. After her return to Poland, the financial situation of the family got worse and the birth of the third child further aggravated the already critical situation. Although Rachid got a well-paid job as a translator for the Polish army in Iraq he still evaded his responsibility for the family. Despite her disappointment, she still saw him as the father of her children and was not able to come to terms with the situation rationally and recognise the injustice of the inequality between them. She felt emotionally bound to him and developed mechanisms of self-deception, which helped her to keep the faith in the continuity of their partnership. But the conflicts between them eventually resulted in her moving out of the flat she had rented and into a hotel.

The duty of taking care of the children, with her low wages in the hospital and the lack of financial support from Rachid led Agata into a trajectory of indebtedness (Schlabs 2007). She could not find a way out of a hopeless debt trap. At that point she did not consider it possible to stay in Poland any longer and with the aid of her aunt who worked in Germany she contacted an irregular work agent, who provided her with a job as a caretaker. She left her three children with her par-

ents and ventured on working in Germany illegally, taking care of an elderly man. One month after she left, Rachid went to England, where he was still staying at the time of the interview. Because of the high rent she had to give up the flat in Poland where she had lived together with Rachid and her children and moved to her aunt's place. At the time of the interview she was paying off her debt but also had to move out of her aunt's flat with her children to find a new place to live.

As a result of the distance between her and the children, Agata is unable to supervise the situation at home and partially loses control over it. Her children face early adolescence without parental supervision. She does not only have the feeling of losing control over her children, but also witnesses their exposure to racist discrimination of their dark skin colour. In addition, the neighbours in Poland spread rumours about her work in Germany, marginalising and stigmatising her. Her separation from her children is difficult to handle for all of them. However, her work in Germany allows Agata to stabilise her financial situation in Poland. These circumstances show that her action scheme of migration has a temporal and biographical limited range; under the given conditions she can manage her everyday life very competently and actively. However, she cannot develop long-term biographical projects, which has consequences in her complicated life situation. Fortunately, Agata's employer understands her situation and the impact the separation from her children has on her life. He acknowledges her need to be in contact with her children and provides his support for communication and mobility. He also gives her recognition for her work.

Her employment in Germany thus provides her with the opportunity to improve her financial situation in Poland and to stop the accumulation of debt and the threat of poverty. She can manage on a day-to-day basis (Strauss 1968) and is aware of the development of the relationship between herself and the children, taking care that the difficulties do not increase dramatically and get out of her control. For that reason, she also goes to England to talk to Rachid, who in the meantime financially supports the family in a certain way, but still does not fulfil his role as a father.

Agata's migration experiences and related processes of profound self-reflection and discovery of her resources have led her from her original situation to a position in which she has more distance to the events and in which she has reinterpreted her biography. She recognizes the "cumulative mess" (Strauss 1985, pp. 163–181) of her life situation, that is the insolvable problems of her relationship with Rachid and the threat of bankruptcy. She is very optimistic and develops plans for the future. Through the recognition of her capabilities and based on her will to improve her own and her children's life, she begins to achieve more autonomy in different areas of her life.

On the one hand she recognises the quality and the universalism of her profession as midwife and that she can also partially use her professional skills, although in a very restricted framework. Her diploma as a midwife is not accepted in Germany and she misses her professional work in the hospital in Poland, which she practiced with passion. Considering the restrictive general conditions, she implements what can be seen as a concept of action with the hope for new possibilities by beginning to consider Europe as a market of vocational opportunities. She experiences her stay and work in Germany as a biographical 'space of potentiality' in which she sees the necessity but also the opportunity to develop her potentials. But she also struggles with the sad reality of the instability of the situation she finds herself in: namely, potential dangers or challenges which could constitute or

lead to a disruption of this important biographical action scheme, such as the unexpected death of her client in Germany, or of her children falling ill in Poland. She thus comments her situation by stating *“I am living from one day to the other”*.

Another important cause of her increase in autonomy is that she becomes more independent through her profound self-reflection of her gender and family role. She gains a new feeling of distance and becomes more and more confident. Should she lose her current employment, which could happen at any time in this kind of work relationship, her action scheme would probably be regressive because of a loss of sovereignty concerning her emancipation. She achieved her gain in autonomy in part through her role as mother and provider. In the past, she tried to compensate for her absence at home and her resulting feelings of neglect, self-contempt and bad conscience through gifts and permissiveness towards her children. Because she solely bore the responsibility for them, she was also the only one being blamed for the mistakes concerning their education. Over the years, she has been able to liberate herself from the feeling of being uniquely responsible for all the difficulties. She now recognises the source of her precarious situation as also being connected to her unfulfilled expectations towards her partner.

### 3.2 Malina: migration as a means of systematic reflection

For Malina Moșeanu, a 38-year-old kindergarten teacher and mother of two children, her labour migration to Italy as a live-in domestic worker is inextricably related to her divorce that took place during her migration process. In retrospect, she sees it as a means of escape from her affliction and her unpleasant marriage. In addition, it can be interpreted as an act of liberation from what was transmitted to her with regard to gender relations from her parents, who held on to their marriage despite of constant massive conflicts.

In the case of Malina, the decision for and organisation of migration are deeply embedded in the immediate social environment of her Romanian home village: a remote peasant village on the eastern foothills of the Carpathian Mountains whose inhabitants had lived almost exclusively on agriculture and transhumance for generations.

Similarly to other regions in Romania, the collapse of the communist regime and the resulting economic transformation caused far-going professional re-orientations among a huge number of villagers, which subsequently led to first external migration movements. Starting in the mid-1990s, after initial seasonal work remained in neighbouring countries, migration to Italy slowly began; finally, the removal of visa regulations in 2002 led to a close chain migration of villagers who were mostly practicing subsistence farming in their home village at this time.

This onset of chain migration caused far-reaching shifts in status. As a result of reproduction practices of transnational families in her home village and their claims to social status due to a better income, Malina felt that her own status as a qualified kindergarten teacher was declining. Explicitly, she describes how she decided to leave for Italy due to income differences between her and her husband who were both state employees, and other families of her immediate social environment living already on remittances from Italy:

“In mutual consent my husband and I decided – our children were still very young; Toma was in fourth grade, Marina in second grade – that I should ask for unpaid vacation for

one year to work somewhere abroad. To make some money in a different way, to buy a computer. However, we bought the computer by instalments. We took a credit and we bought the computer already in advance. I made this payment by instalments, because I had seen that a lot of parents of my children [in the kindergarten and at school A.K.] already had a computer. I felt a difference between us.”

At this stage of the migration process, Malina’s migration appears as a strategy to slow down her experience of an involuntary status decline.

While it is her direct socio-economic environment that causes her to migrate, it is also her home community that offers her support and social resources to facilitate her labour migration. Regarding her home context she benefits from an already existing tradition of multigenerational transregional family arrangements due to well-established forms of transhumance and internal work migration during the communist regime. Her children can stay together with their father at Malina’s parents’ house.

Concerning her destination, she organizes her migration with the help of friends from her home context. Spending about two hundred Euros, she leaves Romania for the first time in 2003 on a tourist visa in a minibus right from her home village. In her own community and in several neighbour communities quite a few people start their own transit business at that time. Mostly they know exactly about border police patrols and pay for the transit for most of the migrants do not fulfil all the requirements of the then current travel regulations (Guarnizo 2003; Portes 2001<sup>4</sup>). When she arrives in Italy, she easily finds a job by the help of one of her former colleagues who had already left for Italy a few months earlier to work there as a live-in domestic worker. She stays with her for the first few days after her arrival. Before this colleague’s departure, Malina had already arranged to stay in contact with her in case there might be an opportunity to find a job for her as well.

Malina’s work migration to Italy as a live-in domestic aid is marked by a sharp contrast between her migration-related status decline on the one hand and her upward social positioning in the family of her employer on the other hand. These migration-related experiences of difference initiate an increasingly lower identification with the gender roles of her immediate social context of origin.

She summarises her feelings on her way from Romania to Italy as follows:

“I was afraid, when I left home. What will it be like? Which family will I find and what will the family be like? I have thought as well, that a woman might be treated differently and maybe that- that they could beat me. I was very lucky, that I found a special family. They treated me very well. I felt totally integrated into this family. I had a place to eat even at their table. (...) And successively it opened my eyes, about life and the place of a woman in a family and in society. I felt a difference, how I was treated at home and how I was treated there [in Italy, A.K.]. I came as a worker, so socially I thought I will drop down. Here I was a kindergarten teacher and there I was someone who took care of someone else. I had to change napkins and clothes, I had to wash the dishes and to cook, I had to do the work Italian women did not like to do. It was seen as lower, inferior work. My conditions got worse, but- (...) to put it this way, I felt very nice, as I had never expected it.”

Malina presents her arrival in her new migration context as surprising. For her it forms a sharp contrast to what she had expected. Compared to her professional background in her home village as a qualified kindergarten teacher, she presumed there would be hard and humiliating working conditions. And even though her work is very demanding and often very unpleasant, she feels that her work is respected.



Although the way she is treated does not compensate her for her tiring labour, it makes her reflect on her situation in her home context, where she suffered in her marriage and where she felt less respected in comparison to how she experiences Italian women as being respected in their marriages, families and in society as a whole. Initiated by her unexpectedly positive living and working conditions in her immediate context of destination, her migration experiences provide a space for reflection (Apitzsch 2000).

Shortly after she arrives in Italy, her husband quits his job as he had done repeatedly in the past. When he does not find another job in Romania, he follows Malina to Italy, where he has difficulties in finding constant employment. For quite a long time, she has to provide for her family alone, while her two children are taken care of by her parents. During this time Malina's discontent with her married life reaches its climax. Her immediate social context in Italy gets to know her husband and assures her that she deserves better than such a quarrelsome and combative relationship. Her experiences during migration question her former experience of her marriage.

Finally, Malina gets divorced. After having been in Italy for two years, she breaks out of her marriage, describing the situation as follows:

“The fact that I left for Italy and the fact that I have seen how women were treated there—I came back home [for holidays, A.K.] and I saw things with different eyes. And I said: It's enough. I don't need to suffer any longer. The children don't need to be stressed, they really count first and then me.”

Malina gained enough support to separate from her husband due to significant encounters (Schütze 2001) in her destination context and her enhanced social position during migration that contrasted with her lower occupational status in Italy and reflected her inferior social status within her marriage.

For Malina, migration has meant an increase of autonomy and liberation from her unpleasant marriage and, seen from a broader perspective, even from what was transmitted to her from her parents. Back in her home village as a divorced woman, Malina seems to constantly reinterpret her experiences that she made during her migration process. In the narrative interview conducted three months after her return from Italy, she feels she has to legitimise her divorce again and again because she suffers from her social position as a divorced middle-aged woman with two children in the context of her home village (“it is not easy to be alone, well, I am 38 years old and alone, I have two kids and it is not easy”). Besides, she interprets her divorce as an act of liberation from what was transmitted to her by her parents regarding gender relations.

Right at the beginning of her narration, she refers to early conflicts between her parents in her childhood to illustrate how her divorce would disrupt this negative family tradition to the benefit of her children. At the same time, her current overall perspective on her biography is ambivalent. As much as she tries to present herself as exempt from this negatively influenced family background, it becomes obvious that she still partly sticks to a traditional family model (“...it is not an absolutely good decision to separate the family but from two negative things [divorce vs. staying together, A.K.] I took the less negative”).

### 3.3 Hawa: transmission of new gender roles to the next generation

Hawa is a 53 year-old woman and a mother of seven children, living in a deprived neighbourhood of a French city and working in the restaurant of a nursing home. Her migration experiences are various, both internal and international, and not unidirectional. They have led to an intense reflexivity and an ability to compare various contexts of life that helped Hawa shape and re-shape her identity and strategies.

Hawa was born in a small town near the Senegal River in 1960 and grew up in a family of six children. In order to improve the economic situation of the family, Hawa's father chooses to migrate – with his wife and children – from a small village where agriculture is the main basis of subsistence to a town where he can work in a rice factory for a steady income. Hawa's mother stays at home to take care of the household. For Hawa's parents, migration is thus already a way of escaping a precarious financial situation linked with the difficulties of earning money through agriculture.

Living between that small town and her parents' village, Hawa feels like an "outsider" in both of those contexts of life: she is considered as a "village girl" in her town because she is not allowed to go out at night and to spend time with boys, but she is considered as a "city girl" in the village because she goes to school and is very mobile during the day. From an early age on, these experiences lead Hawa to question the gender assignments she experiences as a girl and the idea of mobility concerning women. Today she reflects on her youth, comparing it with her daughters' life:

"At my time, the girl was not always allowed to go to school and there was another difference between boys and girls: one said to the boys that they were allowed to go out at night, to have fun and the girl did not have the right to do that. Today, we are taking care of our daughters but not that much. [...] At my time, one also said that a girl could not leave the household before she was getting married. Today, they have to leave if they want to study. So when my daughter was 18, 19 years old, she had to leave if the schools were in Nancy, if the business schools were in Paris, she had to leave."

At the age of 13, Hawa leaves her parents' house and moves to Dakar to live with her older sister, Adja. This migration is not Hawa's choice. Since she does not get the expected grades in order to continue school and since her parents do not have the money to pay for private lessons, she has to take care of family members. Adja is married and the mother of a child while studying in Dakar; she needs Hawa's help in her house to take care of the baby, the cleaning and the cooking. Hawa's migration is strongly linked with the idea that it will improve the family's economic situation in a context where public services and facilities are scarce. Hawa becomes a domestic aid at Adja's house, working for free and thereby allowing her sister to study and to send some money to their parents.

As a teenager, Hawa thinks about studying nursing, but her family rejects her educational plans. They believe that as a nurse she would have to go to small villages, live alone and be in close contact with men due to her job. Hawa's plans are denied because of her family's priorities and the role she was assigned to as a girl. After spending four years at her sister's house, Hawa gets married at the age of 17. Her husband is a teacher and lives in a rural area near the Senegal River. His parents are small farmers and live in precarious conditions. When Hawa gives

birth to her first child in 1978, she negotiates her stay in Dakar with her husband. She does not want to move permanently to her husband's parents' place in the small village even though this is traditionally expected of her. Hawa's husband accepts her wish and when their first child is older he takes Hawa with him as he travels from village to village to teach in small schools. This successful negotiation with her husband allows Hawa not to be restricted to a traditional way of life with her in-laws, related to rigid gender roles.

After various internal migrations Hawa experiences international migration. It seems that mobility really becomes a resource for her and her husband in order to improve the well being and the status of their family and to negotiate gender roles in their household. In 1985, Hawa's husband leaves Senegal. Thanks to a scholarship he enrolls in a PhD programme in English at a French University. A year later, Hawa migrates with her two youngest children. The older ones (8 and 11 years old) will join the family several months later. Hawa explains that her migration project at the time was to improve the lives of her children: she thinks about France as a land of better opportunities for them.

In 1987, Hawa's family moves from its university apartment to a social housing in a deprived neighbourhood. Even though Hawa's husband gets a scholarship, the family's income is low and some of the money has to be sent to Senegal in order to support the family in the home country. Hawa organises the care of her children with other women in the neighbourhood, as she would do in Senegal. She wants her children to succeed in France and soon sets up educational strategies (Delcroix 2001) to make this happen. With the network of women, Hawa does not raise her children alone; the women help each other with their daily tasks.

In 1989, Hawa's husband gets his PhD degree and moves back to Senegal. Hawa stays in France and decides to start working; after being a housekeeper, she finds a place in the kitchen of a nursing home. For the first time in her life, she earns her own salary and does not have to ask her husband for money. In her new context of life, she finds the opportunity to see the professionalization of skills she has developed for free in the domestic sphere.

Three years later, the couple buys a house in Dakar. Hawa misses her family and decides to move back to her home country. In Senegal, she does not have the possibility to work anymore and takes care of her family. But six years later, when her husband has become a professor in Dakar, Hawa decides to go back to France, arguing that the French context provides better educational and work opportunities for her children. She refuses to go back to Senegal until all of them will have finished studying with at least a Master's degree:

"I say to my children: "Why do I stay here with you and leave my life in Senegal? It is for you. It is for your future. It is for your success. If you are not behaving well, you will be a housekeeper; if you are working, you will be in beautiful offices. That's all". So if you put that in a child's head beginning when he is two or three years old, then I think that if he wants to succeed, he is going to achieve it."

Hawa never talks about her own professional opportunities in the decision process of coming back to France. In France, she makes use of a family reunification policy to make her children join her. She finally moves to a social housing apartment where she is still living today.

Hawa knows that she is sacrificing a part of her life for the future of her children. Whereas in Senegal she would have been considered a married woman living with her family in her own house, in France she is seen as a single mother, liv-

ing in a deprived and stigmatized neighbourhood. By migrating back to France, Hawa is thus enduring a process of social disqualification in order to achieve social mobility for her children. Her low social status in France, her economic difficulties and the lack of emotional and social support is nevertheless counterbalanced by her work. Thanks to her job in a nursing home, she gains economic independence and also builds a social network with her co-workers and the patients whom she considers family. The sense of working in a “family atmosphere” plays a key role in the image Hawa has of her job and of her life in France.

For Hawa, providing the best chances for success to her children also means adopting original educational strategies that reshape gender roles. Her experience during migration shows that what she experienced in her youth has to be questioned. Hawa refuses that the conception of gender roles that prevented her from becoming a nurse would keep her daughters from succeeding in their professional lives. She knows that today students have to travel on their own to go to the schools they want. To fulfil her migration project, Hawa – as well as her husband – encourage their daughters to leave home and become independent before getting married.

Hawa’s questioning of gender assignments thus has multiple dimensions. In relation with her husband, she was able to negotiate her migration and to become one of the breadwinners of the family. She nevertheless does not question the fact that her husband remains the head of the family and that she has to obey him in whatever decisions he makes, showing that the reflexivity and the questioning of gender relations is negotiated with the need to maintain solidarity with her husband (Schmoll 2005). In relation to her children, Hawa reshapes her role as a mother. She legitimates her migration to France with the idea that this is going to improve the life chances of her children; she does not advocate the use of mobility for her own personal interests, to improve her own life, but as her duty as a mother. Hawa also transmits new gender norms to her children by allowing her daughters to be mobile, independent and single. It is also interesting to note how the father’s role has been reshaped: not only a breadwinner, Hawa’s husband has developed more relational and emotional ties with his children, negotiating the use of authority with Hawa who implements it on a daily basis.

## 4 Discussion

### 4.1 Reasons for migration

With regard to the three cases, we can confirm the thesis of the importance of the family for the migration of women (Lim 1995). For all three women, their migration is inextricably linked to their families. None of them decides to migrate only for personal reasons. The main motivation, even though the reasons for migration might change in the course of migration, is always the feeling of responsibility for the family (Lutz/Schwalgin 2004). Nevertheless, the framework conditions of the decision to migrate differ a lot between the three cases. For Agata as well as for Hawa the immediate reasons for migration lie in the circumstances of the family. While Agata leaves for Italy and later on for Germany mainly for financial rea-

sons, for Hawa migration is a way to improve the prospects and the conditions of education for her children. She wants to achieve class-mobility for her children. In the case of Malina, instead, it is the broader social environment of her home context that makes her go. It is the onset of chain migration and the cumulative causation of migration (Massey 1990) that cause her departure for Italy. In her immediate home context she witnesses how “transmigrants can make a claim to social status and have their status and social capital valorized” (Goldring 1997, p. 192). Besides, she gains assistance and access to employment due to already established networks of migration. Moreover, for both, Malina and Hawa, already existing family traditions of internal rural-urban mobility – previous to their external migration – represent a key resource.

## 4.2 Family arrangements

In all three cases the families are separated due to migration – even though the family constellations within the three cases vary a lot. Not only do the three women become separated from their families, a phenomenon referred to as transnational motherhood (see, e.g. Hondagneu-Sotelo/Avila 1997; Parrenas 2001). Partly also the father is separated from his children (Shinozaki 2003<sup>5</sup>). For Agata and Malina, being separated from their children is even a prerequisite for their employment as live-in domestic workers (Akalin 2007). Besides, Hawa and Malina can already refer to traditions of multi-generational family arrangements due to well-established patterns of internal migration in their families, respectively in their immediate home context. The care for the children is mainly taken over by other female family members (Gamburd 2000, pp. 173–175).

Additionally, for all three women migration shapes their motherhood and influences the relationship to their children. Due to the fact that they earn a significantly higher income than they could earn in their context of origin, they are able to fulfill their mother role by providing for the material resources and the educational careers of their children. At the same time, Agata and Malina actually have hardly any other way than to express their love to their children in tangible gifts, which has been referred to as commodified motherhood (Parrenas 2001, p. 122). Contrary to Hawa who tries to migrate together with her children, resulting partly in an even closer relationship with them, Agata and Malina complain of emotional deprivation. For both the separation from their children is hard to bear. In the case of Agata, this is aggravated by the fact that her children are discriminated against during her absence because of racist views while she is being stigmatised by her social environment in Poland for being a single female migrant (Kalwa 2007).

## 4.3 Work experiences and social status

For Agata, Malina and Hawa, migration is strongly linked to new work experiences. At first glance, the work strategies of the three women seem quite different. On the one hand, Agata and Malina migrate with the intentional purpose of getting a job in order to provide for their families. On the other hand, Hawa first migrates following her husband, who is the only breadwinner of the household. Nev-

ertheless, Hawa gets a job while living in France and decides to migrate a second time, this time on her own, with the intention of getting her job back. Migration and work strategies in order to improve the wellbeing of one's family are thus two phenomena that are strongly linked in the women's biographies; even though in Hawa's case this strategy is developed by both herself and her husband.

While living abroad, the three women work in devaluated low-paid feminised jobs: Hawa as a cook in a nursing home, Agata and Malina as care and domestic workers living in their employer's home. Working illegally as live-in workers leads to many sacrifices for Agata and Malina, such as leaving their children behind in their home country (even though Agata, thanks to the "tandem-system" is able to go back to Poland on a regular basis). On the contrary, Hawa is working legally, with a permanent contract and on a fixed schedule. This is a big opportunity for her second migration – alone – to France: it enables her to get social housing and to rely on the policy of family reunification so that her children can join her. The suffering linked to being separated from one's children, experienced by Agata and Malina, can be avoided by Hawa who thanks to her legal status is able to have her children with her.

Besides, migration leads to status ambivalences between home and destination contexts (Karakayali 2010). On the one hand, Agata and Malina experience a decline of their social status. Both of them are qualified workers and give up their occupation in order to do domestic and care work abroad. On the other hand, Hawa – who has already worked as a care and domestic worker for free in her own extended family – gains a certain social status through paid work outside the family. But those changes in social status are not unidirectional. Agata and Malina also gain recognition and professionalization in their domestic skills within their new life contexts. While they are experiencing humiliating situations in their families at home – especially from their partners – their paid-work in a foreign family is linked to a new sense of respect and recognition. For Hawa, working outside of the family and getting paid for it is not only a gain in social status. Whereas in Senegal she and her family live in a house she jointly owns with her husband who is a professor of English, in France she is seen as a working-class single-mother living in a deprived neighborhood.

Thus, in all three cases, the work experiences of these women are complex. On the one hand, the three women work in de-qualified, hard and very demanding jobs that compel them to leave their country and their family and to negotiate their social status. On the other hand, through these work experiences, they are able to reflect on their own role in their families and to build new strategies of autonomy regarding their relationship with their partners and their children.

#### 4.4 Changing gender roles in the family

In all three cases, symbolic male and female roles interact. On the one hand, the women retain the reproductive role they have already fulfilled in their context of origin by working as paid care or domestic workers. On the other hand, they professionalize their care and household skills, and in this way participate in or even completely fulfill the role of the breadwinner.

Thus, their migration experiences have enhanced their perception of their role within their families and have made them realize how much in the past their lives

were organized around their families: they constantly adapt to norms and the expectations of their social environment without the possibility of self-realization. Even though migration is strongly related to family needs, it also helps these women to distance themselves from family expectations and to gain agency. They become more confident and start to question their previous positions in their family space.

During migration, cognitive processes take place causing the need for change, which is realized with more or less distance to the partner (Hawa, Agata) or even divorce (Malina).

These processes are neither linear nor only positive but rather characterized by ambivalences. In the case of Agata, the issue lies in the stratification of problems motivated by an exploitative partner relationship with the father of her three children. In her work situation Agata experiences empathy and material support by her employer and by her friend and colleague with whom she shares the work. She can offer her professional skills of medical care and nursing and her competencies from the central family role as a mother, and gain recognition. However, the “cumulative mess” (Strauss 1985, pp. 163–181) of her life situation appears non-resolvable concerning her relationship with her partner and their ongoing precarious debt; she slowly realizes this during her autobiographical narrative interview. In theory, she is aware of her options, but structurally there is no real solution of the situation at the present time.

Malina and Hawa reflect on their gender and family roles based on a comparison of family relationships in the different life contexts. In Hawa’s case, the process of profound self-reflection has already started during migration and becomes increasingly stronger. All three cases contain ambivalences between the will to be autonomous and the will to maintain the existing gender relationship.

Although Agata admits to herself that she is in an unequal relationship, she as well as her children need the recognition and support of her partner, Rachid. Additionally, as a result of the distance between her and her children, Agata cannot remain in touch with the situation at home and because of this partially loses control over it.

Malina, coming back to her home village as a divorced woman, has to legitimize her divorce to herself again and again. It is thus revealed that she is partly still attached to a traditional family model, especially in the social context of her village.

Against the backdrop of an unpleasant marriage, for Agata and Malina their new financial autonomy and self-reflection linked to the experience of migration lead to a shift in gender relations. Although Hawa achieves emancipation for herself through her second migration to France and her job, she does not question her relationship to her husband; for her, he is still the head of the family and she says that she needs to listen to him concerning every decision she makes. Nevertheless, Hawa is working on a shift in gender relations through the education of her children that is linked to her new life context and her aim to make them all succeed in life and professionally.

## 5 Conclusion

Based on our analyses of biographical interviews with three migrant women, we illustrated how migration processes trigger a shift in perspective on gender relations. New understandings and imaginations as well as new social statuses within the context of migration have allowed processes of deep self-reflection for the protagonists. They have partly already questioned their former orientations and normative assumptions during their migration within their country of origin. In each case, the new life contexts made the women look at past biographical experience and on gender norms before migration from a critical and distanced point of view. Thus, our cases show how migration can constitute constant processes of biographical (re-)interpretation and meaning-building. Moreover, the three cases illustrate how migration has provided these women with a growing faith in their abilities and the development of new capabilities towards greater agency. Migration can therefore be seen as a space of reflection for the migrants themselves and for the implementation of innovative educational practices also for their children.

However, as we have seen, these processes of self-reflection and of questioning gender norms are not unidirectional. They are rather characterized by ambivalences. While there are some shifts regarding norms and practices of gender orders experienced before migration, other aspects of gender power relations remain unquestioned. Migration processes do not just take place in the way that old values, norms and practices are simply left behind in order to embrace “new” ways of thinking and doing. Instead, dealing with migration is permanently encased in processes of reinterpretation and negotiation; their dynamics are constituted along biographical backgrounds and experiences. In this way, structural conditions of deprivation and social decline on the one hand can be accompanied by an increase of reflexivity and agency on the other hand. As we have seen, from a biographical perspective, migration experiences elude linear interpretations speaking of a unidirectional shift from ‘tradition’ to ‘modernity’. It is for this reason that we need further field studies that shed light on the complex interactions between migration experiences and gender relations.

## Notes

- 1 I (A. S.) met Agata through an acquaintance who is a friend of her employer. The interview was conducted in Polish, at the home of the person she takes care of and lasted 90 minutes.
- 2 Schütze differentiates between four elementary biographical process structures: 1) “Biographical action schemes, by which a person attempts to actively shape the course of his/her life” (Schütze 2007, p. 11. 2) “Trajectories of suffering, in which persons are not capable of actively shaping their own life anymore, since they can only react to overwhelming outer events; in the course of their suffering they become strange to themselves” (ibid.) 3) “Institutional expectation patterns, in which persons are following up institutionally shaped and normatively defined courses of life, e.g. careers in organizations or the family life cycle that opens up family life in the first part of adulthood” (ibid). 4) “Creative metamorphoses of biographical identity by which a new important inner development is starting in one’s own biography, that might be miraculous and irritating in the beginning since it is new and that initially prohibits pertinent compe-



- tencies of the biography incumbent, and towards which she or he must find out what the very quality of it might be" (ebd. pp. 11–12).
- 3 "Background constructions are self-corrections of the narrator regarding the course of her or his narrative rendering at points of its implausibility. They are quite often initiated by the narrator her- or himself, when during her or his permanent self-monitoring she or he realizes that the course of presentation becomes questionable, inconsistent, discrepant or even contradictory, enigmatic, phony, etc. Then the narrator is driven by the narrative constraint of going into details. The narrator understands that something is missing between a rendering of event A and a following rendering of event B" (Schütze 2007, p. 27).
  - 4 Portes writes about services for transnational migrants as the transportation of passengers and remittances.
  - 5 Shinozaki refers to transnational father- and parenthood.

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