

# Ukrainian Migrant Workers in Italy: Coping with and Reacting to Downward Mobility

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*This article investigates the phenomenon of Ukrainian migrant women employed in the domestic and care sector in Italy. The analysis is based on a broad doctoral research carried out both in Ukraine and in Italy between 2005 and 2007. In particular, I investigate the subjective perception of downward mobility and how migrant women face this process of social devaluation and respond to it, taking into account that, in the case of Ukrainian female migration, the social skidding produced by migration goes hand in hand with the erosion of social and professional identity as experienced in their origin country during the 1990s. Thus, in order to comprehend the complexity of migration experiences it is necessary to analyse the migrants' whole life trajectories. The main results of the article are that Ukrainian migrant women give meaning to the process of devaluation by viewing it as an interlude in their life and as a sacrifice that serves to improve their families' upward social mobility. Furthermore, in order to mitigate the social skidding and the asymmetrical relationships that characterise domestic work, they prefer to personalise the relationship with their employers and to avoid working for low educated and working class people. Finally, Ukrainian domestic workers react to the homogenisation engendered by migration by differentiating themselves both from other foreign nationals employed in the same sector, and from the 'rough mass' of their fellow countrywomen.*

*Keywords: migration, domestic and care work, devaluation, Italy, Ukraine*

## Introduction

The migratory experience is a process in which ambivalent and complex forms of social devaluation and valorisation of the individual coexist. This study explores the first of the two dimensions, based on an extensive ethnographic research on Ukrainian female migration to Italy, conducted in the countries of origin and destination between 2005 and 2007.

Work is one of the public spaces in which subjects negotiate their identity and weave their social relationships. This social field is particularly important for migrants, because work legitimates their absence *vis-à-vis* the society of origin, and their presence *vis-à-vis* the host society (Sayad 1999). In Italy, the majority of Ukrainian migrants are employed as domestic and care workers, so at the bottom of the *labour market*, even if the majority of them are well educated and many of them were skilled workers before emigrating.

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Thus, what are the migrant women's feelings when faced with such a process of devaluation? How do these women experience and interpret their work experience characterised by seclusion, subordination, high labour intensity and emotional stress? And finally, how do they give meaning and react to such experiences? These are some of the questions that this article seeks to answer.

Qualitative sociological research on downward social mobility is scarce, especially in relation to migrant people; exceptions worth mentioning are studies by Rhacel Salazar Parreñas (2001), Ho (2006) and Liverage (2009). The concept of 'contradictory class mobility' as elaborated by Parreñas is particularly useful, since it shows the simultaneous yet contradictory experience of upward mobility, caused by the increase in financial status in the country of emigration, and by downward mobility in relation to the decline in social status in the country of immigration, undergone by migrant Filipino domestic workers living in Italy and United States (Parreñas 2001: 150). However, in order to understand the impact of social devaluation engendered by migration on Ukrainian migrant women, it is necessary to go beyond the recognition of this contradiction, and to analyse how they cope with and react to such experiences during their stay in Italy, taking into consideration such aspects as their social class before departure, profession, educational level, age and migratory project.

In this article I focus only on the most prevalent category of Ukrainian migrant women, consisting of adult women in their 40s and 50s, who usually are the main breadwinner of their families and are employed as live-in caregivers. Generally these migrants leave Ukraine as a short-term project in the hope that they can earn sufficient money in a short time, e.g. one or two years. However, their migratory experience often turns out to continue for year after year, keeping migrants abroad in a transitory condition for a prolonged period. While remaining firmly focused on returning, they continue to postpone it. For this reason I refer to them as 'migrants in transition'. Thus, I exclude from the analysis other categories of Ukrainian migrant women – for instance young women, single women, women married with Italian men – whose way of coping with downward mobility could be different.

After a brief section dealing with methodology, the second section of this article describes the main social and economic implications of transition for Ukrainian women. The third section gives a short overview of labour immigration in Italy, with particular attention for migrant domestic workers and care assistants. After that I analyse three groups of strategies adopted by migrants to cope with downward mobility, which can be summed up as follows: 1) thinking that it is only a short interlude in their life; 2) making the debasement and the subordination milder; 3) adopting practices and discourses of social differentiation.

## **Methodology**

This article is based on the analysis of 41 in-depth interviews with Ukrainian migrant women, collected by the author between 2005 and 2007.<sup>1</sup> The study was characterised by a multi-sited approach (Marcus 1995; Fitzgerald 2006), prompted by the awareness that, in order to achieve a full understanding of the different aspects and dynamics of migration, it is necessary to analyse the social contexts of both origin and destination country. Following this approach, interviews were collected in Italy, in particular in the region of Veneto, and in Ukraine, in the regions of L'viv, Ivano Frankivsk and Chernivtzy. In Italy only migrant workers were interviewed, while in Ukraine the interviewees were both migrant workers who had returned for only a short period of vacation and permanently returned migrants. Interviews conducted in Ukraine were particularly rich in stories, opinions and reflections. This is probably due to the physical and psychological distance from Italy, which allowed women to be more self-reflective and also freer to express their opinion on Italy and Italians. Furthermore, the power relations shaping the interview were less asymmetrical than in Italy, where the researcher, being an Italian citizen, was a representative of the hegemonic group and potentially

damaging for a migrant that could be, for instance, without documents. By contrast, during the field work in Ukraine the interviewer was first of all an inoffensive foreigner and secondly a guest. Thus, migrants interviewed in Ukraine probably felt more confident and secure.

The majority of the women interviewed were between thirty and fifty-nine years old, single mothers – divorcees or widows – and holding a high school diploma or a university degree. In their country of origin the majority of them were employed as teachers, nurses, factory technicians, shop assistants and office clerks, whereas in Italy they had found employment mainly as care or domestic workers. Some of them were employed as concierge, intercultural mediator,<sup>2</sup> blue collar or sales assistants.

### **An upset life**

To understand the complexity of Ukrainian migrants' life trajectories and hence the process and experience of devaluation, it is necessary to outline the entire span of the transnational migratory experience, starting from what happened to them in Ukraine after the dissolution of the USSR and then analysing their entrance into the Italian labour market, where they often end up in the field of domestic and care work.

During the 1990s, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the destruction of its integrated and interdependent economic system, Ukraine experienced a deep economic crisis. The prices of oil and gas increased, the manufacturing output fell, and the national income shrank, while the national deficit and inflation rates increased dramatically. The main economic impacts on common people were a sharp decline in wages, the devaluation of savings, high unemployment, under-employment and inactivity rates, and prolonged delays in wages payment (D'Anieri, Kravczuk, Kuzio 1999; Aslund 2009). In 1996, 30 per cent of the Ukrainian population lived below the poverty line (Dudwick, Wanner 2003). This overall impoverishment destabilised both the social organisation and the cultural reference system, causing radical changes in lifestyles, in daily practices and in the construction of people's identities.<sup>3</sup>

The political and economic transformations affected men and women differently. Women experienced a swift deterioration in their living conditions and social status, primarily due to the increased risk of losing their jobs, the erosion of family support services and the rapid spread of neo-conservative thinking, calling for a return to the traditional sexual division of labour (Buckley 1997). They suddenly found themselves alone in having to simultaneously cope with productive and reproductive responsibilities, as a double salary income was at that time essential for household survival.

Some scholars (Kiblitckaya 2000; Dudwick, Gomart, Kuehnast 2003) argue that coping strategies in post-Soviet countries diverged according to sex, and that men and women reacted differently to the loss of their jobs. Women adapted more easily to the loss of their previous professional identity, since they were already second-class workers. Being used to embodying multiple identities as workers, mothers and wives, they underwent this transformation of living conditions in a less traumatic way. The Italian concept of 'double presence' (Balbo 1978) is useful here in order to better understand the experience of women's double burden. It is the experience of commuting between different universes of meaning and of combining different activities and codes within the same time-frame. Thus, for women there is no separation of the temporal orders typical of the male model, because they belong to a multiplicity of temporal spheres and social identities (Bimbi 1991). For men, on the other hand, unemployment resulted in the loss of the most important part of their identity, which in Soviet society was closely linked to one's profession. Although the post-Stalinist emphasis on education and prosperity had produced a wide range of employment opportunities, Soviet iconography associated the male with the image of the industrial worker: strong and healthy, and committed to his job. The centre of male Soviet citizens' life was work; their self-realisation and social recognition depended on it (Kukhterin 2000; Kay 2006). For this reason they had to invest all their energy in their work, and this was

made possible by delegating all tasks related to the reproductive sphere to their wives. Women, however, depicted as mothers-workers, had a more pragmatic relationship with employment, since they also had to deal with everyday family responsibilities (Hankivsky, Salnykova 2012).

Many of the Ukrainian immigrants interviewed belonged to the impoverished Soviet lower middle class. They were employed in the health and education public services and trade sector, as teachers, physicians, nurses, technicians and craftsmen.<sup>4</sup> During the Soviet period such jobs guaranteed them a certain stability and comfort, which quickly disappeared after the dissolution of the USSR, because of low wages and widespread delays in payments (Boyarchuk, Maliar, Maliar 2005).

In conclusion, most of the migrants interviewed had seen their lives change dramatically during the 1990s. Once they lost their jobs, many women re-invented both their professional and social identities, even accepting a significant deterioration in social status. Many other women had to cope with long delays in the payment of wages and to find alternative strategies to maintain their households. Thus, migration became one of the most common solutions to cope with the tumultuous social and economic transformations occurring in Ukraine, but also one of the strategies adopted by Ukrainian people to pursue upward social mobility for their families. Men and women, pensioners, unemployed or underemployed chose to go abroad.

### **Ukrainian immigration in Italy**

In September 2011, the Ukrainian Mission of the International Organisation for Migration reported that the total number of Ukrainian citizens living abroad was 6.5 million, which equals 14.4 per cent of the total population. Between 2005 and 2008 the Russian Federation had been the first destination, attracting 50 per cent of Ukrainian migrants. Italy in the same period drew roughly 15 per cent (International Organisation for Migration – Mission in Ukraine 2011). However, the current conflict (2014) could radically change this figure in the near future.

Contemporary Ukrainian migration to Italy started in the mid-1990s. However, the presence of Ukrainian migrants has only been registered by the Italian Statistics Institute (Istat) after the general immigration amnesty of 2002. In 2001, Istat estimated that there were just 6 567 Ukrainian citizens with a permit to stay, while in 2004 the permits issued to Ukrainian citizens had rapidly increased to 117 161 (Italian *Institute of Statistics* 2001, 2004). According to the most recent data, 218 099 Ukrainian citizens have a residency permit (Italian *Institute of Statistics* 2011).<sup>5</sup> They now represent the fifth largest national group among foreign citizens in Italy,<sup>6</sup> after Romanians, Albanians, Moroccans and Chinese. 81.14 per cent of residency permit holders are women. Men amount to 18.85 per cent, and minors to 6.95 per cent. Both for women and men the main purpose of presence is work, but women outnumber men (77.04 per cent and 57.3 per cent) (Italian *Institute of Statistics* 2010c).

Even if statistics on the place of origin are not available, during my ethnographic research I observed that the majority of Ukrainian migrants come from Western Ukraine, especially from the regions of L'viv, Ivano Frankivsk, Ternopil and Cernivtzy. The flow is characterised by a prevalence of adult women – in their 40s and 50s – who are either married, divorced or widows (Conti, Ribella, Strozza, Tuoto 2010; Marchetti, Venturini 2013). Ukrainian women arrive in Italy alone, leaving their relatives behind. The majority are quite well educated and the main reasons for emigration are low incomes, unemployment and high tuition fees (Caritas/Migrantes 2006).

Ukrainian migrants are primarily concentrated in five regions: 41 622 Ukrainians in Lombardy (Milan region, northern Italy), 37 391 live in Campania (Naples region, southern Italy), 27 501 in Emilia-Romagna (Bologna region, northern Italy), 18 922 in Lazio (Rome region, central Italy), and 15 179 in Veneto (Venice region, northern Italy) (Italian *Institute of Statistics* 2010a<sup>7</sup>). Initially, the preferred destination for Ukrainians

in Italy was Naples, probably because its port has had long-lasting commercial relations with the port of Odessa (Mazzacurati 2005), and because the black market economy is quite widespread there. This made it easier for migrants without documents to live and find work there. Now, the preferred destination is Lombardy, probably because there are more work opportunities.

The first *Report on Immigrants in Italy* published by the Home Office (Ministero dell'Interno 2007) dedicated a chapter to Ukrainians. It shows that the rate of employment of Ukrainians is one of the highest (77.4 per cent) and that the period of integration in the labour market is amongst the shortest when compared with other nationalities. Furthermore, intermarriages between Italian men and Ukrainian women are quite common, so that many women obtain Italian citizenship and have children with Italian men. The demands for family reunification are presented mainly by women: usually they are rejoined by their children. Finally, the Report underlines that Ukrainian immigration is characterised by a high level of overstayers.

Men are employed mainly in the construction and agrarian sectors (Morrison, Sacchetto, Cretu 2013), while women are employed in the domestic and care work sector and in the sex industry, where undeclared labour is particularly common. According to the most recent data of the National Social Security Institute, in 2011 Eastern Europeans (Ukrainians, Romanians and Moldavians) represented 46.32 per cent (427 565) of those insured in this sector (923 014) (*Italian Institute of Social Security* 2011). Unfortunately, this data does not distinguish between home helpers and live-in elderly carers, but throughout my field research I observed that Ukrainian women are mainly employed as care workers.

In Italy, the increase in female employment that began in the 1970s, combined with the ageing of society, have created a high demand for paid care and domestic work, since native women cannot manage both paid work on the job market and unpaid labour at home. The interplay between the endurance of an asymmetrical sexual division of reproductive work and the Italian familist welfare state, based on the male breadwinner model and characterised by cash transfers to households rather than the provision of services, caused Italian families to rely on private welfare, made affordable by the availability of a cheap migrant labour force (van Hooren 2008, 2010).

In the 1990s, the emergence of Eastern European migration flows towards Italy was matched with a specific demand for labour force. Eastern European women – Croatian, Slovenian, Polish, Ukrainian, Romanian and Moldovan – are the ideal migrants to meet Italian families' domestic and care work needs, as they are white, Christian, educated, middle-aged and alone, hence without any family obligations. Indeed, they are among the nationalities with the highest female incidence and the highest concentration in the care and domestic sector. After Filipino women, who have the highest degree of concentration in this sector (72.5 per cent), there are Ukrainian women (64 per cent) (Direzione Generale dell'immigrazione e delle politiche di integrazione 2012).

Finally, the deep economic recession that is affecting Italy has a low impact on Ukrainian women employment, since the majority of them are employed in services to families. While other national groups like Albanians and Moroccans, which mainly consist of men employed in industry and construction, are the most affected by the downturn in jobs (*Italian Institute of Statistics* 2010b).

### **A short interlude**

Ukrainian migrant women belonging to the social category I have labelled as 'migrants in transition' accept domestic and care sector jobs, because they see the migratory experience as just an interlude in their life. It is a short period of time spent far from their home country, during which it is easier to occupy the lowest rungs of the social ladder. According to this view, the downward mobility is more acceptable when it happens in a foreign country because it does not radically impact their social status. Indeed, the reticence, even after

several years, to consider migration as a long-term experience, can be seen as an unconscious strategy to cope with social devaluation.

Even though migrant women recount that they were aware of the job expected of them in Italy when they left Ukraine, once they actually started working they were shocked upon realising the radicalness of the social debasement. The women I interviewed were torn between a desire to rebel against the condition to which they were subjected and the family responsibilities that inhibited them from doing so, forcing them to carry out these tasks for a while in order to improve their family living conditions. Sometimes, migrants are so ashamed of their jobs that they do not talk about it to their relatives, almost as if to erase it from their own experience. At the same time, relatives often do not ask their mothers, daughters or wives anything (Fedyuk 2012). How they earn money does not matter, but just the value of remittances, which condones the denial of the migration experience. Indeed, Oleksandra, who during the Soviet period was a music teacher, is torn between a sense of humiliation and the pride based on the idea that every work is worthy of respect, in particular if it is necessary for the family's well-being. As she says:

*I do not feel more powerful. Honestly, I must say that since I started working, I've never been so humiliated as I am now. I think that my father would die if he knew the work I am doing here. I'm not ashamed. I accept this work. For me it is a good opportunity. I'm not ashamed to clean bathrooms, to wash the windows. I came here to work, I was aware of it, I expected it (Oleksandra – migrant – Venice 2.06.2006).*

Thus, the first strategy adopted by Ukrainian migrant women working in Italy as caregivers to cope with the downward mobility is to think that this humiliating experience is only an interlude in their life, aimed at improving their family's living conditions and to defend their family's social status. Thank to this sacrifice their children can pursue their studies and find a good job. Furthermore, their expectation is that once they return to Ukraine they will regain their previous social position in Ukrainian society. For this reason they do not like to speak with their relatives about their 'Italian work'.

### **From teacher to servant: how to make the subordination and the debasement milder**

Given the decline in prestige and social status, migrants in transition try to reduce subordination within the relationship with their employers by demanding respect, which they call 'humane treatment', and by personalising the relationship with employers. Towards their employers,<sup>8</sup> who undervalue them because they are foreigners and who show no appreciation for their work and their professional background, they request to be recognised as equals. For this reason, every small sign of equal treatment is greatly cherished by the respondents. The case of Olesia is emblematic, as she recounts how she was suddenly rescued by her employers when she suffered a haemorrhage, as a demonstration of humanity.

*I worked with a family composed of wife, husband and six children. A very simple family, all very good. Even when I was ill, when I had a haemorrhage. Within an hour they had brought me to the gynaecologist. They helped me, but I was not feeling very well, so I decided to return to Ukraine. This family always called me. They told me: 'come back, because you're good, we're used to you' (Olesia – migrant – Venice 2.06.2006).*

Similarly to the Filipino domestic workers studied by Parreñas (2001), the Ukrainian migrants mitigate the contradictory class mobility by seeking out a close relationship with employers. Often, affective relationships arise between the elderly person and the assistant, since both of them live in a condition of frailty and social

isolation. Both parties often describe the nature of such a relationship as typical of the family context, such as one between parent and child. Indeed, it is not rare for the migrants to speak about the person they assist with affection, defining them as grandparents or parents. For instance, Nadia says that she likes the woman she takes care of, who reminds her of her grandmother.

*I work with a lady who is 100 years old. Her head still works. I work 24 hours... day and night. [...] They are a normal family. The daughter is a teacher like me and the lady, Gemma, lives only on her pension, 1 200 euros a month. The Municipality provides a cash transfer, but the salary is enough only to pay me and bills... I take 700 euros. My friends take a little more: 800 euros. But to me that's fine, because there is not that much work: the apartment is small, she visits toilet on her own, she walks... she goes to the window and looks at the weather and then we talk a lot. With older people it is important to have a lot of patience. I have been working for her for a year and a half and I feel good. [...] She reminds me of my grandmother (Nadia – migrant – Venice 13.06.2006).*

Numerous studies (Andall 2000; Anderson 2000a; Scrinzi 2004) have highlighted the ambiguity of personalisation, typical of this employment relationship, given that total commitment is required of the worker – physical, emotional and relational. The involvement in the intimacy of family relations is a double-edged sword, used by employers to obtain the worker's maximum availability, as well as to increase his/her authority. However, domestic and care workers consider being part of the family as a form of recognition of their work that dissolves the relationship of subordination and makes more acceptable the social devaluation. Indeed, some interviewees recount that they maintain friendship relations with their previous employers even after the death of their patients, and sometimes even after going back to Ukraine.

The social class and educational level of the family in which migrants are employed is an important element for the understanding and interpreting how migrants describe and perceive their employment relationship. Here it is important to remember that the Ukrainian migrants I interviewed were socialised in a society that was, in theory, classless, since all Soviet citizens were considered equal owners of the means of production. However, education was one of the main factors of social stratification, since the education level was tied to job opportunities. It was the alternative channel for upward mobility and the main way to obtain a non-manual job (Gerber, Hout 1995). For this reason Ukrainian migrants attach great value to education and have particular difficulties in dealing with subordination to poorly educated Italian women who have the power to give them orders. Anger, bitterness and humiliation are common feelings among respondents who consider the social position reserved for them in Italy to be punitive, where even working class people can afford to hire a graduated domestic/care worker, treating her like a servant. Larissa, for instance, recounts her working experience with an elderly couple of poor origins, underlining that she found it unjust that they could employ a domestic worker. According to Larissa this labour relation is problematic because it is an incongruity of the legitimate social stratification, and it demonstrates how low their social position in Italy is. In other words, in her opinion low educated people belonging to the working class should not employ a person with higher education. She stresses that this is only possible because of the international wage differences and the inequalities between rich and poor countries.

*It's not physically hard to carry out the duties of the caregiver, but it is morally depressing. Not all people are good, not everyone understands the reason why we are here in Italy. Once, they didn't have any servant... now even people who are not rich can afford a servant... when I was in the countryside I was in a not very rich family: when she was young she was a servant too, and he was a gardener... they didn't have better jobs, high level jobs, though at home they had a woman of a different nationality with whom*

*they could behave like masters. I must submit to them, my head must stay down. I always stayed at home, I was not sleeping well because twice, three times a night I had to change her nappy. At home there was little food. Luckily there was a supermarket nearby, so I could go shopping with their money. Well, he told me I was eating too much. I told him that if he wanted to die he was free to do so, but I actually wanted to live. I told him so!* (Larissa – migrant – Padova 04.06.2006).

Thus, the reason why it is particularly frustrating for Ukrainian migrants to be employed by families of a lower class and often low education level is that it throws into sharp relief the process of debasement engendered by migration, as well as the injustice of international inequalities. They are more willing to work for cultured families belonging to the middle or upper class, since it confirms the social order: an affluent and educated family has the ‘right’ to hire a domestic worker. Furthermore, the relationship with well-educated people gives the worker some advantages, like for instance learning the Italian language<sup>9</sup> and being well paid, as Maria explains.

*In Bologna I work as domestic worker in a family of physicians. He is also a professor at the university. One child is a journalist and the other one is still at school. I like them because they pay me well, they respect me, they know that I was a teacher for deaf-mute people. Furthermore, I am happy because they taught me Italian. Before, I worked for an elderly woman in a little town near Salerno. I didn’t like such work, because she didn’t speak Italian and I couldn’t learn it, she spoke only in the local dialect* (Maria – Sambir – 17.08.2006).

To sum up, my thesis is that the greater the employee’s educational superiority toward her employers, the more pronounced is the perception of degradation. By contrast, if the difference in educational level between employer and employee is not as wide or if the employee feels culturally inferior in comparison to the employer, then the debasement seems less drastic and more acceptable. In these cases, it is easier for Ukrainian migrant women to accept and manage the downward mobility. However, there is a difference between middle and upper class employers, since it is easier to establish an informal relationship (which as we have seen, the migrants prefer) with the former. Middle-class families, being less accustomed to managing staff, tend to relate to the employee on a more equal basis, while well-off families are more accustomed to such servitude, and are used to establishing a professional and cold relationship.

In conclusion, in this section I have shown two strategies adopted by migrants in transition to mitigate the subordination and the social debasement, and thus to cope with downward mobility. Firstly, seek to have a respectful and informal relationship with their employers, so as to reduce the hierarchical relationships in their labour setting. Secondly, migrant women try to avoid working for lower class and low educated people because even if they accept to do servile work, they cannot tolerate doing it for people they consider culturally and socially inferior to themselves.

### **Tactics of differentiation**

Domestic workers react to the social devaluation through different practices of differentiation. First of all they try to set themselves apart from other foreign nationals. Indeed, many respondents say that they do not have any immigrant friends from other continents and that they feel uncomfortable when they are associated with them. They consider themselves to be culturally superior to people of African, Asian or South American origins and sometimes even other Europeans, like Romanian and Moldavian, because they define themselves as Central European<sup>10</sup> For this reason they can integrate more quickly than the other migrants. Oksana’s de-

scription of a Filipino woman is particularly emblematic of the Ukrainian migrants' attitude toward other nationalities.

*Filipinas, idiots, oh my god, what kind of people are they? I don't understand why Italians like them so much. Sometimes I think that you [Italians] are idiots too. They are like monkeys. You are happy even if they don't do anything, they don't understand anything. I have worked with them. In a house in Milan, before me a Filipina had worked there. He [the employer] arranged her residence permit. When I arrived, she had to teach me the work, how to prepare the food, etc. Sometimes she came to ask him information about the contract and he was so happy when she came. She couldn't speak Italian. By contrast, after these 18 months I began to understand everything, I didn't speak perfectly, but I understood and could explain myself. Even though she had been in Italy for many years, she wasn't able to cook well. She had learned how to prepare only a few things to eat. After that job, she went to work for a priest. She prepared food for the priest. They don't take on heavy work... Then, once we were in the kitchen she asked me about my country of origin. I told her and she didn't know where Ukraine was. I explained that it was in Central Europe, between Russia and Poland, close to Germany. She seemed to understand, but then she asked me, 'Why are your countrymen so black while you are so white?'. She didn't understand anything [laughs] (Oksana – returnee – L'viv 17.09.2006).*

The claim of superiority is due to the stratification of the domestic service sector, where wages and working conditions are diversified primarily on grounds of nationality and, secondly, to the colour of one's skin. In Italy, the Filipinas are typically at the apex of the hierarchy, followed by women from Latin America and Eastern Europe and, finally, by the African women (Nigeria, Morocco), who earn less and are often rejected by employers because of both skin colour and religious faith (Zanfrini 2005). On the other hand, African women coming from the former Italian colonies who immigrated during the 1960s and 1970s share the top of the hierarchy with the Filipino women (Marchetti 2010). Therefore, in Italy the hierarchy structuring domestic services is different from the United States and the United Kingdom, where the intersection between gender, ethnicity and class is particularly evident since black women often serve white women (Glenn 1992; Andersen 2000b). In Italy another type of stratification and labelling operates. Migrant women are classified on the basis of fictitious essentialist cultural differences and their bodily characteristics: there are national groups more suited to acting as servants, since they are petite, silent and discreet, namely the Filipino women, while other groups are more preferable for assisting the elderly, as they are skilled, physically strong, and show a spirit of sacrifice, namely women from Central and Eastern Europe (Scrinzi 2004). Furthermore, since Ukrainian migrant women are in their 40s and 50s, they are considered more patient and calm than young girls, and thus more apt to spend long hours within the domestic space. Ukrainian women try to affirm their domain within the care service niche in order to obtain better working conditions, using the Italian society's stereotype of them to their advantage, and stigmatising the 'others', labelling them as inferior because they are 'non-European'.

Ukrainian migrant women furthermore adopt distinction tactics with regard to their fellow nationals. The experience of international mobility produces a sort of social and generational levelling among migrants. They are emptied of their past and share a new common identity, i.e. being Ukrainian immigrants. Indeed, as one interviewee said: *in Italy, Ukraine becomes unique [...] no matter what job you did in Ukraine, here we are all equal*. However, some women resist the homogenisation that occurs in Italy and look for other ways to stand out. The active participation in religious communities and ethnic associations is one of the most common practices adopted by some 'migrants in transition' to seek fulfilment, valorise their skills and distinguish themselves from the others. During my research I met women who devoted their free time to being

leaders of an ethnic association, ministers of music in their church, Ukrainian language teachers in the community school for second generation children, or journalists for small newspapers. For instance, Daria was member of the editorial staff of an Ukrainian newspaper for migrant people called *Do Svitla* and she had the idea of including a new column based on migrants' letters.

*In Bologna I started collaborating with the editorial staff of Do Svitla. I thought it was necessary to improve the involvement of migrant people with the journal. We contacted our friends living in Italy asking them to write something for the newspaper. It started as a joke, but we received many, many letters. So many letters to write a book, not a newspaper. In Italy there are so many Ukrainian teachers, many educated and intelligent people. While we work we don't need to use our head, but at night-time we like to use it and to write (Daria – returnee – Ivano Frankivsk 14.08.2006).*

Recapitulating, in this last section I analysed how migrants in transition react to the process of downward mobility and in particular to the social levelling they experience in Italy. I identified two differentiation strategies; the first one concerns attempts to distinguish themselves from migrants coming from other countries. They use ethnic stereotypes in their favour to improve their working conditions. The second strategy is to try to stand out and to recover their skills by doing voluntary intellectual work and participating in religious or ethnic associations.

## **Conclusions**

As we have seen, Ukrainian migrants employed in the Italian domestic and care sector experience a double process of downward mobility. The first one occurred in Ukraine after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The majority of migrant women I interviewed were originally employed in education, health and public services, but underwent a sudden process of impoverishment during the 1990s due to a loss of job and/or buying power, wage arrears and inflation. Migration was seen as a means of escaping the pauperisation and of maintaining their family's social position and standard of life. However, in Italy they underwent a second devaluation, as their skills are not recognised and they can only find work as unskilled workers in a few sectors of the Italian labour market such as domestic/care work and prostitution.

In this article I have analysed how a particular category of Ukrainian migrant women, the 'migrants in transition', employed in the domestic/care sector, cope with downward mobility and how they react to it during their stay in Italy. First of all, I have argued that migrants give meaning to their experience and justify it by viewing it as a short interlude. The economic gains justify this process of devaluation and give meaning to the migratory experience. According to Parreñas (2001: 171-196) the money earned through wage differentials justifies the contradictory class mobility, which leads educated and qualified women to carry out work which is repetitive, poorly paid, servile and socially under-recognised in order to improve their respective family's social mobility in their country of origin. For migrant women, remittances are therefore one of the means by which they reaffirm their self-esteem.

Furthermore, I have gone beyond Parreñas's analysis by highlighting two different coping strategies that migrants adopt to mitigate the downward mobility. Firstly, they try to weaken the hierarchy within the labour setting, looking for an informal, cordial and respectful relationship with employers. Secondly, they try to avoid working for lower class and low educated people. In particular, concerning this last finding I have shown that 'migrants in transition' are more willing to work for well-educated families, since in that context they consider a hierarchical relation to be socially legitimate and because they appreciate cultured people like themselves. Conversely, they are unwilling to serve people they judge to be uneducated and belonging to the

lower class, since they consider themselves superior to them. Therefore, being employed for working class people underscores their proletarianisation and calls into question their logic of social stratification.

Finally, I have shown the Ukrainian migrants' tactics of differentiation as a response to downward mobility. Just as emigration could be interpreted as a response to impoverishment, differentiation is the migrant's response to the downward mobility engendered by migration. On the one hand, Ukrainian migrants adopt discursive strategies to differentiate themselves from migrant women from other countries whom they consider to be inferior, in order to improve their work conditions. On the other hand, they attempt to set themselves apart from their fellow nationals by seeking personal self-fulfilment and social recognition during their free time. By doing so they can recover, at least partially, their previous social position and self-esteem.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> This article draws from a Ph.D. research project completed in 2008 at the Department of Sociology of the University of Padua (Italy), which was published in Italy with the title *Migrando sole. Legami transnazionali tra Ucraina e Italia (Migrating Alone. Transnational Bonds between the Ukraine and Italy)* (Vianello 2009) and also in some English-language articles and chapters (Vianello 2011, 2013a, 2013b).

<sup>2</sup> In Italy the professional figure of the intercultural mediator is an intercultural advisor and a linguistic go-between. Usually they work for public employment centres, migrants offices, social and health services and schools.

<sup>3</sup> For further information about this topic see: Brück, Danzer, Muravyev, Weisshaar (2010); Round, Williams (2010); Brück, Lehmann (2012).

<sup>4</sup> Comparing data on employment according to job types from 1989 to 2005 (Laborsta 1989-2005), I noted heterogeneous trends. For some professions the employment levels were constant or had increased, for instance for blue collar workers and store clerks, while for technicians, agrarian workers, clerical workers and artisans, the levels had significantly decreased.

<sup>5</sup> No data are available on unregistered Ukrainian migrants in Italy.

<sup>6</sup> The legal status of Ukrainian people in Italy is that of non-EU citizens. They can enter Italy only with a visa for tourism, family, work, business or study. Upon arrival in Italy, they must apply for a residence permit which, however, is not required if their stay in the country – for visits, business, tourism or study – is for periods not exceeding three months. They can stay in Italy only until the visa expiry date, unless they have the right to obtain a longer permission to stay. For more information see: <http://www.interno.gov.it/mininterno/export/sites/default/en/>.

<sup>7</sup> Newer data are not available.

<sup>8</sup> In the case of elderly assistance, by employer I mean the elderly person's children, although if the elderly person is self-sufficient or if he/she has no relatives, then this person incorporates the roles of beneficiary and of employer.

<sup>9</sup> In Italy the use of dialects is quite widespread.

<sup>10</sup> Western Ukraine, and in particular the ancient region of Galicia, belonged to the Polish Crown and later to the Austrian Empire.

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