

Living in Transition: How Kyrgyz Women Juggle Their Different Roles in a Multi-local Setting

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The major destinations for labor migrants from rural southern Kyrgyzstan are Russia, Kazakhstan and Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan. As well as searching for better income, younger men and women also migrate for educational reasons and to escape from traditions such as early marriage. Although these migration processes make both women and men vulnerable, women face particular forms of vulnerability that intersect with one another. Middle-aged migrating women do experience a devaluation of their education and struggle to handle the multiple roles and expectations of being breadwinner, mother, wife and daughter-in-law, supporting the older and young generation left behind. The youngest generation, born during this transitional period since independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, faces its own challenges of trying to take advantage of economic liberalization. Using an approach, which views the multi-local settings of families from women's perspectives, this article provides insights into perceptions and experiences of migration and their consequences for different generations.

Introduction

In times of economic recession, are there reasons other than financial ones for migration? Who migrates and who does not? How do women

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from different generations experience migration? How do those women juggle different expectations, roles and their personal wishes in a multi-local setting in which family members live in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Russia? These are the questions that form the focus of the article.

One of the recent developments in Kyrgyzstan has been the increasing contribution of migrant remittances to the country's development. It is mainly the young male and female population that migrates in search of a better income, either to Kazakhstan and Russia, or to Kyrgyzstan's capital Bishkek. There is increasing interest among researchers as well as policy makers to gain a better understanding of such migration processes. The major discourses about international migration and development in Kyrgyzstan focus on the importance of remittances, poor working conditions and the abuse of labor rights in Russia and Kazakhstan. Internal migration processes are discussed in the light of how new settlers in Bishkek appropriate space, as well as the challenges and opportunities that result from an increasingly urban population. The article adds another dimension to the debate on labor migration in Kyrgyzstan, namely the dimension of multi-local households as a side effect of migration. It brings into focus women's experiences as migrants and non-migrants within this multi-local situation. While commonly framed in gender-neutral language, mobility is a gendered process related to age and other social factors. Migration within and from Kyrgyzstan involves only a part of the family migrating. Migrants are both males and females aged between 20 and 40. When family members live in different places in different political and socio-economic contexts, people's livelihoods take on a multi-local dimension. Despite increasing spatial distances between migrating and non-migrating family members, women in particular are nevertheless expected to conform to their roles as mothers, wives and daughters-in-law, as well as being income earners. At the same time, women challenge existing roles when, for example, younger women start establishing their lives in places other than where they originally come from and this has medium-term and long-term consequences for the development of the whole country. Beyond gender, social categories such as age and generation, combined with economic status as well as destinations, have bearings on migration experiences.

This analysis sheds light on the complexity of migration patterns within families and puts forward a multi-local perspective rather than a one or two dimensional (trans)national one. The multi-local perspective of the

article, with a focus on women from different generations, highlights the side effects of migration, which can easily be overlooked when the center of attention is only remittances and migrant working conditions. To understand why women face particular challenges, the social construction of the categories gender and age/generation has also to be understood on a theoretical scale. Here, I use Bourdieu's Theory of Practice as an analytical starting point, and structure the article as follows. First, I introduce the theoretical and methodological framework using Bourdieu's way of analyzing power relations within a society; second, I provide a short overview of recent patterns of labor migration from Kyrgyzstan and the case study area. In the main part of the article, I outline reasons for and experiences of migration by women of different ages within their specific family settings and I describe the people who do not migrate. Finally, I discuss how women juggle different expectations and their different roles in those multi-local settings before summarizing the article in the conclusion.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

In Kyrgyzstan, an increasing number of people are being forced to diversify their sources of income through migration. This mobility involves, in most cases, only part of the family migrating, and this results in people's lives taking on a multi-local dimension. The reasons behind this migration, as well as the opportunities it provides and the restrictions it implies, are socially embedded and reflect power imbalances and roles related to gender, age, ethnicity and class. These roles and power imbalances determine how much access to and use of certain resources people have, the capacities and strategies for negotiation and decision-making and also who migrates and who does not. Migration and the resulting multi-local livelihoods are driving forces that not only challenge but also reinforce power imbalances. Inequality and power have been discussed extensively in Pierre Bourdieu's work (Bourdieu 1977; Bourdieu 1990; Bourdieu and Waquant 1992); it has inspired a great deal of feminist research (Adkins and Skeggs 2004; Kraus 2006; McNay 1999; Siegmann and Thieme 2007), although Bourdieu's explicit attention to gender is limited to one publication (Bourdieu 2001). In his Theory of Practice, Bourdieu clarifies the instruments of power and domination. The Theory of Practice constitutes a dialectical relationship between social field and habitus, in which the social practice of an

individual or a social group has to be analyzed as the result of the interaction between habitus and social field. These two main concepts are supported by the ideas of struggle and various kinds of capital, which determine social practice. A social field is constituted by the position of different actors and their interrelations, for example, between employer and employee in a job market or between members of different gender and age in the same household. The relations between these positions constitute a 'social topography' in which some actors are more powerful than others. No actor's position within a social field is absolute. It is based on whether they possess various kinds of capital, be it social, economic, cultural or symbolic, and how much of each they have. The key characteristic of all kinds of capital is that they can be transformed into one another. However, the common factor for all kinds of capital is that individuals only derive a benefit from it if they enter a social field where it is valued. Resource access and inequality are at the basis of each social field operation. Individuals will automatically be advantaged or disadvantaged depending on their background. Therefore, the notion of the social field is not only determined by strategies, but also by a struggle for a position in the field (Bourdieu 1977; Bourdieu 1990; Bourdieu and Waquant 1992). The habitus, or a person's incorporated history, is a socially and culturally conditioned set of durable dispositions for social actions and thus a product of history. Habitus generates and limits people's practices at the same time, but it is only in relation to certain structures that habitus produces given practices (Bourdieu and Waquant 1992: 135 in Siegmann and Thieme 2007). Bourdieu claims that through the habitus, large-scale social inequalities are established through the subtle inculcation of power relations upon the disposition of individuals (McNay 1999: 99). Gender is one of the most powerful social hierarchies embodied this way (Krais 2006; Siegmann and Thieme 2007).

In the particular case of migration and multi-locality, migration affects both the family members who do not migrate and those who do. 'Home' and 'away' are not only distinctive in their spatial context but also in their social one, where work, household formation or day-to-day activities differ in nature and consequences. The ways migrants live are influenced by social identities and structures from 'home' (i.e., the places of origin) as much as by the structures of the new places of residence, and this transforms the meaning of 'home'. Being in a different 'place' also creates new 'spaces' (Conway 2005).

Although they are in different places, these social spaces are inter-related. The two, three or more places that make up the multi-local network create new spaces, which are not only influenced by the flow of people, information and remittances, but also by the social structures from the past. Similarly, everybody affected by migration needs to renegotiate their social positions. These newly negotiated power relations might create new opportunities or new restrictions (Thieme 2008).

The empirical examples are based on research endeavor during four and a half months in 2006 (April to July) and a one-month follow-up study in June 2007, which focused on labor migration and multi-locality in Central Asia. A case study was carried out in a rural municipality of Osh Oblast (province) in South Kyrgyzstan, utilizing qualitative research with a quantitative basis. The municipality is about a three-hour car drive away from the oblast center Osh and in 2006 had a total of 9,911 inhabitants. During the mayoral elections at the beginning of 2006, the municipality realized that many people were missing, and it therefore produced a list of absentees from the elections (name, year of birth, in most cases new places of living). Using this list, the author first checked with municipality leaders how many people were absent, and then completed the list through a self-selected random sample of households. The results revealed that people work mainly in either the capital Bishkek in northern Kyrgyzstan or in Russia and Kazakhstan. In accordance with Kandiyoti (1999), the survey data were supplemented by in-depth studies, which are of particular importance in such a rapidly changing environment of income generation, social provision and redistribution. To explore the multi-local household settings, the author chose five households with the widest possible range of migration patterns (household members only within Kyrgyzstan, only in Kazakhstan, only in Russia, or a combination of all three). First, I interviewed the household members who had not migrated. As a second step, I followed the routes of the household members who had migrated and interviewed them in Bishkek, Almaty, Kazakhstan and Moscow. To close the cycle, I returned to the place of origin and discussed the experiences again with the non-migrants. Apart from the selected household members, I also talked to other family members (who were not necessarily living in the same household) and also friends and co-workers. At the end of the cycle, I had interviewed 68 women and 90 men, all of them ethnic Kyrgyz. In June 2007, I revisited the interviewed persons once more (except for

those living in Moscow), focusing this time on the members of the five selected households.

Furthermore, in 2006 as well as 2007, I carried out interviews and group discussions with key people from the village of origin, including the mayor, teachers and social workers. At two schools, both the teachers and pupils were interviewed in group discussions.

Life in Transition

The collapse of the former Soviet Union in 1991 caused fundamental political, economic and social change in Kyrgyzstan. The breakdown of the complex economic linkages between the member republics and the Soviet Union resulted in a massive economic crisis with drastically reduced output and the closure of companies, and hence mass unemployment. There was therefore a sharp increase in poverty after Kyrgyzstan gained its independence (Howell 1996; Ronsijn 2006).

The southern part of the country (Osh, Batken, Jalal-Abad oblasts) has a different demographic and economic structure from the north; it is more rural and has the lowest Human Development Indicators. However, although the south is generally perceived as being less developed than the north, it is more accurate to characterize poverty as varying from one region to another. Poverty is widespread in rural areas, particularly mountainous ones, and also exists in other provinces (oblasts) like Talas and Naryn. Bishkek in the North is Kyrgyzstan's center of modern economic and cultural life and a major center for migrants from the South. The city of Osh is second-most important city with regard to its economic, technical and cultural infrastructure (UNDP 2002).

In official Soviet ideology, engaging in productive work was considered to be an essential factor for women to achieve personal independence and improve their social status. However, women mainly worked in agriculture and social sectors such as health and education. As is the case in many Western countries, they were rarely in leading positions. Their average salary was about 65–75 percent that of men. The role of the state has changed dramatically with the collapse of the former Soviet Union, which was responsible for a wide range of basic needs such as schooling, childcare and health provision. These services were quickly discontinued after the collapse (Farrington 2005). Therefore, most women in Kyrgyzstan still share many common experiences: they were the first to be affected by

the economic changes, were typically the first to lose their jobs or occupied jobs with very low salaries. Women were the first to have to deal with the closure or deterioration of government-supported infrastructure such as childcare, medical services and schooling, and they were confronted more directly than men with the consequences of labor migration.

Elderly, unemployed mothers with a large number of children and young rural women in particular became vulnerable. They not only lost their economic security but also their social position and status (Kuehnst 2002), and thus were excluded from valuable networks in various social fields that brought economic advantage.

This ongoing transition is also characterized by a mixture of cultural values, which women and men use to cope with daily hardship. The older generation were disappointed by the new society and the lack of protection it afforded them. They felt especially nostalgic for the communist ideology and idealized the Soviet period. The nostalgia was often accompanied by a revival of pre-Soviet traditional values and of religion. The younger generation turns to Western values based on individualization, income and private property (Gungoren 2004).

Because of these changes, one major strategy that emerged was to migrate for work. After a first wave of ethnic migration (Schuler 2004; UNDP 2002), the major flow of people during recent years has been economically motivated, with international or internal migration (UNDP 2005). More than 75 percent of the remittances transmitted to Kyrgyzstan flow into rural areas (World Bank 2007). Most migrants who have left to seek better economic opportunities outside Kyrgyzstan find work in Russia and Kazakhstan. According to official Kyrgyz estimates, there are 30,000 Kyrgyz in Russia. However, unofficial sources in both Russia and Kyrgyzstan put the number somewhere between 200,000 and 500,000, with the higher number almost equivalent to 10 percent of Kyrgyzstan's total population (UNDP 2005).

The survey in one municipality in South Kyrgyzstan showed that out of 9,911 inhabitants, 19 percent were absent in the year 2006. Sixty-four percent of the migrants were men and 36 percent women; their average age was 32. The percentages of migrants are higher than official statistics show, but match national estimates, which assume that up to 20 percent of Kyrgyzstan's population live outside the country. Internal migration is almost as important as international migration. About 45 percent of absentees migrated internally, mainly to the capital Bishkek, and some to Osh.

Another 41 percent of the migrants work in Russia; in this case, Moscow has been the predominant destination, followed by cities like St. Petersburg and Tomsk. Kazakhstan is a destination for 12 percent of migrants, who mainly work in Almaty. These numbers indicate that migration is both a very important livelihood strategy and a highly gendered process, which has also been confirmed by further case studies in the southern oblast Batken in Kyrgyzstan (Bichsel et al. 2005; Rohner 2007).

Reasons for and Arrangements of Migration within the Family

Family is not only a physical location but also a matrix of social relations, and can be perceived as one type of social network and of potential social capital. A family has multiple meanings and is experienced very differently by different social groups (Herzig and Thieme 2007; Valentine 2001). Traditionally, the home has been constructed as a private sphere but in reality it is also an important site of care work and petty production as well as work. In Kyrgyzstan, women have always been involved in the paid labor market, but were also charged with the responsibilities of making and maintaining the home, childrearing and taking care of the elderly. Men are seen as the main cash-income earners and, as a consequence, are supposed to migrate for work first. The only exception is the youngest son of a family and his wife, who traditionally stay with his parents. However economic necessities challenge existing power relations. Spatial and temporal boundaries in relation to both domestic space and public space are negotiated and contested between household members. Despite a statistical overrepresentation of male migrants in the case study, 36 percent of women also migrate, contributing their share of family income.

Women are migrating more and more. What can they do? They have to support and bring up their children, although being separated from them does create problems. Women earn and return more money back home than men. (Gulsara, 30 years, Moscow 2006)

Among the interviewees, in most cases, men were, at least formally, presented as family heads and the main earners. For women, it was a common sense to start migrating first. Their employment was perceived

as an additional source of income, and therefore women were the first to lose jobs and access to social networks for new opportunities. If women are excluded from the labor market, their social networks also decrease and social capital does play a key role in accessing job opportunities. Not being able to find alternatives, they were the first to act pragmatically, reducing their expenditure and actively looking for other income sources (Gungoren 2004). Many became involved in petty trade, first selling homemade products in the village, then in the nearest center or capital Bishkek. Later, women and men explored neighboring Kazakhstan and more distant Russia to buy and sell products such as clothes, shoes, watches and kitchenware (see also Kuehnast 2002). Increasingly, women are also taking on service sector jobs in Russia, as its growing economy has greater demand for shop and service workers (UNDP 2005: 141). Furthermore, women are perceived as more reliable and better ‘remitters’.

Women are more focused on the family, everything they earn will be used for children, clothes and house ware. But men just spend their money on drinking vodka and they choose other, wrong women. They don't try hard to save for their family. (Chynara, Almaty, 2006)

Although money is the most obvious incentive for migration, interviews revealed that there are manifold reasons for migration. In many cases, women (in their roles as wives) prefer to accompany their husbands, concerned that their unattended husbands might fancy alcohol, or might get married a second time.

Even if they are away from home, young unmarried migrating women are still supposed to fulfill the traditional dual responsibility of maintaining the house and supporting the family financially. Sana (23 years, selling clothes on a market in Almaty, 2006) articulated the worries of taking care of family members based in multiple locations:

I came here because my mother asked me to join my brothers and take care of them. I wash their clothes and prepare their food. My mother asked me to take care of them. I am supposed to prevent them from taking the wrong path [...] They should not go out too much and should not meet the wrong women.

Women's contributions to the family are often greater than those of men, rationalized through gender-specific normative assumptions (Siegmann and Thieme 2007). These assumptions reflect existing gender inequality.

For parents, it is a major concern that their children (especially girls) should marry at an early age. Due to patrilineal and patri-virilocal family structures, after marriage a woman is supposed to leave the home of her birth and move into her parents-in-laws' house, providing many women with an early experience of migration. Embedded in these patrilineal structures, especially in rural areas, is the widely applied custom of bride kidnapping. Bride kidnapping is a new dimension of post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan and can be interpreted as one way of confirming a man's power. There was very little evidence of this practice during the Soviet period. Not all women are victims. Sometimes women agree beforehand to being kidnapped and perceive the kidnapping itself as an easy way to get their parents' permission to marry a particular man. However, bride kidnapping often also results in forced marriage. Young women in particular are increasingly trying to avoid early marriage, and attitudes concerning marriage are changing. Thus migration makes it possible to extend unmarried life and, in some cases, parents are even supportive. For example, Ainura, aged 24, was informed several times that young men in the village were planning to kidnap her. She wanted to escape from the village, and decided to join her brothers who trade in Almaty:

... that was not the right time for marriage and my parents did support me. I wanted to help my brothers in Almaty, I wanted to travel and enjoy myself. ... My parents supported me in that decision and I feel comfortable now. (Ainura, Almaty, 2006)

However, despite a delayed marriage age, marriage itself remains a major stage in the life cycle of young women and men. Remittances are a guarantee of meeting family expectations to make the wedding a big and unforgettable event and of having sufficient financial capital to start one's own family.

Education is another major reason for young men and women to migrate to Bishkek and sometimes to the Oblast capital Osh. Bishkek has a broad range of universities and colleges, and in most cases young people live from a combination of studying and work.

Who Doesn't Migrate?

In the context described above, migration also involves part of the family not migrating and remaining in the village. How do non-migrants experience migration? Kyrgyz household organization is based on the help of extended family members. Traditionally the youngest son stays with the parents. His wife (and new daughter-in-law) handles the main burden of housework.

In other cases, men leave their wives and children, and migrate alone. In a patrilocal setting, the husband is a crucial mediator between his parents and his wife. Thus, male out-migration can lead to a loss of protection of the daughter-in-law's interests and in many cases, women accept decreased bargaining power within the household. However, belonging to and being dominated in a social field may also generate resistance (Bourdieu and Waquant 1992), and in some cases, women challenge patriarchal structures and claim more decision-making power within the household and even at village level (see also Siegmann and Thieme 2007).

In other cases, women found their parents-in-law to be unbearable, forcing them to move back to their own families. Their own relief, however, brought shame on their own family. Gossip in the village will say that their daughter was unable to conform to the role of being a 'proper daughter-in-law'.

If men do not come home for harvest, women also have to take on the additional agricultural work or organize male support, thus depending even more on remittances of their husbands. As primary carers, they are the first to have to deal with the lack of health and childcare services, schooling, and organizing clean water and food—struggles for which remittances are needed. In addition, gifts and the ability to provide things for one another are essential for maintaining relationships. Because women are the backbone of these relationships, a lack of financial capital to practice mutual exchange is another major constraint, and can lead to a loss of status and recognition.

Most gender stereotypes inherited from Soviet times still have a major impact on existing gender roles in society and private life, even if they are contradictory. Many people assume that the man is the head of the family and the main breadwinner. At the same time, women are expected to support their family in any financial way possible. Therefore, it is not only men but also women who migrate alone, leaving their husbands

and children behind. For those younger men who remain behind, it is a challenge to accept that they are no longer the main economic providers for their families.

The major sections of the population that do not migrate are children and those over 50. In other words, young and middle-aged men and women who migrate, alone or in couples, leave their children behind with their parents or parents-in-law. These migration patterns have changed the structure of the family care relationship. Caring from a distance involves relying on older children, grandparents and other relatives.

In villages across Kyrgyzstan, only grandparents with small grandchildren are left behind. (Amara, 23 years, Almaty, 2006)

One woman in the role of a grandmother explained:

Once they grow up, their parents will take them with them—and then I will take care of the next generation of children. [...] Right now they are calling us father and mother, but soon they will understand that we are their grandparents. [...] I keep explaining to them who their father and mother are and who their grandparents are.’ (Gulsara, 58 years, 2007, Osh oblast).¹

In spite of the important caring role of the elderly, a significant change of status took place. As Kuehnast (2002: 35) notes, in ‘... both the Soviet system and Kyrgyz nomadic tradition, the elderly were highly revered and cared for. Even women who had large families felt this enormous shift in societal respect, from recognition under the Soviet system for being “mother heroes” to disparagement as poverty cases’.

Juggling Multiple Roles in Multi-local Settings

Regional, national and local labor markets are affected by global dynamics, which influence the specific demands of employers and customers. When women enter the labor market in the new place of work, they regularly face problems. Particularly, their cultural capital (education, skills and working experiences) are not valued. For young women, their educational careers were often interrupted by the sole need to earn money to survive:

When I started school, I was very strong. I participated in all school activities—I sang, I danced. But I had to come here and had to forget

all those things. Once I go back to Kyrgyzstan, I plan to get another education to become a teacher of Russian language. (Gulsara, 24 years, from South Kyrgyzstan, Moscow 2006)

Cleaning restaurants and toilets, working as waitresses or traders are now common for middle-aged women who have formerly worked as teachers, nurses, doctors or engineers. They work in the center of prosperous urban Moscow and Almaty, but have at the same time become marginalized. Kyrgyz migrants work illegally on Russian territory and are thus constant victims of police or security guards checking their papers and taking bribes. They work in dreadful conditions, without contract or social security, which add to the exploitation and vulnerability of these workers. Many migrants experience racism and fear to leave their shelters at night. This semi-legality causes pressure, and increases the feeling of being an alien and an 'illegal worker'. In Almaty and Moscow, people live in very congested environments and share rooms not just with family members, but also with fellow villagers and friends. In Moscow, men sometimes meet in certain parts of the city to play volleyball and chat. The author never observed women enjoying any leisure time. Cleaning in restaurants in particular demands much longer working hours, they are required to work from early morning until late evening. In addition, they are once again caretakers of relatives, fellow villagers and colleagues, making it almost impossible for them to attend get-togethers of fellow villagers. Migrants in general experience racism and fear to leave their homes. Women feel even more uncomfortable than men walking in the streets on their own.

Migration does not seem to be the decision of just one volunteer. For many, it is pure necessity, and migrants feel reduced to their image of low-skilled, illegal workers. But, depending on the social field, different requests and roles are needed. For example middle-aged women with children have their roles as mothers, and find it difficult to live apart from their children and other family members, causing major concerns and sadness.

All my children are at different places. It's not a normal family anymore. I would love to bring my children up, but because of the bad economic situation I don't have any choice. I am their mother, and I know best

how to treat my children. [...] My two-year-old girl couldn't stay with my mother-in-law because she is too difficult and too young for my old mother-in-law, but for my middle daughter it was OK. My youngest daughter now stays with one of my aunts. (Gulja, 30 years, Almaty, 2006)

Back home, grandparents, parents and teachers all expressed their deepest concerns about the possible consequences of long-term separations of children from their parents. Existing migration regimes and power constellations in labor as well as housing markets make it hard for migrant parents to bring their children along. Due to hard work and a desire for the maximum possible earnings, they would not have time to care for their children. In addition, migrants usually share housing with others, which makes it difficult for them to have their children around. House or apartment owners also often do not allow children to stay in their properties. Given these conditions, women and men see their migration as mainly temporary and express a strong intention to return.

Remittances, or financial capital, gained especially in Russia and Kazakhstan, are certainly a major marker of transnational links. Many people described the ways of materializing remittances like a kind of 'set menu', investing in livestock, a house, a car and in a marriage. Although they never mentioned it at first, women do later reveal their deep commitment to their families and make a conscious decision to place their families' well-being above their own needs and to be with their family. Along with increasing competition among neighbors, women feel a pressure not to fail:

Every family tries to support its own household as a priority, to build a house and buy livestock. The number of rich families is increasing, but at the same time there are also poor families. [...] My family firmly expects me to send money. It is difficult. Even when you are sick, you have to work and earn money. You try to earn money even when you are sick. You realize that your family and your children expect your support. There is no way out, you have to work. (Tonja, 40, selling bread in a market in Almaty, 2006)

Sending remittances and providing economic support to family members increases women's own honor and enhances the social position of the

whole family. Women challenge the image of the ‘immobile woman’, but experience a loss of influence over their own children and the increasing workload causes worry among family members:

My daughter (she works in Moscow) is fine. But actually, I am worried about her. It is difficult for women. Women have increasing responsibilities for the house, their children and to earn money abroad. Don’t you think it is too much? I would prefer to see my daughter at home. (woman, about 60 years old, South Kyrgyzstan, 2006)

What does become visible, however, is that the unequal distribution of responsibilities within the family is not questioned, but the women’s role as an income-earner is. What’s more, the assignments are not only gendered, but age and generation also plays a major role in being the daughter-in-law. Women remain ‘naturally’ assigned to caring, and potential freedom and independence through their own salary are neglected.

Such stories are frequently told and reveal that different levels of vulnerability exist within the family or community social fields. Struggles and vulnerability for individual women living abroad might contribute to a decrease in the vulnerability of the family back home and her own status might also rise in her place of origin, owing to their ascribed role as bearers of family honor, or upholding its symbolic capital. However, in their role as remitters they ignore and rarely communicate their own individual worries and interests: their voices are not articulated at household, local or national levels.

One of the main achievements of the Soviet period was access to education, which was also considered an important element for the political and economic mobilization of the population. Furthermore, higher education was long seen as a pathway towards upward mobility. The breakdown of the educational system has been a dramatic, distinct experience for every generation. The landscape of and the need and value of education and degrees has changed radically. First, for the parents or older generation themselves, it is a harsh matter of fact that their skills and education were often rendered obsolete by the collapse. Very low salaries, which made it impossible to live simply on the basis of one’s qualifications, contributed to that shock.

Having lost their professionally established roles, women and men as parents also work as hard as they can to enable their children to have the

best education possible (for example, cultural capital), hoping that they will have better prospects than the ones they themselves had. However, the quality and fees of colleges and universities vary enormously. At many institutions of education, obtaining a degree and passing tests are connected to corruption and financial capital, as is acquiring a job. In the newly structured social fields of education (Grenfell and James 1998) and labor, this devaluation of locally acquired education leads to the fact that tertiary education abroad such as Europe, North America or Japan is a guarantee of high-income jobs. Less affluent parents send their children to Turkey, Kazakhstan, India or Russia. A further possibility (or often a combination of both) is that children can be sent to the elite university (American University of Central Asia) or departments of other universities, which are known not to be corrupt. However, access to good universities requires outstanding high school grades and high scores in the national qualification test, which has created a strong North-South divide over recent years (key informant, Bishkek 2007). Often even excellent marks are no guarantee of a full scholarship, and thus financial capital is needed to pay tuition fees. Those trends highlight a stratification among the population: those people who do not have finances but do have the personal skills or cultural capital to access better education and prepare themselves for highly competitive scholarship programs at universities in Bishkek and abroad, those who have the financial capital to pay high tuition fees to get through the competition or even bribe university officials, and the remaining part of the population that does not have the necessary financial capital to pay for tuition, and therefore opts for less profitable education.

In addition, social mobility now requires an education abroad, creating a competitive disadvantage for young women in particular. First, the threshold for investing in girls' education is lower in general because of marriage and potential motherhood. Second, although women are supposed to receive higher education, they are also supposed to marry and to conform to their expected roles as mothers, wives and daughters-in-law. Staying abroad or even in the capital Bishkek prolongs the bachelorette life and women start to question traditional roles. Not all parents and relatives by a long way support these changes and might not agree to send their daughters away for higher education.

Despite all the obstacles, younger women aged between 16 and 25 are becoming increasingly mobile. For the younger generation, urban life,

exposure to Western and capitalist market values and better economic standards and urban infrastructure change their attitudes. Traditional values are increasingly combined with globalized values and phenomena such as television, the Internet and Western culture. Mothers with young children also take pragmatic decisions to meet their living necessities.

Compared to the hard life here in Almaty, I like the village. However, I would still prefer to live in a town because of the lack of facilities for my children in the village. For example children need vitamins, good food, good education and access to computers, hot and cold water at home, a satellite dish. If there were better conditions, I would love to live in a village, despite the traditional village mentality. (Gulja, 30 years old, Almaty, 2006)

With a strong attachment to their previous rural home, women see their future in Bishkek rather than in a rural setting in South Kyrgyzstan and the question remains whether, in the long term, physical contacts with the village of origin and their parents' home might decrease.

Gender in Migration as a Social Field

The individual experiences of female migrants and non-migrants from a rural area in southern Kyrgyzstan shown above demonstrate the need to deepen our understanding of the impact of labor migration through the perspective of 'gender' in a social field of power. Women migrants have to (re)negotiate their positions and needs (consciously and unconsciously), which can open up new opportunities and also reinforce or create new forms of power imbalances. Through the interplay between habitus and capital in a particular field, the opportunities to react successfully to negative experiences might be limited or widened. Depending on the change of social fields or of aspects of it, capitals take on new values. Some might lose their significance and hence lead to a loss of power. Others might gain in importance and might thus protect individuals from the impact of external change. Gender, age and stage in the lifecycle are major markers in this process.

In the process of transformation now occurring in Central Asia, for instance, women have faced increasing disadvantages in the labor market

due to their lack of access to economically relevant social networks. The traditional ascriptions of 'male breadwinners' and 'female homemakers' now have renewed importance. As a result, female participation in the public sphere of the labor market has been increasingly curtailed. In addition, the role of social networks in daily life and migration has become more relevant than educational qualifications.

Middle-aged women are subject to deskilling, shifting from the positions of physicians, lawyers and teachers in Kyrgyzstan to petty traders and street cleaners in Russia and Kazakhstan. Cultural capital has thus depreciated or lost its relevance.

Women were the first to start petty trading to secure the survival of their families and migrate, although men now make up the majority of migrants statistically. Women are often seen as the more flexible and trustful remitters. While many women become marginalized once again in Kazakhstan and Russia, their economic success puts them at the center of their home communities. However, they also have to negotiate their new roles and aspiration of their future life. Radical changes in social, economic, cultural and political life have not only challenged the formerly 'stable' values of education and having a job but also values and ideas attached to age and/or inter-generational and gender relations.

While women's mobility is increasingly accepted, the question remains whether women's responsibilities and workloads are simply increasing rather than being newly and more equally negotiated. Women are still under great pressure to conform to their conventional roles as mothers, workers and carers. The question of the long-term effects on women of working longer hours, settling family disputes and coping with health risks needs to be raised and examined.

The younger generation of women, who were born during this transitional period, wants to escape from conservative rural settings, and are looking for adventure but are also concerned about their education. To finance their education, young people work and partially rely on their parents. Young women also interrupt their education to support their families or accumulate further money for their education. With increasing age, women's aspirations for education can conflict with their family expectations that they will get married, have children and are responsible for their parents-in-law. While the elderly often feel that this separation

of the traditional family is only temporary, younger people start to build their lives in places other than in their original homes.

Conclusion

Labor migration within and outside Kyrgyzstan reflects the country's political and economical structures in transition. Often assumed as an efficient means to reduce the vulnerability of individuals, households and economies, labor migration has produced new types of social stresses visible through a multi-local lens. Due to the Soviet legacy, social politics and the distribution of household responsibilities women carry heavier burdens and are more vulnerable than men in the migratory process. Yet state discourses on labor migration overemphasize the role of remittances without due attention to the social stresses experienced by women as 'stay-behinds' or as migrants. This article shows how power relations in migration are not fixed resources: power also operates at a symbolic level that requires the further operationalization of concepts such as habitus and social field to give a fuller understanding of gender dynamics in migration. Research about the migrants and their household members must be added to the study of non-migrating people who are affected by migration to provide a fuller meaning of the 'migration experience' that takes into account units larger than the households of migrants. Understanding how socially constructed categories such as gender, age or ethnicity influence the migration experience in its extended meaning may be useful to assess the broader impact of labor migration. Detailed examination of power relations can be particularly fruitful for migration research to counter the dominant assumption that migration and remittances actually contribute to reducing individuals, households and even nations' vulnerability. It is therefore important to distinguish between vulnerabilities at different levels of analysis in order to access their gender and age dimensions, because vulnerability at the level of an individual woman may not go hand in hand with the vulnerability of her respective family or community.

NOTE

1. Gulsara's three sons and two daughters work in Bishkek and Almaty, and she and her husband take care of their five grandchildren.

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