Long-Term Care Crisis in The Netherlands and Migration of Live-in Care Workers: Transnational Trajectories, Coping Strategies and Motivation Mixes

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ABSTRACT

The crisis of the welfare state has generated a powerful pulling effect for contemporary intra-European migration flows. This article focuses on the migration of live-in care workers from the Central and East European countries to the Netherlands, following the Dutch care reform. It explores the motivations and strategies of live-in migrant carers (LIMC) engaging in transnational mobility, aiming to understand how their agency is structured in multiple contexts. I am especially interested in transnational coping strategies and in how migrants pursue specific motivation mixes combining need and self-realization. The article draws on in-depth interviews with LIMC workers, triangulated with data from LIMC providers, family carers and other stakeholders. Participants use the LIMC jobs to cope with home and host country constraints, reconcile work and private life, and keep family ties. Continuous mobility is a strategic choice, which makes tough working conditions bearable and enables the achievement of long-term goals.

INTRODUCTION

The crisis of the welfare state has generated a powerful pulling mechanism for contemporary intra-European migration flows. Since the early 1980s, a growing concern with the sustainability of the welfare state has spread among policy-makers across Europe. As rising costs placed elderly care at the centre of debates, most European countries have launched reforms targeting cost-containment in the long-term care system (Palier, 2012). Care policy reforms in conservative-corporatist countries have been very closely linked to specific employment policies, providing a backdoor for the introduction of labour-cheapening measures and employment flexibility (Morel, 2007). In the Netherlands, policy reforms have resulted in a strong flexibilization of the labour market in the care sector, through the massive use of temporary work (Scheer et al., 2016). The demand for migrant workers is growing as a result of the job losses that followed the reforms and the economic downturn in the long-term care (LTC) sector (CBS, 2016).
This article focuses on the migration of Central and Eastern European (CEE) live-in care workers to the Netherlands, a predominantly female flow that emerged in the last decade following the Dutch welfare reform. The confluence of free movement schemes, labour market liberalizations, and LTC reform paved the way for this migration flow. EU free movement has been instrumental for fulfilling the labour demand following the crisis and reform of the Dutch welfare state. Facilitated by the EU free movement regime, a new migration system has emerged in Europe channelling new forms of migration related to a combination of pull and push factors (King, 2002; Favell, 2008; Favell and Recchi, 2009). As a consequence of the major economic liberalizations launched in the 1990s by CEE countries, many women in post-socialist countries have been pushed out of the labour market (Avlijas, 2016). Using their free movement rights or posted workers schemes, some of these women have found live-in care jobs in Italy, Spain, Germany, Austria, and more recently in the Netherlands. Since live-in care jobs are often organized with care workers who take shifts, alternating periods of work in the country of work with periods of rest in their home country, these migrants engage in transnational lives by which they commute back and forth over the years.

The Netherlands has a universalist long-term care system targeting the chronic ill, disabled or the elderly, based on social insurance and financed through income-related contributions and taxes. Traditionally, the Dutch LTC system has been characterized by public responsibility and high levels of institutional care. However, since the mid-1980s successive governments have launched market-oriented reforms combining cost-containment objectives with a new policy framing. Understanding that the welfare state is no longer sustainable, policymakers propose to substitute it by a “participation society” in which the responsibility for delivering care should be shared among all citizens. In this “participation society”, elderly persons are encouraged to live at home as long as possible supported by state-funded home services and by informal care provided by their relatives, friends and neighbours. Policy-makers have introduced measures to promote home care and to restrict residential care through need-tested assessments. Likewise, cash-benefits have been introduced to allow care recipients to purchase care services, whether professional or informal. A shift towards home care is taking place, as shown in the proportion of people over 65 receiving care at home, which has increased from 65% in 2004 to 71% in 2015 (OECD, 2018).

The increasing demand for migrant workers is also a consequence of the familiarization of LTC, as families must face the choice for either delivering care or purchasing affordable care services. Facilitated by the marketization of care provision and the introduction of cash allowances, a new market for live-in migrant care workers (LIMC) is emerging, channelled by a new type of care providers offering around-the-clock services. While this niche market is still a small phenomenon in the Netherlands, some observers expect it to grow following the increasing demand for long-term care and the continuation of the present policies (Da Roit and Van Bochove 2015).

CEE migrant women are contributing to fill in some gaps of the Dutch LTC system, but the question is: how does this fit with their migration projects? And why do they take live-in jobs, known for their long working hours and low wages? The purpose of this article is to
explore the motivations and strategies of transnational migrants employed as live-in carers, trying to understand how their agency is structured in a context of multiple embeddedness. I am interested in exploring how LIMC migrants apply “transnational coping strategies” as a response to context-dependent motivations or to facilitate self-realization. The discussion revolves around two questions:

1. Which motivations and aspirations trigger these transnational patterns of mobility?
2. What kind of mobility and employment strategies do LIMC migrants devise?

The article is structured in the following way. After a description of the theoretical framework and research methods, it outlines the specific motivations driving respondents to engage in transnational trajectories and to take low-end jobs in the Dutch LTC care sector. Subsequently, it discusses the transnational coping strategies that the participants apply. Finally, the paper draws some conclusions about this fluid form of contemporary migration driven by a mixture of need and self-realization, and about how the welfare crisis functions as an incentive for sustained cross-national migration.

CONTEMPORARY INTRA-EUROPEAN MIGRATION AND TRANSNATIONAL MOTIVATIONS

Migration scholarship has recently described the emergence of a new migration system in Europe, facilitated by the free movement regime of the European Union (King, 2002; Favell, 2008a; Favell and Recchi, 2009). Such a system features East-West migration flows, transnational networks, informal labour incorporation and circular and temporary mobility patterns (Favell, 2008a: 702). In particular, contemporary intra-European migration has been characterized by its high degrees of temporality, fluidity and uncertainty (Drinkwater and Garapich, 2015). The disappearance of EU internal borders allows for a specific migratory habitus of “intentional unpredictability” of open options for the future (Eade et al., 2006). The notion “liquid migration” has been coined to refer to these new and rather individualized forms of mobility, less anchored within family or social networks (Engbersen, 2012).

The study of the motivations behind this migration flow has often been framed by a narrative of freedom and lifestyle, associated with the EU free movement regime. However, whilst emblematic studies of intra-European migration have focused on highly-skilled migrants driven by career-related motivations (Favell, 2008b), studies of post-accession and post-crisis migrations highlight the role of context-dependent motivations. Highlighting the “human costs” of labour-market deregulation, this literature follows two different approaches. One line of studies emphasizes the impact of the home country’s economic and political situation on migrants’ plans: moves are driven by frustration with the socio-economic deterioration of living conditions or by a sense of relative deprivation (Meardi, 2013; Triandafyllidou and Gropas, 2014). The second approach highlights the dual influence of both home- and host-country contexts on migration decision and plans; for example Bygnes and Erdal’s (2017) study of the “return considerations” of Spanish and Polish migrants in Norway. Remarkable in this latter study was the near-absence of “footloose” migrants in the sample, which the authors explain...
by life-course considerations, together with the differential scope of opportunities that migrants see in the home and host countries. Polish and Spanish migrants do not perceive the possibility of a “normal life” in their home countries, because of the lack of predictability and of economic security. Accordingly, Spanish migrants reject the idea of returning to Spain, and Poles either settle in Norway or engage in continuous mobility.

This article sets out to contribute to the literature about intra-European migration driven by increased liberalization of labour markets. I am interested in liberalization processes and economic crises conceived in a broad sense, as societal shifts that affect people beyond their personal economic securities. The studies mentioned above suggest that contemporary forms of labour migration encapsulate broad context-linked motivations, related to multidimensional objective constraints and subjective perceptions of opportunities in host and home societies. For the respondents of this research, the strongly liberalized Dutch care labour market constitutes at the same time a niche that enables migrants to find employment, and a highly segmented employment sector that constrains migrants’ opportunities to move on to other jobs. In the paper I explore migrants’ “motivation mixes”, which I define as complex, multidimensional objectives which are often coupled within one individual migration trajectory. The literature suggests that motivation mixes often combine economic and non-economic objectives, and that even where economic rationales remain paramount these are intertwined with other personal concerns (King, 2002). In order to set economically-oriented rationalities within a broader context, I lean on Bygnes and Erdal’s work (2017) and frame the motivations of the respondents within a ‘working life’ frame which includes not only such aspects as availability of employment or decent salaries, but also social rights and relative facilitation to conciliate work and private/family life. This refers to mobility driven by the aspiration to achieve sufficient employment security and a decent salary as a basis for achieving a “grounded life” with emotional and economic attachments and responsibilities.

I am also interested in contributing to the literature on live-in migrant care workers and their motivations for migrating. While the bulk of this literature highlights the harsh working conditions of live-ins across different care regimes (Van Hooren, 2012), a few studies emphasize how these jobs may become a strategic choice for some migrants, understood as circular mobility that enables personal life-projects (Neuman and Hunger, 2016) or as “displaced” or postponed expectations of future well-being (Boccagni, 2016). Malek (2011, in Gozdziak, 2016) distinguished five motivations, combining economic and personal reasons: helping the household, seeking adventure and new experiences, escaping strained family relations, following partners, and seeking self-actualization. Likewise, the intrinsically rewarding value of caregiving work has also been found to motivate some live-ins (DeGiuli, 2007; Hochschild, 2003).

My analysis associates transnationalism with the relative position of migrants in both their home and host countries. Since I am particularly interested in transnational mobilities, instead of seeing migration as a unidirectional and permanent move I think in terms of “migration trajectories” (Eade et al., 2006) with changing strategies over time and across life-cycles. Likewise, I use the concept of coping strategy applied to the transnational level in order
to explore the strategies that migrants develop to cope with the constraints of multiple contexts and to navigate them. Migration can be understood as an active “exit” strategy through which to address and ameliorate perceived life chances and social inequalities (Faist et al., 2015: 193). From this perspective, I conceive the transnational migration trajectory involving back-and-forth mobility between two contexts as a set of adaptive responses applied to constraints that the migrant confronts in both home and host countries. Transnational coping strategies are deployed when the migrant perceives that the home’s national context hinders in one or more ways the achievement of a “normal life”. As migrants move into a host country, they develop new strategies to cope with specific constraints of the host society, such as a segmented labour market or adverse working conditions (Friberg, 2012). Transnational migration can function as an “outlet” that makes the sustaining of social and economic frustrations in the host country bearable (Goldring 1998).

This research also acknowledges the existence of transnational commuters by their own preference, as documented in the literature, aiming to capture non-context-dependent motivations. Since from the migrant’s perspective need and choice interact in complex ways, I propose to see coping strategies as a continuum that goes between subsistence and self-realization, each extreme corresponding to one kind of dilemma triggering coping responses. In the first case, coping strategies respond to material constraints or the perception thereof, e.g. lack of employment opportunities or precarious employment conditions. As a response to self-realization dilemmas, coping strategies imply making choices, either career-related or related to projects of other kinds, consistent with personal values and life-style (e.g. pursuing “work with a meaning”).

**METHODOLOGY**

This paper is based on data from the ESTRANCA project on transnational arrangements for elderly care. It draws on 10 semi-structured (in-depth) interviews with intra-European migrants working as live-in care workers in the Netherlands. The interviews were conducted between July and November 2017 in different locations of the Netherlands. We used a clustered sampling technique, getting most respondents via employment agencies for live-in care workers. Snowball sampling did not function with this category of respondents, given their isolation from other colleagues and their a priori reluctance to participate. Data collection and analysis was done in English, Dutch or German, according to the second language that respondents preferred – normally it coincided with the language that they used with their elderly clients. Interviews have been analyzed using ATLAS-ti with a combination of inductive and deductive codes.

The socio-demographic profiles of the respondents were roughly equivalent. Profiles essentially coincide with existing literature, suggesting that our respondents are broadly representative of LIMC migrants in Europe. All of them were foreign-born adults with Polish, Bulgarian and Slovakian citizenship. There was a majority of women (only one male). While ages ranged between 23 and 57 years old, the majority were 45 or older. Their educational level was post-secondary or higher and their previous occupational level in their home country has
been higher than in the Netherlands, but this did not coincide with higher income than presently. Most of them have no previous employment experience in the care sector. In their home countries respondents were employed in very different sectors and occupations.

The average time that they have been working as live-in care workers is three years. All of them have worked with different clients and have been employed for different providers. Most care workers interviewed have been employed on various bases as live-in carers, particularly posted by employment agencies based in a CEE country (especially Poland or Slovakia) or directly hired by a Dutch care provider. This allows us to ask them to compare the different situations and entitlements, insofar as they are aware of them, and to ask them about their preferences and strategies navigating the opportunity framework.

The limited number of interviews has to do with the fact that live-in care workers are a very difficult-to-reach group. Their reluctance to participate in the research has to do with the fear of losing their job if their employer gets to know. To solve this reluctance, all the interviewees were contacted with the agreement of the employment agency and the client. To compensate for the limited number of live-in interviews, they have been triangulated with 34 in-depth interviews with family carers who hire live-in arrangements and other stakeholders (municipal officers, labour inspectorate, healthcare inspectorate, migrant associations), and a telephonic survey to 10 employment agencies of live-in carers.

**ASPIRATIONS AND MOTIVATIONS TO ENGAGE IN TRANSNATIONAL MIGRATION**

The interviews with live-in migrant workers in the Netherlands reflect a specific East-West pattern of transnational labour migration, that concerns primarily women at a particular stage in their lives. This migratory pattern is structured by the type of employment mode and rotation turns offered by the employment agencies. In the Netherlands most LIMC workers are recruited through commercial placement agencies which have appeared in recent years, mostly after 2012. A search of the internet, the Dutch trade register and two online databases of providers, identified 20 employment agencies active in the Netherlands in November 2016. This new type of provider offers round-the-clock care services for the elderly and people with chronic diseases. Dutch agencies cooperate with agencies abroad to recruit LIMC workers from the new EU member states and act as intermediaries between Dutch clients and LIMC workers. According to the project’s survey of ten providers of LIMC services in the Netherlands, agencies specialize in carers from one or two countries, particularly Poland, Slovakia and other new EU member states. They recruit mostly women aged 40 and older, with limited training or experience in care, although some agencies supply certified care workers.

Employment agencies offering live-in jobs for elderly care generally provide workers for fixed periods such as one to three months, after which the worker may enjoy a period of rest at home. This serves several purposes, as to comply with EU norms (e.g. a two-year maximum period for posting) or Dutch regulations (e.g. the 183 days tax rule) and to allow LIMC workers
to rest. Agencies’ preference for certain employment modes exerts an important influence on the niche of available jobs, as the majority of Dutch clients hire LIMC services through agencies’ mediation. According to our survey, most Dutch providers preferred posted arrangements: in six out of ten cases workers were posted by an Eastern European employment agency, through the mediation of a Dutch agency.6

LIMC migration is a pattern of mobility by mid-life women, who at an earlier stage of life have been combining family and work responsibilities that required them to be spatially fixed. Previously, they were busy raising children, carrying out paid employment and informal domestic work. Coinciding with existing literature (Da Roit and Bochove, 2015; Elrik and Lewadowska, 2008; Boccagni, 2016), most of the respondents are middle-age, middle-class or low-middle-class women, with vocational education or technical university studies (post-secondary or higher). The majority of them are married or divorced and have grown-up children. These women are now starting a new phase in life characterized by fewer family obligations and increased free time which can be filled with new activities. In their migration projects, labour objectives are prominent but not isolated from other kinds of motivation, and LIMC migration becomes a strategy to achieve multiple, intertwined goals. So, several respondents indicate that their migration is functional for starting a company, studying, or buying a house. Zuzanna for example, a single Polish woman without children, sees her migration project as a means for internal mobility within Poland. Her decision to migrate reflects her wish to leave the countryside, where she perceives a lack of opportunities, and move to a big city. Her motivation mix combines social mobility plans with a search for a more inspiring social environment:

I have some plan, because I [want to] sell this house in my village, that there was not much work, not much options for me. And I would like to buy an apartment in Poland in a big city, in Poznan. I need to work [abroad] and save some money.

LIMC migration indicates that more fluid forms of mobility can be adopted at later stages of the life cycle, as a form of coping strategy triggered by structural constraints within the home country’s liberalized labour market. Respondents make sense of their migration decision as a search for better labour opportunities understood in a broad sense. So, as Zuzanna’s words illustrate, it is not so much about coping with unemployment, but above all with tough jobs, low wages, precarious conditions and meagre social rights:

In Poland I live in a small village. I have a really very hard physical job, the only job you can find there. So, then I decided if I have to do really hard work for not much money, then maybe I prefer to find some job abroad.

Some migration projects are “enfolded” with those of other relatives, as in the case of Ewa, a Slovakian woman, married with one grown-up daughter. After working more than twenty years as an administrator, she decided three years ago to look for a LIMC job in the Netherlands. Ewa’s daughter migrated to the Netherlands to study, found a Dutch partner and
decided to stay. Ewa gave up her job to be closer to her daughter, something that in her narrative takes the form of a highly desired aspiration to enjoy her grandchildren:

I have worked my whole life in an office. I have saved from this job and I have a daughter, she is married (…) with a Dutchman, and I have two grandchildren here. And for this reason I came to the Netherlands. (…) I can go more to see my daughter than if I were in Slovakia.

Only by a further examination of her decision to move, Ewa acknowledges that she was extremely tired of her intensive job and was willing to do something else, more meaningful to her. Now she is much happier as she enjoys taking care of people. As Ewa’s story illustrates, motivations behind migration projects are multiple and intertwine in complex ways.

Ewa’s story also indicates that flexible live-in care jobs enable broader family migration projects combining different types of mobility. This shows that, while the LIMC migration pattern conveys some of the features of “liquid migration”, it also has some fundamental differences with it. LIMC migration corresponds with features of temporality, regularity, and to some extent unpredictability. At the same time, it shows a fluid form of mobility in which family does not become looser but rather stronger, and where economic and non-economic migration motivations mingle. In fact, characteristic of the narratives of some participants is that the ‘pendulum’ pattern is often chosen as a way of keeping or strengthening family and personal ties, and sometimes to better combine them with individual projects.

Labour-oriented motivations are actually embedded in broader aspirations, and a quest for a grounded life (Bygnes and Erdal, 2017). So, Andrea, a Romanian woman, divorced and with one daughter, explained that her LIMC job in the Netherlands allowed her to better combine work with spending periods with her daughter studying in the Netherlands. And for Andrej, a divorced Polish man, LIMC jobs offer the opportunity to build a future in a more generous welfare state. Finally, travelling abroad for the sake of having new experiences and getting to know new countries or languages was an additional important motivation for some respondents, such as Veronika, Simona, Anna or Petra. As we expected, subsistence and self-realization interrelate in different ways in each of these motivation mixes.

The above stories illustrate that if interviewees see taking a job in the Netherlands as an opportunity to escape an increasingly liberalized labour market, choosing a LIMC job is for them a way of keeping a foot in two countries and a strategy for reconciling both work and private life. The interviewees justify their choice for live-in care jobs in the fact that it provides great flexibility, enabling a good combination of work with other aspects in life. From the perspective of the mid-life migrant women in this study, live-in jobs allow them to use concentrated vacation periods for personal projects such as studying or starting a new business, and for spending longer periods of time with family and friends. In words of Ewa:

And for me it’s good. I’m here 5-6 weeks, I’m at home also 5 weeks. I’m more at home than when I worked [in Slovakia]. I came at home at 5pm and I was less, less with my
husband and with my family than now. [Now] If I’m [there] for 5 weeks I’m more with everybody.

Broadly speaking, the transnational LIMC arrangement provides a solution to the tension between mobility and the need for emplacement, which the participants feel offers the most flexibility to accommodate to competing goals between work and private life. Participants solve this mobility-emplacement tension in different ways that could be placed along an emplacement continuum (Ryan and Mulholland, 2014). For most participants this migration pattern is not intended to lead to settlement in the host country, but they keep future options open. One of those with clearer return plans, Zuzanna, reflected upon them in the following way:

That is the plan. Buy this apartment, work here some I don't know [how many more] years, I will see. Now this is the plan. But I will see how it goes. Maybe... It is not definitely that I will stay in Poland. Maybe... this job is also nice. For a longer period, maybe. Or if I go back to Poland, I can work here for some months in the year. Maybe. I will see.

Although most respondents show this intentional unpredictability typical of a “migratory habitus” (Eade et al., 2006), four of them explicitly describe their aspirations to settle permanently in the Netherlands someday. The family situation plays a decisive role here, as the most open to emplacement are respondents with daughters living in the Netherlands, and single or divorced persons without family attachments in their home countries. Still, the majority see themselves in the future as keeping this commuting life for many years; in one participant's words, being “a kind of gypsy, moving around in Europe”.

**TRANSNATIONAL STRATEGIES NAVIGATING THE SYSTEM**

Another factor structuring this pattern of migration are EU free movement schemes. LIMC workers can work on various employment bases, either employed by a Dutch company, by a temporary work agency in another member state, by the care recipient directly, or as a self-employed worker. In particular, two bodies of legislation, on the free movement of workers and freedom to provide services, entitle with different rights EU citizens working in other member states. Under the framework of free movement,9 EU citizens are entitled to reside and work in other member states; under the free provision of services, EU citizens may work in other countries, “posted” by their employer in their home country. The crucial difference here is that, under the free movement of workers legislation, EU mobile workers are entitled to equal treatment with nationals, hence the labour law of the country of work is applicable. The labour rights of posted workers, on the other hand, are much more limited.10 Posted workers are not entitled to wage parity, and their wages can be lower than those of local workers. Posted workers can also be placed with user undertakings in other EU member states as temporary agency workers,11 but in this case wage parity prevails as in the case of free mobile workers.
Although the participants show low levels of legal consciousness, they are aware that different employment models imply more or fewer opportunities for them. Accordingly, they engage in “shopping strategies” to maximize their economic and social rights by shifting job, company, EU employment mode or country. In doing so, they exert their free movement rights in order to go where the best working conditions are, although choices are framed within the market opportunity structure. Migrants’ shopping strategies are a case of ‘structured agency’. As interviews with care providers and clients illustrate, agency is channelled within a set of available possibilities, which reflect employers’ preferences for certain employment modes and free movement schemes, and clients’ preferences for certain categories of workers (BLINDED REFERENCE). So, as male care worker Andrej explained, the scarcity of families willing to hire a male carer substantially restricts his opportunities to shift company.

LIMC migrants also orient their shopping choices according to their own hierarchy of preferences. Most care workers interviewed have worked in more than one country and have tried more than one employer. Based on their own transnational work experience, they have developed ideas about convenient working conditions in different countries. In the following citation, Miruna, a Polish, single woman who worked as a posted worker in Germany, explains how she deliberately searched for ways to get a job in the Netherlands:

Miruna: I worked eight years in Germany. (...) But I wanted to come to Holland.
Interviewer: Why the Netherlands?
M: You earn more here! I had already lived here and I speak Dutch (...). But I knew that this [live-in care] job existed and I wanted to get one, but I just couldn't find any. (...) So, then I went back to Poland and there I was recruited by a employment agency to come working in Holland.

Some interviews show an ideal trajectory, in which shifting jobs implies changing employment mode and hence from one body of EU legislation to another. Several respondents have shifted from a job as a posted worker by an agency in their home country (Poland, Slovakia, Bulgaria), to a job as an employee of a Dutch company hiring them under Dutch labour law. Normally participants encapsulate this preference in the metaphor of the “Dutch contract” as opposed to the “Slovakian/Polish/Bulgarian contract”, the main added value attached to the Dutch contract being entitlement to healthcare or old-age pension in the Netherlands. This is done for example by Saskia, a divorced Slovakian woman working now nearly twenty years as a live-in care worker in different countries, companies and modes of employment. In the next quotation Saskia talks about her shifting strategies to opt for better-paid employment modes, such as self-employed (or informal) jobs rather than being posted by an agency:

I was in Hamburg. That was also a family where everything was very well taken care of. There the daughter paid a lot to us, at least 4000 euro per month. Another [family] was in Berlin, a German sister, who paid cash through an agency. (...) But the agency paid me only 890 euros (...) Therefore I said: I don't go there anymore.
Participants’ migration trajectories do not reflect in a straightforward way this ideal progression towards a “Dutch contract”. Rather, trajectories show messy patterns and resist an easy categorization, indicating that people also change their objectives over time and adapt their personal goals to different circumstances. While strategies are generally informed by cost-benefit considerations, they are not entirely rational in character. Also ethical principles and professional values are part of the decision-making process, indicating that migrants’ coping strategies not only aim at improving their economic position. Several respondents argue for the intrinsic value of caregiving work, as something that enables self-realization by showing solidarity with other persons (“you must not do it only for the money”). This human aspect of care work is what makes LIMC jobs “worthy” (Hochschild, 2003). Saskia, for instance, explains that she takes care of people “the way she wants to be looked after when she is old” because sooner or later “you will get paid back”.

Some strategies to improve life standards relate to gaining access to good protection schemes against social risks. Most participants are concerned about health insurance and some speak openly about their aspirations for building enough security for their older years. The Netherlands represents a more “secure” and “predictable” life for them. As Anna explains:

If I retire now I would get more pension from the Netherlands than from Hungary. That’s one of the reasons why I will stay here, because of the high pension that I am building from this job.

Unemployment on the other hand is not a concern for them, and they disregard the possibility of applying for unemployment benefits. Becoming unemployed simply means looking for another job, which according to them happens quite quickly. As the case of Miruna illustrates, this disregard of social benefits is partly explained by their limited entitlements to rights in the Netherlands and the scantiness of benefits in their home countries. But partly it is informed by the value that they attach to hard work and to doing things by yourself, and their disapproval of those applying for benefits who are seen as “lazy”. In the cases that they envisage mobility as an opportunity to build old-age pensions in more affluent welfare states, they understand contributive rights as a reward for which they need to work hard. In words of Andrej:

It’s not that I don’t want to work, I know that I have to work very hard. But in my country there is no security. Colleagues of mine who have worked all their life in care homes, receive €260 when they retire, so they need to keep working.

Migrants also deploy coping strategies to face difficult working conditions. All participants agree that live-in jobs have harsh working conditions: particularly, long working hours, insufficient rest, limited free time, and lack of privacy. They acknowledged that long working hours and overwork are typical of this sector. Interviews with clients show that many share this negative image of LIMC jobs, but some downplay the burdens and emphasize advantages (BLINDED REFERENCE). Moreover, several participants explained that during their working period they sleep poorly as their elderly clients need attention during the night,
and most families do not hire another care worker for the night shift. Finally, most participants explain that they do not have free days and they hardly go out in their free time, which generates feelings of seclusion and isolation. To quote two specific yet typical remarks, they referred to their work regime as “living in a golden cage”, or “living in a convent”.

Although there are cases of “individual negotiation” in which care workers speak with their client or employer about their working conditions, most participants do not engage in bargaining feeling that they lack assets to negotiate. Some employment agencies recommend their clients to respect minimum working conditions (40 hours per week rule), leaving it up to the family to observe it or not. As one of the participants explains:

I spoke with my boss, I said “I don't sleep now for two months. Please do something”. I spoke with five persons in my company. Nobody did anything. Nobody cares. I said to my boss “You cannot leave it up to the family to give us free time, you must say that the carer must have one day per week off”. No, no, no, [he said] you must discuss it yourself with the family.

Variations in the agentic capacity to engage in negotiations can be seen to be associated with the accumulation of “transnational capital” (Weenik, 2008). The interviews illustrate how migrants accumulate “cosmopolitan assets” over the years, such as spoken languages or work experience in other countries or other sectors, for example in residential care. Transnational capital and employment experience can be used as to change jobs, employment modes or countries. Andrea, for example, is aware that other colleagues use their transnational capital to negotiate better wages than hers, for example a Polish colleague “who has two years of experience in the UK”.

Likewise, the participants do not resort to trade unions, even when they are aware that their rights have been violated. Acknowledging the high degree of informality and lawlessness in the LIMC sector, they do not expect that taking this risk would lead to any progress for them. In the words of Anna, the only participant willing to take formal action:

I believe that the situation cannot go on like this. This must be brought to the attention of parliament and there must be a new regulation… The problem is that, if I do something on my own, I risk losing my job… So I don’t know what to do. How, where do I turn to? To whom? To the trade union? But I’m not in the union.

Broadly speaking, when confronted with bad conditions most respondents prefer to leave the company at short notice and look for a better one. As Andrea explains, choosing to leave is a question of reaching a no-go point – “I always think that I have to reach some limit”. The exit option takes two different forms, either “shifting company” and moving to one offering better conditions, or completely “opting out” from the LIMC sector. Andrej, for instance, compares agencies to a “train station”, to which care workers arrive, work there until they become aware of the working conditions (“open their eyes”), and leave in search for better jobs. On her part, Anna sees no point in changing companies because “all of them work with the
same system”. Many participants only endure these jobs because it fits their personal life-project. As in Thornqvist and Bernhardsson’s (2015) study of male construction workers in Sweden, the motivation to pursue life-projects and the short-term endurance required by LIMC work-shifts are key in explaining why the participants do not engage in organized “resistance” strategies.

Opting out is accompanied by the use of emplacement strategies to accumulate transnational capital, such as learning the language, acquiring extra qualifications, looking for a house, etc. Opting-outs would prefer to move to jobs in the formal care sector, with well-defined working hours and boundaries between work and private life. A recurring aspiration is to work for a home care organization delivering ambulant services for different clients. Some respondents use the metaphor of “having a car”, in which the car symbolizes the freedom to go home and leave their work behind ("eight hours, and go home!"), versus the feeling of being immobile and locked-in characteristic of live-in jobs. For others, their aspiration takes the form of “having their own house”, which conveys their ideal separation between home and work and the wish to create their own private space.

CONCLUSION

The crisis of the LTC system in the Netherlands has drawn in to the country a new migration flow of live-in care workers. Using their free movement rights or posted workers schemes, CEE migrant women are filling gaps in the Dutch LTC system. This paper has analyzed the motivation mixes that drive these women to take low-end jobs as live-in carers of elderly persons, and the strategies that they devise to cope with constraints in different contexts.

The interviews show that this transnational pattern of migration is used as a coping strategy, triggered by survival and self-realization dilemmas. Interviewees engage in LIMC migration because they perceive that the home-country context hinders in one or more ways the achievement of a “normal” or “grounded life”. However, for the participants, live-in work is an “active choice” (Degiuli, 2007) which enables personal life-projects despite the harsh working conditions (Neumann and Hunger, 2016; Boccagni, 2016). The choice of a commuting life with a LIMC job allows EU migrants to benefit from better employment opportunities elsewhere in the EU, while keeping activities and attachments in their home country. Above all, my research shows that need and self-realization are tightly intermingled in migration projects. Participants sometimes combine a narrative of coping with material constraints with a self-realization narrative, by which taking a LIMC job becomes consistent with values of solidarity or choosing a “job with meaning”.

The desire to reconcile work and private life plays a central role in informants’ motivation mixes, which indicates that LIMC migrants set their labour orientation within a broader context of a “working life” (Bygnes and Erdal, 2017). Despite their harshness, LIMC jobs facilitate relative employment security as a basis for a grounded life. Among the complex aspirations behind the migration decision, family ties still play a crucial role for LIMC migrants, albeit in new arrangements. In fact, LIMC migration conveys some features of liquid migration
but also shows some fundamental differences. Our cases convey a fluid form of mobility which allows people to engage in family projects, also showing that open migration projects are possible at later stages in life.

LIMC migrants are caught between two crises. Their case illustrates multi-embedded motivations and strategies, structured by constraints in the home and host countries. The migration trajectories of the participants show that while LIMC jobs and transnational patterns are used as a coping strategy in itself, migrants also develop strategies to cope with LIMC jobs. So, as LIMC jobs also have many downsides, some migrant women try to improve their working conditions by shifting job, company, country, or opting-out of the LIMC sector. Although such strategies remain a case of “embedded agency”, they navigate the different possibilities comprised in EU free movement schemes in order to work under more convenient employment modes, according to their expectations of better working conditions and social rights. While migrants initially see in the Dutch welfare crisis an opportunity to find employment, over time their experiences with low-end jobs in an increasingly flexible and segmented labour market may adjust their perception of opportunities for social mobility in the Netherlands. Adjusting their expectations to the Dutch care sector, participants maintain over the years their transnational commuting pattern. Continuous mobility is for them a strategic choice, which makes tough working conditions bearable as long as this facilitates the achievement of long-term personal goals.

NOTES

1 This was recently supplemented by user’s co-payments.
2 Van Grafhorst (2014) estimated that several hundred persons in the Netherlands are cared for by live-in migrant carers.
3 I label these strategies ‘transnational’ because they convey systematic cross-border mobility over time, which structures agency in distinctive ways.
4 Studies of intra-European footloose migrants have generally focused on young childless persons, disregarding the influence of life-stages on the fluidity of migration trajectories. Recent research indicates that as highly mobile people grow older or became parents they tend to settle down (Ryan and Mulholland, 2014: 587).
5 ESTRANCA is a research project which studies the emergence of transnational eldercare arrangements in which elderly people are cared for by live-in migrant carers. It compares the Netherlands and Germany.
6 LIMC workers can also work as self-employed or be directly hired by the care recipient, but the available data indicates that these employment modes represent a minority (in our survey, only two out of ten agencies).
7 Some couples migrate together, with the man being posted for a job in agriculture and the woman for a care job.
8 Time away from home is used by some as escape route, to put distance with their partners in strained relationships, divorce or other life transitions (Malek, 2011).
9 Citizens Directive (Directive 2004/38/EC).
10 The Posting of Workers Directive (Directive 96/71/EC) provides only for certain minimum terms and conditions of employment in the host state, including: minimum wages, maximum work periods and minimum rest periods, minimum paid annual leave, health, safety and hygiene at work and equal treatment between men and women.
11 Temporary Agency Work Directive (2008/104/EG).
12 Miruna’s precarious contract did not entitle her to disability benefit when she got ill.
13 In two cases, the client negotiated with the company to improve care worker’s salary.
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