

# Transnational Motherhood and Forced Migration. Causes and Consequences of the Migration of Polish Working-Class Women 1989–2010

Sylwia Urbańska\*

*This article discusses and expands on two related issues. The first is the unexplored reasons for the departure of Polish migrant women: the forced migration phenomenon. The author describes the system behind forced migration as created at the intersections not only of care, gender and migration regimes but also of legal regimes. Second, the author points out that the close relation between forced migration and the process of ‘unbecoming a wife in the transnational context’ creates a distinctive type of transnational motherhood experience. In order to explain the specificity of these types of experiences better the author introduces a new typology of transnational motherhood biographies. The case study of Al-dona is representative of the experiences of some Polish women in the period under study, 1989–2010.*

*Keywords: transnational mothers; (un)becoming a mother/wife in the transnational context; domestic violence; forced migration; working-class families from Poland*

## Introduction

One of the two main aims of the article, and at the same time its novel contribution to the debate on gendered migration and transnational motherhood, is to show the unexplored reasons for the departures of Polish working-class migrant women: the forced migration phenomenon. This perspective can bridge the gap in the source literature. Non-economic motives for migration – forcing someone to leave or having to deal with domestic violence – appear only on the margins of the literature on Polish migration. The literature often assumes that it is the gendered labour markets in receiving/sending countries that pull women’s migration. It is indeed the first and foremost economic cause of migration, due to the discrimination in the Polish labour market (Pustułka 2015), and also for a vast array of cultural reasons (e.g. Cieślińska 2012; Kronenberg, in press). Where the issue of forced migration is addressed, it is primarily in the refugee context (Nizyńska 2014) or in relation to trafficking in the sex industry (e.g. Slany and Krzystek 2010), but rarely in relation to inequalities and power in conjugal and family relations – supported by conservative Polish state gender politics and the attitude of the law towards women. Therefore, the novel contribution of this text to the debate is the theoretical analysis of

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\* Institute of Sociology, University of Warsaw, Poland. Address for correspondence: urbanskas@is.uw.edu.pl.

female Poles' forced migrations at the intersection of various regimes. My argument broadens Helma Lutz's (2008) conceptual framework of the intersection of care, gender and migration regimes. Lutz successfully introduced that framework to analyse both migrant care work and certain aspects of transnational motherhood. I propose broadening this framework, and expanding on the legal regimes in Poland and Europe to better analyse specific aspects of forced migration, and its relation to transnational motherhood and to the class dimension.

The second aim of the article is to show how the forced migration phenomenon relates to transnational motherhood at the intersection of various regimes. To better situate and explain the specifics of this type of migrant-mother experience, I introduce a new typology of the biographical trajectories of transnational mothers: 1) transnational mothers; 2) mothers who actually abandon their children; and 3) in-between transnational mothers. To demonstrate the theoretical importance of this distinction I explain here some details of the proposed typology.

Two oppositional points on the continuum of migrant mothers' relations with their children left in the care of others can be identified. On the one hand there are migrant mothers who break all ties with their children and families. These mothers live among migrant communities, but it is still difficult to find any cases, which have been analysed in the literature about migration and families. On the other hand there are transnational mothers. A great deal of research exists describing the variants and contexts of this type of engaged care relationship. But between these extremes – mothers who actually abandon *versus* transnational mothers – there is another category, even if liminal and hybrid. It covers those migrant mothers who, despite the struggle to engage transnationally in the lives of their children, have lost contact with them for some time or for many years, not of their own volition. This category includes some elements of the other two. What makes it similar to the situation of 'mothers who actually abandon' is the temporary or permanent loss of contact with the children; what relates to the transnational mothers is the unceasing effort to keep in touch and restore the relationship. The novelty of this typology therefore lies in its greater diversification of the biographical trajectories of transnational mothers. This typology also makes it possible to identify the systemic causes of the mothers' different experiences, and so to avoid much confusion over involvement and abandonment.

I found many of the 'mother in-between' cases while pursuing ethnographical research in the working-class Polish migrant communities in Belgium and in their places of origin in Poland.<sup>1</sup> I also discovered that these women migrate for similar reasons. They went abroad either because they were forced against their will into economic migration by exploitative husbands and families or as a way of dealing with domestic violence (economic, sexual, psychological and physical). In Poland they could not obtain effective support either from traditional local communities or from conservative state institutions. Their forced migration was therefore the result of violence, or was an act of opposition to violence (see Parson 2010) at the intersection of various regimes. The abuse was not only individual in nature, but it was also structural – it occurred as a result of the low status of women within the family, the politics of the state and patriarchal power relations. I identified these types of migration patterns in 29 out of 54 narrative interviews, and I heard about them many times during the ethnographic research (33 additional cases), showing that this is a collective phenomenon with distinctive push factors. The discussion of these two phenomena – the biographical trajectories of transnational mothers and unexplored reasons for migration – shows how they intersect with each other.

I also propose and develop a conceptual framework linking forced migration to the transnational mothering, which follows. Forced migration starts two processes affecting the distinctive specificity of the motherhood experience. The first process is 'unbecoming a wife in the transnational context', as for these women, migration opens up the possibility of leaving the marriage, which had been blocked structurally in Poland. I use the term 'unbecoming a wife in the transnational context' to define the individual and collective unstructured change of status from the category of a wife to the deligitimated category of a non-wife. I develop the latter term based

on the interactionistic theory of status passage developed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1971) and the theory of ‘becoming an ex’ (Ebaugh 1988). These catalytic processes are closely intertwined with the second process of ‘(un)becoming a mother in the transnational context’. I developed the latter term from Diana Gustafson’s term ‘unbecoming mothers’, which ‘captures the socially constructed process of moving from an authentic state of mother to a deligitimated category of bad mother or nonmother’ and ‘characterises both the process and the quality of many women’s experiences of living apart from their birth children on a long-term or permanent basis’ (Gustafson (2005:1). I adapted this term to the experiences of transnational migrant mothers at the intersections of care, gender, migration and legal regimes, analysing the ‘structural process of cumulative disorder’ (Riemann and Schütze 1991) that is embedded in their biographical trajectories.

The first part of the text discusses the research perspective and methodology. Polish and international source literature is reviewed to confirm that it does not take into sufficient account the variety of transnational motherhood experiences and the causes of Polish migration. Background information on the Polish socio-economic and political context is also provided. The next section explains why Aldona’s experiences are described as a theoretical representative pattern among Polish women migrants’ collective experience during 1989–2010. Aldona, a 36-year-old migrant from Poland and transnational mother of two children working as a domestic help in Belgium, against her will completely loses contact with her child. The dynamics of her relationship with the family are reconstructed, together with the effects of an abusive marriage, forced migration and the process of unbecoming a wife on her maternal experiences.

### **What is known about conjugal relations and transnational mothering: literature review**

In recent years, issues concerning the identity and status of women, other than those related to reproduction (care, motherhood) and labour, are beginning to be raised on the margins of transnational motherhood research. As Mirjana Morokvasič and Christine Catarino explained in their evaluation of migration and gender research, ‘when focusing on a new form of migration, there is a reproduction of stereotypes – women are seen primarily, if not solely, in their reproductive role’ (Morokvasič and Catarino 2010: 61). Furthermore, in various areas of transnational research, transnational mothers have mostly been depicted as devoted to the care of others and implicitly constructed as subjects without their own needs and interests. Thus, the most important questions in the study of transnational motherhood concern new maternity practices and identities, care relationships with children and other caretakers, and the gender regimes in which they operate. Prevailing explanations are set in the study of the direction of gender-contract change between spouses and caregivers of children (Carling and Schmalzbauer 2012). Many researchers show that the frustration of those left behind is caused by resident male caretakers failing to take on caring responsibilities, and female relatives and girls (transnational daughters) being overwhelmed by household chores previously performed by the mother (e.g. Parreñas 2001, 2005; Lutz and Pallenga-Mollenbeck 2012a, 2012b). In other types of explanations, researchers refer, *inter alia*, to dominant normative gender patterns (e.g. Slany 2008; Ryan, Sales, Tilki and Siara 2009; White 2009; Małek 2011; Pustulka 2013; Lutz and Pallenga-Mollenbeck 2012a, 2012b; Krzyżowski 2013; Muszel 2013; Szczygielska 2013). What is revealed is, for example: gender in the circulation of care (Baldassar and Merla 2014); gendered patterns in public discourse, or in moral panics (e.g. Parreñas 2001, 2005; Urbańska 2010; Lutz and Pallenga-Mollenbeck 2012a, 2010b); gendered activities of institutional experts and local support organisations, such as churches; and the role of relatives, caretakers and teachers (e.g. Parreñas 2001, 2005). These approaches give an insight into the living conditions of transnational families and to a large extent explain the source of family crises, but some knowledge gaps remain. These include the complex biographical stories and the trajectories of mothers’ marital/intimate relationships, their biographical plans, struggles and choices long before and

post-migration, and finally the intersection of the complex causes of migration and the trajectories of the marital relationships of the mothers.

Such findings are still found on the margins of reports relating to female migrants, despite the insights of Morokvasič (1983), Phizacklea (1998), Kofman, Phizacklea, Raghuram and Sales (2000), and Anthias and Lazardis (2000), who mention that women see migration in terms of opportunities to overcome violent or oppressive marital or familial relations, gendered normative expectations, the impossibility of divorce, and the prevalence of conservative social legislation. This is because the majority of applied migration theories and research focus on the purely economic factors behind women's decisions to migrate (Anthias and Cederberg 2010: 24). References to such non-economic motives for migration can be found in works describing female migrants and refugees from different parts of the world, but apart from noting these reasons for forced migration, far fewer works analyse them systematically and systemically. There is not enough analysis covering the periods long before and after migration, and recording changes in the relationship with the partner/husband towards motherhood. Works that address this problem more systematically recognise that women/mothers migrate to escape from domestic violence (e.g. Gamburd 2000; Parreñas 2001, 2005; Keough 2006, Dreby 2010; Illanes 2010; Parson 2010; Fedyuk 2011), from the macho culture (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Lauser 2008), to obtain divorces that are not legally available (Gamburd 2000; Constable 2003; Lauser 2008), to protect their children from violence and alcoholism (Fedyuk 2011), and to escape from wars and conflicts as refugees (Kofman 2004; Madziva 2010; Merla 2012; Zontini 2010). They also migrate because they are forced into labour migration by their husbands or families (Schütze 2003).

It is much harder to find such cases in analyses of Polish migration. Motives for migration other than economic ones appear mostly on the margins of research (see Slany and Małek 2005; Krasnodębska 2008; Świećkowska 2008; Ryan, Sales, Tilki and Siara 2009; Siara 2009; White 2009; Lutz and Pallenga-Mollenbeck 2012a, 2012b; Krzyżowski 2013; Muszel 2013; Szczygielska 2013) and/or have not been analysed in an in-depth and systematic manner. An exception is the pioneering work of Wioletta Danilewicz (2010), which discusses transnational families mostly from a psychological/pedagogical perspective. The author identifies the factors which must be in place in order to foster any intimate-care transnational relations between different family members, including parents and children. These include, *inter alia*, an appropriate level of ties between the spouses (family bonds), commitment, and migration occurring in the early stages of family formation.<sup>2</sup>

Reviewing the research, which consistently shows the intersections of the conjugal relation trajectory and the motherhood trajectory, we see that most of the studies have been done with reference to the period after the departure. Here conflicts between spouses and difficulties in re-adapting upon return are attributed to the length of separation (Menjívar 2006). One consequence of long-term separation, it is noted, is the formation of new families, with combinations of step-parents and step-siblings who barely resemble the families whom other family members can imagine (Bernhard, Landolt and Goldring 2005; Menjívar 2006). Other works focus on the relationship between transnational divorce and parenthood, and the challenges for gender patterns. Reserchers have found that gender norms persist throughout and following the process of divorce (Dreby 2010; Contreras and Griffith 2012). For example, mothers who have ended abusive or dysfunctional relationships with partners or husbands, despite new forms of independence, continue to mother from afar in ways that attempt to 'make up for' their disruption of their traditional roles (Contreras and Griffith 2012: 79). Dreby points to the same process. Despite the gender shift, she found that 'in cases of divorce, transnational fathers were likely to use their change in status as an opportunity to strengthen their bonds with their children, whereas mothers were more likely to respond by temporarily distancing themselves. (...) Men were still the most stressed about their role as economic provider, while women bore the brunt of resentment from their children' (Carling *et al.* 2012: 5, quotes Dreby 2010). So, even though these studies show some gendered patterns of changes, there is a need for more studies which encompass all the biographical, intersected trajectories of the

mothers' marital/intimate relationships, and the trajectories of migration and motherhood analysed in various socio-political and economic contexts, in the pre- and post-migration periods. This conclusion applies especially to studies on Polish migration, where there has been no analysis of forced migration, domestic violence, divorces and separations in the migration process and at the intersection of different types of regimes.

In this article the above perspective is used in the analysis of the intersectional processes of forced migration: 'unbecoming a wife in the transnational context' and the subsequent process of '(un)becoming a mother in the transnational context'. I propose to analyse these phenomena by adapting the conceptual framework for studies of 'migrant domestic work' in Europe as introduced by Helma Lutz (2008). Lutz argues that migration of domestic workers in Europe occurs at the intersection of gender, care and migration regimes. She uses the Esping-Andersen's (1990) term 'regimes', 'refers it to the organisation and the corresponding cultural codes of social policy and social practice in which the relationship between social actors (state, (labour) market and family) is articulated and negotiated' (Lutz 2008: 2). Her conceptual framework includes analysis of cultural scripts, which organise household and care work (gender regimes); various regulations and allocation of responsibility for national citizens' wellbeing between the state, the family and the market (care regimes); and a multitude of regulations and practices responsible for migration regimes (Lutz 2008: 2). Inspired by this concept I present the system behind forced migration and transnational motherhood as created at the intersection not only of care, gender and migration regimes but also of legal regimes. I argue that it is worth differentiating legal regimes especially in the Polish contexts of conservative gendered state politics, practices and attitudes to domestic violence. I define legal regimes as not only legal regulations but also daily applications of the law which are termed 'street-level bureaucracy' (Lipsky 1980). In the next section I present the gendered and class-divided socio-economic and legal contexts that constitute these regimes and their intersections.

### **Working-class mothers and domestic violence in Poland, 1989–2010**

The emergence of a new political and socio-economic reality in Poland after the collapse of the communist regime in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989 added new dimensions to the class peculiarities of migration from Poland. Factory closures, rising unemployment, and a series of financial crises (such as the 1998 Russian market crisis) forced about 60 per cent of the Polish population below the breadline (Tarkowska 2007, cited by Skóra 2012: 30). This deprivation process was influenced especially by gender and class. The neoliberal economic policies imposed externally on the post-communist countries, as well as spending cuts prompted by the EU accession requirements, hit women disproportionately, increasing the feminisation of poverty. As pointed out by Ewa Charkiewicz (2010: 7–8), the feminisation of poverty does not concern all Polish women, but is mediated by class, age, work and family status. The post-communist transformation particularly affected working-class women employed as factory workers and farmers, and women from villages, small towns and peripheral regions of Poland, mostly in the Eastern and in particular South-eastern parts of Poland – the so-called 'Eastern Wall'. It also affected low-skilled women, women under 24 and those over 50, single mothers and mothers of large families.<sup>3</sup> These groups faced prolonged structural unemployment, comparatively lower wages than men, with no state support for their children. They lacked any economic perspectives that could allow them to escape from poverty. Even full-time jobs were no protection against poverty because the minimum wage in Poland is still one of the lowest in Europe, and the majority of minimum-wage workers are women; the working poor phenomenon is highly feminised in Poland (Zachorowska-Mazurkiewicz 2012: 9–10).<sup>4</sup> Therefore, post-communist migration is characterised by new features – the intensified migration of women (Slany and Małek 2005) and people from lower social classes (Jaźwińska and Okólski 2001) – both groups that are drastically affected by the transition to the market economy. Migration as a way of ensuring

the economic survival of one's family has become a strategy to escape from poverty, but sometimes poverty intersects with other primary motives.

The desire to escape oppressive or violent environments must be added to the diversity of motives for migration. About 29 out of the 54 migrant women I interviewed were working-class women who migrated to work abroad in order to escape various types of domestic violence. As shown in the analysis of particular trajectories of migrant biographies, other ways of dealing with domestic violence had been blocked by several micro and macro structural constraints. A combination of biographical, economic, socio-cultural (gender, class, religion, and local community traditions) and political circumstances, and the absence of policies to tackle domestic violence in Poland, forces women to resort to migration.

For women who are victims of violence or abuse, emigration is a kind of 'informal service of social assistance'. Poland lacks actual policies to help victims of domestic violence, and those that exist were still at the formative, initial stage in the period 1989–2010. For almost the entire period of transformation, important reform projects and the ratification of the Council of Europe's 2011 Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence were blocked. This was because the conservative parties and the Catholic hierarchy interpreted it not in terms of care for the family, but as a threat to traditional patriarchal family values (Hryciuk and Korolczuk 2015). Only six years ago, in 2010, a few basic formal procedures to protect victims of domestic violence were introduced in Poland: an order for the perpetrator to leave the place of cohabitation, a restraining order, free medical examination, prohibition of corporal punishment of children, and mandatory treatment for perpetrators of violence. The Convention itself was ratified by Poland as late as 2015.<sup>5</sup> It is worth pointing out that in Poland there is only one welfare centre per million inhabitants offering refuge to wives and mothers – victims of domestic violence (The Centre for Women's Rights). For example in the Podlasie region, where I conducted fieldwork, such infrastructure is rarely available. The region has only one crisis intervention centre in Kolno (10 beds), and in 2012 its 24-hour assistance was able to help as few as 29 people (out of a total of 1.2 million inhabitants). It is worth adding that in Podlasie the practice of separating the perpetrators of violence from their victims takes place in only 4 per cent of cases (Dziekońska 2012: 74). Women with whom I conducted interviews drew attention to the fact that even the police officers intervening in family matters informally advised battered wives to emigrate as the only way to deal effectively with the problem.<sup>6</sup>

My research shows that in the period under study it was still easier for Polish women to adapt to an abusive husband/family than to move house. I discovered that during this time (1989–2010), it was very difficult for women in Poland to get a separation or divorce, especially for those dealing with economic deprivation and/or from a traditional Catholic background, especially those from villages and small towns. These findings rather contradict recent sociological research (Sikorska 2009) concluding that marriage and family are becoming secularised and democratised in contemporary Poland. However, the interviewees' experiences are far from such optimistic interpretations, and my research shows that divorce in smaller villages and in the Polish countryside still carries a social stigma. Traditional family values, strongly influenced by Catholicism, function as adaptative patterns. For example, persevering in an abusive marriage is presented as a way of saving one's soul in a very influential pre-marital instruction authored by Pope John Paul II (1994). Such contradictory findings are most probably due to the fact that recent sociological research into the family mostly investigates middle-class families (e.g. Sikorska 2009).

The argumentative normalisation of domestic violence is clearly visible not only in the biographical interviews I conducted, but also in other quantitative research. Although it is estimated that one in five women in Poland have been raped, most of them by a closely related person – a partner (22 per cent) or an ex-partner (63 per cent) – in their own home (55 per cent), only 5 per cent of the women report the matter to the police or the prosecutor's office. The voices of the remaining 95 per cent remain unheard, and no one is talking about their

experiences (Fundacja na Rzecz Równości i Emancypacji STER 2015). Violence is part of everyday life; for example in 2012, more than one in four Polish respondents (28 cent) declared they knew either personally or in their neighbourhood a woman experiencing physical violence from a male partner (CBOS 2012: 3).

Against this background, with no institutional support for women experiencing violence in the absence of social consent to a divorce, and when leaving an abusive husband or family is often prevented by the scarcity of economic resources, migration remains the only way to deal with the problem. Since the collapse of the communist regime in Poland, migration has become a much more accessible strategy. For Polish women, and in particular for poorer women from working-class and traditional backgrounds, it has become a way to escape from domestic violence and/or to exit a traditional marriage (Urbańska 2010, 2015). This is both an individual and a collective change of status. However, this pattern did not emerge only with the post-2004 mass migration, as has been thought. Among the women from Podlasie, it was as early as the 1990s, or even earlier in the communist regime, that these migration patterns became the route to divorce or its substitute in the form of informal, sometimes implicit, separation. This pattern would be transmitted to relatives and friends in case of marital problems, such as domestic violence.

All these phenomena generate a more difficult gendered context for the interaction of transnational mothers with their children and provide resources which, in the patriarchal hierarchies of power and family conflicts, can be used negatively against them.

### Research methodology

The results presented are drawn from my doctoral project, which focused on the biographical experiences of Polish transnational mothers, spanning two decades of post-socialist transformation (1989–2010).<sup>7</sup> Between 2005 and 2010 I conducted 54 biographical narrative interviews with various types of transnational mothers, mostly from the working class, as well as numerous ethnographic observations/interviews with migrant families (children, fathers, various types of carers), neighbours, local officials and activists, Catholic and Orthodox priests. This multi-sited, participant ethnographic research was conducted in rural areas of Poland (villages and small towns in Podlasie, the north-eastern agricultural region) and in the Polish migrant communities in Belgium, mainly in Brussels. I was interested in the dynamics of the process of becoming a transnational mother and how these inter-relate with the dynamics of family relationships, local and national cultures, and the gender and care regimes embedded therein. The biographical experiences and reasons for migration were also investigated in relation to the 1989–2010 post-socialist transformation in Poland.

The aim was to collect the greatest possible diversity of patterns of transnational motherhood. I looked for mothers who had at least one year's experience of separation from their child. At the time of the interview the vast majority of women were aged 35–60 and had at least two children, and the experience of being a transnational mother ranged from 2 to 23 years. In the case of most women the raising of their children coincided with at least 10 to 15 years of migration (including visits to Poland two or three times a year for a few weeks' holiday) or with several-years' circulation periods between countries, at different intervals. The interviewees came from all over Poland, apart from a group of 22 women from the Podlasie region. Only a few women from the sample of 54 had higher education; it was very difficult to find labourers with higher education. Almost all of the interviewees came from the working class and had graduated from vocational schools or technical colleges. The majority of the mothers interviewed worked in Belgium illegally or during their career had experienced a long period of illegality, because Belgium did not fully open its labour markets to Poles until as late as 2009. Some of the women had already been working legally in the *titres-service* coupon system, which was gradually introduced in Belgium from 2006.

In theoretical terms, Aldona's case study represents the experiences of a proportion of migrant Polish females. What does this mean? And what other types of experiences are we dealing with?

In qualitative research, theoretical representativeness and theoretical sampling are much more important than statistical representativeness. Theoretical sampling entails a classification of phenomena into sets of types, in such a way that what is observed can be classified as one type or another (Gomm 2008: 285). Any generalisation based on a study would be a theoretical generalisation. This is the kind of generalisation that attempts to specify the circumstances under which the processes of migration and unbecoming mothers/wives in the transnational context appear. In such research, certainty as to whether the phenomenon is an important theoretical pattern is obtained through theoretical saturation. It is supported by the strategy of seeking varied cases and by an analysis based on the principle of maximising and minimising the contrast, which is the basis of theoretical quality sampling and analysis (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

The variants of the causes of migration (recognised as procesual phenomena) which I was able to decode from the 54 interviews were divided into three main categories: 1) economic (13 narratives); 2) socio-economic (41 narratives); 3) other cases (mothers who actually abandoned) (7 observations).

Aldona's case study belongs to category no. 2 – socio-economic conditions. Within this category were narratives where the central themes were marital and family problems being dealt with in a traditional, patriarchal culture in a context of economic deprivation. The economic causes of leaving are crucial for the interviewees, but nevertheless secondary to the dominant problem. The variants of socio-economic category migrations are internally diverse. I have distinguished several types of the sources of migratory coercion and the resourcefulness presented by the narrators: a) migration as a plan for separation/divorce (12 narratives); b) migration as an escape from violence (9 narratives and 33 observations); c) migration as a forced 'nomination' by exploitative husband/family (5 narrations including Aldona's case); d) migration as a consequence of being abandoned (mothers without alimony payments, 15 narrations).

Categories are ideal types, but they are not mutually exclusive. First of all, c) and d) types of migration can be classified as linked to experiences of domestic violence. The difference is that the migration is not a planned escape. Second, one biography can pertain to many categories at the same time and there are different stages of biography and migration.

The analysis of the narratives on transnational motherhood (and family biography from the pre- and post-migration periods, because this is what those narratives in fact are) together with multi-sited ethnography makes it possible to capture the dynamics of three inter-related biographical trajectories: 1) trajectory of family/conjugal relations from the pre- and post-migration period; 2) trajectory of mother's relation with children from the pre- and post-migration period; 3) trajectory of migration itself.

Outlining these processes was possible due to the open formula of the biographical narrative interview, based on Fritz Schütze's (1983) methodology. In the first part the researcher asks the interviewee to tell a story; questions and hypothesis only arise in the second and third phases. In their biographical accounts, the mothers frequently recall scenes of interaction with the children and with significant others. These provide an insight, although filtered through the mothers' accounts, into the perspectives of the individuals entering into relationships. Not only the mothers and their children, but also the caregivers, friends of the family, relatives, the local and the migration communities, as well as institutional actors (such as teachers, clergy, experts). Data presented in such a way shows the range of agency and the processes of loss of control ('trajectories of suffering, structural process of cumulative disorder' – Riemann and Schütze 1991). They also give an insight into the specific social and structural contexts in which these interactions occur. Analytical notions applied here are derived from symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, phenomenology, hermeneutics and dramaturgical perspectives, and through the use of qualitative analysis tools such as conversational analysis. Such is the theoretical and methodological research strategy that is proposed in the interpretative paradigm.



### **Biographical analysis of Aldona's forced migration**

The case study of Aldona's biographical narrative presented here will serve as a theoretically representative pattern of the phenomena related to the processes of unbecoming a mother and wife in the transnational context of forced migration and various regimes. Aldona's case will be discussed in terms of the significance of her pre- and post-migration family and conjugal relations – rooted in gendered local/national cultural patterns and socio-economic contexts – for her relations with her children.

The interview with Aldona, a 36-year-old Polish migrant working in Brussels as a maid, was conducted in 2009. We spoke in her apartment, a small rented studio with a kitchenette, which she was sharing with her young daughter, brought from Poland three years earlier. At the time she had been trying for three years to establish any form of contact with her teenage son, brought up by his father and her parents-in-law. Originally, Aldona's solitary migration to Belgium in 1997, twelve years earlier, was forced on her by her husband and the in-laws. She had a weak negotiating position in a violent, hierarchical, patriarchal system of marriage and family-in-law. Aldona, who before migration ran the house and worked in agriculture on the farm of her husband and the in-laws, admits that she was persuaded against her will to migrate, then forced to constantly extend the length of her stay abroad and to be separated from her children. The pressure to make money abroad was exerted on her by the husband and the in-laws. It was not her first experience of subordination and exploitation. Long before migration, the burden of the housework and farm work was imposed primarily on her (e.g. preparing animal feed, feeding them, cleaning the barn, preparing products such as milk and eggs for sale, buying fertiliser, managing fieldwork and harvest, cleaning the farmyard, and carrying heavy goods). The husband delegated all the tasks to his wife – not just the household tasks, but also those heavy, physical, production jobs on the farm. He himself was not working nor looking for a job, and granted himself the exclusive right to manage the substantial 'pocket money' that came in the form of remittances sent by his parents working abroad. When the money stopped flowing in, as the parents returned to Poland, the role of maintaining the family was handed over to Aldona. This pattern of exploitation and forced migration contradicts the New Economic Migration Theory (Stark and Bloom 1985), which predominates in the literature on Polish migration. This theory explains that members of families cooperate harmoniously to nominate one of them to take on the burden of migration.

The twelve years of Aldona's work abroad is a typical example of a history of exploitation (economic violence) and a loss of control over some dimension of her life, but also a history of resistance and identity change, which altogether I have called the process of 'unbecoming a wife in the transnational context'. The resistance that she finally showed was undoubtedly possible only because of her economic independence and the more liberal space acquired through migration. Aldona took her daughter with her, but lost contact with her teenage son, who totally broke off the relationship with his mother and refused any contact with her. Aldona's narrative, saturated with factual details and numerous scenes of interaction with the children and the family in the transnational context, vividly portrays the dynamics of the loss of the relationship with a child.

The analysis of Aldona's biographical experience will be preceded by an extensive fragment of her narrative (see Appendix 1). The presentation of such large fragments and even entire interviews is often a standard procedure in certain variants of biographical analyses (Schütze 2003).

#### *Forced migration and the first stage of resistance*

The initial asymmetries of power in Aldona's family relations with the dyad of husband/in-laws are built on the wife's position in terms of patriarchal dependence. This position is reinforced by Aldona's relatively lower economic status before marriage. From other parts of the narrative we learn that her husband's family had fully

covered the wedding expenses and had built a house with the money earned by the in-laws while migrating abroad. The farm, livestock and land were also his property. These facts weakened the wife's negotiating position in the family system from the start. Even after the wedding, the traditional agrarian hierarchies that are still present in the habitus of the rural communities in Podlasie are reproduced in the relationship between the spouses. In the case of Aldona, these are differences between the poorer and the wealthier peasants. This kind of status gradation within which the relationships develop bears a striking resemblance to feudal dependence, which still survives in the mind and in the fabric of social relations. In the narratives of female farmers from the region it is not uncommon to find other people's identities represented in terms of their economic status. Terms like 'noblemen' and 'the gentry' are usually used in the pejorative sense, when talking about the manifest superiority of a given person in relation to others.<sup>8</sup>

Indicators of such patriarchal post-serfdom relations can be seen in these fragments of the narrative, in which the narrator evokes the interpretation frame of the nobleman–farmhand, using terms such as 'Mr/Mrs in-laws' (i.e. the husband); from other excerpts: 'I can be a servant here [in Belgium], cos after all there I was a farmhand all the time'; to a cousin who was hired at the in-laws' farm as an assistant for grooming animals: 'You, as much as I, serve as a farmhand here'. Aldona also recalls her husband's interpretative tactics confirming her low economic status in the family: 'He called me "HOMELESS" a few times, or "GET THE FUCK OUT OF HERE, IT'S NOT YOUR HOUSE!" (...) He was banishing me, was telling me that I was ALREADY homeless'. Aldona's dowry could only have been her hard work and dedication, but this did not improve her position in the family hierarchy.

In Podlasie the *longue-durée* structures are still functioning, and gender regimes are one component of the patriarchal post-serfdom model. These initial family asymmetries deepen during migration. Aldona is forcibly nominated by her husband and the in-laws to migrate economically, and to send more and more remittances, as well as to continually extend her stay. The narrator tries to put up determined resistance to the in-laws' requirements and to the claims of her husband, whom she describes as a sponger. She wants to return to Poland permanently and gain control over her family life and motherhood. In spite of living in a structure of economic violence she still believes that her husband will change.

In the first stage of migration, the strategic resistance of the interviewee lies in her secret plan for another pregnancy. She associates with it the hope of improving her position in the family negotiations. Aldona expects that the status of a pregnant woman will gain her the consent of her in-laws and husband to a break in her physical work abroad, and even to her permanent return to Poland. Therefore she is planning to actively use elements of a traditional pattern of femininity to leave the trajectory of disorder/loss of control over her life. Aldona manages to get pregnant and returns to Poland. However, this strategy of gender bargaining is not effective in the long term. She also doesn't manage to escape the typical expectations of Polish agricultural families with strong traditions of women's migration. In their eyes, intensive work abroad is perceived as an obligation to the family and a proof of the woman's virtues – her resourcefulness, diligence and dedication to the family or to the community. Therefore, the space of the household/farm expands transnationally to the country of migration, and consequently the expectations and obligations of women increase. In such families, where you can usually find extensive chains of migrant workers, going abroad becomes a duty. During the period of our research, 1989–2010, when a woman returns to Poland, usually to give birth, breastfeed a child, get medical treatment or undergo surgery, she expects a cousin to take over and maintain her 'hours' during her stay in the native country. Such patterns are revealed in the present story. Aldona is expected to travel as a substitute: 'I remember his [the husband's] sister was pregnant, they [the in-laws] told me to go. Wandusia was three, and it was my son's First Communion, and after the Communion I had to go again, take Mrs mother-in-law's hours'. A failure to fulfill such specific, locally defined duties of a wife and mother, or losing a job while acting as a substitute, is the source of many serious conflicts in families. It is worth adding that some jobs have been

passed on to friends since the 1980s, and families from Podlasie have often served the same employers for several decades. Hence, any potential refusal to migrate creates a conflict, which can be seen in the reactions of Aldona's in-laws. In other parts of her account the narrator evokes the comments of the mother-in-law and the husband regarding her refusal to depart after giving birth: 'A couch potato, she does not want to work'. Thus, three years after the birth, having finished feeding her second child, a daughter, Aldona must return to work in Belgium as a replacement for her mother-in-law. The economic pressure also plays an important role here. The husband still does not want to work on the farm, but at the same time is not looking for another job. The spouses are therefore economically dependent on the in-laws. Ultimately her strategy for returning to Poland in order to raise a small child is not effective.

#### *Turning points in the conjugal/family-in-law relationships*

However, in the second stage of migration Aldona individualises and begins to change. The turning point is determined by several processes. After some time, she realises (without rationalisations and excuses) that her husband – the sponger – and her parents-in-law exploit her financially and do not properly care for and feed the children. In this identity work and conception of gender-contract work, important help is provided by the significant others who define the behaviour of Aldona's husband and in-laws as exploitation. Following the advice of her female migrant friends and liberal Belgian female employers – who suggest that she divorces and brings the children over to Belgium – Aldona starts to control the remittances and the ways her husband spends the money. She also starts to manage the budget in detail and care from a distance. She hires a neighbour/friend, who comes over to the house in Poland to clean, wash, iron and cook dinner, and to additionally oversee the childcare. She pays the baker to deliver fresh bread and dairy products for breakfast every other morning. During short visits home Aldona cooks and freezes food for the next couple of weeks of her absence, irons clothes and prepares sets of outfits for every day of school. However, despite her involvement in transnational childcare, despite maintaining her family, it turns out that her resistance to the exploitation and her attempt to gain control over the management of the family finances meet with covert reactions from the in-laws and the husband. They use conservative gender norms – they start to accuse Aldona of behaving immorally and of cheating on her husband abroad. In the initial phase of her resistance Aldona still tries to rationalise her husband's behaviour, blaming her in-laws for the deterioration of the relationship, but she soon abandons the idea of protecting her husband's image. The catalyst for change is the accidental discovery of how the in-laws and the husband are altering her image for her children. They regularly distort the image of Aldona as a good mother and try to manipulate her good relations with the children.

#### *The process of unbecoming a wife and unbecoming a mother in the transnational context*

Stigmatising labels are regularly addressed to the children of the 'absent' mother by those who are looking after them, despite the fact that the mother is involved in the care and upbringing of her children 'at a distance', and all this time is in fact the only breadwinner of the family. These strategies are effective. The 12-year-old son begins to stigmatise his mother and eventually breaks off contact with her. Therefore, the experiences of the 36-year-old Aldona show not only the situation of being forced into migration by the family, but also the process of unbecoming a mother – the systematic loss of control over the relationship with the children, mediated by patriarchal and violent power hierarchies at the intersection of severe regimes.

The conflicts in the relationship with the in-laws and husband, deepening with time, become the reason for the introduction of 'awareness contexts of suspicion' by the people caring for the children, on the basis of which the children construct their image of the mother.<sup>9</sup> Although earlier they themselves forced the daughter-in-law to

migrate to Belgium for work purposes, in a conversation witnessed by the grandson Dominic, they skilfully use elements of the ‘The Polish Mother’ pattern to depreciate Aldona as a good mother. ‘The Polish Mother’ ideal is defined as a woman sacrificing herself for her children and the family, asexual (see Hryciuk and Korolczuk 2015 and resident (looking after the children at home). First, to assess her activity as a mother they apply the categories pertaining to the normative pattern of a mother who is present at home. They argue that the mother did not meet these expectations during her stay in Poland: ‘Cause she said to me like this, over this phone: “YOU ARE STAYING THERE! THE CHILDREN DON’T NEED A MOTHER LIKE YOU. THEY GO HUNGRY, DIRTY, AND YOU LEFT THEM HOME ALONE WHEN YOU WERE IN POLAND’. Second, when the narrator begins to put up determined resistance by sending less money and controlling the shopping, the in-laws take revenge by adding categories relating to the sexual morality of a wife and mother into the image of the mother. The effect of this stigmatising strategy on the son is shown in the following fragment:

*He [the son] called me names, went to my friend and started calling me names. (...) HOW CAN A GRANDMA INCITE HER GRANDSON TO CALL HIS MOTHER THAT? And so... he had such a... COME ON, HE HAD SUCH STORIES ABOUT THE MOTHER. After all, when he went over to my friend, then she said to him: ‘WHAT ARE YOU SAYING?! WHAT ARE YOU SAYING?! THIS IS YOUR MOTHER. Remember that no one loves you as much as she loves you’.*

#### ***And what was he saying?***

*‘SHE IS A WHORE!... WHAT CAN ONE DO WITH SUCH A WHORE?... WITH SUCH A FUCKING ONE!’ [the narrator is crying]. Well just... These, these, these... these are the words of Mr and Mrs in-laws. When I rebelled and was controlling the money so that [the husband] did not blow it all, they were saying there all the time that ‘SHE IS HANGING AROUND WITH NIGGERS’. Once, after the mass at Chapelle [a Polish church in Brussels] I was standing in front of the church with Irek, my friend’s husband, and we were talking, come on, just like people normally talk... They [the in-laws] rushed to her [Irek’s wife] and told her that we were sleeping together, that I am his lover. So now tell me, how can you not be afraid?! Come on, tell me!*

The use of gendered categories relating to the sexuality of a wife and a mother by the in-laws and the husband in her new context of becoming independent from the patriarchal authority and power control of the family is typical in migrant communities (see Kempadoo 2005). During ethnography I observed that migration space becomes identified with immorality space, which is the result of the disintegration of the traditional symbolic universe accompanying the gendered social change processes that are taking place during post-1989 migration from Poland (e.g. separation, divorce). It is worth recalling other examples from my field observation in the Podlasie region, where I was regularly told the local ‘jokes’, usually referring to the sexuality of the migrating wives and mothers. The content of one of the most popular ones reads as follows: ‘Two boys are insulting each other’s mothers. The first insults his friend’s mother by saying: “Your mother is a whore!” The other one replies: “And your mother is in Belgium!”’. I heard this joke several times from different people, men and women, both in the Podlasie region and in Belgium from the migrants. It was always told to illustrate convictions of the moral decay of Polish women abroad. This context with its gendered sexualised stigmatisations and moral panics concerning female migrants successfully supports family strategies of blaming the mothers.

Aldona, having made the shocking discovery about her in-laws and husband’s actions regarding the children, decides to take her daughter to Belgium and informally separate from her husband. Eight-year-old Wanda

joins her mother in 2006, after Poland's accession to the European Union, and is enrolled in a public school. This is the point where the power of the (il)legal context of migration for the quality of relations with children is visible. In 2009 she has already decided to file for divorce. However, she delays this moment for three years, until her son turns 18, because she's afraid that as a transnational mother, she will be stigmatised in court and labeled as a mother who abandoned her own child. She does not want to become a legally non-custodial mother because of the taboo and stigma linked with this status in Poland. This is also the point where the power of gendered legal regimes is visible – Aldona cannot count on state support in the fight against domestic violence, and her status of illegal migrant or transnational mother makes it impossible to win the battle for custody. Meanwhile, the narrator's son Dominic does not want to go to Belgium with his sister Wanda. He completely breaks off contact with his mother. The strategy of his grandparents and father, depreciating the image of the mother, has proved effective. Aldona suffers greatly, all the while trying to rebuild the relationship with her son. She writes him letters, texts him, asks friends and teachers to help her explain her perspective to her son. She believes that one day Dominic will understand and come back to her.

Aldona's efforts to return to her children and home in Poland, but also her attempt to abolish the patriarchal relations, provoke resistance and revanchism. During the process of migration the family asymmetries of power from the pre-migration period conspire against Aldona. In the transnational context the power structure inherent in the husband-and-in-laws system is mediated by the gendered expectations regarding family roles, the lower economic status of the narrator in her marriage, lack of support in her fight against domestic violence, living with a child as a condition of the right to custody, and the illegality of migration and work – all of which weaken Aldona's position. She realises that it is necessary to break the ties with her husband and the in-laws and start living abroad on her own, but the price she pays is the loss of control, contacts and relationship with one of the children. Thanks to migration she gains independence and undergoes a process of change, the process of unbecoming a wife in the transnational context. Although it is successful, it results in another change – the process of (un)becoming a mother in the transnational context. Aldona's case illustrates the experience of women who may have migrated away from patriarchal and violent relationships, but while achieving separation/divorce across borders have lost their children.

## **Conclusions**

The dynamics of Aldona's relationship with her children and the patriarchal family have been explained intersectionally, against the background of the wider phenomena in which working-class women have been included since the end of the 1980s in Poland. And also against the background of the socio-cultural transformation processes of the state and the local community which Aldona comes from. What conclusions can be drawn from the analysis of Aldona's case in relation to existing empirical studies?

Polish empirical research on transnational motherhood is devoted to economic migrants and the very term refers to a situation when the mother involved in looking after her child is temporarily living in another country. However, these studies often focus only on the description of the continuity of the mother–child relationship under the new circumstances. If relations with her husband or other caregivers are analysed, it is only in relation to the changes in the gendered division of household care work caused by the woman's migration. In fact, little attention has been paid to the impact of the often turbulent relationship changes between migrant women and their partners (and therefore, to the different causes of migration) on motherhood. The complications that a divorce or informal separation cause for transnational motherhood when the child remains with the father but the mother works abroad, have not been sufficiently studied. As a result, despite the already substantial achievements in this area, the widespread image of transnational motherhood has become too simplistic and often idealised. The condemnation of transnational mothers depicted in opposition to the neoliberal, normative

discourse nevertheless does not fully convey the situation and problems of women whose relationship/marriage and motherhood status is more complex. These women gain liminal, in-between status located between ‘mothers who indeed abandon’ and transnational mothers.

I have therefore pointed out non-economic reasons for the emigration of Polish women – domestic violence, conservative state politics and forced migration (so far not fully described in the literature about Poland) and their gendered individual and collective consequences. The intersected processes of ‘unbecoming a wife and unbecoming a mother in the transnational context’ are examples of these sorts of experiences/consequences. They pertain especially to working-class wives and mothers in patriarchal families in a subordinate position within the family power hierarchy, without the support of patriarchal state politics. These consequences, as the case of Aldona shows, have a strong impact on the processes of reconstructing the mothers’ practices and identities, and on their relations with the children. Aldona became, in fact, a non-custodial mother, though without a legal judgment. The process of ‘unbecoming a mother in the transnational context’ is not simply the consequence of distance, it is being created at the intersection of gender, care, migration and legal regimes.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The experiences of mothers whom I researched concerned the years 1989–2010. Although after the fall of the communist system in Poland in 1989 the borders were opened, this did not translate into the opening of the labour markets for Poles. Belgium opened its border as late as 2009, so the experiences analysed here relate largely to illegal work.

<sup>2</sup> This insightful work introduces transnational issues primarily to the area of conservative Polish pedagogy, which perceives split families as dysfunctional and incomplete. However, its limitation for gendered, sociological analysis is that the research focuses on the psychological area of intimate relationships in the analyses of the nuclear family. The author does not set her analyses in a broader context of social relationships with the extended family and relatives, neighbours, local and migration community, and relations with employers. There is also no gender perspective – the experiences of family members are discussed in generalised manner from the perspective of those who remained in Poland. However, the pioneering strength of the study is the attention it draws to the psychology of conjugal conflict.

<sup>3</sup> See Tarkowska (2008); Charkiewicz (2010): 7–8, Zachorowska-Mazurkiewicz (2012): 9–10; Skóra (2012): 20.

<sup>4</sup> Women constitute more than half of all the unemployed in Poland: 51–58 per cent in 2003–2009 (Zachorowska-Mazurkiewicz 2012: 30). Women’s earnings are about 20–25 per cent lower than those of men in the same sectors (Sztanderska 2006, cited by Skóra 2012: 25). Polish single mothers’ high poverty rates are partly due to the 2003–2008 liquidation of the public fund providing financial help to lone parents when the co-parent was not paying alimony (Desperak 2010).

<sup>5</sup> Law amending the Law on preventing domestic violence and some other laws (Journal of Laws of 13.07.2010, no. 125 125, item 842).

<sup>6</sup> It is worth noting that even if national statistics show a relatively low percentage of divorces in the Podlasie region in comparison to Poland as a whole, such data should be interpreted extremely carefully in the context of migration, because significant changes may occur without officially registered statutory changes.

<sup>7</sup> The PhD thesis was defended in 2011. On its basis a book was written and published in 2015: *Matka Polka na odległość. Z doświadczeń migracyjnych robotnic 1989–2010* [*The Mother Pole from a Distance. Experiences of Women Migrant Workers 1989–2010*].

<sup>8</sup> The data and its interpretation come from different types of observation: not only from the ethnographic research which I conducted in Podlasie between 2005 and 2010, but also from observations rooted in my experience of growing up in rural communities of Podlasie.

<sup>9</sup> The concept of awareness contexts is rarely used in Poland (see Kaźmierska 1999). Its creators are symbolic interactionists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1980), who in the work *Awareness of Dying* developed the concept of dying awareness context. This concept refers not only to the situation of dying, but also to other social situations in which a specific course of interaction between people depends on the type of their mutual knowledge about each other. We distinguish four basic awareness contexts: closed awareness, suspicion context, mutual pretending and open awareness. Suspicion context means, *inter alia*, competition for control over the knowledge of someone, tactics and counter-tactics of secrecy, both verbal and non-verbal.

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### Appendix 1. Excerpt from the Aldona's narration

*It was not my choice to come here [to Belgium]. I remember his [the husband's] sister was pregnant, they [the in-laws] told me to go. They told me to go, they told me to go and I went. And I came here... May, it was the end of May, I don't want to lie. It was the end of May. Dominic wasn't four then... He wasn't four, and I came here. May, June I worked, July. And something like the end of July, till half June I worked every day of the week, like on a treadmill, from dawn till dusk. And I wanted to go to Poland [after three months of working], cause I wanted to go to my kid, and to my husband, cause we were married for only five years. And then Mrs mother-in-law told me [the narrator starts yelling, imitating the mother-in-law] 'WHAT THE HELL FOR?! ONLY WASTING MONEY! YOU'LL SEE, YOU'LL COME FOR CHRISTMAS!' And I didn't see my child for seven months. And then she saw that she can order me around, cause I was afraid of her. (...) I cried terribly, cause for me not seeing the child for a month, two, three was... [the narrator is crying] And I remember that when I was going to Poland, I bought him, to make it up, so that he just, I don't know, so I just went with this thoughts, that maybe I will stay in this Poland, that I won't have to go back. I DID NOT WANT TO GO [to Belgium]! I DID NOT WANT TO GO! I REALLY DIDN'T!... IT WAS A SHOCK... I went [to Poland] the first time after seven months [in December], then for Easter, I don't remember if I went later in the summer, to be honest. I can't remember it now, after so many years [12 years of work in Belgium, with a 4-year break for having another child and maternity leave]. And just in the second year of my leaving [to Belgium] he [Dominic, the son] came over for Christmas, because I was already living with Mr and Mrs in-laws here in Belgium [the in-laws are also working in Belgium]. He [the husband and the son] came over and I really wanted to go back to Poland, and in order to come back to Poland, I just had Wandusia [a daughter], [in another part of the narration I learn that the interviewee had planned to get pregnant without having consulted it with her husband, in order to return to Poland]. This way I could go back for some time to Poland [for four years] and stay in Poland. Oh, and Mrs mother-in-law had a good go at me! That she [the daughter] is on her way. [the narrator starts yelling] CAUSE IT WAS A GRUDGE THAT SHE IS COMING, AND THAT'S THE EEEEND. And later [for four years the narrator stays at home, in Poland] Wandusia was three, and it was my son's First Communion, and after the Communion I had to go again, take Mrs mother-in-law's hours [she had to substitute for her mother in law in the houses where she worked as a housekeeper]. And then I came here [to Belgium] for two months, it was supposed to be just for the summer. We had a deal that I'd work over the summer and that in September I'm back home. And I remember, it was somewhere in mid-August. Mr in-law came to me from 'the telephone' from 'the cabin' [it means the phone service for migrants], and says to me: [the narrator reports the conversation in a very imperative manner] 'YOU ARE STAYING FOR SEPTEMBER TOO!'. So just imagine, how you are feeling, when someone tells you 'YOU ARE STAYING!', and you have no influence on this decision. I remember that I broke down and cried. And I called Mrs mother-in-law [in Poland]. And then, and then I saw how she's... how she's manipulating my kid, I realised this only now. She was all the time inciting him against me, ever since he was nine. Cause the words he used were... Cause she*

[the mother-in-law] said to me like this, over this phone: 'YOU ARE STAYING THERE! THE CHILDREN DON'T NEED A MOTHER LIKE YOU. THEY GO HUNGRY, DIRTY, AND YOU LEFT THEM HOME ALONE WHEN YOU WERE IN POLAND'. These are her very words, God trust me. I can swear to God, that these are her words. She said it herself. And then she passed the phone to Dominic [the son] and he says to me, hear this: 'Yeah, it's true what grandma said. WE DON'T NEED YOU!' Can you imagine how I felt hearing this? I called Mr [the husband]. Everything was good between us back then. He wasn't home, the kid wasn't in. And I think to myself, I must get on the first camionette [the popular name for the mini-buses which take the migrants back home] and I go back. AND FUCK THE HOURS! [this is the way that the migrants in Belgium describe the workplaces] I WILL NOT... I called one more time, it was four or five [p.m.]. Both he [the husband] and the kid were home. He had taken him over to his grandma. So I ask him: 'Sonny, why did you speak to me like that? Why? Did mum really leave you hungry, when she was with you for those four years in Poland? [the son:] 'No, but grandma said, that if I say so she will buy me nice trainers, and I really wanted to have them'. [the narrator's voice breaks down, she starts stuttering]. This is, this is, this this, yyy... cause, cause I was just afraid of her, afraid. I was PETRIFIED. In the way you can be afraid of, and so I... I am still SOMETIMES, I AM STILL AFRAID OF HER! I AM STILL AFRAID OF THIS PERSON, BECAUSE HER TALKING CAN BE LIKE SCREAMING. And back then it was still good. For quite a long while it was good, but then she [the mother-in-law] started stirring and telling my husband that I don't send enough money, that if I sent five hundred euros per week then it would be enough. And someone gave me good advice: 'When you go back home, don't give him [the husband] any money, but just buy everything for the children, and don't give him cash, cause he will blow it'. And this is what I did, and this was the moment when automatically everything started falling apart. He called me 'HOMELESS' a few times, or 'GET THE FUCK OUT OF HERE, IT'S NOT YOUR HOUSE!'. (...) He was banishing me, was telling me that I was ALREADY homeless. IN FRONT OF THE CHILDREN... Really, I don't know... Once... [the narrator is crying] I was just... talking to a friend and she goes: 'You should take the kids. Cause he won't do anything [i.e. work]... He will be doing backyard politics [the husband belonged to the Self-Defense party, didn't work, and wasn't even looking for a job], and you or his mother will just carry on working for him. You should take the kids'. And I REALLY REGRET THIS. I should have done it maybe four year ago, maybe five, when it all started falling apart. I was thinking that maybe things will somehow work out, but later on I realised that this will all come to nothing, cause this... I was fooling myself that it will be good, that maybe.... But when I found a substitute for me and went to Poland for three months, and... IT WAS A SHOCK... The first month things were quite good, but then the grudges started, that I don't do anything, that I have no money, that I don't... But later I was just telling him, that it is a man's job to support the family, and the wife is to help in the care. And that's where it all started.