

# WOMEN MIGRANTS FROM EAST TO WEST

Gender, mobility and belonging  
in contemporary Europe



Edited by

**Luisa Passerini, Dawn Lyon, Enrica Capussotti and Ioanna Laliotou**

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Edited by

Julia Landolt, Diana Koczka, Laura Cavallaro and  
Angele Del Boca



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Luisa Passerini, Dawn Lyon, Enrica Capussotti and Ioanna Laliotou  
October 2006

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# Editors' Introduction

*Luisa Passerini, Dawn Lyon, Enrica Capussotti  
and Ioanna Laliotou*

## Gender, Mobility and Belonging in Europe

This book is about women who move across Europe, specifically women moving from the European Centre–East to the West. Just fifteen years ago, before the fall of the Berlin wall, and the transformation of the Eastern bloc, mobility in eastern and central Europe beyond national frontiers was rare, requiring either political authorization or considerable risk. In present day Europe, migration from the East to the West is a very significant trend in international patterns of mobility. And, in a parallel change to the character of migration in the recent past, many contemporary migrants are women.

The research this book presents is an oral history of women who have migrated from Bulgaria or Hungary, to Italy or the Netherlands. Our aim is to identify new forms of subjectivity that are part of the contemporary history of Europe, and to explore how the movement of people across Europe is changing the cultural and social landscape with implications for how we think about what Europe means. The research assumes migrants to be active subjects, creating possibilities and taking decisions in their own lives, as well as being subject to legal and political regulation amongst others. We ask: How do people make sense of their experiences of migration? Can we trace new or different forms of subjectivity through present day mobility within Europe? What is the spectrum of contemporary forms of identification in Europe in relation to mobility? These latter questions are also relevant to native<sup>1</sup> women. Through interviews with native women in Italy and the Netherlands, we document and analyse the points of connection of friendship and empathy between native and migrant women, as well as mechanisms of exclusion and xenophobia expressed by native women, for what these allow us to perceive about the symbolic boundaries of Europe. In short, the contribution of this book is to explore migration for what sorts of subjectivity contemporary forms of mobility induce, in both migrants themselves and in native women, and to reconsider the complex set of representations and perceptions attributed to migrants and migration.

Our focus on the interrelation between gender and migration is grounded on particular historical as well as theoretical developments in the field of migration studies. Contemporary migration is marked by particular characteristics that distinguish it from past population movements (Koser and Lutz 1998) amongst which is the so-called feminization of migration. Social scientists have documented the marked increase in the number of women migrants in recent years, and the proportion of women in relation to the total number of migrants. This phenomenon is related to economic, political, social and cultural transformations of late capitalism; transformations that are taking place globally and have different effects on people's lives locally. The feminization of migration is also related to a theoretical re-orientation in the field. During the last decade the study of the relation between gender and migration has foregrounded the dynamic interplay of agency and structure in the organization and operation of the global economic, political and cultural processes that sustain human migration. Scholars have demonstrated how re-thinking these relations through gender offers insight into the feminisation of migration flows and the establishment of transnational families whose networks expand globally and whose importance is fundamental for the operations of economy and culture in late capitalism (e.g. Sassen 2000; Parrenas 2001; Phizacklea 2003).

The testimonies of both migrant and native women confirm the central role of human mobility in the redefinition of relations between Central-Eastern and Western Europe post-1989. If new forms of encounters are shaped within the social, political and economic conditions of post-communism and through the intensification of a wide variety of social, political, economic, and cultural exchanges, mobility and migration between the East and the West play a central role in these exchanges whilst also giving rise to new transnational forms of subjectivity in Europe today. Gender relations have been at the core of these processes: first, the transition from state socialism to capitalism has had a huge impact on the lives and the position of women in Eastern European societies; secondly, the re-arrangement of gender relations is related to the modification of political and social practices, and to understandings of the private and public sphere in post-communism.

In these introductory remarks, we are using the language of migration, yet the concept of migration itself is problematic and warrants some discussion. The term refers to a wide range of movements of individuals and groups of people across regional and/or national borders. Migration has been largely connected to the pursuit of employment and the betterment of one's material conditions of life. Forced migration – as a result of political or religious persecution – has been located in a separate category of refugees. However, during the last two decades, and due to the intense diversification of population movements related to the economic and political processes of late capitalism, the concept of migration has expanded in order to include

different forms of mobility across continuously shifting geographical, economic and political territories. The present research continues in this spirit by emphasizing the diversity and interconnections of processes and motivations through which migration takes place. This volume gives attention to the cultural and emotional underpinnings of the mobility, thus valuing a whole range of 'subjective' motives beyond the quest for material improvement, or political or religious freedom.

In addition, this project seeks to enrich the field of migration studies through an empirically grounded critique of understandings of the migrant as a dislocated and uprooted subject, either prey to forces of integration, or motivated exclusively by rational choices related to the betterment of living conditions. Taking as a starting point how women are moving across Europe immediately challenges the understanding of migration as a linear process of departure and arrival (loss and integration), in which places of origin and destination are singular and fixed and patterns of integration are assumed to follow several stages.

Indeed, the interviews provide us with input for a theoretical reconsideration of the assumptions attached to the term migration. For instance, since the early 1990s scholars of migration have stressed the importance of transnational movement and the establishment of transnational networks of interaction for the understanding of contemporary transformations in the practices of migration in cultural, political, civic and economic terms. The practices of mobility that are presented in the interviews challenge the conventional association between migrancy and loss of subjectivity (as a result of dislocation and uprooting) by suggesting that women transnational migrants develop new forms of subjectivity based on sets of relationships that develop in the context of the movement. Migration and mobility between the European East and the West is marked, enabled, motivated, and realized through the establishment of these relationships. Mobility is also often associated with the types of social, personal, professional and intimate relationships that the migrant establishes and maintains. Through relationships the physical movement of women between East and West Europe is related to the affective mobility that defines the migrants' subjectivity.

Overall, migration in the present research is envisioned as a contemporary form of mobility and a dynamic set of relations between places, cultures, people and identifications. And this has meant reconsidering simple categorizations of these women in terms of labour, family reunification, ideas of home and belonging, assumptions of happiness and satisfaction. For instance, migrant women may be transnational mothers, dividing their time between one site and country in which they work and another in which they share time and space with family members; or they may travel back and forth between different locations. Under these sorts of conditions any straightforward assumptions about sending and receiving societies are also challenged.

As we have already indicated, the study of migration presented here – from the European Centre-East to the European West – is part of a reflection on the repercussions of European migrations on existing ideas of Europe and Europeanness, which helps us to rethink forms of European belonging and to envisage new ways of being European. The contemporary historical context is marked by multiple processes of building a new European social, political and cultural environment that transgresses older divisions between the West and the East. Intra-European migration and the pursuit and establishment of relationships – personal, intimate, professional or collegial – across the European East and West, play a pivotal role in the consolidation of this emergent new European political and cultural space. Intra-European migration has been a constant process in the modern history of the continent and has contributed greatly to the making of European nation-states and the establishment of the European international state system (Bade 1987; Kussmaul 1981; Lowe 1989; Moch 1984; Wlocewski 1934). The intensification of migration from Eastern to Western and Southern Europe is a phenomenon inseparably connected with the post-1989 political changes in Eastern Europe and with the subsequent processes of EU enlargement to the East. Based on the post-Second World War division of the European geo-political space, Western and Eastern European migration systems were almost separate entities (see Hoerder 1990 on the concept of migration system). Post-1989 these two systems merged in a way that has led to the massive migration of people across borders (themselves often difficult to determine) between eastern and western parts of this continent, and this mobility has produced a phenomenon of major political and cultural significance, accompanied by a massive scholarly investigation.

Most studies of the relation between subjectivity and transnationalism trace the impact of the cultural logics of transnational networks on the construction of subjectivity. Aiwa Ong has argued that new modes of subjectivation are drastically shaped by the conditions of transnational mobility and consist of 'flexible practices, strategies and disciplines associated with transnational capitalism', themselves connected with 'new modes of subject making and new kinds of valorised subjectivity' (Ong 1999: 18–19). The expansion of transnational migrants' networks and communities and the intensification of transnational cultural, political and economic interaction in late capitalism have led to the emergence of new forms of subjectivity that enable the subject to act within different levels of local and global communication. The exploration of women's mobility and subjectivity between the European East and the West prompts us to consider how new and old practices of mobility re-configure political space, geo-cultural territories, and ideas of home and belonging.

While political and social transformations within the European Union as well as in single European states are at the centre of public debate, funda-

mental cultural aspects that shape political and social processes are marginal in EU politics. We do not wish to deny the importance of political, social and economic approaches to the significant moments and processes of the contemporary construction of Europe, e.g. EU enlargements on 1 May 2004 and 1 January 2007, however, we want also to stress the importance and gains of thinking through a cultural lens to analyse, understand and transform political, economic and social inequalities. Culture is often invoked in the context of official EU discourse in order to refer to top-down policies that aim at the bureaucratic engineering of European 'cultural identities'. Instead, the notion of culture that we invoke in this research refers rather to dynamic processes of production of meaning that enable the conceptualization of political, social and economic transformations on the level of everyday life and subjectivity.

The present research tries to open up ideas of Europe and Europeanness to include the experiences – in all their diversity – of being a woman moving between two or more countries, and to reconfigure traditionally established relationships between Eastern and Western Europe. It not only attempts to indicate the limits of the Western ways of being European and to criticize Eurocentrism on intellectual and empirical grounds; it also contributes to deconstructing stereotypes about Eastern and Western Europe and Europeans, interpreting the 'hints' at new forms of connection which emerge from the intercultural dialogue in daily life between 'migrant' and 'native' women. We therefore see it as a contribution to rethinking and redefining the very idea of Europe, and of belonging to this continent, into the future. In this perspective, focusing on Europe is a way of locating Europeanness in the world, seeing its specificity and giving up all claims to any alleged superiority and to all internal intra-European hierarchies. While we are aware that some of the problems we have been dealing with in this volume reappear virulently in relationships between European women and women from other continents, we think that the work we have done will constitute a platform for future approaches to intercultural dialogue in a perspective wider than the European one.

### *Methodological Choices*

The choice of the method of oral history in this research responds to two major considerations that we wish briefly to recall. The first is the unique opportunity that oral interviews offer as sources for history, allowing us to combine insights in individual experience at the same time as in the understanding of cultural changes in communities and the relationships between them. The second is the fact that oral history provides a privileged ground for a multidisciplinary approach. Indeed, the present research draws on the following fields of study: cultural history, philosophy, sociology, law, literature, and women's studies. While not all the participants in the research were

specialists in the field of migration, their different expertises brought, we believe, innovative visions to this topic. Moreover the plurality of disciplines involved has had an impact on the language of the book itself. In the chapters of this book a multiplicity of vocabularies shaped by disciplinary and national conventions cohabit with the appropriation of specific theories, models and styles.

The research we present here is primarily based on the collection of life stories and interviews with migrant women from Bulgaria and Hungary, and native women in Italy and the Netherlands. This material is treated in different ways by the authors (single or multiple) of the different chapters. The interviews reappear in various configurations; this choice has been made at the risk of repetition, but it testifies to the possibility of viewing the same material from different points of view. One difficulty of dealing with the testimonies is that they are heavily loaded with projections and stereotypes, for instance based on nation or gender. The cultural stratifications of memory, ideology and experience converge to compose complex narrations that correspond in an indirect way to the complexities in the social processes of geographical mobility. The chapters in this book try to cope with this universe indicating various possible ways of interpreting it. The women's accounts are much more than personal stories. Through migrant women's narratives, we trace the processes (institutional and inter-subjective) which have shaped their strategies and their selves, their understandings of the past, and aspirations for the future, such that their narratives become a document of the contemporary phenomenon of migration in Europe.

We made several choices here which warrant further comment: to select women migrants, and not to include men; to conduct interviews with native as well as migrant women; and to do so in the specific countries chosen. First, our focus on women is connected to the feminization of migration we discussed above. Given the difficulties of managing the large quantity of materials produced in oral history research, we decided to privilege relationships between women as subjects. We set out to document the lives of these new social actors undertaking mobility, and to explore the repertoires of meaning through which they make sense of their trajectories. By asking women to tell us their own accounts, we effectively made it possible for them to position themselves as central actors in their mobility, in contrast to assumptions of their place in migratory processes as connected to family reunification, even though this has ceased to be the dominant reality. Whilst we made the choice to place the resources we had available for the research in the collection of women's testimonies – which has resulted, in addition to this book and other publications, in a digital archive of the interviews<sup>2</sup> – further research might adopt a similar approach to interviewing men. However, in the present research, men are not absent. They are frequently mentioned in the interviews (both in the questions and the answers) as interlocutors

and partners, whose place in the decision to migrate, and more generally in the construction of new subjectivities, is crucial. They are often presented along nation-based stereotypical lines and they seem to be the target of a shared criticism. We acknowledge the necessity to give them the word on these matters and we look forward to future research taking up the suggestions from recent developments in men's studies and applying them to the study of migration.

Second, the interviews with native women have allowed us to trace contemporary forms of intercultural exchange through accounts of relationships between native and migrant women (and men), and broader perceptions and representations of migrants on the part of native women. This connects to our approach to migration set out above which emphasizes mobility as a dynamic set of relations between places, cultures, people and identifications, and thereby situates native and less mobile subjects in the frame alongside those who move. In other words, we explore migration as a set of acts and effects in the lives of women who are not necessarily mobile themselves but whose worlds are also marked by mobility. In particular this approach has allowed us to document and analyse different forms of encounter – experienced and discursive – between migrant and native women, which exposes both points of connection and empathy, and mechanisms of exclusion and racism. That we have been able to read the narratives produced in different national locations has given us greater purchase in the historical and cultural grounding of these processes.

This brings us to the third element we discuss here: the comparative design of the research. Comparative work illuminates processes specific to certain settings, in addition to those that have a wider resonance. Regarding the specific countries, the choice of Hungary and Bulgaria has made it possible to analyse a spectrum of different paths and patterns of migration. Migration during communism was a political act, irrespective of individual intentions, and a challenge to restrictions on freedom of movement. Within the interview sample, we include a sub-group of women who migrated for political reasons in the past 40 years. Their stories were collected both to document this mobility and to explore connections between the stories of women whose conditions of migration were very diverse, post-1989. Nevertheless, whether the explicit reason given for migration after the changes was love, work, education, or adventure, migration remains tightly bound with the ideas that brought about democratization and commercialization in the former communist block.

Bulgaria and Hungary can be seen as representing two different trajectories of communism. Whilst twentieth century Hungarian history is strongly marked by the events of 1956, in contrast in Bulgaria (a satellite of the Soviet Union), there were not strong anti-Socialist reactions. Today, Hungarian politics continue to be influenced by the 200,000 Hungarians who

left after 1956 and formed a huge global diaspora of political migrants. Whilst some Bulgarians also migrated for political reasons during the 1944–89 period, this was not a general trend (Vassileva, 1999: 9) and has not left a similar legacy. Hungarian migrants in Europe nowadays still tend to form networks based on political, economic or intellectual ties, and the interview material evidences activism in preserving the language and traditions of the Hungarian diaspora. In contrast, Bulgarians abroad prefer to be part of informal networks that are not so strongly differentiated by background, education or political affiliations.

One dimension of the choice of these countries was to explore similarities and differences on the question of Europeanness, as viewed through their *central-to-eastern* locations. They offered a good field of observation, being both – at the time of the research – still out of the EU, but in the process of becoming part of it. The question of European belonging is immediately connected to considerations of gender relations. In addition to political independence, claims for equal opportunities for women and men in education were prerequisites for becoming European in Bulgaria; and in Hungary too Europeanness was explicitly equated with some level of gender equality. The history of the twentieth century and especially of the Socialist period brought to both countries similar discourses of women's liberation, equality and competitiveness between Eastern and Western Europe. Long before the end of the Socialist era, Bulgarians regarded Hungary as 'the West' of the 'Eastern Europe'<sup>3</sup>. In Bulgaria, women worked and had considerable property rights even in the context of the Ottoman empire. After independence was won, women from wealthier families continued to work: the middle-class family ideal in which women stayed at home was never a significant phenomenon, unlike Hungary.

With regard to the receiving countries, the Netherlands and Italy represent two of the variations within Europe in terms of their histories and politics in relation to migration, which makes their comparison significant. The Netherlands has shifted from being a multicultural society with a long tradition of tolerance, to one that is leading debate on the failure of multiculturalism, and as such opening the way for the acceptance of restrictive policy measures directed at migrants. Italy represents a new receiving country (characteristic of most Southern European countries), in which the category of 'the migrant' is used to redefine Italy's place within Europe from marginal to more central as boundaries of inclusion and exclusion are shifted, from Southern Europe to the East.

The discussion now turns to the research techniques we adopted and some of the issues we grappled with in managing the material and negotiating interpretation. The construction of the sample of migrant women was deliberately open-ended, as we sought to unpack categories of migrants built around singular motivations for migration, e.g. labour or marriage. Nevertheless, we sought to build a sample with internal variation along several dimensions:



marital status; sector of labour market participation; duration of stay (beyond the duration of a tourist visa); date of arrival (to include predominantly but not exclusively post-1989 migrants); age; family status in country of origin; religion; level of education; and location. We did not prioritize 'ethnic minorities' as a category but neither did we exclude it. In practice, too few interview subjects were found to belong to 'minorities' within Bulgaria or Hungary to do any comparative analysis in this respect. Neither did we seek out women who had been subject to forced migration or enslavement. In practice we found very considerable variation in these dimensions *within* women's lives. For instance, legal or illegal as tightly bounded and distinct categories did not make sense in the lives of some women who might pass between the different statuses as they were subject to changes in the law and their job situations.

To gain access to migrant women we used a 'snowball' sampling method. This involved making simultaneous approaches to potential interviewees through different channels, including informal contacts, associations, jobs agencies, and churches. The Bulgarian team established contacts with individuals, networks and organizations that could provide information about the location, occupation and status of migrant women. In practice, some interviews with return-migrants in Bulgaria were decisive for making initial contacts. Following the initial chain of connections, the researcher entered networks of women-migrants ('ex-dancers' in Italy, and workplace-based networks in the Netherlands). The Hungarian team contacted Hungarian embassies, cultural institutes and organizations of the Hungarian diaspora prior to commencing fieldwork, and initial contacts were set up through these organizations. In the Netherlands, the internet homepage of Hungarian immigrants and the mailing list of the Association of Young Hungarians were key sources for contacts: indeed almost all of the contacts came through responses to our call for interviewees advertised in these places. Finally, personal contacts within the sending countries, especially in the case of the return migrants, were also crucial.

All of the interviews were conducted in the first language of the interviewee by a native speaker who was a full member of the project team, and thereby involved in all stages of research design. Nadejda Alexandrova conducted all the interviews with Bulgarian women, and Borbála Juhász conducted the majority of those with Hungarian women; in addition, several interviews were carried out by Judit Gazsi and Andrea Pető. These interviews were semi-structured (by the interviewer) and followed the lines of the interviewee's narrative. We nevertheless sought to explore several themes: the decision to migrate, networks, the journey, employment, experience of legal and other institutions, relationships, customs, and aspirations for the future.

The interviews with native women followed a more structured set of questions: their relationships to migrant women from Eastern Europe; knowledge and images of countries of central and Eastern Europe, including