Domestic Work and Intercultural Violence.
A Study of Some Romanian Migrant Women's Personal Narratives

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***Abstract**: Part of the research conducted in the framework of the EU-funded FP7 collaborative project, **Gender, Migration and Intercultural Interactions in the Mediterranean and South-East Europe: an interdisciplinary perspective** (Ge.M.IC.) (2008-2011), the study focuses on issues related to violence in the context of migration, with a view to underlining its impact on the victims' gender and national identity[1]. Relevant material for the study of violence as a multifaceted phenomenon was provided by the victims' personal narratives in which individual ways of making sense of a past, influenced by the overlapping of certain social and cultural patterns, could be revealed to sustain or run counter "the cultural discourses constructing [this] experience" (Sangster in Perks and Thomson, 1998: 88). Dwelling particularly on the stories of four women from the city of Galați, in search of employment as illegal domestic workers in Italy and Spain, this paper attempts to cast new light on the gendered consciousness of the specific category they belong to, that of migrants subject to various forms of violence in a larger social and ideological context.*

***Key words**: gender, migration, intercultural violence, domestic work, personal narratives*

Introduction

In her studies on the major coordinates of analysis of the Other's representation, Judith Butler starts from two assumptions: that victims of intercultural and gendered violence somehow 'come to exist' or gain more or less visibility when addressed in the legal, political and/or media discourse, and that the language which is directed towards them and which they cannot control communicates the precariousness of their life. Next to the violent acts that victims are subject to – whether considered in traditional, denotative terms as physically (in particular sexually) aggressive behaviour or from a broader perspective as also including other acts that result in harm for migrants as an expression of social, economic and cultural exclusion as well as racial and gender discrimination – "there is a certain violence" in the way in which victims are addressed, "given a name, subject to a set of impositions, compelled to respond to [our] exacting alterity"[2]. The images representing victims of violence may draw attention to or, on the contrary, suspend the precariousness of their life. In this respect, cross-legally constructed, much of the present-day mainstream official discourse apparently aims at finding solutions to lend visibility to different forms of victimisation (including gender and nationality-related victimisation) and to combat them. Yet, (women) migrants' victimisation and trafficking in particular seem to remain, to a significant extent, cultural blind spots[3] that the legal framework still fails to render visible enough. The same could, at least partly, be said about media discourse. Then, oral history aiming at the collection and analysis of the victims' personal narratives hopes to re-shape our "face"[4] in relation to the victimised Other, to raise an awareness of responsibility thus achieving the condition for our own humanisation. Living through experiences of violence and loss, victims suffer from disturbances in their emotional, affective and social behaviour:

> Trauma is itself a shattering experience that disrupts or even threatens to destroy experience in the sense of an integrated or at least viably articulated life. There is a sense in which trauma is an out-of-context experience that upsets expectations and unsettles one's very understanding of existing contexts. Moreover, the radically disorienting experience of trauma often involves a dissociation between cognition and affect. In brief, in traumatic experience one typically can represent numbly or with aloofness what one cannot feel, and one feels overwhelmingly what one is unable to represent, at least with some degree of critical discourse and cognitive control.[5]

Therefore, the traumatised subject may remain trapped in "the compulsive repetition that remains within – or manifests an uncanny fidelity to – trauma" (acting out)[6], intrinsically

related to the manifestation of various posttraumatic symptoms. Nevertheless, though trauma cannot be entirely transcended, the subject may be encouraged to work through it by engaging in an empathic relationship with the addressee (that, however, should not verge on vicarious identification):

> Working-through means work on posttraumatic symptoms in order to mitigate the effects of trauma by generating counterforces to compulsive repetition (or acting out), thereby enabling a more viable articulation of affect and cognition or representation, as well as ethical and socio-political agency, in the present and future. (…) Indeed there is a sense in which, while we may work on its symptoms, trauma, once it occurs, is a cause that we cannot directly change or heal. But (…) we can work to change the causes of this cause insofar as they are social, economic, and political and thereby attempt to prevent its recurrence as well as enable forms of renewal.[7]

Consequently, one of the tasks that oral history studies, in general, and this paper, in particular, endeavour to achieve is "to establish modes of public seeing and hearing"[8] that might respond to the cry of the victims in the process of migration and lend them proper representation that would prevent – if not, at least diminish – the perpetuation of a certain state of legal, social and cultural blindness to their victimisation.

Going West: Some Romanian Migrant Women's Stories

For the Romanian team of the "Dunărea de Jos" University of Galați, the participation in the EU-funded FP7 collaborative project *Gender, Migration and Intercultural Interactions in the Mediterranean and South-East Europe: an interdisciplinary perspective* (Ge.M.IC.) (2008-2011) was a challenging experience that involved embarking upon two major thematic areas identified as relevant for the intersectional study of the causes and consequences of migration as well as of their impact on gender hierarchies and intercultural communication against the background of the post-1989 changes affecting European cultural spaces. Thus, apart from the exploration of media texts (films and written press articles), research conducted by the team members, as representatives of a mainly sending society[9], implied recording and analysing individual opinions and experiences of or related to gendered and intercultural violence that could be better made sense of in the larger social and political context of emigration from post-Communist Romania.

A special category of interviewed subjects[10] was that of the victims whose experiences could reveal different circumstances in which violence manifests in (inter)cultural and/or gender interactions. Their personal narratives were taken particular interest in to see to what extent individual ways of making sense of a past, influenced by the overlapping of certain social and cultural patterns, may ultimately sustain or run counter "the cultural discourses constructing [the] experience" of violence as a multifaceted phenomenon[11]. Four of them were women from Galați who migrated to seek employment as illegal domestic workers. Since the position of migrant women working illegally in the domestic sector seems to have remained unclear and, hence, marginal in the national and EU policy frameworks currently at work (whether reference is made to labour migration or trafficking policies), the Romanian team hoped to use these domestic workers and carers' 'stories' to empower them by self-representation, by giving them the opportunity to define their own identity in terms that would cast new light on their gendered consciousness as shaped in a social and ideological context in which they were subject to various forms of violence.

Three of the interviewees, all in their mid/late 40s, migrated to Italy at different moments in Romania's difficult transition to a free market economy and a new status as an EU member state. Thus, Gettina (47), an unemployed widow living on a small widow pension, chose to migrate to Italy in 2002; Georgia (45), a former union leader with an unemployed husband, gave up her job on condition that her husband were employed and left to earn a living in Italy in 2004; Aura (45), a masseuse who lost her job and lived on the small wages of her husband working as a mini-bus driver, migrated to the same country of

destination in 2007. A fourth, much younger interviewee, Mihaela, migrated in Spain in 2004 but in slightly different circumstances: daughter of a couple who had lost their jobs, she had to raise money to pay for her studies at the university, hence she decided to temporarily interrupt her education and migrated to earn the money she needed to complete her education upon her return home.

For all these women, the economic impulse was definitely the basic motivation for migration, but, depending on each case, further personal circumstances determined the decision to leave: for instance, as a widow, Gettina hoped not only to make money by seeking employment in Italy, but also to conveniently marry, so as to settle permanently there, in an environment that would have ensured her emotional and financial stability; in her turn, the much younger Mihaela considered migration as a travel that might help her gain, besides money, more life experience by bringing her in direct contact with people living in a different cultural space.

The expectations of these women as migrants and the fact that they accepted jobs as domestic workers were somehow related to their educational background: the three migrants to Italy were semi-skilled (secondary education in Georgia's case, and elementary and vocational education in Aura's) or unskilled workers (only elementary education in Gettina's case), therefore, they sought employment in a domain in which they were most likely to easily find a job because of the high demand on the Italian (black) market. In this respect, Mihaela, the migrant to Spain, was an exception: despite her (even if incomplete) higher education, she accepted whatever temporary employment she could have access to just to earn, within a short period of time, the money she needed to pay for her studies at home.

The circumstances in which they migrated indicate further similarities between these four women's stories: they all embarked on temporary (circular) migration favoured by informal networks that could facilitate their access to jobs on condition they assumed the status of illegal migrants. Nonetheless, what they thus chose to ignore was that, by working illegally for the sake of a more or less significant financial gain within a short period of time, they exposed themselves to different forms of abuse and violence by their employers/hosts and/or, in some cases, by migrant co-nationals. Two of these women were actually lucky to have been supported by their family members and friends: Mihaela migrated to Spain with the help of an uncle who had permanently settled there and who kindly offered her support throughout the periods when she could not find a job, while Aura left with a close friend and former witness at her wedding who found her a job as a domestic worker and carer for an elderly person, replacing another Romanian woman who returned home after the legal three-month stay in Italy. Georgia, on the other hand, was a victim of debt bondage and/or emotional blackmail that caused all the more harm since the victimisers were either former friends or her own relatives (her brother and his mistress):

> Georgia: When you first arrive in Italy, you are blackmailed by Romanians … they take you to an employer and, after the Italians accept you, they ask for money for having procured the job… […] But first I was 'done' by my own brother's mistress. […] So, family ties mean nothing in Italy. You cannot leave Romania thinking 'I'm going to Italy because I have a relative there.' No. […] I remember I had a friend, former companion from the co-op and secondary-school colleague; she took me to a job and, after I was accepted, she asked me for 150 euros, because that's how things go in Italy. They sell jobs. Romanians sell jobs to Romanians.

Gettina's situation was somewhat different: having met an Italian citizen travelling to Romania for business, she thought she might take advantage of the situation in order to migrate legally to Italy, either to get involved in a more serious relationship that might end up in marriage and her permanent settling abroad or at least to work illegally to make some good money before returning home. Her migration to Italy in legal terms depended, therefore, entirely on the Italian citizen, who sent her a letter of invitation in which he vouched for her and committed himself to providing her with accommodation (according to the legislation in force). That put her in a position of dependency through tied accommodation, psychological

pressure, restriction of movement and of freedom of choice. Under the circumstances, conditions gradually deteriorated until she realised that the Italian 'boyfriend' was more interested in her as a domestic worker whom he had the opportunity to exploit without payment rather than as a potential marital match:

> Gettina: So you have to clean, to cook, to do the laundry and to iron it within just a few hours, to take care of the house … and then he starts, of course, 'Look, you haven't cleaned that properly… See this cooking machine, it's made of stainless steel and you haven't scrubbed it well enough, you see…'

The pressure the relationship with this Italian put on her, next to the constant fear induced by the awareness of her (illegal) status, enhanced by a traumatising experience upon her first attempt to travel to Italy[12], determined her to keep a low profile and to accept whatever domestic job she could find (on the black market, of course) within the limits allowed by the strict control exercised by the Italian 'boyfriend'. This is how she expressed her feelings of isolation, of being 'kept behind a barrier':

> Gettina: You feel alone, marginalised; no one even looks at you. If you dare speak, 'cause you only wanted to ask about a bus stop or something like that, they turn their back on you and simply walk off. (…) You feel a stranger, an outsider, an outcast. I could have never imagined that.

Despite her leaving under different circumstances and at a different moment (Romania had become an EU member state), Aura was also a victim of deceit, this time by one of her Italian employers, who would not keep his initial promise regarding the working and payment terms. For instance, though the initial agreement included the payment by the employer of the trips from and back to Romania after three months, upon her arrival, Aura was not reimbursed the costs of the trip to the destination, and, before her departure, she had to do extra-work, clearing the employer's garden, a job she was not actually supposed to do, but which she had no other choice than to accept in order to cover her trip expenses:

> Aura: I spoke with the old woman's son a month before leaving, at least to get the money I needed to pay the man who was to take me to Napoli by car, as the coach was very far, 40 something kilometres away; I spoke with him to clean his whole garden [...] I dug and cleaned his whole garden, I worked for three days in the sun at 37 degrees [...] I worked for three days and then I was sick for a whole week, I thought I would die. [...] And he didn't pay me. He had promised to give me 100 euros [...] He only gave me 50 after I begged and told him that, if he didn't give me the money, I would curse him, and he was afraid of God and gave me the 50 euros...

Though such aggravating circumstances affected only some of the interviewees, they were all subject to exploitation. In all four cases, one could easily identify the combination of at least two indicators of forced work (according to ILO): restriction of movement and confinement, and withholding of wages or excessive wage reduction[13]. Their precarious condition as illegal domestic workers and/or carers resulted partly from their exploitation in connection to "a) hours and pay and b) health and safety"[14]. Though she did not get the chance to work for too long mostly because of her tense relationship with her Italian 'boyfriend', Gettina acquired enough experience as an underpaid domestic worker who had to put up, besides exploitation through hard work, with psychological pressure increased by the discriminatory attitude of some of her employers:

> Gettina: They simply humiliate you. They won't allow you to have an opinion and to express it. They make you think you're of absolutely no use there. You just do what you're told, if you've got there, for very little money: 5 euros an hour. […] Or, if you have just cleaned the floors and left the room to go to the next one, behind you, the mistress of the house or whoever it is you are working for, takes a bag of flour and throws it down. That's how it's done, dear, sheer humiliation! 'See, you haven't cleaned here, come back and do it! Come on!' And she doesn't even pay you. So, lots of humiliating!

Having stayed longer in Italy, Georgia and Aura had to put up, for longer periods of time, with extreme humiliation and exploitation. Perhaps more than Gettina's, their cases reveal to what extent, for their Italian employers, "they contribute[d] to maintain as a norm the caring arrangements functioning on a daily basis, closely bound spatially and temporarily", solving thus "the problem of double burden" for the Italian women and reinforcing patriarchal gender norms for the Italian men, while remaining "strongly embedded in and sustaining of the ideal of family care for the elderly"[15]. Despite the interval of time separating their arrival in Italy – 2004 in Georgia's case and 2007 in Aura's – and the changes in status of the Romanian migrants (as EU citizens after 2007), their employers' attitude did not seem to have evolved too much. Thus, Georgia's determination to earn the money necessary for the renovation of her house in Romania and for the education of her son made her accept very harsh working and living conditions, and often abusive treatment: severely disabled old people, requesting round-the-clock care, washing the laundry, cooking (herself being underfed), ironing (sometimes for the relatives too, with no supplementary payment):

> Georgia: I remember working for an old woman; she didn't sleep all night and wouldn't let me sleep either; she woke me up every half an hour. I had to please her or she screamed so loud that the entire building heard her and I had to get up. That woman died after I took care of her for two months, and then her daughter took me to her aunt. This one was even worse. […] She ate cucumbers and peeled them and she gave me their skin to eat saying that we, Romanians, eat like pigs, that we eat off the floor. […] For us, as *badante*, it is easier if we find an old woman to work for, not a family. If you work for the old woman and her daughter lives in the same building, you get to clean the mother's flat and the daughter's for the same pay. They take advantage of you. There was a Romanian woman from Moldova, they gave her 300 euros a month. She accepted, the poor woman […] she would clean upstairs too, where the daughter lived in the villa, she would do the cleaning for the old woman as well… cleaning, washing, ironing… so Italians take advantage of us. […] Yes, they take advantage of us a lot.

Aura was subject to similarly abusive treatment on the part of some of her employers whom she could please only by watching permanently over their elderly relatives, even if that included giving up the off-hours that the Italian law entitled her to (she was allowed to leave the house only for three hours on Sunday):

> Interviewer: But once you got there, would you stay with the old woman the whole time, or would you go out every now and then, besides doing the shopping?
> Aura: No. No, I wasn't allowed to, I only had three hours on Sunday, because her children wouldn't change her. […]
> Interviewer: So practically you were there 24 hours a day.
> Aura: Night and day, no breaks: at eight in the morning I would make *collazzione*, give her milk and *biscotatti*, then I would give her the medicines, at nine more medicines, at ten I would give her a massage... because she also had a doctor and a masseuse come from the hospital. I needn't have, but I wanted to help her, I didn't have to give her a massage, but I felt sorry for her, so I massaged her legs to recover [...] after the massage, I would change her again and get her dressed in the clothes she used to wear inside the house, I would iron as many as 40-50 gowns a day plus bed linen. I used to change the beds three or four times a day because she drank liquids all day and when she wetted her nappies, she wetted the bed too. I changed the beds, so I had to use the washing machine three times a day, then, of course, to iron the linen because her children said that their mother had worked hard, she had been a forewoman and she had to have all her nightgowns and clothes well ironed. [...] To conclude, Romanians are slaves; you work, it doesn't matter that you have just cleaned up, in ten minutes it's all the same again.

The mental pressure that the awareness of their illegal status exerted, the multiple dependence on the employers and the desperate need of money to provide for their families at home determined these women to accept abusive situations and attitudes, as well as underpayment, to the point that, in a top of illegal domestic workers, Romanian illegal domestic workers and carers would range as the worst paid:

> Georgia: So Italians behave discriminately… they consider Romanians poor, so they pay us less. There are girls, women from other countries, who ask for more, want a higher pay: Nigerians, Filipinas… They won't work for 500 or 600 euros. They don't negotiate. So when I started, I went to the church to look for a job and they berated me because Romanian women would work for 500 euros and bang the market. They didn't negotiate. Good for them! (Georgia worked, most of the times, for 500-650 euros, unlike other migrant carers, of different nationality, who worked for 900 euros; only rarely did she earn 1000 euros a month. – our note)

Aura agreed to the same precarious payment, i.e. 680 euros a month in 2007, apart from putting up with former payment agreements broken by the employers. That is why, to earn the amount of money she needed to help support her family, she worked extra-hours for her employers and/or their neighbours either doing their laundry and ironing it, or doing their hair, giving them a manicure/pedicure treatment or a massage. By 2007, the legal and policy framework addressing the problems of Romanian migrant workers (as EU citizens) had already changed and Aura admitted that there were indeed legal alternatives, i.e. submitting an application to the local authorities for a work permit and a valid work contract. But the expenses were too significant (220 euros for the medical insurance) and the employers wouldn't cover them; hence, she preferred to charge less and to endure pressure, humiliation and exploitation for the three months of her legal stay period so that, upon her return home, she could bring enough money to indeed make a difference for her family[16].

Though prior to Romania's accession to the EU, Mihaela's experience as an illegal worker in Spain was less harsh than that of her co-nationals in Italy. A student for whom "status preservation at home is (…) contingent to declassing in [the] country of work"[17], she had to accept different jobs in other 'feminised' work sectors like the service sector, before becoming a domestic worker: initially employed for 7 months as a bartender in a disco where she was treated fairly by the employer and got good payment, she had to 'bend' to the patriarchal gender hierarchy and give up the job at the request of her boyfriend who did not agree with her working there. Lacking alternatives and trying to avoid long periods of unemployment, she became a domestic worker and carer; as such, she also experienced humiliation: "After all, you are an immigrant there, no matter what studies you have, no matter how smart you are or how much knowledge you have acquired; everyone looks down on you… because you're a foreigner in their country…" Yet, unlike the other interviewees, she would not accept extreme humiliation and daily – often xenophobic – offences; there is a limit of self-respect which she would not have infringed: "If someone else had been in my shoes, they would have been content with having a job; but I have never thought that enough; I preferred to have a job, to earn less, but be respected, not trampled on as she [the lady of the house] wanted."

Actually, for all their illegal status, it is respect (both the others' and self-respect) that these women crave (Mihaela and Georgia made it very clear in their narratives). Some of their employers, fortunately, showed indeed kind feelings to them, ranging from a fair business relationship to close friendship and (almost) integration in the employer's family. The difference – all the interviewees remarked – is made by the employers' education as well as their social and intellectual background. (The worst are the middle-class women and the upper-class non-working housewives for whom the presence of a domestic worker is meant to perpetuate a tradition of household work and a way of maintaining a social status, respectively.) The manager for whom Gettina worked for a few days trusted her and appreciated her work; he would have employed her legally on a contract basis, if she had not had to give up the job because of lack of transportation to that workplace. One of the old women whom Georgia took care of and her entire family offered her the respect she deserved and even got to love her as if she were a member of the family. In her turn, Georgia became so attached to them that she would not even leave the old woman's side to go to her father's funeral in Romania; she stayed with her 'new' family for three years without returning to Romania and, when the old woman died, she was so afflicted that she had a nervous breakdown. Mihaela also remained in very good terms with some of her employers who

treated her well and trusted her; in time, they became her friends and they kept in touch by email after Mihaela stopped working for them. Finally, Aura also had some pleasant experiences in her relationship with her employers: unlike their brother who adopted an unfair, exploitative attitude, the daughters of the old woman whom she worked for had at least a civil attitude and ultimately showed their gratitude to Aura by offering her gifts. (Were these gifts, perhaps, a way of putting at ease a guilty conscience as they were perfectly aware of their brother's and mother's having violently constrained Aura to isolation, humiliation and deceit?) All in all, as Aura put it: "Romanians go to Italy to make a better life. Some women are lucky and find employment with some kind-hearted people who wouldn't have them work like slaves." But, reading between the lines of Aura's story, some are not that lucky.

Irrespective of their employers' attitude, these women enjoyed, in fact, few civil rights. "Caught in a no-rights zone", as Laura Agustín puts it[18], they were denied, among other things, direct access to the health system. Suffering from severe headaches, Gettina could barely get a few pills of a mild painkiller from a chemist who felt sorry for her. When she had her nervous background, it is true that Georgia was hospitalised, but the costs for her medical treatment were covered from her kind employers' medical insurance; similarly, in other situations in which she needed medical treatment, she completely depended on the good-will of the employers in the name of whom she could get recipes. The worst case was Aura's: victim of a domestic accident, she was consulted by a doctor and was given painkillers, but she was not hospitalised, despite the severity of her injury, for not having medical insurance. As a matter of fact, for all three domestic workers/carers from Italy, declining health was one of the main reasons of the return to Romania.

> Aura: The old woman's daughter had had a bath and I slipped and fell on my back and I stayed wrapped up in a bed sheet for a month, I had two vertebrae dislocated; because the kitchen floor was lower than the bathroom floor, I fell, I slipped on the floor tiles for approximately three metres and I couldn't get up for half an hour, since nobody had seen me fall; until the old woman's children came home, I lay down there, all stiff. I tried and crawled towards the bed and I tied a bed sheet around my waist to be able to change and dress her.
> Interviewer: Didn't they bring you a doctor?
> Aura: They brought me a doctor, and the old woman's sister brought me two *Pustin*, some very good pills, to take my pain away. Because I am a masseuse, I knew my body and I knew what I needed, so I tied a bed sheet tight around my waist, like a sort of cast, and I used oils and took pills, ointments and, after a month, they were scared that nobody would come to stay with the old woman and they were worried because they didn't know what to do with her; as I was barely able to move, and so was the old woman, you realise it was a big problem.

Under the circumstances, in the absence of state support to diminish their vulnerability, to protect their rights and to provide them with at least minimum medical care, these women could rely – if well informed and lucky – on help from NGOs like Caritas. Georgia gave numerous details of her relationship with sister Rita on whom she relied for recommendation to potential employers and help when she could no longer bear extreme exploitation:

> Georgia: They wouldn't pay me. For the last month, they wanted to give me only 300 euros instead of 500. I was lucky to have this nun, so I told her 'Sister Rita, help me get out of here' … I couldn't sleep at night, I was under a lot of stress, I cried, I never cried in my entire life as much as I cried when I worked for this old woman. […] At a certain moment, I told Sister Rita, that nun who was helping me, 'Sister Rita, send me some food'. […] And she did. She would buy me oil, tinned food, pastry; this nun also brought me pizza. She helped a lot of Romanian women, but some let her down.

As the above quotation from Georgia's narrative indicates, some of these women blamed it for the humiliating treatment they had to endure on other categories of migrants and on the negative representation, based on abusive generalisation, of the Romanian migrants in the media. Probably because of her personal history as well[19], Georgia repeatedly stigmatised Romanian sex workers in Italy and those Romanian women who, having sought

empowerment through migration, wrongly understood freedom from family-related responsibility getting involved with other men: "So Italians consider us stupid, they think we don't know anything, but who shames us? Romanians wrongdoers and prostitutes. They [the Italians – our note] mistreated us, especially the women, because of the prostitutes." Both Georgia and Mihaela made explicit reference to the negative consequences of sensationalist, crime-oriented representations of Romanian migrants in the media of the host country, this contributing to boosting xenophobic attitudes towards them:

> Georgia: When that Mailat did the murder… when he killed the Italian lady Giovanna Reggiani, it was on TV for a week. And if something happened… there were our Romanian *badante*… one of them, from Bacău, killed the old woman with the slipper. The sister of the old woman with whom I stayed came and said: 'Georgia, did you see what that Romanian, your conational did?', 'Did you see what that one did?', so I felt very badly and I reproached her, I said 'eh, signora, these ones didn't come for money, they came to do harm.' She couldn't understand.

Such comments and public announcements on shop windows like "No dogs and Romanians allowed" (in Castellón) would make both women define their identity by contrast with other categories of Romanian migrants whom they found guilty of using violence against and/or causing violence to be used against their own co-nationals, thus maintaining the perspective on migration as essentially a security issue.

Ultimately, it is worth pointing out that one of the cases – Georgia's – turned out to be particularly relevant for another defining feature of the Romanian woman migrant's identity: motherhood. In her narrative, Georgia described herself as a good mother who, "in going abroad to work, [is] selflessly making sacrifices for her [child]"[20]. However, upon her return after 5 years, she realised that the financial support she had provided from a distance could not prevent the "disruption of the family"[21]. Whether she just tried thus to legitimise her absence and to come to terms with "the contradiction of the 'good mother provider' and the 'bad absent mother'"[22], or she honestly believed that she had been a 'better mother', though from a distance, Georgia got to find out the hard way that she had lost important years in her son's life and that she irreversibly appeared as a bad mother in his eyes. Apart from her husband's betrayal, she was mostly hurt by her son's transformation into a hard-rock fan and a Satanist whom she tried – like a good mother – to discipline and bring back on the 'right' track by force, if necessary. Her failure, epitomised in her son's message, left on the desktop of the computer, "Dear mum, I hate you", brought her on the verge of despair and she even tried to commit suicide.

Conclusions

One of the conclusions that the analysis of these migrant domestic workers' narratives could lead to – if considered illustrative for larger social, gender and cultural interaction patterns in the context of migration – is that illegality and trafficking should not be conflated. As demonstrated by numerous studies as well as by the cases of the four interviewees referred to above, not all illegal migrants are trafficked (according to the definition of the term currently in force) and not all trafficked victims are exploited for labour and have travelled illegally to a destination which may be within, not only across national borders. Illegal migrants and victims of trafficking share indeed increased vulnerability to violent exploitation, but that should not justify abusive tightening of migration control under the cover of anti-trafficking policies, because that would expose migrants to further victimisation and would divert attention from the larger economic, social and political context as well as from state responsibility in relation to these two complex phenomena.

One important step towards improving the current policy frameworks regarding violence and migration should be, as also suggested by Anderson and Andrijasevic, "to put the state back into the analysis, and to address the role played by the state's immigration and labour regulations in creating the conditions in which trafficking and exploitation of migrant

labour are able to flourish"[23]. To particularise, state responsibility might be considered in terms of both source and target of labour migration flows. A problematic issue which seems to favour illegal migration and expose thus many Romanian migrants to exploitation is the still large number of countries of destination that impose work restrictions for Romanians. As long as potential Romanian employees remain dependent on their employers for the granting of their work permit or they are not allowed free access to jobs in certain domains, according to their education and qualifications, they will be vulnerable to exploitative treatment, prone to restrictions of access to social rights and health insurance, and, at the worst, compelled by the circumstances to assume an illegal status. Therefore, granting Romanian workers the freedom of seeking employment in any work domain in the countries of their destination could be a very good starting point for a social action programme meant to encourage fair treatment of all EU workers "on an equal footing with the rules on competition and economic freedom", as stated in a declaration recently issued on the European Economic and Social Committee site to mark the twentieth anniversary of the adoption of the Community Charter of Fundamental Social Rights[24]. The same social action programme could, among other things, stipulate certain facilities for the employers who decide to legally offer jobs to migrant workers. The effects of such measures could be beneficial in many ways. Paying fewer and/or less substantial taxes might function as an incentive for both employers and employees to opt for a legal work contract rather than for unofficial agreements: an important sector of the current black market could thus be lent visibility, tax evasion would be reduced, and employees' vulnerability (manifest in their lack of access to proper medical assistance and social rights) and potential victimisation (as part of 'recommendation networks' forcing them into debt bondage or as subjects to abusive treatment by the employers) would be avoided.

Nevertheless, until such measures are adopted by the host countries, the Romanian state should take steps to protect its citizens migrating across national borders from potential victimisation. An institutional and policy framework has already been created to encourage legal labour migration and to provide Romanian migrant workers with all information needed on their rights (social security and not only). That is a good starting point for further development of policies meant to facilitate Romanian citizens' access to full information about job offers and contract mediators. Public awareness campaigns should be organised to draw the attention of the public at large on the wide range of information available to those who wish to seek employment abroad, and on the risks to which they will expose themselves, should they choose to ignore it. Furthermore, the Romanian state should reconsider the policy framework aimed at encouraging Romanian migrant workers to return home: more coherent social and economic policies aimed at providing new alternatives to the migrants whom economic crisis and severe unemployment have driven abroad could reduce migration out-flows and the ensuing shortage of skilled labour, and boost Romania's economic development.

More determined action should also be taken with a view to addressing more specifically the issue of women's roles and rights in the society, given that the feminisation of illegal, semi-/unskilled, low-paid labour force migration (and of trafficking) has remained irrefutably prominent. In this respect, the women's rights debate in Romania should more explicitly tackle the specific needs of women, in general, and especially of women who are discriminated against on account of their femininity as well as on additional grounds. Through the implementation of the EU Acquis, the Romanian legislative, policy and institutional framework has indeed acknowledged the importance of gender mainstreaming (see, for example, the National Strategy for Gender Equality 2006-2009), and, though steps have been made towards a reconsideration of women's role in the Romanian society, concrete action should still be taken in this respect.

That the Romanian society has remained essentially patriarchal, still fixing women's roles mostly by their association with the domestic sphere (mothers and wives) and their sexuality (innocent virgins/vs./whores), cannot be denied. As a matter of fact, many of the

illegal Romanian migrant women working abroad as domestic workers and carers have come to comply with abusive treatment in their country of destination partly because their rather poor education would not allow them to aspire to better-paid jobs, partly because they have (vainly) hoped that migration might both empower them by opening up new opportunities to challenge patriarchal gender hierarchies, and improve their financial status within a short period of time. Consequently, a wider range of social and educational policies should be implemented with an aim at improving life conditions and educational standards as well as to raise awareness of the unacceptable nature of gender discrimination and its negative consequences for the identity and integrity of women.

Last but not least, public-awareness campaigns should be organised in both the sending (Romania) and the receiving (e.g. Italy, Spain, etc.) countries, involving state institutions and NGOs defending women's rights in addressing the issue of gender-related violence in the present-day European societies. Such campaigns should tackle some of the blind spots of patriarchal culture (all the more painful in poor societies), such as domestic violence, sexual abuse, harassment and discrimination, and they should imply, for a successful implementation, a significant change in the representation of women in the media. Most regretfully, at the moment, for consumerist purposes and in line with the patriarchal gender norms, media discourse in the destination countries tends to associate the image of the Romanian migrant women with "victimhood, prostitution, or criminality to the extreme, conflating stereotypical constructions of femininity (victims) and masculinity (criminals) of eastern European migrants"[25], while Romanian media promotes such stereotypical representations as: the woman as a sex object (shallow in her exclusive preoccupation for her looks rather than her education, therefore beautiful but stupid), the bad mother who mistreats and/or abandons her children, the woman as a victim of violence (beating, mutilation, rape, trafficking for sexual exploitation, even murder). To conclude, more vigorous action should be taken in order to change mentalities and behaviours at both micro- and macro-level with regard to migration and gender roles in the contemporary European societies; it is only thus that various forms of violence that women might be subject to could be properly addressed and combated as socially and culturally determined issues.

Notes

[1] See Colipcă, G. I. and S. Stan, "National Case Study. Intercultural Violence (WP8). Romania", *Gender – Migration – Intercultural Interaction. Ge.M.IC.*, 2010, available at http://www.gemic.eu/wp-content/uploads/2010/07/WP8-Report-Romania-final.pdf.
[2] Butler, J., *Precarious Life. The Power of Mourning and Violence*, Verso, London and New York, 2006, p. 139.
[3] Felman, S., *The Juridical Unconscious: Trials and Traumas in the Twentieth Century*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England, 2002, p. 68.
[4] Levinas, E. in Butler, J., *op. cit.*, p. 131.
[5] LaCapra, D., *History in Transit: Experience, Identity, Critical Theory*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, 2004, p. 117.
[6] LaCapra, D., *op. cit.,* p. 123.
[7] LaCapra, D., *op. cit.*, p. 119.
[8] Butler, J., *op. cit.,* p. 147.
[9] The status of post-communist Romania can be described as that of a sending, transit and receiving country at the same time. However, taking into account the fact that out-migration flows have been by far the most representative (The National Institute of Statistics, http://www.insse.ro/cms/rw/pages/anuarstatistic2008.en.do), the study of migration in the Romanian context has focused on Romania as mainly a sending country. See also Colipcă, G. I., "Policy Analysis Report (WP3). Romania", *Gender – Migration – Intercultural Interaction. Ge.M.IC.*, 2009, p. 3, available at http://www.gemic.eu/wp-content/uploads/2009/04/wp3-romania.pdf; Colipcă, G. I., I. Ivan-Mohor, M. Praisler, G. Dima, A. M. Dumitraşcu, and M. Neagu, "National Case Study. National Identity and the Media (WP4). Romania", *Gender – Migration – Intercultural Interaction. Ge.M.IC.*, 2010, p. 5, available at http://www.gemic.eu/wp-content/uploads/2010/07/WP4-Report-Romania-final.pdf.
[10] The second category of interviewees was that of representatives of different institutions in the Galați area, involved, at different levels, in the implementation of policies concerning trafficking in human beings, as a

manifestation of extreme (inter)cultural and/or gender-related violence. See Colipcă, G. I. and S. Stan, *op. cit.,* pp. 17-26.
[11] Sangster, J., "Telling our stories: feminist debates and the use of oral history" in Perks, R. and A. Thomson (eds.), *The Oral History Reader*, Routledge, London and New York, 1998, p. 88.
[12] When she first travelled to Italy, despite her having the letter of invitation signed by an Italian citizen, Gettina was denied entrance on the Italian territory by the airport border police on account of her not having the 100 euros a day required by the law for each of the 90 days of stay that she was legally entitled to. Despite the Italian boyfriend's intervention, she was sent back to Romania on the next plane in the company of a group of Romanian illegal migrants and criminals taken up by the police. That experience had a tremendous effect on her sense of identity as a woman and a citizen, and, when the economic impulse determined her to try to migrate again a few months later, once in Italy, she constantly lived with the fear of being identified as an illegal migrant, subject to police harassment and ultimately to deportation.
[13] van den Anker, C., "Trafficking and Women's Rights: Beyond the Sex Industry to 'Other Industries'", in *Journal of Global Ethics*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (December), 2006, p. 167.
[14] van den Anker, *op. cit.*, p. 174.
[15] Morokvasic, M., "Migration, Gender, Empowerment", in Lenz, I., C. Ullrich, and B. Fersch (eds.), *Gender Orders Unbound. Globalisation, Restructuring and Reciprocity*, Barbara Budrich Publishers, Opladen, Farmington Hills, 2007, pp. 71-72.
[16] The interviewed women quantify their income not in comparison with the salaries earned by other EU/non-EU domestic workers and carers, but with those one could earn in Romania: "Georgia: So you get sick and mad there, but you sacrifice yourself for money. What can you do in Romania? For example, when I stayed at this old woman for three years, I earned 1000 euros a month, meaning 36 million lei. I immediately made a comparison and then I didn't consider working hard or staying in all Sundays or Thursdays is too much. 1000 euros is 36 million lei; in Romania this is a manager's salary. […] at 45, I accept to take care of an old woman or man. Because I don't pay the rent, the electricity, or the food. I live there, eat there, and send the money home. This is the difference."
[17] Morokvasic, M., *op. cit.*, p. 72.
[18] Agustín, L., "Migrants in the Mistress's House: Other Voices in the 'Trafficking' Debate", in *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State and Society*, Spring, Vol. 12, Issue 1, 2005, pp. 112.
[19] Georgia's brother who migrated to Italy forgot about his wife and daughter in Romania and found a mistress for whom he broke all ties with his sister; upon her return, Georgia would find out that her husband betrayed her and wasted the money she sent him from Italy.
[20] Morokvasic, M., *op. cit.,* p. 74.
[21] Ogaya, 2004 in Morokvasic, M., *op. cit.*, p. 74.
[22] Idem, p. 75.
[23] Anderson, B. and R. Andrijasevic, "Sex, Slaves and Citizens: the Politics of Anti-trafficking", in *Soundings: a Journal of Politics and Culture*, Issue 40 (December), 2008, p. 144.
[24] European Economic and Social Committee, "Declaration to mark the 20th anniversary of the adoption of the Community Charter of Fundamental Social Rights", *Community Charter of Fundamental Social Rights*, 2009, http://www.eesc.europa.eu/documents/declaration-Charter-Fundamental-Social-Rights/index_en.asp.
[25] Colipcă, G. I., I. Ivan-Mohor, M. Praisler, G. Dima, A. M. Dumitraşcu, and M. Neagu, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

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