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The transformative potential of migration: polish migrants' everyday life experiences in Belfast, Northern Ireland

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we analyse the processes of migration from the perspective of agency-structure debate. In particular, we focus on the reflexive and emotional aspects of geographical movement and the complex relations between the settlement context, Belfast, Northern Ireland, and migrating people, with their biographies, gender positioning, resources and agency. The movement across space is biographically significant, as it is often meant to resolve economic, family or personal difficulties. However, the geographical movement in itself is not necessarily empowering. We bring the notion of migration as potentially transformative but only when it is accompanied by structural enablements and agential powers of reflexivity. The reflection on one's life course and the relations between self and the changing context of action shapes the migration experiences profoundly, which may further lead to shifts in gender positioning. The dynamics of shaping and being shaped is constantly present between migrants and the new context: the place influences everyday practices and, at the same time, the place is influenced by everyday actions and their reflexive elaboration. This article sheds light on these reflexive processes through the lens of gender.

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Introduction

Migration and gender research provides us with contradictory findings demonstrating on the one hand the empowering potential of migration for women (Duda-Mikulin 2013; Siara 2013) and, on the other, the tenacity of patriarchal norms and structures (Hofmann 2014; Urbańska 2015). This contradiction can be explained in part by differences in the cultural and structural dynamics present in the places of origin and destination, individual or family migration processes and gender relations within households and broader social contexts. The explanations can

be sought also on the level of agency (Lutz 2011). In this article, we conceptualise migration as a process that is not necessarily empowering but one that brings some transformative potential, which can be activated by the cultural and structural enablements (Archer 2007) of the new context and by the agency of migrating people: their reflexive elaboration of their past, present and future, including the reflection on their gender roles, their significant places and the movement between them. The purpose of this article is thus to analyse the ways gender and place are interwoven in migrants' biographies and how they are reflected upon, questioned, negotiated or taken for granted contributing (or not) to social and personal transformation. We focus here on Polish post-2004 migrants, women and men, living in Belfast, Northern Ireland.

With the growing scale of migration following Poland's EU accession, the option to move became readily available for Polish nationals. The idea to migrate took on the realistic shape of a potential scenario as it was constantly confirmed by those who had already migrated and was accompanied by their offers to help with finding work and accommodation in the new place (White 2011a). Going abroad soon started to take on the role of a 'solution' to people's economic, family or personal problems. Yet, geographical mobility, also brings about emotional costs and biographical consequences (Spanò, Perone, and Domecka 2013; Bell 2016). It may also constitute a challenge for established gender roles.

Migration place provides a structure of opportunities and constraints shaping biographies of migrants. Belfast as a migration place requires an acknowledgement of the fact that this is a city marked by a history of conflict and violence, and the experiences of the past impact the perception and day-to-day interactions of the people living there (Shirlow and Murtagh 2006; see also Bell 2012). It may though seem surprising that the issue of the Northern Irish conflict was rarely mentioned by our interviewees. Thus, due to the specificity of the place, in our discussion we decided to draw attention also to what was not reflected upon in the narratives. In this article, we examine migration processes, including the constant reworking of actor-context relations through migration experiences, autobiographical narration and reflexivity. The movement in space, with its transformative potential contributes to the management, negotiation and re-construction of gender roles and expectations. We apply here a dynamic notion of agency, not only as resistance and active action, but also as adaptation and reception (Näre 2014, 225). To be an agent may mean resisting or acting against someone or something, but also being receptive and adapting to one's circumstances, as well as creating and crafting alternative forms of action. This requires a capacity and capability to act (*ibid*).

In the following parts, we will introduce the notion of reflexivity as an agential power and then focus on Belfast as a migration place. We will analyse the meaning of place and gender from the perspective of biographies of migrating people. We will then ask how migration and its reflexive elaboration may contribute to the renegotiation of gender roles.

Agency, reflexivity and chance

Following Margaret Archer (2007), we stress the role of reflexivity in mediating between structurally shaped circumstances and what people deliberately make of them. Reflexivity can be described as the capacity to consider ourselves in relation to our social contexts and vice versa, to consider the context in relation to ourselves and our life projects. Focusing on migrants' agency and the role played by their reflexivity, we also recognise the fact that migration process entails a significant amount of pure chance, which is not easily acknowledged in social sciences. Some of the decisions taken by migrating people are indeed a result of their deliberation, but others are not premeditated. They are made spontaneously, as a result of contingency, an unexpected event or an encounter, which trigger a quick reaction. The change in circumstances also require a capacity to act in novel ways, to incorporate change and to live with contingency, in short, the agency. In migration deliberations, there is a gender dimension clearly visible. Many of our interviewees followed a common path of family unification, where male migrants came to Belfast first, and only after they settled and found accommodation were they joined by their female partners and other family members. Yet, the role of women was far from being passive followers (see also Ryan 2008; White 2011b). It was usually the women's responsibility to plan the last steps of the family move and to close the remaining affairs in Poland. At the same time, the initial proposal for the move was in our interviews often described as the women's initiative.

Migrants' biographies are the fields where the dynamic of agency and structure is well articulated. We see migration as a process where intentional action and structural opportunities and constraints of the place of origin and destination intertwine. Our interest in autobiographical narratives goes hand in hand with a growing focus on personal life, memoir and autobiography in feminist writing, and in the social sciences more generally (McDowell 2014, 152). Feminist geographers, among others, argue that family relationships and personal recollections should be an essential part of studies of the construction of personal identity and a sense of place (ibid., Ramdas 2014). It could be expected that being such a significant turning point in one's life, migration brings transformation. People, often for the first time, get confronted with different perspectives and see that everyday life can be organised differently. Migrants may also become more aware of the relational, contextual and performative nature of gender roles as they observe practices and expectations varying across space (cf. Siara 2013). The transformative potential of migration means that the movement in space may bring about the possibility of questioning the dominating gender discourses and practices, especially in the case of a move from a traditional to a more liberal society (Urbańska 2015). Kindler and Napierała, for example, note that 'Polish women often "escape" abroad because they cannot reconcile their professional career with the patriarchal division of labour in their respective household. Migration gives them a chance for increased independence, or an asset in fighting for gender equality' (2010, 22). However, it is

only a potentiality as migration may also strengthen the traditional gender roles and expectations (Morokvasic 2007; Hofmann 2014). The biographical and practical consequences of migration thus are not only a matter of movement itself but a matter of interaction between the moving self and the place as well as its reflexive elaboration. We argue here that migration may be a way of exercising one's agency but the outcome depends on the type of possessed resources, life projects and structurally given opportunities and constraints in the place of destination as well as the dynamics of gender relations.

The discussion about agency and reflexivity is important for our argument that mobility across borders is not necessarily empowering as one does not become an agent only by the mere fact of migrating (Hanson 2010). At the same time, as has already been observed by Bakewell (2010), many theories of migration rest on the assumption that migrants have a significant level of choice over their decisions to move and, by moving in space, they exercise their agency. These issues will be explored further in this article.

Data, method and context

Polish migrants constitute the largest ethnic minority in Northern Ireland with over 19,000 Polish-born residents (out of which 4000 live in Belfast) registered in the Census 2011 (NISRA 2013). Our analysis is based on empirical material consisting of 12 autobiographical narrative interviews with Polish migrants, a part of a large corpus of data collected in two research projects based in Belfast, Justyna's doctoral research and Markieta's FP7 EUROIDENTITIES project. The interviews were conducted between 2009 and 2011, transcribed and then analysed in-depth combining a single-case approach with the case-transcending procedure. All interviews were conducted, transcribed and analysed in Polish. Combining the two studies was possible as both applied the same technique of interviewing and analysis (Schütze 2008). The process of selection of participants was, in both studies, undertaken according to the principle of minimum and maximum variation (Glaser and Strauss 1967) where the categories emerging from constant comparison of first cases guide further sampling (*ibid*). We were aware that the interview situation, including gender and social position of the interactants, can be crucial in activating particular aspects of participants' stories and concealing – consciously or not – others (Letherby 2003). Family roles, gender and perception of sexuality in Poland – especially in smaller towns and villages – are still partly defined by the conservative, patriarchal views grounded in the rhetoric of the Catholic Church (Platek 2004; Siara 2009; Duda-Mikulín 2013; Urbańska 2015). As a consequence, the roles which the interviewees and the researcher take on during the interview might also be dictated by gender expectations formed in the country of origin. In this research, a clear example of the differences in the narratives produced by male and female participants was the level of disclosure when talking about their personal relationships and sexuality. Several young women discussed their

relationships and referred to the freedom as well as lack of social control over their sexual behaviour abroad. It could be argued that, although their stories transgressed the traditional Polish view on their gender roles, they remained comfortable talking about their relationships as they felt they were not going to be judged by young Polish female researchers. Women, in general, shared their reflections on the emotional difficulties their families went through in the course of migration, whereas male stories were more focused on the factual course of migration.

Belfast as migration place

Although there has been a long tradition of Polish migration to the UK, Northern Ireland was not a common destination before Poland joined the EU. As the reception that newly arrived migrants receive and their everyday interactions with the local population are shaped by the history and identity of place, we will focus on the specificity of Belfast, trying to avoid the oversimplification of divisions into homogeneous groups of unionist/loyalist/Protestant and nationalist/republican/Catholic. Migrants arriving in Belfast enter localities marked by intricate relations, plural and contested sense of place, polemical politics of ethnicity, and everyday sites of cultural exchange (Amin 2002, 959). Accordingly, the adaptation of normalising processes classifying a particular migrant population as a unidimensional group of 'the other other', proves inadequate. For Polish migrants in Belfast, one such conventional image was their ascribed Catholicism, commonly used as a predictor of their experiences and their relations with the local population (Kempny 2011; Bell 2012; see also Ryan 2010). Yet, for most Polish migrants, their religious affiliations were rarely a decisive feature in their settling patterns as they have taken up residence in mainly unionist/loyalist/Protestant working class areas (Svašek 2009, 133; Bell 2012, 107). This drift is associated with the population trends within the communities in the Belfast Urban Area – the new housing developments and a decline of working-class Protestant population following deindustrialization (Shirlow and Murtagh 2006, 69). As a result, these areas offered more affordable rented accommodation to the incoming migrants (see also McGhee, Heath, and Trevena 2013). They were also more convenient due to their location on the main public transport routes. The general perception of Poles as Catholics had a real outcome on their relations with the local population (see also Gill 2010). One such consequence was the precaution undertaken by most Polish organisations and local public bodies in building a bond with unionist/loyalist communities. As a consequence, local community organisations – which in loyalist areas especially have often strong links to loyalist paramilitary groups, some of which are still involved in criminal activities – have, in many cases, provided a form of protection for the Polish families living in these parts of Belfast. Neighbours of Polish migrants were often instructed to show a level of hospitality to the new residents.

Interestingly, for most of the interviewees who resided in unionist/loyalist/Protestant working class areas in Belfast, the visual territorial markings depicting

commemoration of identity – including omnipresent British flags, kerbs painted in red, white and blue, and murals – was not seen as anything out of the ordinary. When talking about their areas of residence, most of the interviewees usually spoke about personal – mainly positive – relationships with their neighbours. This does not mean that the interviewees were unaware of the local situation and spatial divisions but their visual representation was not significant for them. Polish migrants we interviewed rarely mentioned the local conflict as having an impact on their daily practices, they referred to it as a ‘nuisance’ towards which they had to develop a practical solution. One such instance was related to cutting across the borders between different neighbourhoods. Due to the fact that many of the schools in Northern Ireland are still segregated into Catholic and Protestant, most Polish migrants chose Catholic schools for their children. Thus, many of the Polish children, on a daily basis traversed unionist/loyalist/Protestant working-class areas where they resided and nationalist/republican/Catholic areas wearing Catholic school uniforms. Even if playing with Polish kids was acceptable for the neighbours’ children, the moment they put school uniforms demarking a certain ascribed identity, an embargo was put on them. Consequently, in order to lower the tension, the Polish children changed into normal clothes before crossing the borders of their neighbourhoods. Such elaborate manoeuvring in the process of place-making displayed by Polish migrants (see also Gill 2010) was referred in the interviews as a pragmatic solution to the local circumstances. This seems similar to the accounts raised by the Polish migrants living in socially deprived and sometimes dangerous parts of Glasgow, who balance the issue of safety and security with the sense of ‘normality’ defined as affordable, independent housing (McGhee, Heath, and Trevena 2013).

Some of our interviews were conducted around the time of a spate of attacks on Polish households following football violence instigated by a group of Polish supporters during and after a match between Northern Ireland and Poland in Belfast in March 2009. As a retaliation, over 80 households (mainly Polish) were attacked, with some residents forced to leave their homes. Yet, only a few interviewees alluded to these attacks. Katarzyna found herself caught up in those events by the mere fact of living in the affected area. She did not emphasise those events and instead, used this opportunity to praise their Belfast neighbours for their support. Kasia and other interviewees who also lived in a unionist/loyalist areas known as The Village, where most of the attacks took place, spoke about their fears for their families’ safety. Still, they stated that they were put at ease by their Protestant neighbours saying that they were safe and it was only the ‘misbehaving’ Polish migrants causing problems in the area that were in danger of being attacked. Such justification was in line with the previously mentioned vigilantism in these areas. Apart from the match violence in 2009, at the time of the research, the reports of racist attacks in Belfast were rare. The situation has changed more recently as there has been a growing number of attacks on migrant families in Northern Ireland, targeting a lot of the Polish households and involving anti-Polish graffiti.

The meaning of place and gender

Our interviewees tended to portray their migration in terms of an escape, as they felt trapped in their lives in Poland and had an urge to change their life trajectories (cf. Duda-Mikulin 2013, 108; Näre 2014). Migration was supposed to be the means of change and at that point, the destination place was not of the highest importance. The priority was to find a gateway from life conditions, which were objectively and subjectively defined as 'unbearable'. In the context of a harsh neo-liberal economy and downsizing welfare state where structural problems become privatised, there are stories of people who experienced unemployment, bankruptcies and debts, as well as those working very long hours, sacrificing their social life and looking for a way out. Some were in conflict with their families, trying to get some distance, others looked for ways to deal with biographical turning points, recovering after a break-up or another personal crisis. Migration, promising employment, independence, a new place and a new start was the means of escaping prescribed life scenarios and the possibilities and impossibilities shaped by place, class and gender.

The gender dimension of migration is clearly visible in case of women first packing their husbands' suitcases and then after some time following them abroad, not because they had a desire to migrate themselves but 'to keep the family together', which due to multiple difficulties, was not possible in Poland. This had an additional impact on the experience of migration, as the initial move of the men was usually portrayed as a swift action of 'opening the opportunities in the new place' and putting migration of the family in motion, whereas, for their partners it meant the lengthy process of organising the family move and 'closing the affairs in the homeland'.

There was no work, I was laid off because ... because I was pregnant (...) because there would be maternity leave, some benefit, some leave and there are some costs ... for a company. And ... we were left practically with one wage. (...) Really, it was very hard for us and eventually it was so hard that we took a decision, unfortunately, that it was necessary to leave. And ... and what? I packed his little rucksack and he left. (...) And then ... I decided that ... I need to follow my husband, because if I don't go there, it will be over. [Monika, 35, cleaner and care worker]

The work of 'keeping the family together' is considered here to be a 'woman's task', which is performed at great personal cost (White 2011b; Bell 2016, 87). Monika, as some other women we interviewed, feels it is her task to repair the relationship. At this point in the decision-making process, Belfast was not relevant in itself. Our interviewees, trying to escape their personal troubles, did not know much about the place they were headed for and many of them felt they did not need to know. Monika initially thought that Belfast was in Germany and the name sounded 'a bit German' to her. Only when buying the ticket did she realise she was going to Northern Ireland, which did not change much for her. Many other interviewees did not have any image of the city or the country prior to the move. The local particularities – the division of Ireland and the sectarianism in Belfast – did

not have much meaning for our interviewees as their own migration projects were not related to them. The choice of Belfast as a destination was on the one hand accidental – going ‘where their network took them’ (White 2011a, 20) – and on the other hand, instrumental as it offered the opportunity structure of employment and smooth bureaucracy, related to their EU citizenship.

The place, with its physicality and its strangeness, enters the biographies of our interviewees in the ways completely unexpected to them. The pragmatic project they followed put them in a social, political, geographical and linguistic context they were unprepared for. The confrontation of the self and the new place is thus emotionally charged.

It was hard because I had to take a plane for the first time, with two children, who were scared, and I was scared ((laughing)) it was horrible (...) [my son] started crying at the take-off and I thought I would start crying as well. (...) The first day [in Belfast], it was something horrible ... It's something when you land ... in a place you completely don't know (...) It was horrible ... I was scared I would go out and get lost (...) so, I was staying at home with children, because it was still summer holidays, I only walked to the playground and back. [Kasia, 35, housewife and cleaner]

The emotionally exhausting journey from Poland to Belfast seems to suspend Kasia's agential powers. Similar to Burrell's study of Polish migrants in the Midlands region of the UK (2008), it shows that migration can be also a paralysing experience making it impossible to perform the simplest day-to-day tasks. At the time of the interview, a few years later, Kasia is in a different place leading economically stable and socially active life in Belfast. She has a sense of becoming a new person and, from that perspective, her earlier inability to leave the surroundings of her house at first comes almost as a comical reflection (she laughs while narrating). Moreover, Kasia was one of the interviewees who talked about the practical approach to her children having to change out from their school uniforms when entering the area they live in – something that would have most likely terrified her should she have heard it at the point of arrival in Belfast. The initial emotional and cognitive shock, paralysing even the simplest everyday life activities, had to be overcome in order to make the migration project work. The pragmatism of our interviewees, their determination and their agency helped them to deal with the difficulties they experienced. Monika tells with pride that the next day after her traumatic journey, ‘with a dictionary in her hand’ she managed to find a job in a printing house. In their cases, the new place did not trigger the renegotiation of gender roles. As in Poland, also in Belfast they see themselves first of all as ‘caring mothers’ and ‘supporting wives’ (Hofmann 2014), with their working hours well synchronised with their household duties and family daily routine.

Place, agency and transformation

In the transformation our interviewees experienced, an important role was played by their neighbours and co-workers. Belfast at this point starts becoming much

more significant, as it not only provided the expected opportunity structure, but it also turned out to be a friendly and welcoming place. There are numerous stories of the practical help and emotional support received from neighbours (cf. McGhee, Heath, and Trevena 2013, 335). The local people also share their knowledge about 'good locations' in the city, where one can 'live well' and 'feel safe'. Thus, among our interviewees, there were experiences of meaningful, reliable relationships with the locals and more superficial contacts based purely on geographical proximity of residence and workplace (Cook, Dwyer, and Waite 2011). Still they tend to ignore the Loyalist-Republican dynamics and the acts of community violence in the city as long as they do not interfere with their life projects. After years of living in Belfast, many aspects of the place, both positive and negative, are now recognised. The opportunity structure provided transformed our interviewees' lives in many different ways and the improvement of economic standing is considered as one of the most important:

I started getting the money I could have never thought of, not at all, twice or three times more than my parents took home together ... and I just could afford everything I liked.
[Piotr, 30, junior doctor]

There are also many aspects of our interviewees' lives that stay unchanged. The negative family dynamics many wished to escape by leaving Poland, keep haunting them even in Belfast. There are numerous stories of family visits, which bring back the troubling relationships which are especially emphasised in women's narratives. This demonstrates that geographical movement does not in itself resolve personal and family issues if it is not accompanied by reflection. Our interviewees' agency, their resilience and resourcefulness, enable them to move successfully on the labour market and reach a good standard of living, but still, it turns out to be insufficient in dealing with complex personal issues. We see here that there are different types of agential powers needed in order to deal with pragmatic issues, such as work and housing and those needed to deal with complex emotional and relational problems.

We also see that migration does not necessarily change gender relations as taken for granted ways of thinking and acting travel across borders. There are stories of unequal treatment of men and women, both in the country of origin and destination, which are not necessarily called 'discriminatory' or 'sexist':

[at work] people are less kind to Marta, I think ... because she's a girl (...) When I sometimes talk on the phone, I feel that sometimes ... guys especially, sometimes they are able ... to be really unkind to her ... She is firm, but ... maybe they think they can let themselves go further. [Michał, 25, recruitment consultant]

In the narratives we analysed, the new place does not emerge as particularly stimulating for the redefinition and negotiation of gender relations. Contrary to Siara's analysis of London as a migration place, a global city, being on 'the opposite ends of a gender continuum' when compared with Poland (Siara 2013, 111), our interviewees living in Belfast do not perceive their situation as significantly different. Those of our female interviewees who were housewives in Poland are

also housewives in the new context taking perhaps some temporary or part-time cleaning jobs – the sector they are structurally channelled towards. Those already active in the Polish labour market, take unqualified jobs first but having more capacity to move across sectors and positions, they have greater chances of promotion. In fact, the gender dimension of migration transpires on multiple levels. Firstly, migrant occupational destinations are often drawn on traditionally gendered lines and in Belfast we see female domestic and care workers and male construction workers, with implications for experiences of advantage and disadvantage at work. When Monika lived in Poland, she was pushed towards gendered education and occupation – forced by her mother to become a beautician. Then, she experienced losing a job due to pregnancy and followed by difficulties in finding a job after maternity leave. After arriving in Belfast, she is first channelled towards factory work and then to cleaning and care jobs. The structural impact of the migration place on our female interviewees' biographies is visible in the fact they have been segregated into occupations being an extension of their unpaid work at home. This is the mechanism not questioned by them as they treat their employment as 'additional' to their husbands' work. We have only one example of a woman working in a male-dominated sector: a 29-year-old Basia who works as a bus driver in Belfast and who recognises how unusual her path is.

A relevant question here is how the moves in space reproduce, alter and challenge gendered subjectivities of migrants (Parreñas 2009; Morokvasic 2013). Thus, our findings point out that, although, this can be the case for some migrant women, many others find themselves in the family relationships transplanted almost directly from Poland, or even undergo re-traditionalisation (Morokvasic 2007, 71; Siara 2013). The lack of support in childcare, for example, placed a heavy strain on some of our female participants. Katarzyna delays her decision of having a second child until her mother retires and comes to Belfast to help her.

I would only work evenings, just as I'm working at the moment. But now I also have additional work during the day, while my daughter is at school, that's when I go to work. But I'm not saying that this is great because it's really, really exhausting. So I go back home and one needs to do the chores, right? And then my husband is back from work, so a dinner ... and then I have to go back to work for 8.30 pm. It's quite tiring. [Katarzyna, 30, cleaner]

For Katarzyna, patriarchal relations in her family brought about the multiple burden (see also Duda-Mikulin 2013, 111) of participation in the workforce and taking responsibility for household duties maintaining unchanged gender relations at home as well as feeling the consequences of social isolation and the lack of extended family support (Schmalzbauer 2014, 111). If the socialisation of women in Poland as those 'taking care of everything' (cf. Duda-Mikulin 2013) is not challenged by the new place, new opportunities and a new type of reflection, it results in women dramatically overworked, especially when they have small children and are employed in low-skilled jobs:

So ... these are the skirmishes of everyday life, ups and downs. You know, just everyday life. But sometimes I've got enough and I cry under the shower. (...) So, these are such ordinary, simple things of a life of a woman who brings up children and works hard and has a nuisance of a husband. [Monika]

Here, reflexivity moved towards strengthening of the traditional gender roles as Monika defines herself and perhaps is externally identified mainly through her motherly and uxorial roles. The fact she is overworked does not make her question the role division at home. Her husband (called a nuisance) plays his traditional role of a breadwinner, while Monika, equally traditionally in Polish context is a co-breadwinner and takes care of 'everything else'. The potentiality of migration does not have much impact on the transformation in this part of her life.

In the case of highly-skilled women who had no children at the time of migration, the move often provided more opportunities for arranging their lives. For Zuza, an architect, the move to Belfast exposed the flaws in the internal dynamics of her marriage leading to a divorce.

It was a little bit funny, strange ... because I was married in Poland ... funny because we split up when I moved here (...) My husband really wanted to migrate but for me in Poland it was ... I was working (...) I was very determined to be an architect (...) so generally I was labouring 20 hours per day, I carried this way for 5 years (...) and I remember my husband used to say 'let's move out from this country', yet he was doing nothing in that direction. So, at some point I said 'OK, maybe I will try' (...) so one day when I was feeling really down, I thought 'I have to find a well-paid job'. I opened a newspaper and saw that they were looking for an architect in Northern Ireland. So, I sent my CV (...) they chose two people and I was one of them and I thought I'd try and see (...) I did get to like it a lot, especially my job. This was a little bit at a cost of my marriage ... because all of a sudden it turned out that my husband did not really want to ... I mean he came here but he couldn't find himself here and things just fell apart. [Zuza, 30, an architect]

The determination of Zuza's husband to move out from Poland made her act upon it, but when she organised a job and a life in Belfast, their paths split. Her reflexivity and high cultural capital helped her to make the most of the opportunities she found in the new context and to build an independent life.

It is sometimes presumed that becoming a co-breadwinner should yield an equal position within the marital dyad (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994) and lead to a transformation in gender roles within the family. Such changes, however, may lead to tensions and other unforeseen consequences. Natalia, a teaching assistant, spoke about the impact of migration on her relationship. Her husband co-owned and managed two well-established bars in a small village in Poland and was the main earner in the family, being able to provide a comfortable existence for himself and Natalia. When they moved to Belfast his position in the relationship changed and he became entirely dependent on his wife in terms of her language skills and finances. Natalia was an English teacher in Poland and she tried to teach her husband the language, but he was not quick in grasping it. At the beginning, they both worked in the same restaurant, but soon Natalia found a job in a Belfast primary school. Owing to the fact that her husband was in conflict with several

Polish workers in the restaurant he worked in, Natalia's function was to intervene in the disputes and interpret her husband's stands to the manager, which additionally put her husband in a difficult position as his wife's protégé. At the time of the interview, Natalia was at the point when she had realised the shortcomings of such an imbalance in the relationship. She felt helpless and at the same time did not dare to initiate any discussions on this delicate matter with her husband. In protecting her husband's head-of-household role she participated in a certain type of gender performance coming from the prevailing gender discourses both in Poland and in Northern Ireland.

Conclusions

The analysis of autobiographical narratives allows us to look at the process of migration from many different angles. We can follow the migration paths from the moment of decision making, the actual geographical movement, the moment of arrival and the subsequent process of 'life building' in the new place. Analysing autobiographical narratives we are able to reconstruct, on the one hand, the perceived opportunity structure and on the other, the workings of reflexivity that enables individuals to deal with the structurally given opportunities and constraints in the light of their life projects. The transformative potential of migration may be realised in different ways. It may result in biographical metamorphosis of migrants, social transformation of places, transformation of relations between migrants and places as well as transformation of gender relations. It may also be translated into maintaining the gender roles brought by migrating people across the borders and fulfilling them in similar ways despite the change of context.

Our analysis of the biographies of Polish migrants in Belfast has shown that as the geographical movement itself is biographically significant, the place of arrival may remain unproblematised. A strong need to build a 'normal life' is felt and the place is reflected upon only when settlement does not go smoothly. Belfast itself becomes discussed only in the case of incidents viewed as potentially endangering the project of life building. The new place first of all serves as a reference point for comparisons with the place of origin. It seems as if the significance of Belfast for the individuals as the migration context has been externally ascribed as a predictor of their experiences, however, in their stories of everyday lives in Belfast, other aspects of life seemed more crucial.

When we analyse the role of migration process and Belfast as the destination place for the process of 'doing' and 're-doing' of gender relations we see a potentiality rather than a transformation. Migrating people may become more aware of the contextual and performative nature of gender, as they see the differences in gender roles and expectations in the countries of departure and destination. Belfast, however, as the context of action is not particularly stimulating for the reinterpretation of gender relations, which may be the result of its cultural similarities with our interviewees' home places. It does provide an important opportunity

structure, including employment both for men and women, but we see the channelling of women towards part-time, temporary, unqualified jobs, allowing for modest income and little chance for advancement. This in turn impacts gender relations in the family where women's paid work is treated as 'additional' to the men's and it is expected to fit all the caring and housekeeping needs. The structural opportunities and cultural repertoire offered in the new context seem to favour more the maintaining of the traditional gender roles taken from Poland than challenging them. In fact, they make fulfilling these types of roles much easier. Our male interviewees stressed the fact that their salaries were much higher than in Poland, which allowed them to play 'better' their roles of fathers and husbands, reinforcing their main-bread-winner position. Our female interviewees, on the other hand, were glad finding part-time employment allowing them to meet all gender expectations ingrained in traditional Polish culture: contributing to family budget without compromising their household 'duties' and their roles of 'caring mothers' and 'supportive wives'. For many of our interviewees, migration was not a way of transforming gender roles but to fulfil them 'better': 'doing' gender rather than 'undoing' it.

These type of gender relations, however, are not given once for good as the changes in the macrostructural context have an impact on the dynamics of family relations. The loss of many of construction and factory jobs, a direct consequence of the economic crisis, resulted in some women becoming main-bread-winners, which may potentially improve their position but can also result in stigmatisation as those who disturb the given gender order. It should be also kept in mind that the context does not impact upon actions directly, as there is always a reflexive process involved, where different options are taken into account, chosen and invested in or discarded, leading to the enactment of different life scenarios and gender relations.

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