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Consequences of Female Migration in the documentary film *Mama Illegal*

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Abstract: The rate of female migration has increased noticeably in the last two decades. This new trend of “feminization of migration” requires a separate research which would take into consideration gender differences. On the basis of the documentary movie *Mamma Illegal* that tells a story of three women from the poor villages of Moldova, who migrated to Europe, the present article investigates the problem of female migration from Eastern Europe, focusing on the consequences of this migration to separated families.

Key-words: female migration, irregular migration, documentary, *Mama Illegal*, Moldova, the European Union.

Although women have always been participating in migration processes, for a long time they remained “invisible” in migration studies. The latest research proved that the rate of female migration has increased noticeably in the last two decades. Nowadays this phenomenon is not something particular or isolated. Due to globalization it involves migrants from different parts of the world, such as Asia, Africa or Eastern Europe. According to the United Nations Statistics, the rate of female migration increased up to 49.6 % by 2000 [1]. If earlier female migration was a part of the family-reunion process, now women migrants move independently as job-seekers, asylums or refugees [2]. As a result of the so-called “Feminization of migration”, this trend in changing the migration gender pattern needs a special approach. Such issues as the reasons of female migration, the changing role of the women in society, consequences of migration, family cohesion, and social integration should be taken into account. According to American researchers Stephen Castles and Mark J. Miller, “feminization of migration” is one of the five main characteristics of the present era that can be called “The Age of Migration” [3]. The difference in cultural and ethnical background of the female immigrants, their country of origin as well as the destination of migration, plays an important role in the investigation of the above-mentioned issues.

Migration patterns of Europe have changed since 1990. If earlier such countries as Spain, Greece or Italy were the countries of emigration, now they are receiving a large number of immigrants. A great part of them is coming from Eastern European countries, such as Moldova and Ukraine. Migrants from above-mentioned countries are usually facing socio-economic difficulties at home. In comparison to immigrants from Africa or Latin America, these migrants are more qualified, often having a higher education. However, despite their qualifications, they usually have to work in domestic sectors, performing care-taking or cleaning jobs. The need for a labor force in these sectors is stipulated by the fact that more and more women from the developed industrialized countries have a full-time employment. The other factor is the restructuring of the international labor market. That is why women from low-income countries successfully fill this gap [4]. It is obvious that this kind of work is more familiar to women than to men. Due to this fact, it’s

easier for them to get jobs in these sectors. According to the research made by Yvonne Riano (2005), it's easier for women to remain "invisible" in the host countries, even without the necessary documents. It was found that police usually control men immigrants, checking their documents and residence-permit. According to this research women usually feel more pressure from the society that makes them to leave the country and search for a work abroad [5].

By virtue of the prevalence of female migration, the increasing interest in media in this phenomenon can be noticed. More frequently TV programs, movies and documentaries are trying to portray the character of a modern woman-migrant. It is obvious that the most informative and reliable sources are documentary films, that are following the stories of real women, depicting their life and work conditions, the process of cultural and social integration in the "host" countries, and relations with the family that has been left home.

One of these films, *Extranjeras* (sp. Foreign Women), directed by Helena Taberna, shows how do the female immigrants, who are different culturally and even ethnically, live in Madrid. Seeking a "better life", these women have left their homelands and family. Immigrants tell their stories, explaining the reasons for immigration, the difficulties that they are facing and the peculiarities of living and working abroad. Trying to maintain their culture and religion and to share their experience, women immigrants create places where they can meet and help each other, as well as share their culture. The important aspect, raised in the film, is the process of cultural and social integration and the adaptation of female immigrants. As it can be noticed from their stories, the process of integration differs greatly, depending on ethnicity and religion. Although the European Union promotes multiculturalism, tolerance and diversity, *Extranjeras* shows that in fact the examples of discrimination can be found even in such a developed and civilized city as Madrid. Muslim and African immigrants tell that it's more difficult for them to find appropriate employment and to participate in social life. Even though some of the respondents have a positive experience (obtaining a degree or opening private small business), the majority admits that the problems of integration still exist for them. The principle social circle of immigrants is other immigrants; their potential business (e.g. bars or hairdressing salons) is intended for the immigrant clients. It was also observed that immigrants usually hire other immigrants rather than local people. This trend creates more separation between locals and immigrants dividing them into two (or more) absolutely different communities.

The other issue, which unites above-mentioned immigrants from different countries, is their attitude to their families. Regardless of their ethnicity, culture or faith, the majority of women immigrants express a profound affection towards their children. Benefiting from the "Family reunion" migration policy of some European countries, women immigrants are trying to take their family members to the host countries. It can be noticed that in the documentary women, when they speak about their children, mention whether they are "with papers" or without. The process of legalization of their children becomes the most important aspect in the lives of women immigrants. As the majority of women immigrants took this difficult "path" of immigration in order to help their families and provide their children a happy future, there they struggle really hard to ensure equal rights for their children (such as the right to study in a public school, to attend language courses etc.). Unfortunately, not all of the women-immigrants have an opportunity to bring their family to host countries. Due to legal and financial reasons, it's difficult

for these women to return home or just to visit their families. Usually immigrants have to live apart from their families longer than it was planned originally. It's obvious that distance produces an enormous and irreversible effect on the families and especially on under-aged children.

The problem of family separation is still a big issue in the study of female immigration. It was particularly explored in another documentary movie called *Mama Illegal*, the example of three Moldovan immigrants living in the countries of the European Union: Italy and Austria.

The documentary film *Mama Illegal* (2011) was directed by the Austrian ORF journalist Ed Moschitz. For seven years he was following lives of three illegal immigrants (Raia, Aurica and Natasha) from the Republic of Moldova. In keeping with the official web-site of the documentary [<http://www.mamaillegal.com>], the problem of the female immigration disturbed him since he was working for the program "Village without Mothers" for an Austrian Television. Since 2004, he was visiting and filming women from this program for his own project that later resulted into the above-mentioned documentary. In his touching and full of tragedy film, Ed Moschitz raises such important questions as the reasons for irregular immigration and its consequences. For a more clear comprehension, it's important to know a current reality in the Republic of Moldova, a country of the heroines' origin.

Moldova is a small country that lives under the huge influence of emigration. Its weak economy keeps the propensity towards emigration very high. The years after 1991, when it declared independence, were marked by economic crisis and low levels of production. By the year 1999, 63% of the population lived below the poverty line. Inability to find an appropriate employment as well as poor salaries caused a rise of the emigration [6].

Approximately two thirds of Moldovan emigrants are males. Nevertheless, a choice of destination country depends on the gender of emigrants. Thereby, male population prefers countries of CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States), mainly Russia, where they usually perform construction works (74% of male migrants work in this sector). At the same time, female emigrants prefer the European Union (mainly Italy). Research shows that the majority of emigrants who choose the EU are females; they are usually more educated and are older than the average emigrant. More than half of female emigrants work for a private individual in the domestic sector, providing cleaning and caretaking services. A relatively big part of immigrants comes from rural areas and from Southern Moldova, which is the poorest and the most disadvantaged region of Moldova and it's strongly affected by emigration [7].

The qualitative researches (UNICEF/CBS-AXA, 2007; UNAIDS, 2009 and UNFPA Moldova, 2010) showed that women, who immigrated to EU countries searching for a job, are often more likely to find a new partner in life and even to marry abroad.

It has been proved that emigration has a strong impact on family relationships. Thus, in each fifth Moldovan family with children at least one parent is working abroad. Separation with parents causes emotional and psychological damage to children, especially when their mothers leave. Usually, children whose parents work abroad receive worse nutrition and show lower achievements at school. Also these children are at a higher risk to get in conflict with the law. Husbands, whose wives are working abroad, often fail to perform their parent responsibilities, and most of them suffer from alcohol abuse.

The documental film *Mama Illegal* begins with a sad picture of a rural school where all of the pupils are victims of emigration: as at least one parent in their families works abroad. This scene perfectly illustrates the statistics of Moldovan emigration mentioned previously. This separation creates a new generation of children (that can be called “mobility orphans”), who grow without an appropriate participation and influence of parents on their lives. The departure of parents (even if they do so with the best intentions, trying to improve the lives of their families) seriously affects their family members, especially children.

The three main characters of *Mama Illegal* are working illegally as house-keepers for the European families. Owing to the fact that they have Caucasian appearance and can speak the language of the host countries, they remain “invisible” for the police. Nevertheless they live in a constant fear of deportation or dismissal. Although they are closer culturally to the traditions of the host countries and don’t suffer from a racial or religious discrimination, it remains almost impossible for them to integrate in the European society. The documentary shows why it’s difficult for Raia, Natasha and Aurica to participate in a social life abroad. As they are working illegally, they don’t have specified work-hours or leave of absence. Often they work on holidays or weekends spending the majority of their time in host families. The host families are aware of the illegal status of their workers. Although it’s forbidden by law to hire irregular immigrants in Italy and Austria, the European citizens are likely to use their services because they are cheaper and employers can dictate their rules to poor, deprived of their rights immigrants. The employers sometimes show lack of any tolerance or compassion towards their illegal workers. For instance, when one of the immigrants, Raia, needed a health care and asked for help, the employers was concerned more about her safety. Without documents illegal immigrants can’t obtain a medical assistance; they are afraid to ask strangers for help or even to go to public places. These are the reasons why the immigrants almost don’t have any social life abroad. The only relief for them is the opportunity to communicate with their families and especially with their children left at home. Illegal status doesn’t allow them to leave the host country; hereby they are prolonging separation with their families.

One of the parts of the movie is dedicated to the homecoming of the heroine (Aurica), who hasn’t seen her children for almost 4 years. After coming home she faces lack of understanding with her husband and alienation of her children. She has never been really accepted in the West, but she feels the alienation from her homeland. The gender roles in her family are changed: while she was abroad, gaining money for her family, her husband was performing a role of “mother” for their two children. Although Aurica was trying to provide a better life for her children by working abroad, the consequences of her long absence resulted in a terrible family tragedy. Her husband, depressed by his miserable position in the family, committed a suicide leaving their children with the mother who became a stranger to her own children. Although Aurica loves her children, she finds it really hard to stay with them; she doesn’t feel a “sense of belonging” to her own home.

The same alienation happened to the other heroine, Raia: when she had finally received the papers and came home, she couldn’t get into contact with her children. Even though her children were relatively adults, they looked at their mother as if she were a stranger. This total loss of connection was caused by a long separation.

The examples of these women are not isolated cases; there are many more similar stories of families broken by emigration. Corroborating the theory of Zygmunt Bauman, these women, like “vagabonds” are forced to move abroad for economic reasons, when they don’t want to do it. Then they are obliged to stay in a place, where they don’t want to be and work for the “tourists” who are free to make their life decisions. The film *Mama Illegal* perfectly chronicles the reality of people who are forced to work abroad and remain “invisible”. The film raises the questions of irregular immigration, family separation, and institutional responsibilities for the migration trend.

Among many awards and prizes, the most important is the Grand Prize at “One World” Human Rights Film Festival in Brussels. The jury that consisted of members of such organizations as “Human Rights without Borders” and “Amnesty International”, stated: “While the film does not give any answers, it poses a lot of questions about those circumstances that lead to illegal immigration, personal decision-making and institutional responsibilities” [8].

The prize decision for *Mama Illegal* was stipulated by the importance to “bring the complexity of illegal migration to European decision makers” [9].

Nowadays female migration is a big issue, which should be viewed separately from the male migration, as an independent phenomenon. Regardless of the reasons for migration, female migrants are more vulnerable and face more obstacles and consequences. The problem of female migration and family separation should be resolved on the governmental level. As it is a really big problem in Moldova nowadays, special policies should be implemented. On the local level, the vulnerable groups affected by migration should have a wider access to specific support services, including counseling, medical and legal assistance. On the international level, the liberalization of the visa regime (after the recent initialing the Association Agreement with EU it has more bases) will promote circular migration, significantly reducing the share of illegal migration. This will lead to a shortening of the forced separation and family reunion.

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