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# ‹I SHOULD BE WITH MY FAMILY›
# A PRELUDE TO MIGRANT WOMEN'S AGENCY

Monika M. Váradi

## INTRODUCTION

In Hungary, international labour migration to Western countries has become a common livelihood strategy affecting almost all social strata. However, in contrast to other post-socialist countries such as Romania, Poland or the Baltic states, economic and political transition as well as EU accession did not trigger an immediate and significant outmigration from Hungary. This delay, on the one hand, might be the result of the progressive opening up of the Western European labour markets; on the other hand, it could be related to better employment conditions and the relatively generous welfare system in Hungary (Hárs 2016, Kureková 2011). In recent years, especially after 2010, the crisis, concomitant austerity measures, the deteriorating economic situation and the insecurity of livelihood perspectives have triggered many Hungarian women and men to seek jobs and prosperity in Western European countries. The most popular destinations have been the UK, Germany and Austria. The shortage of labour in receiving European societies as a consequence of low fertility rates and extended life expectancy has provoked calls for immigration (Fassmann and Sievers 2014) of cheap, hardworking, and flexible immigrant employees (Sandberg and Pijpers 2015). Due to the unequal distribution of job opportunities, accessible incomes and livelihood perspectives, Western European

societies will continue to attract people living in European semi-peripheral countries such as Hungary.

Recent statistical data indicate that in 2014 about 330,000 Hungarian citizens lived and worked in European destination countries (Gödri 2015). The available data do not tell us much about the demographic and social composition of the migrant population; however, they shows that migrants are generally younger than the average Hungarian population, and the proportion of men is 55% (Blaskó and Gödri 2016). ‹Women have always been part of migration› (Van Nederveen Meerkerk et al. 2015, p. 10); however, in recent years we have witnessed a feminization of migration which not only means that half of the migrants in the global migrant flows are women, but also that women no longer appear in migration research merely as wives and mothers accompanying husbands. They are seen as autonomous actors in the global migration process (Wastl-Walter 2010). Our ongoing empirical research[1] points out that Hungarian women of different age, marital and social status move to work and live legally or illegally in Western European countries.

## THE CONCEPT OF MIGRATORY AGENCY

In order to be able to understand and interpret the causes of migration, the motivations behind migratory decisions and migrant trajectories, I draw in this work on the theory of migratory agency conceptualized by de Haas (2014). De Haas argues that both the functional and the historical-structural theories on migration have inherent limitations in conceptualizing the socially differentiated nature of migration processes that vary across time and space. Moreover, these theories pay little attention to human agency. In his view, the complex and context-specific nature of migration does not need universal theories, but urges the elaboration of an ‹improved contextualised theorisation of migration, which is systematic, precise but eclectic› (de Haas 2014, p. 13). To develop a meaningful understanding of agency in migration

processes, de Haas proposes a meta-theoretical conceptualization of ‹migration as a function of aspirations and capabilities to migrate within the given set of opportunity structures› (de Haas 2014, p. 4). De Haas draws on Sen's concept of capability, which means the extent to which opportunities allow people to live the life they aspire to (Sen 1988). Migration capability is people's freedom to control their own lives, to decide where to live irrespective of whether they aspire to leave or to stay. Migration aspirations are an essential part of people's general life aspirations, their perceptions of a good life and the social and spatial opportunity structures, which may support or constrain the fulfillment of their aspirations. In other words, migration aspirations are linked to the question of where people believe and wish to find their well-being, while capability means people's freedom to choose the place where they aspire to live.

An important aspect of migratory agency is that people need to have access to economic, social and human capital to be able to move, to decide where and under what conditions to move. However, the distribution of different forms of capital is highly unequal within societies. In addition, people's perceptions of the good life just as their aspirations differ from one economic, social or cultural context to another. Neither people's capability nor their aspirations to move or to stay are fixed, they change over time, and in different contexts they depend on and correlate with the change of opportunity structures. As de Haas points out: ‹People's capability to make independent migration choices is strongly constrained by states and other structures such as family, community, networks and culture, which ultimately determine the social, economic and human resources they are able and willing to use› (de Haas 2014, p. 9).

The concept of migratory agency reflects the complexity and changing nature of migration processes, and highlights the interdependence of the economic, social, cultural structures and people's capabilities and their aspirations. The concept

helps us understand and interpret the migratory decisions and trajectory of Nora[2], a middle-aged teacher who worked and lived with her husband for 5 years in Northern Ireland.

## NORA'S STORY: A WIFE'S AGENCY

Nora was born in a Hungarian small town, where she grew up and lives now. She taught maths, physics and informatics for 25 years in the local elementary school. She married her husband, Thomas, a bricklayer at 22, the couple has one son, Peter. Thomas began to work abroad in the nineties, first illegally for shorter periods of time. After some bad experiences (he was not paid properly or at all for his work) he found legal ways of labour migration. He worked as a typical circular migrant for shorter or longer periods in many European countries, for example in Belgium, Germany, and Austria. In 2005, their son, Peter left Hungary when he was 18 and has worked ever since in England, Denmark, the US and Northern Ireland, where he eventually settled. In 2006, Thomas also left for Northern Ireland; in 2009, Nora joined her family. She was then 48. Nora and Thomas returned after 5 years to Hungary.

The only one in the family who aspired to live abroad and who made an independent migratory decision (independent from his family) was Peter. ‹To be honest, when he was 15, he told me, «Mum, I want to live in America», but I didn't take it seriously, and said, we will see my son, we will see›. Although in the case of Peter, called by his mother a ‹world tramp›, we can identify the desire for adventure and discovery as the key element of his migration aspiration, when he decided to leave, he was seeking for a better life than what he perceived his parents' life had been.

He said: *Mum, you and father worked yourself to death. Now see, did you make it? No, you didn't make it. And he said he didn't want to live this way. And although he is my only child, I didn't hold him back, because I knew that he had no possibility at home. At first, I didn't want him to leave, but*

*then I realized I cannot forbid him to leave. Even if my heart was to be broken.*

Unlike their son, the parents originally did not aspire to migrate, but Thomas saw no other possibility than to work abroad after they began to build their family house. The family's financial situation worsened considerably after 2007 when they borrowed a Swiss franc mortgage. In recent years, because of the dramatically worsening exchange rates, the interest rates increased, thus they could not afford to pay the high instalments [3]. One of the important evidences of our ongoing research is that many Hungarian middle-class families, or at least one family member feel the need or are forced to migrate in order to pay back their Swiss franc loans and mortgages, otherwise they wouldn't have a chance to avoid an existential breakdown. In sum, Hungarian credit policy and its disastrous consequences constituted one of the most powerful factors that fuelled labour migration from Hungary to Western countries.

Nora was facing a new situation after her son and her husband left for Northern Ireland. ‹I was forced to decide either I will live here without my family, or I give up my existence here, everything, everything›. Nora postponed her decision as long as she could, because she was also considering the facts and arguments for staying. Both her mother and father-in-law were old, not ill at that time but they could have needed her care. In addition, she loves her profession passionately and was then also headmaster, feeling responsible for the children.

*I hesitated long, very, very long, truly, it made me sick. But then I decided that I have only this one life. I should be with my family, so I followed them.*

By explaining why she left, Nora did not mention their financial difficulties, the indebtedness, but emphasized the emotional burden of the separation from her husband and

son. Her aspiration was to overcome the pain of separation, and to be where her family was. The family did not leave by chance for Northern Ireland. They could mobilize their social capital by relying on the knowledge and networks of Nora's brother, who had lived there for years. In fact, he helped them to find jobs.

The first workplace where Nora began to work one week after her arrival was a meat processing plant. At the beginning she was afraid of whether she would be able to cope with the difficulties, because she missed her school class, she was not used to doing physical work and she could not speak English. The first half a year was very hard for her, working 12 hours a day, staying the whole time in the ice-cold plant. Thus she seriously considered returning. ‹But at the end it turned out well›, she said. Her husband worked at the same workplace, helped and encouraged her when she was tired, and Nora began to learn English first at home after her working hours, later at a college. In addition, with her job she earned three times more than as a teacher in Hungary. She stayed. After a year and a half the plant was closed. Again with the help of her brother she got a cushy job in a bakery, while her husband changed to another processing plant.

In Northern Ireland, Nora had only jobs below her educational level and qualifications. This is a widely observed phenomenon among international labour migrants. In her influential book on Filipina migrant domestic workers in Los Angeles and Rome, Parrenas observed the controversial interplay between upward mobility in terms of increase in financial status, and downward mobility in terms of decline in social status, and identified this inconsistent status on the labour market as one issue of dislocation (Parrenas 2001). Unlike Filipina migrant women, Nora never felt dislocated in her new position on the labour market, she did not interpret her migration trajectory as downward mobility or decrease in social status. Except for the first months she was never worried about the working conditions, and as she says, she

loved her workplaces and her colleagues. This fits in with her general satisfaction with her new life. She really found her well-being in Northern Ireland because of different reasons. First of all, she lived with her husband, they worked together for a while and spent as much time together as they could.

As far as their finances are concerned, they could not only easily pay the instalments, but managed to build up a new household and to make considerable savings. ‹We had a standard of living much better than at home. Before I left, I had to decide what to buy, milk or toothpaste, I couldn't afford both›. On weekends, they travelled a lot visiting famous spots, discovering the country, which they could not afford at home, ‹although in Hungary there are beautiful spots, too›. Besides the material well-being and comfort they achieved abroad, Nora loved the people and was content with the everyday culture of the receiving society. Speaking of her experiences she becomes very enthusiastic. ‹I loved being there very, very much. People were very nice, very polite, and very helpful. They helped us as they could›. She was fascinated with things she has not experienced in Hungary: the trust and security, the less bureaucratic way she was treated in public offices. ‹Another thing I admired, it was a totally unknown city, and I was a guest worker, wasn't I, but when I was walking down the street people looked into my eyes, smiled and greeted. I adored it so much›. Although Nora was happy and satisfied, and aspired to stay in Northern Ireland, they decided to return.

*I adored being there. But my husband didn't. We built up a totally new household there, and I tried everything to make him feel at home, but he didn't. He didn't like the weather. I adored it. These were the years of my menopause, for me the weather was fantastic, neither too cold, nor too hot, there was no fluctuation in temperature. He hated the wind, the rain, I loved it, and I loved everything there. He didn't love the people there, he said, they were in fact sly, they were nice only on the surface.*

The decision to return took a long time. Nora realized that the frequent diseases of her husband might be psychosomatic symptoms, and she started to talk about what to do. Interestingly, although it was Nora who wanted to stay, and Thomas who wanted to return, it was Nora who ultimately said ‹we are going to leave›. After they had fixed the date of their return, Thomas never got ill again. The prolonged decision making process can be interpreted as the re-negotiating of the agencies of the couple. Thomas produced physical symptoms of his malaise, ‹but he never complained›, and Nora could hardly bear his silent suffering, ‹I didn't want my husband to be ill›. While Thomas obstinately insisted on returning, Nora again became confronted with the ambivalence of her aspirations. On the one hand, she felt better than ever, found her aspirations fulfilled in Northern Ireland, on the other hand, her well-being and emotional comfort could not have been complete without her husband. ‹It might sound ridiculous, but I am very much in love with my husband after so many years›. Because of her love she was emotionally forced to give up her aspirations to stay, but to overcome the frustration attached to the seemingly autonomous decision, she was the one who initiated the return.

*It was my idea, so it was easier to accept it, even if I didn't like it. It wasn't, it wasn't easy. You sometimes have to make decisions which are not sure to be good for you.*

During our conversation, there was a point where Nora unintentionally highlighted the character between her and her husband's agencies in their marriage. Talking about Peter, Nora told me that her son, while working illegally in Los Angeles, met a nice Bulgarian girl. They returned together to Northern Ireland and at the time of our interview, the young couple was expecting their first baby.

*I adore her. I decided that I am going to unconditionally love the girl who will tolerate my son. He is difficult like his father. I am going to adore her. But she is really most kind.*

*I think my son has big luck with this girl. How to say? In Bulgaria, maybe there is patriarchy... My son is just like his father, he likes when everything is as he wants it. But I think, she is clever, she can achieve (whispering), like me, what she wants. So they have their will, and we have ours.*

While describing the pattern of the relationship between men and women in her family, Nora speaks about the reproduction of traditionally gendered roles and agencies, linked to the patriarchal model, in which men's agency prevails, while women's agency allows them to act through the back door, by wisely influencing the men's mind. However, in the decision-making process on return to and stay in Hungary, it was obviously Thomas whose agency prevailed, even if this was covered by the fact that the last decision was made by Nora.

Upon their return, Nora began to work again as a teacher, but she has to commute between three schools in the district. Thomas found a workplace in the construction business as a daily contract worker. He often works in distant regions of Hungary and thus has to leave for entire weeks. Obviously, their income in Hungary is much lower than in Northern Ireland, but until now, they could rely on their savings. However, they spent most of the savings on the family house. For Thomas, the ultimate goal of migration was, beside to pay back the mortgage, to complete the construction of the family house – for their son, Peter. The research for this article reveals the deep frustration of some middle-class parents; although they are aware of the structural constraints that a young adult faces in recent Hungarian society, they blame themselves that they could not afford to support their children to start their own life, and because their children were forced to leave. In other words, from the parents' point of view, structural constraints are transformed into the parents' painful failure.

*I think, we don't speak about it, but we just feel bad, me and my husband, because we couldn't help our only son to start in life. We did not have savings, we couldn't meet his needs. Not that he had special needs. ... But we tried. At least, we built this house for our son. We were considering selling this house and staying in Northern Ireland. But my husband always said, our son needs something, which is his own and gives him security.*

The family house built for their son might be a late and futile attempt to compensate for the parents' failure. Looking further ahead, their son now living in Northern Ireland aspires to go back with his wife and child to the US, and has absolutely no intention to return to Hungary. Aware of and saddened by this, Nora says:

*I would like to go back, I don't want to be a grandmother who sees her grandchild twice a year. We are now considering to go back, that is to say, I am considering it, but my husband doesn't want to hear about it.*

For the second time in her life, Nora aspires to overcome the emotional pain of separation by migration, and also for the second time her migration agency is limited partly by the need for care of her old mother and father-in-law, but basically by her husband.

*I haven't much hope of leaving. It is somewhere among my secret desires, because I really loved to be there. (...) Those were the most beautiful 5 years in my life.*

Nora's story highlights that although women might decide and act autonomously in the migration process, their agency could be and in fact is, to different and changing degrees, constrained by family structures and relations, by their perceptions of their own duties, responsibilities and their emotions linked to their roles as child, wife and mother.

## ENDNOTE

[1]International Migration from Hungary and its Impacts on Rural Societies, funded by the Hungarian Scientific Research Fund (OTKA: K 111 969).

[2] I conducted the interview with Nora in her hometown in January 2016. Her name and those of her family members are pseudonyms.

[3] Only to indicate the seriousness of the problem, in 2007 they got a Swiss franc mortgage amounting to 15 million HUF, and in 2016, after converting the mortgage, they have to pay back 12 million HUF.

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