COVID-19, (im)mobilities and blockages: Re-thinking mobilities of migrant women in Northern Ireland

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Abstract
This article deals with the recent COVID-19 pandemic and how it has affected mobilities in Northern Ireland. Drawing on the findings of in-depth interviews with migrant women and elements of autoethnographic research, the author discusses how migrant women reshape their mobilities in the context of global pandemic. The article looks into how COVID-19 has reinforced the existing mobility regimes and how waiting has become an important part of migrant women strategies. To this end, it examines waiting as both passive and active condition. It then explores politics of mobility and transgressive powers involved in migrant women trajectories.

KEYWORDS
cosmopolitanism and identity, identity, migration and mobility, transnational migrants, transnationalism

The era of globalization has led to shrinking of the world and time and space compression (Harvey, 1989), and as a result, over the last 50 years, international migration has increased in volume, diversity and geographical scope. This can be attributed to advances in transport and communication technology, and processes of ‘widening and speeding up of worldwide interconnectedness in all aspects of contemporary social life’ (Held et al, 1999, p. 2). At the same time, as Sheller aptly puts it ‘we have seen the emergence of new global regimes for managing mobilities – especially as control of borders, airports, and entire urban zones become key points of containment’ (2016, p. 25, see Belanger & Silvey, 2020). The current scope and scale of infrastructures and policies aimed at monitoring, intercepting, immobilizing and controlling migration are unprecedented (Belanger & Silvey, 2020).

This has been further exacerbated by the recent COVID-19 outbreak, which has affected global mobility in the form of various travel disruptions, restrictions and blockages. The current COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbates this increasing immobility by a closure of national borders, curfews and worldwide international travel restrictions.
(Brandhorst, Baldassar & Wilding, 2020). In Europe, internal border controls in the Schengen area have been imposed in the context of COVID-19 even more profoundly than at the peak of the ‘European refugee crisis’ in 2015 (Brady, 2020). International mobility in this context has been seen as a threat to national security (Brumat, 2020). One can argue that COVID-19 has reinforced the existing mobility regimes, having a negative impact on movement of people across the globe (Schling, Espinoza & Datta, 2020).

With these concerns in mind, in this paper, I will examine how the recent COVID-19 crisis has affected mobilities of migrant women in Northern Ireland (NI). First, I will focus on questions of being immobile and waiting on one hand and on mobility on the other. I will examine how waiting can be passive, experienced as an extended, or suspended present (Gray, 2011), but also can be seen as a conscious choice that requires agency (Schewel, 2020). Second, I will focus on mobilities of migrant women, who overcome barriers to their movement, challenging existing mobility regimes. NI presents an interesting case due to its close proximity to the Republic of Ireland, which is a different jurisdiction and has introduced different laws and travel restrictions in relation to COVID-19 than NI. This adds an additional layer of complexity to how migrant women navigate and negotiate complex migration control mechanisms in the context of global pandemic. From this perspective, this paper will yield insights into the politics of mobility and transgressive powers involved in migrant women’s trajectories.

THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS TO DATE

This paper draws on theoretical contributions on transnationalism by examining how migrant women’s transnational practices have been reconfigured in the context of COVID-19. Transnationalism in migration literature has been defined as the ‘multiple ties and interactions linking people or institutions across the borders of nation-states’ (Vertovec, 1999, p. 447, see also Vertovec & Cohen, 1999). Transnational practices allow migrants to ‘maintain, build, and reinforce multiple linkages with their countries of origin’ (Glick Schiller et al., 1992, p. 2). These links are forged through different activities, such as sending of remittances, gifts, correspondence, telephone contact, and various forms of care and emotional networking (Basch et al., 1994). As a result of transnational practices, migrants become inserted in ‘transnational social fields’ (Glick Pries, 2001; Schiller & Fouron, 1999). Within these transnational social fields, migrants are exposed to a set of social expectations, cultural values and patterns of interaction that span across the borders of nation states. As Tedeschi, Vorobeva and Jauhiainen aptly put it, ‘In transnationalism, a broad range of economic, sociocultural, and political cross-border activities and practices, and their various combinations, modify people’s sense of belonging to places; affect their citizenship and nationality; change their aspirations, imagination and decisions in everyday life; and influence their identity’ (2020, n.d.).

Adapting a transnational perspective in migration studies means following a ‘de-nationalised epistemology’ (Dahinden, 2017), while bearing in mind the potential force of categories of nation-state, and how they shape people’s identities and structures they are embedded in and act upon. It is important to mention here that transnational perspective should be treated as epistemological lens rather than a theoretical framework (Dahinden, 2017; Glick Schiller, 2015). As such, cross-border phenomena are understood as the outcome of particular processes which are embedded in multi-layered structures (political, economic, social) at simultaneously local, national and supranational scales (Dahinden, 2017, p. 1482).

Both in theoretical and empirical works, many scholars pointed at travel and mobility as important features of transnationalism. Cheap flights enable migrants to go home on a regular basis. From this perspective, transnationalism through mobility is characterized by circulation and thus perpendicular movement across borders (Faist, 2010, p. 18). Portes et al. suggested that:

For the purposes of establishing a novel area of investigation, it is preferable to delimit the concept of transnationalism to occupations and activities which require regular and sustained social contacts over time across national borders for their implementation. (Portes et al., 1999, p. 219).
Mobility across borders has been therefore seen as an important element of transnational practices. The authors also highlight the high intensity of these exchanges and the multiplication of activities that require cross-border travel and contacts (Portes et al., 1999). In this context, some scholars observe that going home is of enormous importance for migrants for whom the return is to their place of birth (Baldassar, 2001, p. 3). The idea of ‘going home’ can be then seen as a key metaphor which orients the lives and desires of those who foster it (Baldassar, 2001, p. 4). Similarly, Bianchera, Mann and Harper (2019) argue that although migration is often initiated for economic reasons, transnational mobility should be considered through the lens of family life cycles, family care needs and sentiments of ethnic memory and belonging. Mobility across borders is a highly emotional endeavour. This is pertinent to the questions of how COVID-19 has affected migrant women’s mobilities in NI.

Nevertheless, at the same time, over the last couple of decades, there has been increased securitization of migration, ‘which has been paralleled by the reinforcement of migration (Border) apparatuses and the emergence of state and non-state migration-control industries’ (Dahinden, 2017, p. 1481). In this way, the contemporary scholarship on transnationalism has focused attention on how nation-state and its institutions impact and co-shape transnational fields. This paper will contribute to these discussions by focusing on disruptions of travel and airport closures as mechanisms that curtail migrant women’s movement/mobilities. It will examine how despite these limitations migrant women are active actors, who exercise power and agency in the context of COVID-19.

Migration and Women

The present paper is situated within the scholarship in the field migration and gender. For a long time, gender has been a topic neglected in migration research. It has often been presented in migration literature as a phenomenon specific for the new ‘age of migration’ (Castles & Miller, 1998). Different scholars seek to reform immigration scholarship so that it acknowledges gender as fundamental to migration processes. For example, historical evidence evaluated by Donato et al (2006) demonstrates that women have been significant element of migration flows over centuries. The authors called for gender balance in studying migration. Furthermore, intersectionality scholars have increasingly recognized that in order to understand people’s experiences of transnational migration, we need to address the intersections of gender, race/ethnicity, nationality and class dimensions (Anthias, 1998).

The bulk of research on women experiences of migration focused on transnational motherhood (Carling & Schmalzbauer, 2012; Dreby, 2010; Mazzucato & Schans, 2011; Parrenas, 2001, 2005, 2008). Much of this research has examined how transnational family forms affect gender roles and ideologies and transformation and reconstitution of gender roles through transnational practices (Bell & Domecka, 2018; Erdal & Pawlak, 2017; Ehrkamp, 2013). Scholars also explored the questions of transnational care from gender perspective (Baldassar, 2007; Baldassar & Merla, 2014; Nedelcu & Wyss, 2016). Kilkey and Merla (2014) in this respect highlight importance of migration regime in the configuration of the care-giving arrangements of migrants themselves. More recent work has also focused on the immobility regimes approach that sensitizes the analysis on transnational family care for global inequalities (Brandhorst, Baldassar & Wilding, 2020). Other research has tackled the questions of nationalism and citizenship (see Ong, 2006; Shinozaki, 2015; Yeoh & Willis, 1999), belonging, exclusion and identity in particular places (Yeoh & Huang, 2000) and the social and spatial dynamics of diasporic communities (Silvey, 2000; Yeoh & Huang, 2000). This research highlights the necessity to avoid ‘simplistic equations between ethnic identity, culture and community’ (Huang, Teo & Yeoh, 2000, p. 397) and instead look at other variables including gender and class in how migrant experiences and family expectations across borders are shaped.

The existing literature also discusses questions of structural factors associated with female migration, as female migrants in particular are susceptible to dead-end and often temporary low-wage work (Anthias, Kontos, and Morokvasic-Mülle, 2013; Bastia & Piper, 2019; Fernández-Kelly & Schauffler, 1994; Pearson & Sweetman, 2019). This is important to understanding of the situation of many migrant women, whose mobility options may be constrained due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Regarding literature on employment, migrant women and COVID-19, it is
worth in this respect referring here to Foley’s and Piper’s paper (2020), which explores the impacts and implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on women migrant workers. It examines how the global health crisis has both amplified existing gender dynamics and created new gender-biased outcomes that disproportionately impact upon women migrant workers. The study investigates the health, social and domestic care services that women migrant workers provide and considered ‘essential’ during the pandemic, and contrasts this with migrant workers’ exclusion from key services and support. This paper draws on these debates and examines how COVID-19 has affected migrant women transnational practices, looking at lived experiences of (im)mobility during the pandemic times. My research will contribute to the existing literature on migrant women, and instead of focusing on women employed in social and health care settings, I will also include perspectives of women from other professions, including cleaners, accountants, interpreters and charity sector workers.

Context for migration

NI due to the long history of sectarian divide and troubles has been excluded from influx of foreigners. However, since 2004, the situation has diametrically changed with new communities making their home in this country. Up to 2004, the largest ethnic minority group were Chinese who migrated to NI in the 1960s. Apart from this, other groups came from Commonwealth countries, particularly India and Pakistan. Moreover, there is a large Portuguese and East Timorese community in NI, showing patterns of chain migration. These communities are located in the area of Dungannon and Portadown, with many individuals working at a local Moy Park factory. Since 2004, there has been a high influx of East Europeans, who migrated mostly because of economic reasons. The Polish are the largest group, and there approximately 30,000 Polish nationals in NI. The East European migration to NI has shown signs of decreasing following the Brexit vote in 2016 with some people going back to their home countries. Migrants in NI find themselves often in deeply segregated locations, such as Belfast, Derry, Lurgan and Antrim. The places where they often choose to live are demarcated by symbolic boundary markers, such as painted curbs, flags and so on. This may have negative effect on their relations with the local communities as they may become target of hate crimes and racism. According to some commentators racism is new sectarianism, and in a culture where social divisions and hostilities are so deeply engrained in everyday fabric of the society, migrant lives may also be affected. Nevertheless, there are visible attempts to strengthen notions of multiculturalism in NI, and ethnic shops are readily observable in different locations across NI. It is particularly visible in Belfast, and migrants and refugees tend to settle in South Belfast, with a high concentration of them around Ormeau Rd area. Nevertheless, East Belfast has become largely populated by migrant communities due to lower rent prices.

Methodology

I conducted 18 in-depth interviews with different migrant women originating from different geographical areas (US, Argentina, India, Poland, Romania, Hungary, Bulgaria) to show a multiplicity of ways in which COVID-19 has affected migrant women in NI. My research has taken place from March 2020 to May 2021. Originally, my research was going to focus on the first lockdown but I was curious how things have changed over time and I have extended my research to see how different stages of pandemic affect people’s mobility strategies in different ways.

The aim of this paper is to contribute to a gendered analysis of migrant women, focusing on their experiences of the pandemic and how it has affected the ways in which they maintained strong links with their families home. These migrant women were employed in different professions, including working-class and middle-class individuals. At the time of the interview, they were between 23 and 46 years old and seven of them were mothers. I have known most of my interviewees for a long time through different networks. Some of them were my contacts from previous research on Polish migrants. Other informants were my colleagues working with me at the Migrant Centre NI, and some were
recruited through the snowball sampling. Before the interview took place, I informed women about the purpose of the interview, obtained informed consent and also informed them about the right to withdraw from the interview at any given time. I ensured that pseudonyms were used to maintain confidentiality of my informants. The interviews were voice recorded, transcribed and thematically analysed. Interviews were conducted in Polish, Spanish and English.

Conducting an interview in the native language of participants, Polish and Spanish, made the interview flow better and it seemed more natural and I had a feeling that it was easier to establish a good rapport with these informants. This was particularly the case of Polish participants as both of us were speaking in our native tongue (see Espiritu, 1997). In case of interviews with non-English speakers in English (e.g. Romanians, Hungarians), the extra effort has been required to translate what the interviewees wanted to express, which may have caused more strain on participants, especially when discussing issues that are highly emotional or sensitive to them. However, I opted for interviewing them in English because of issues of semantic loss or difficulties inherent in translating the cultural meanings embedded in linguistic expression (see Temple & Young, 2004).

The interviews followed a loosely structured set of themes: (1) migrant women’s transnational connections before COVID-19; (2) migrant women’s experiences of pandemic and how this affected their daily lives; (3) migrant women’s connections with their family members back home and their mobility strategies.

My positionality in the field of study was complex. On one hand, I was a migrant woman myself and felt the same kind of anxiety over the pandemic as my informants did. However, I had to try to put my a priori assumptions aside and be able to step in my interlocutors’ shoes. Also even though I was a migrant woman, I felt that my experiences of migration could be more comparable to the experiences of other East European women and very different from experiences of women who originated from India or Argentina. Physical remoteness of their homelands seemed to constraint their mobilities to a larger extent. Because I interviewed a mixed group of women, I felt it was easier to establish rapport with professionals (e.g. interpreters, as I used to be an interpreter myself) and sometimes it was more difficult to establish good rapport with members of working class. I also felt privileged in a way because many of working-class migrant women could not take out many days of annual leave and that constrained their mobilities. As a person who could work from home during the pandemic, I was in more advantageous position than some of them. This increased social distance between myself and them. I will come back to this in the next sections.

The interviews were mostly conducted over the phone, in particular in the initial phase of COVID-19, when there was a total lockdown. I felt that they restrained me as I could not observe migrants’ emotional expressions; however, I still could hear their voice. For example, people’s vexation was clearly heard in their tone of voice. I also conducted several interviews outdoors when the lockdown was eased and people from different households were allowed to meet outside. In order to protect my informants, I wore a face mask, which caused an awkward feeling. My informant, Magdalena said ‘are you joking?’ – she laughed at me, and even though that at the beginning, I tried to maintain a two meter gap with her, this gap decreased as time went on. I found it difficult to maintain the safe distance with my other two informants who spoke to me face to face. Such an interview brings people together, especially when dealing with emotive issues.

I also included elements of autoethnography in my research. Autoethnography can be defined as an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno) (Ellis, 2004; Holman Jones, 2005). The emphasis upon both ‘analysis’ and ‘cultural experience’ places autoethnography alongside the many other forms of social research that seek to observe and interpret cultural life. Even though autoethnography has been criticized as solipsistic and navel gazing, Olesen argues that this is not the case, as researchers’ deeply personal and emotional experiences are examined in the context of larger social issues (2005, p. 253). I see autoethnography as making a valuable contribution, within proper limits and among other methods to the processes through which we seek to accumulate data and analyse the world (see Anderson, 2006). It is with these concerns in mind that I chose to use analytic autoethnography as my research strategy. This term is coined by Anderson (2006), who makes a distinction between analytic and evocative autoethnography. He proposed a more analytic form of autoethnography … in which the researcher is (1) a full member in the research group or setting, (2) visible as such a member in published texts and (3) committed to developing theoretical understandings
of broader social phenomena. The overarching aim of analytic autoethnography is to transcend the data to provide broader generalizations of how the insights from the research may inform the social world. For these reasons, instead rather focusing on my own experiences of COVID-19, I decided to complement research carried about other migrant women with my personal insights. Throughout the pandemic I took notes, which were taken in the form of a personal diary.

COVID-19 AND WAITING

In this section, I will examine how questions of uncertainty and waiting prevailed in migrant women narratives regarding COVID-19. Travel disruption, quarantine and different blockages meant that in many cases, women had to postpone their plans to go to their home country and visit their relatives back home. Migrant women in this case experience immobility while ‘waiting to become mobile’ (see Belanger & Silvey, 2020, compare Vidal & Musset, 2016). For women who are engaged in the ‘waiting’ process, the physical space of ‘waiting’ is multi-sited, virtually linked and physically far apart. ‘Waiting’ involves the deployment of strategies to reduce and end ‘waiting’ (Belanger & Silvey, 2020). In my analysis, I will focus on waiting seen as both active and passive condition. On one hand, waiting means bearing witness to possibility of change. As Vannini comments, ‘if life is made of between-moments that offer nothing to become, then waiting can be understood as a dynamic activity’ (Vannini, 2002, p. 205). On the other hand, waiting can be seen as a passive condition, making time feel ‘numb, muted, dead’ (Crapanzano, 1985, p. 44). It is a sort of liminal condition that usually prevailed in refugee narratives. There is a certain feeling of stickiness that may accompany such a waiting. Those are the moments when time is noticed and where we experience things such as waiting, nostalgia, impatience, and boredom (Bourdieu, 2000; Everaert, 2020). In this aspect, Conradson and McKay recall how mobility might induce ‘disturbing senses of rupture, loss and even failure’ (2007, p. 169).

Waiting – active

Vignette 1: Summer 2020

When the pandemic broke out I felt a sense of rupture and separation from my family in Poland. I was sad that I wouldn’t be able to see my mother for a long time. I kept wondering what Covid-19 is going to mean for my family and how I am going to travel to Poland with a 3 year old Daniel in the context of pandemic. I remember when my mum said to my son ‘I don’t know when or if I am going to see you again. It was a devastating experience to find out that it won’t be like it used to be. My plans to travel to Poland in May just after the semester ends were shattered. The annual rhythm that I was used to was disrupted. All I knew, however, was that I was going to go home sometime this summer (2020). I actively followed the infection rates in both Poland and the UK to make sure that I keep everyone as safe as possible. My waiting was an active act, and I looked for possibilities to go.

Many migrant women highlight unpredictable nature of the pandemic and this affects how they go about their plans. However, they realize ‘agency-in-waiting’ (Brun, 2015), through which they cope with this experience of uncertainty that COVID-19 brought about. A vast majority of my informants highlighted that they were waiting for the situation to develop. Magdalena, is a 40 year-old Hungarian woman, who has been in NI for over a decade. She is well settled in the local community and runs an interpreting agency. She recently got a house on mortgage.
She said:

I am waiting for the situation to develop and I don’t make any plans. I know that the situation can change because there can be a second wave, although they don’t think it’s coming in the summer. I was thinking of going to Hungary and just seeing them from the street. You know, just social distancing, but then again does it make sense just go there looking at them? Especially my grannie, because I think if I go home and I infect my mum, then my grannie would catch it and there would be terrible consequences of that. I don’t know, I would need to talk to her, but I don’t know if it’s good decision not to see them at all if the rates are low or just see them from the distance.

The fear of infecting relatives back home was the main reason that would deter migrant women from travelling. Magdalena is unable to make precise arrangements, and her travel plans are characterized by uncertainty about changes in pandemic over time. However, in her narrative we see ‘intentional unpredictability’ (Garapich, Drinkwater, Eade, 2009) as a way of thinking about her mobility. She also shows an agency, when thinking about visiting her relatives. Considering seeing them from distance is a way of protecting them but being able to see them at the same time. In this sense, she is engaged in a process of thinking actively about her mobility. In my research, I also came across a couple of individuals, who in order to protect their relatives, self-quarantined themselves at a bed and breakfast or a different part of their family home.

It is also worth noting in this respect that many countries are at different stages of the pandemic and sometimes it was difficult to plan around, as the pandemic may have subsumed in NI but it had not been past its peak in other countries. This has been reflected in Anca’s words. Anca is a Romanian interpreter and a support worker who has been in Belfast for 3 years. She is doing her MA in International Relations at QUB. Her father had died in tragic circumstances just before the pandemic erupted. When I asked her if she has intention to go over to Romania to visit her sister and mum, she said:

I was actually thinking about that, speaking to my mum as well. I’d be worried that I’d need to stay in quarantine for two weeks. If I travel I will have to travel to Dublin. We are already talking about two airports and my mum has a serious heart condition. I really wanna see her after my father died, I want her to be healthy and if it means talking for next year just through video calls, it is fine with me. (...) Well, considering what happened to my dad, I want to go there in September to pay him tribute for 6 months but I won’t be able to do that. For example if numbers are very low and there is not much risk if you travel by plane, then I will probably go. But if it’s risky to travel, then I will avoid it. I am waiting for pandemic to become weaker. Second wave will be different in every country, and the cases started raising at different times. In Romania it will be October/November. To be honest I am expecting to go sometime in March next year to pay tribute to my dad.

Anca highlights that it is her individual choice that she will not be going to Romania in the nearest future. However, she constructs herself as an active agent, who is seeking the opportunity to go to Romania, and highlights that it is her personal choice to stay and wait. In this context, she decided to use video calls as an alternative way to keep in touch with her family back home. She is very conscious of different stages of pandemic in NI and Romania and she intends to navigate these different time frames in her decisions when to travel back home. Waiting for the future opportunity to become a mobile agent again forms part of Anca’s daily life and remains a source of uncertainty in the context of COVID-19 when the future remains undecipherable. However, in her case, uncertainty is not totalizing (El-Shaarawi, 2015). In these narratives, it is clear that for waiting is a condition that offers hope. Hope is a complex, many-layered notion resting on the capacity for imagination, on a sense of time and of temporal progress, on a desire to believe in a better future or in the possibility that something can change, and to some extent on uncertainty.
Waiting – passive

Although in the previous section, I looked at the process of waiting as an active act, that does not deprive migrant women of their agency, in this section, I will focus on waiting as a passive experience, which does not necessarily offer hope but has a devastating effect on migrant women.

First, it is important to understand complex social and economic factors involved in how COVID-19 restricts people’s options. Many migrant women are working-class women and their work situation does not allow them to travel. Such was a case of Agnes, a 38-year-old Hungarian female, who has been working at a local call centre for over 10 years. When I interviewed her in March 2020, she said:

I had to cancel a plane ticket, I usually go home only once or twice a year, and luckily I was home in January, which is very unusual, but I wanted to go for a short trip now in May and then this happen and maybe I can’t see them at all this year. That’s the most difficult part for most people. For local people to try to put themselves into our shoes, they already have restrictions. I know locals who find it difficult now not to see their family for one month or two months and for some of us it’s 6 months or 1 year that we don’t see our relatives.

Agnes is a graduate of Cultural Studies in Hungary; however, she finds herself in a low-waged job. When I re-interviewed her in April 2021, she mentioned also that she would not be able to afford quarantining upon arrival and taking PCR tests upon arrival in the UK. Call centres have been seen as ‘ghettos’ of female employment, implying inferiority in skill and job quality and a lack of opportunity for their ‘inhabitants’ to leave (Scholarios & Taylor, 2011).

This example points to structural and agential constraints on women impacting women’s mobilities and choices. From this perspective, coronavirus has reinforced differential mobilities that are characterized by peripherality and marginality as migrant women in their transnational practices come up against differential and multiple forms of power (Burrell, 2017, p. 817). The experience of time from this perspective slowed to a standstill, coronavirus feels distorted, stretched out, with neither endpoint nor scale.

Another important point is that the COVID-19 pandemic has coincided in time with Brexit and European Union Settlement Scheme. I have spoken to a 24-year-old Bulgarian woman, Mirella, who is a waitress. She got a degree in English philology in Sofia but she moved to the UK following her partner. She arrived in the UK in early 2020 and she wanted to travel to Bulgaria last Christmas to see her family and come back before the end of the year 2020. However, she was still waiting for her response from the Home Office and did not want to risk difficulties at the border in case of flights being cancelled. Her uncertain immigration status has further limited her options to travel. For Mirella, waiting clearly referred to a blockage of action (Gasparini, 1995). In this context, she could not act on time, and she felt that she lost a control over the situation. She said

I feel hopeless. I was hoping to visit my parents at Christmas. I said I would save up some money and then I will visit you… Now I’m stuck here, waiting for people from the Home Office to decide on my case. I am just thinking short term, not to go crazy.

Clearly in Mirella’s case, the waiting is passive condition. Her involuntary immobility highlights inequalities in access to and control over mobility that have been further exacerbated by Brexit in the context of hostile environment policies. Furthermore, it seems that Mirella’s life has a quality of enduring temporariness.

An Indian MA student, Ashima, presents a completely different case. Ashima is a member of upper class in India and she mentioned that she was the only child in the family. She was very much reliant on them. She came to NI to obtain her first international experience and also in a search for more personal freedom.
She told me:

I came here to become independent, to get an experience of living in another country and now I am stuck here. I am sitting in my room. I would like to go home but I need to arrange for repatriation flight to take me back to India. My friend took flight from London and she had to take a ferry and a train there. I would be afraid to use this mode of transport. I feel like a burden for my parents, who pay my accommodation fees and I would like to go back.

Physical remoteness from India as well a lack of opportunities to socialize with the local society contributes to Ashima’s sense of isolation. She has not got a chance to fully integrate with the NI society as her stay coincided with pandemic. There is a sense of alienation and an ability to go back home makes her feel ‘stuck’ in the UK in the midst of pandemic. This links to the question of displacement, which strips a person off their illusory comfort of life with stability and into a reality of a future that is not only uncertain, but which is determined by forces that are outside of women’s direct control. Furthermore, Ashima in her words refers to the idea that women in India are often seen as burden to their parents, due to the large sums of dowry that must be paid to their future husbands. The fact that her parents have to maintain her during her stay in Belfast, puts an extra emotional strain on her, further reinforcing the feeling of stickiness.

Furthermore, family obligations are also important in women decisions to travel. Often migrant women have children, which to some extent constraints their options. In this context, Maria, a 38-year-old female commented,

I really wanted to go to see my parents in Poland in June, when infection rates dropped. My son is 3 year-old. But unfortunately, my husband strongly opposed, panicking that we would get stuck in there if the country closes its borders and he won’t be able to see his child for a couple of months. I felt between a rock and a hard place. I didn’t go and I feel stuck in NI. Now situation is much worse.

Maria is a Polish-English interpreter who can work from home. However, her husband, also Polish, is a call centre agent and has to go to work. For Maria, waiting is a clearly passive act, as she has to negotiate her commitment to her Polish husband in NI and her family that she left behind in Poland. She emphasized the negative impact this situation has had on her mental health. She commented ‘Perhaps, if I had known that this would be the case, I would have just stayed in Poland and not migrated to the UK’. One can also argue that decision not to go in her case has been linked to the questions of wider family strategies in the context of COVID-19. While this account may suggest that the wife simply followed what their husband said, the fact that she commented that ‘she felt between a rock and a hard place’ suggests that this was not a decision influenced by her husband, but a difficult choice, a decision made based on complex considerations (compare Ryan et al, 2008). This is in lines with Yeoh’s and Huang’s argument (2000) that women’s sense of identity is tied up with their roles as female family members, and their mobility strategies are integral to affirming their personal identities.

These examples show that gender together with social class, cultural backgrounds, family situation and immigration statuses of women produce multiple forms of differentiation, unevenness and inequality. Particularly, working-class women find themselves in a sort of liminal stage, where they often feel stuck and lost. Furthermore, women mobility becomes an issue of complex family negotiations, often leading to a feeling of anguish and sadness, when they feel torn between their family back home and the one they made in NI. Furthermore, Brexit has further reinforced these inequalities.

Going

Although the previous part of my paper dealt with questions of immobility and waiting, at the same time, some women show their ability to remain mobile agents, adapting their mobility strategies to the context of the global pandemic.
Vignette 2: Summer 2021

This summer I have booked flight tickets to travel to Krakow from Belfast. I have planned my trip around the evolving pandemic, possible job interviews and my son’s pre-school. As a mother I didn’t want Daniel to miss out on his pre-school so I had to take this into account. Furthermore, I have postponed my flight till after completing a project that was going to secure me financially over the summer. I was worried that going in late July might be a bad choice because of spread of delta variant across Europe but I felt I had no choice. As a precarious worker I had no luxury in declining a job opportunity. A week ago I found out that flights from Belfast are constantly being cancelled. This caused a lot of anxiety, but I decided to travel from Dublin if worse comes to worse. When the Polish government announced stricter rules for the UK arrivals, I thought that travelling via Dublin is actually a better choice. My friend told me that people with the British passports were not allowed to enter Czech Republic. I decided to apply for the Polish passport for Daniel, who at the moment has only Irish and British passport, to avoid any potential difficulties. I feel I am in privileged position because I can afford self-quarantine myself after arrival to the UK. I was lucky to get involved in a project this summer that will give me more flexibility upon arrival. I won’t have to work. I am going to play it by ear; but I do want to go. I realise that some women will not be as lucky.

Migrant women develop different strategies in relation to COVID-19 and the travel restrictions. On one hand, the travel is hugely constrained, which contributes to the feeling of stickiness mentioned earlier, but on the other hand, they take up different journeys in order to reunite with their relatives in Europe. They are active agents, who want to maintain transnational connections despite the difficulties.

For example, while air travel has been suspended, many migrants decided to undertake long car journeys to meet their relatives back home. They would organize themselves in small groups and travel together to their homelands during the lockdown. An example of this is Anniko who travelled to Hungary during the lockdown. She is a middle-aged woman who is working in a food processing sector in NI. She had a wedding planned in Hungary for April 2020. She and her partner, also Hungarian, who is a lorry driver travelled from NI to Hungary by car. They had already arranged everything before the pandemic and they did not want to postpone their wedding. Anniko recalls her trip:

They said there would be border control but when we actually reached the border there wasn’t actually any check or anything. We took the car as our flight was cancelled and it was the safest way travelling. The travel wasn’t too hard because Janos is a lorry driver. The travel took 18–19 hours. We took a ferry from Dublin to Holyhead and then to Calais. We travelled through France. We had a Covid-19 test in NI but no one even asked us about it. We didn’t have to quarantine ourselves. We took the test and it only took 10 minutes, and in the morning next day we got the results.

Anniko commented that she preferred to get married in Hungary, and she wanted her relatives to be present at the ceremony. She felt that she wanted to conduct this important rite of passage back at her home country. Velayutham and Wise (2005) talk in this context about importance of ‘ritual returns’ in maintaining physical presence by those living abroad. When I asked Anniko about her travel experience, she told me that the time ‘slowed down’. She usually would take the Ryanair flight from Dublin to Budapest. Although in the past, she would be able to get to Hungary quickly, in this case she experienced slowness of a lengthy journey. In this context, time space compression has been stalled. Traditionally, migrants experienced movement that has been accelerated due to the globalization which meant easy and speedy travel. In a sense migrant mobility has been channelled more than before (Cresswell, 2010), moving along routes and conduits rather than flowing like spilt water over a tabletop. Such a channelling process leads to correct mobilities through the designation of routes. Regardless, Anniko undertook the challenge and travel to her
homecountry, engaging in a process of re-routing, which is a process of continuous adjustments and navigations (Schapendonk et al., 2018).

I also found out that some Polish migrant women took advantage of the country’s close proximity to the Republic of Ireland and of the issue of still ‘invisible border’. Often their decisions to travel intersected with tragic moments in their lives. Barbara presented such a case. Barbara is an accountant in her late 30s and she has been in Belfast for over a decade. She is well settled in NI. During the pandemic, in March 2020, her mother was sick at a local hospice in Poland and she had to visit her, as she was in critical condition. Her narrative evolved in the following way:

I was made to travel from NI to Poland in April this year when there was a full lockdown. All the shops were closed, flights being cancelled. It was the first wave when restrictions were much more severe than now. I had to travel because my mother was in critical condition, she was suffering from cancer. I decided to go despite everything. At first I tried to drive but I found out that people who are being sent back from the ferry. It wasn’t possible to go through France, and cross the border. I was told no one will let me go on ferry. I asked one of our delivery men who said that if worse comes to worse he will send me by transit to Poland, as one of his employees. I kept this option open. I was able to buy a Ryanair ticket for flight between Berlin and Dublin. There weren’t any flights to Poland from Belfast and Dublin. I bought this ticket. I ordered a taxi, got on, I went to the Europa Bus Station. (...) I was the only person on the whole bus. I felt as if I were in a movie, and I was wondering if there would be any zombies or other creatures jumping from behind the corner. It was such a surreal feeling. It was the first time I was in such an empty airport. I checked in my luggage, I went through the security and I was surprised. All the shops were closed, even Starbucks. It was very empty, all the planes were parked outside like cars at the car park. I went to the gates, and then problem started. There were 4 of us, Polish men and a Czech and we heard that we are not allowed on the plane, because we don’t have German citizenship, and we have Polish passports, we are not going for work purposes. We were not German residents. So they banned us from entering the plane. I couldn’t stand it, I was crying. I told this woman I am going to a funeral. She didn’t care. I told her it was essential travel. I asked them why they took my luggage and let me through the security control in the first place. We tried to call the embassy so that they confirm what’s essential travel, we called the German police, Bundesvera, as they told us that the Germans won’t let us in. The Germans said that they would let us in. There were 12 of us and we got to Berlin. In Berlin right we got off the plane, the police and border control were waiting for us and they were checking where we are heading to. When I showed them my passport, they didn’t ask more questions. They asked for confirmation that we have booked transport to get from the airport to Poland. I had a ticket bought for a private bus company. They let me through the passport control without problems. I went on the bus, which was private company bus. At the Polish border we filled out some paper work, and they didn’t check our temperature and nothing else. We were informed to go into quarantine and we should download app to our mobile but I didn’t. I asked the driver to take a detour to visit my mum at the local hospice.

Barbara’s story brings attention to a couple of issues. On one hand, it shows how international migration does not sever the obligations and responsibilities between family members living apart (Baldassar & Merla, 2014). This example also brings attention to the gendered nature of care, whereby women often carry moral responsibility to provide care. Second, it sheds light on new migration regimes that have emerged in the context of COVID-19. It clearly points at Barbara’s attempts to traverse borders that have been closed as a result of COVID-19 restrictions. The idea to go to Poland in transit meant how borders become malleable despite the states’ attempts to curtail migrants’ ability to reach their anticipated destinations (Ehrkamp, 2020; Torres, 2018). Despite intensified controls the borders were porous despite new forms of friction due to the pandemic. As a result, migrants’ mobilities and disrupted rather than stopped
all together, leading to ‘blockages’ or ‘coagulations’ (Adey, 2006; Marston et al., 2005) in mobility. Migrant women were able to overcome the barriers to their movement imposed by mobility regimes as clearly seen in Barbara’s case.

Second, migrant women are capable of travelling despite the restrictions. This poignant story points to the fact that migrant may breach COVID-19 and quarantine regulations in order to meet their relatives in the home country, such as not installing the required app and taking detour instead of going directly to the place of quarantine. Different elements of migration infrastructure related to COVID-19, including regulatory apparatuses of quarantining and border controls and technological aspects, such as the quarantine app, have made people’s mobilities more complex (cf Xiang & Lindquist, 2014). Migrant women agency however involves decision-making, strategy and often transgression, as they determine which services will or will not be used in order to achieve particular goals within their journeys. Schapendonk et al. (2018) similarly point to the transgressive powers of migrants through which they negotiate and navigate complex migration control mechanisms.

Although coronavirus seems to make women more sedentary in a place of their migration and there is this feeling of stuckiness that prevails in many narratives, in certain cases, they are able to engage in an active process of re-routing by crossing multiple borders to visit their homelands. They navigate complex geopolitical topographies in keeping their transnational connections with families back home. Migrant women mobilities to some extent were constrained by the regulatory and technological framework of migration infrastructure, but their transgressive powers allowed them to exploit territorial vulnerabilities and loopholes.

CONCLUSIONS

I believe that this paper yielded important insights into how experiences of migration can be affected by the global pandemic and how uneven mobilities can be reinforced in such a context. More specifically, this paper integrated the accounts of migrant women with my own autoethnographic insights into the ways in which COVID-19 has reconfigured women mobilities. This study has found that COVID-19 pandemic has challenged the ways in which many migrants maintained relations with their families back home. It has greatly reinforced existing mobility regimes, leading to increased securitization and surveillance in the first stage of pandemic. The question of uneven mobilities takes on a new dimension in the face of global pandemic. On one hand, everyone has been affected to some extent. On the other hand, however, some women were more affected than the other. Working-class migrant women are in a particularly vulnerable position of losing their jobs; they are often employed in sectors that do not allow for working from home. This makes their journeys back home far more difficult than of their middle-class counterparts, who can work remotely and do not need to worry about self-quarantining upon arrival. Furthermore, family considerations add an additional layer of complexity to women’s uneven mobilities, as leaving NI involves complex negotiations with both sides of family, in country of origin and NI alike. Moreover, women’s immigration statuses further may have impact on their (im)mobilities. This points to the intersectional aspects of migrant women experiences of COVID-19 pandemic.

This rupture in taken for granted transnational practices of migrant women has led to feelings of anxiety and longing for their homelands and relatives back home. This is accompanied by a fear of illness that could potentially affect their families in the country of origin. This sense of loss and nostalgia is particularly strong when turning points in migrant women lives intersect with the global pandemic as in the case of unexpected bereavement. This brings attention to importance of intersecting temporalities in how COVID-19 is experienced and lived.

The interviews with migrant women suggest that they develop different coping strategies with respect to their returns home. On one hand, waiting is an important aspect of migrant women lives in the context of COVID-19 and many of my informants find themselves in a limbo situation. This waiting can be an agentic state, in which hope is of crucial importance in how women cope with pandemic. Through an active act of waiting, women are seeking out for opportunities to go home. On the other hand, however, waiting can cause anxiety and contribute to the increasing feelings of stuckiness, when time came to the standstill.
From this point of view, one can see immobility as something differentiated. It may be the purview of women, who have taken their own decision to stay in NI, or it may be a constraint for migrant women, who lack the capability to leave, rendering them out of control. In all these cases, waiting is a highly emotional endeavour that affects migrant women lives. Furthermore, as my research has shown, some migrant women are active agents and adapt their trips home to the changing times. This is often linked to crossing/transgressing multiple borders, which are being strengthened due to the COVID-19 but at the same time differentiated in their permeabilities.

**CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest that could be perceived as prejudicing the impartiality of the research reported.

**DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT**

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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