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The interconnectedness of biographies, migration and gender norms

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Abstract

The aim of the paper is to reveal the relationship between biographies, migration, and gender norms among Hungarian live-in migrant care workers and show their interaction through a dynamic analysis. The study is based on empirical research conducted mainly in the sending country, Hungary. The analysis involved thirty-seven interviews carried out between 2016 and 2019. The interviews were undertaken using a combination of narrative and semi-structured interview techniques. I employed the method of biographical case reconstruction and thematic analysis. I observe the potential links and interactions between the biographies, migration, and gender norms of carers with the help of a typology based on demographic and biographical elements. The analysis demonstrates that family background and partnerships have important effects on work abroad and its perception, while working abroad can also shape gender norms. Interview analysis reveals a complex picture. While some migrant workers of various social backgrounds can rely on supportive families, members of non-egalitarian families experienced reinforced gender norms due to labor migration, and women can find themselves in an even more vulnerable situation at home.

Keywords: migrant care work; labor migration; biographical case reconstruction; gender norms; Hungary

1 Introduction¹

The phenomenon of transnational care highlights several layers of social inequalities on a global and local level and raises questions about the regulation of immigration, employment, and gender-related issues in the migratory space. By now, a whole industry has been built around the transportation and employment of live-in migrant care workers around the world, including in Central and Eastern European countries. One of the economic im-

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plications of the mobility of labor is that migrant carers are missing from the domestic labor market as they support their left-behind family members with remittances. At the same time, the cheap labor provided by migrant workers relieves the pressure on the social and health care system of the host country. Care migration from Hungary to Western European countries, mainly Austria and Germany, is increasingly widespread. Hungarian around-the-clock carers leave their homes to care for people abroad, while because of demographic aging, the demand for live-in care is also increasing in the sending country. While care migration is often depicted as a win-win situation for both sides, empirical analysis shows that inequalities are reproduced at different levels (Uhde & Ezzeddine, 2020).

In the following, I analyze different aspects of care migration with the method of biographical case reconstruction of narrative interviews (Rosenthal, 2018). I observe the potential links and interactions between the biographies, migration, and gender norms of carers with the help of a typology based on demographic and biographical elements. This method helps to demonstrate how these links and interactions can be interpreted sociologically. The novelty of the study can be identified in the dynamic analysis. I aim to show the embeddedness of migration within the life course and present how particular gender norms affect migration choices as life events and the life course itself. The goal of the paper is to contribute to gender-sensitive labor migration studies through the lens of care migration.

Previous sociological analysis that focused on the dynamics between biographies, migration, and gender norms has been carried out by Kovács and Melegh (Kovács & Melegh, 2004; Melegh & Kovács, 2010). Their method and research results contributed to the formation of my hypotheses, and their observations were also useful during the analysis. The paper undertakes an analysis of the interactions between biography, migration, and gender norms. I assumed that these three aspects are interconnected and affect each other in both directions. Regarding the connections between biography and labor migration, I intend to reveal how migration fits into the life course, what consequences it has for the latter, and what impacts the life course has on migration-related decisions. Regarding the links between biography and gender norms, I scrutinize how biography shapes gender values and the reverse. Concerning gender values and migration, I presumed that labor migration influences gender norms, just as gender expectations impact migration and, therefore, biography as well. Thus, gender norms have a dynamizing role.

2 Gender norms and the labor migration of women

In this paper, I use the following interpretation to define gender norms: Gender role attitudes are beliefs about the proper division of paid and unpaid labor, including domestic and care work between men and women (Walter, 2018). One of the pioneers in the field of family sociology was Frédéric Le Play, a French sociologist, who summarized his observations of twenty-five years in a book entitled *Les ouvriers européens* ('European workers') in 1855 (Mogey, 1955). The work of the Catholic and strongly conservative Le Play is significant mainly due to its methodological considerations, in which geographical environment was awarded a relevant role. Early ethnographic literature also discusses the subject of families. *Proper Peasants*, written by Fél and Hofer in 1969, attracted significant international interest (Fél & Hofer, 1969). The monograph analyses a traditional peasant society in

a Hungarian village and provides precious information about the role of each household member and the organization of work within the family. While the family head produced and provided for the needs of the household, the housewife was in charge of the property and maintained social ties. Thus, gender roles and duties were separated and precisely settled among men and women.

In recent decades, a frequently raised question within the migration literature has been if women's labor migration increases the autonomy and emancipation of women (Castles & Miller, 2003). Lutz states that the latter cannot occur when women leave for work abroad from patriarchic family arrangements and live and work on the periphery of the host country in a vulnerable situation in the labor market (Lutz, 2011). Turai claims that neither the daily tasks of carers nor their socio-demographic characteristics should frame the interpretation of their status; carers undertaking the same duties, regardless of their social status, might interpret their positions completely differently (Turai, 2018). Case studies demonstrate that the labor migration of women partners does not change essentially the division of household duties, except possibly during the time of her absence (Parreñas, 2001; Haidinger, 2008). Women with traditional gender norms may think about their roles after migration in the same way as before (Fedyuk, 2016, referring to the doctoral thesis of Volodko, 2011).

The analysis does not only seek to specify whether the emancipation of migrant women takes place. Instead, the paper offers an original contribution within the migration literature and starts a new debate by synthesizing the dimensions of gender norms, biographies, and labor migration as a life event. I assume that gender norms play a significant role in the life events of the individual, and the perception of migration can be explained according to these values.

3 Method

Based on experience with previous empirical research, I chose a qualitative method for the data collection process. I conducted thirty-seven in-depth interviews with thirty-one migrant care worker women, two migrant care worker men, and four left-behind partners between 2016 and 2019 (Table 1). The sociological fieldwork and the face-to-face interviews predominantly took place in Baranya County, Hungary, a region with disadvantageous economic indicators. Additionally, I conducted some interviews in Austria and Germany with care workers, where I had the chance to see their working environment. The fieldwork in the Hungarian countryside enabled me to obtain insights into the phenomenon's prevalence and to meet other players in the care market (such as intermediaries, managers of travel agencies, and locals). I selected the interviewees with the help of the snowball method. Regrettably, due to the illegality of their work, some potential respondents refused to participate in the research. I used a combination of narrative and semi-structured interview techniques. First, I asked the interviewees how they had become live-in care workers who worked abroad. Afterward, I asked specific questions about their employment history, labor migration, working conditions abroad, and family background, including care obligations and plans. All participants signed a consent form that gave me permission to use the information they shared for the purposes of the research.

Table 1 Basic demographic characteristics of care workers (n)

Age	
20–29	3
30–39	3
40–49	7
50–59	12
60–69	7
70+	1
Marital status	
married	13
in relationship	10
divorced	5
widow	3
single	2
Education	
primary school (8 years)	8
vocational school	7
maturity exam	10
college/BSc degree	7
MA degree	1

3.1 Biographical case reconstruction

The aim of the narrative interview is to let interviewees talk about their experiences in a long, uninterrupted narration about a specific topic (Rosenthal, 2018, pp. 133–134). In this way, the researcher can reconstruct action sequences and capture the complexity of relations between biographical elements. I analyzed the data using the method of biographical case reconstruction (Rosenthal, 2018, pp. 155–186). For reconstructing biographies, it is necessary to distinguish lived experiences from the narrative life history (Rosenthal, 1993; 2018). The method of case reconstruction does not employ previously determined categories but observes the whole interview in the context of the life history. Narrations of lived experiences are related to the present of the narration. The method assumes that past events in the narration do not exist in isolation in one's memory but are part of a coherent whole.

The first step in the analysis is determining the chronological order of events (Rosenthal, 2018, pp. 168–175). Afterward, the researcher takes into account all the options which were available to the biographer in a particular situation. The principle underlying se-

quential analysis is the assumption that each event consists of several potential choices in the life situation of the narrator. After defining the possible alternatives and hypotheses, the researcher observes the actual selection of the biographer. Biographies can be reconstructed with the help of hermeneutic interpretation. The method not only shows the embeddedness of migration in the life course, but I have made an attempt to connect decisions and interpretations associated with certain biographical events with the observation of gender norms.

Life course is an important aspect of the study. I assume that the current migration of individuals can be understood by looking at life events and situations from the past. Therefore, employing a historical perspective is inevitable in the analysis. Hareven finds that the life course approach reveals the interaction between demographic, structural, and cultural changes in individuals' family patterns (Hareven, 1994, p. 438). This perspective takes into consideration life and historical events and cultural heritage and assumes that they shape life experiences. In the analysis, I show that life history is strongly connected to agents and factors that structure migration.

3.2 Biographical typology

Based on the biographies of the interviewees, I created a typology that represents the foundation of the analysis. The typology does not contain the narrated life stories of the respondents but includes only biographical elements. The biographical typology can be considered a social status variable, although it helps us understand dynamics by including the dimension of time. It takes into account five aspects: the financial situation, employment history, agency, education, and age of the respondent. Financial situation contains three elements: debt, number of properties, and income of the household. Employment history refers to the continuity/fragmentation of employment before migration, where periods of unemployment, dismissals, frequent changes of jobs, bankruptcy, and the collapse of the industry are taken into account. According to de Haas, functionalist and historical-structural theories fail to grasp the complexity of migratory practices since they do not take into account individuals' agency – namely, their capacity to act, their curiosity, or their lifestyle choices (de Haas, 2014). In this typology, agency refers to the range of opportunities and the capability to act of individuals to sustain themselves and change their lives, with particular emphasis on finding a decent job in the locality. The research shows that all the respondents have agency; however, its level is very uneven. The education variable distinguishes three categories: primary education, matriculation, and higher education. Finally, I identified age as the fifth variable, as it was striking that care-related migration for those over 60 years of age fits into the life course in a different way to that of the younger generations.

Using these elements, five groups of respondents were created: 1) drifters, 2) partly drifters, 3) entrepreneurs, 4) overeducated, and 5) youth before starting a family. Although migration is part of the biography and not the most recent life event of the individual, the typology I created does not include current migration but only former elements. This consideration enables us to separate these two domains throughout the analysis.

Drifters. The group can be characterized by the most disadvantageous traits in all five dimensions. They live in general insecurity, their employment history is strongly fragmented, and they have experienced marginalization in the labor market throughout the years. Drifters are in a highly vulnerable position not only because of their employment history, poor financial status, and potential debt but also due to their lack of networks and difficulties accessing state benefits (see Standing, 2011). Therefore, they bear the traits of the precariat. Their agency is limited in terms of their ability to find a job in their vicinity, and they cannot sustain themselves or their families if they stay at home. They are middle-aged or over 65, and almost all of them had finished elementary school at most.

Partly drifters. The second group has similar traits to the previous one, with the exception that people who belong here are in a slightly better situation in terms of security in life. Partly drifters have a better financial situation, many of them talk about their continuous employment history in Hungary, and their education level might include matriculation. The group is diverse concerning agency, while their age is similar to that of the *drifters*.

Entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurs have a fragmented employment history in Hungary; they have had to change jobs relatively frequently, but they adapted well to market conditions. Even though some had a successful business before becoming involved in migrant care work, labor market pressure made them give up their business. They have an average or above-average financial background; they are highly mobile (either downwards or upwards), and due to their risk-taking attitude, skills, and connections, they have a high level of agency. They have room to maneuver thanks to their resources and could do various kinds of jobs in Hungary if they wanted to. Entrepreneurs have the lowest level of education compared to members of the other groups.

Overeducated. Although none of the respondents with a college/university degree worked abroad in line with their original qualifications, the life circumstances of the overeducated are significantly more advantageous than those of the others. Their course of employment is continuous in Hungary. They had a stable financial situation even before migration; therefore, working abroad is not a constraint for them but rather a kind of experiment that might involve self-fulfillment. Their agency is the highest among all the groups. They could find a job easily in the sending country.

Youth before starting a family. The fifth group includes respondents in their twenties or early thirties whose mobility in the future is possible and who are trying to settle down both in terms of personal life and work. Their financial situation is unfavorable, and they do not have savings. While some of them still live with their parents, others have to sustain themselves from a very early age due to complicated family situations. All of them have labor market experience in the sending country, where their employment has not been continuous. The members of this group have limited agency since they face difficulty commuting to bigger towns from their localities, or their low wages do not allow them to live a decent life. They are pushed abroad due to limited job opportunities, and sometimes this decision is embedded in family patterns of care migration. Their education ranges from primary school level to college degree.

4 Effects of migration on gender norms within the life history

Quantitative research reveals that men and women have different perceptions of the time they spend on domestic and care work. Data from the Generations and Gender Survey panel survey show that both men and women overestimate their contribution to childcare compared to the other sex (Murinkó, 2014, p. 190). Therefore, it is difficult to determine the actual amount of time spent on these duties by gender. Domestic and care work is only one of the aspects of household dynamics. In the following, I observe the consequences of labor migration on gender norms within the households and scrutinize the potential patterns compared to the period prior to migration (Table 2).

Table 2: Effect of migration on gender norms in biographical frame

	Egalitarian-traditional	Traditional	Individualistic	Individualistic-egalitarian	Traditional-individualistic
Drifters	does not change	intensifies	intensifies		
Partly drifters	does not change	intensifies	intensifies	does not change	
Entrepreneurs	does not change			intensifies	intensifies
Overeducated			does not change	does not change/ intensifies	
Youth		does not change/ not known			

Source: author's own compilation. Empty spaces mean that no case was identified among the interviewees.

Methodologically, it is interesting to examine cases when both members of a couple were interviewed. Partners not only complete the picture with relevant biographical elements, but they provide information on relationships within the family or raise topics that their partner hid intentionally or non-intentionally. Interviews with partners also shed light on the responsibilities of husbands (e.g., managing the household and raising and caring for children before or during the labor migration of their wives). Empirical evidence highlights that some women tolerate having lazy and unmotivated husbands or children, and these attitudes do not change at all during labor migration, while the values of others might shift (Gábel, 2019).

Concerning gendered norms, I distinguished five categories based on the narrations and personal stories of respondents. These are the following: egalitarian-traditional, traditional, individualistic, individualistic-egalitarian, and traditional-individualistic values.²

² 'Egalitarian values' refers to the belief that men and women should do equal shares of household chores and that women should participate in paid work, just like men (Walter, 2018). 'Traditional values' means a belief in the unequal social roles of men and women, such as that care and domestic work are the responsibility of women, while the duty of breadwinning is men's. I identified individualistic values among those who emphasized their independence, and mutuality was lacking in their narrations.

Although opinions and practices might be mixed among the respondents, specific values are more dominant than others.

There are various constellations of these gendered values among migrant care workers (see Table 3). Table 3 is an alternative to Table 2, in which the dynamics of interactions are more detailed. The section presents six categories, namely, 1) family unity in migration, 2) fragmented family life, 3) reinforced individualistic gender values, 4) fixed gender values, 5) experiencing agency in migration, and 6) unclear gender values. These categories illustrate patterns through which the interactions of gendered norms and care migration can be interpreted.

Table 3 Types of gender values associated with migration, biographical frame

	Egalitarian-traditional	Traditional	Individualistic	Individualistic-egalitarian	Traditional-individualistic
Drifters	Family unity in migration	Fragmented family life	Reinforced gender values		
Partly drifters	Family unity in migration	Fragmented family life	Reinforced gender values	Experiencing agency	
Entrepreneurs	Family unity / Fixed gender values			Reinforced individualistic gender values	Fragmented family life
Overeducated			Reinforced gender values/ Experiencing agency	Experiencing agency	
Youth		Unclear gender values			

Source: author's own compilation. Empty spaces mean that no case was identified among the interviewees.

4.1 Family unity in labor migration

Within the group of *drifters*, *partly drifters* and *entrepreneurs*, we can identify a combination of egalitarian and traditional gender values. Among interviewees whose gender norms contain elements of egalitarianism, labor migration is understood as a family strategy. In these cases, partners show a mutually supportive, cohesive, and sometimes a kind of 'sticking-together' behavior. This phenomenon confirms the sociological finding that groups with lower social status are exclusively each other's resources (see Tóth et al., 2017). One of the important claims of the present paper is that within households where egalitarian values are present, gender norms do not change due to migration, even if traditional values are also present.

Family unity is represented in the case of a family living in a village of 2,100 inhabitants. The latter had to close their pub, a local business, after 23 years, due to the deteriorat-

ing health of the husband. After a few unsuccessful attempts to find work in the Hungarian labor market, the wife left for Germany to undertake care work while the condition of her husband deteriorated. Still, the couple fought together to sustain their livelihood. The wife regards herself and her husband as a loving couple who can balance the situation and fight for each other. Thus, the main reason for migration is an earlier event that affected both the household economy and the life course of the members.

But I would not betray him. He did not betray me either; our life is not about this. That is why I left. Because physically, after his heart surgery, how to say, after his heart surgery, he wanted to [work] in vain, [but] he could not have worked. He tried it in vain; it did not work out. And I had to realize that there was nothing else [I could do]... (57-year-old Hungarian care worker)

Based on the above, while engagement in daily domestic tasks might shift the gendered division of work within the household, care migration does not change gender norms significantly if egalitarian values predominate. This permanency of values can be explained by family dynamics and economic factors. On the one hand, as such cases show, women may go abroad leaving a stable relationship and supportive family. The decision to migrate to work can be interpreted as fitting with a strong pre-existing family system, where migration does not cause a break within the family but instead reinforces the responsibility and commitment of members towards each other. In this case, the stable and caring family background made the distance bearable for the commuting woman and stay-at-home partner. On the other hand, labor migration was induced by economic difficulties, debt, insecurity in life, and worsening health conditions; thus, working abroad becomes a household-economic solution (Sik, 1989).

4.2 Fragmented family life and migration

As a counterpoint to *family unity*, another pattern called *fragmented family life* may unfold. This pattern is also closely connected to migration and gender values. Disunity was observed within households with strong traditional gender values, a lower social class, and where the employment history was fragmented. In my sample, this was identified among the *drifters*, *partly drifters* and *entrepreneurs*. The image of a caring mother and wife maintaining the household was particularly strong, while self-sacrifice and self-exploitation motifs were also perceived in their narratives.

Women with fragmented family lives talk about their husbands with disappointment and pity. Their stories imply that the women are not equal partners in the relationship, but they rather function as service providers in the household. This experience is constant and does not change over time. 'Together with my husband? I did, I did [everything...] He wasn't really good at anything, but when he [got] ill, nothing, nothing' – stated the 74-year-old woman haltingly, who had left for Austria to undertake care work at the age of 63. These problematic, sometimes degrading relationships do not cease to exist even after several decades of marriage. This highlights the limited agency of these women, whose independence is hindered not only because of economic reasons but due to their own limitations.

A fragmented family life can go hand in hand with the exploitation of women by male family members. One of the interviewees described her complicated family situation, involving men taking advantage of her. Her adult, capable son is unwilling to work. Therefore, she has to support him; her abusive son-in-law demands money from her for various expenses; and her ex-husband stayed in her house for years after their divorce. Avoiding conflict leads to a situation of vulnerability, which becomes even more acute in relation to labor migration. This vulnerability is enhanced further by the distribution of remittances. Thus, altruistic, self-denying norms might be strengthened due to migration for work, and negative experiences with men also become stronger.

The empirical research shows that the predominantly traditional gender values and ambivalent attitudes to men of some women might be intensified due to labor migration. In the group of people with unfavorable biographical elements and traditional gendered values, migration did not boost women's emancipatory aspirations; rather, it reinforced previous norms. This can be interpreted as an emancipatory trap, which phenomenon is also identified in the case of immigrant women described in FEMAGE research (Melegh & Kovács, 2010). Based on the latter's results, the expectations of migrant women are not necessarily fulfilled, leading to disappointment and isolation. The analysis demonstrated that in most cases, the family forms a close economic unit, but the interests of individuals are relegated to the background due to the interests of the family (see Szélényi, 2016).

4.3 Reinforced individualistic gender values

Predominantly individualistic gender values were identified among certain respondents. The latter are typically childless women in their late forties and can be found in each group except for *youth*. Sometimes migration shapes and intensifies these values.

One of the live-in care workers among the *partly drifters* explains that her partner, who is away every week for work, does not really appreciate that she also works abroad. Although she works in Austria because of financial considerations, not for adventure, her partner regularly expresses his social expectations and judgments:

He was not happy about it because he only saw that I would not be at home [...] he is a truck driver, so I do not understand how it came up [the question] why I am not at home. Isn't it all the same whether I am in Austria or at home if he is abroad anyway, as he is on the road from Monday to Friday? [...] he yells at me, about why I am [going to] Austria and why he has to be alone. But then, then he is reconciled; he does not agree, of course, but he does not bleed, but he always [says] 'See, again, I have to walk like a single idiot.' I say, 'Well, I am sorry.' So, that's it. He can handle it. (45-year-old Hungarian care worker)

This respondent sticks to her opinions and does not let her partner influence her in her personal decisions. However, with the help of migration as a life event, the care worker is able to justify – regardless of her relationship – that she is an independent woman with agency.

Women whose narrations about migration are marked by strong individualistic values not only seem to be more autonomous but also often renegotiate their gendered

expectations. In their narratives, they return to important life situations, such as their failure in relationships or their childlessness, and they explain the act of migration partly according to these circumstances.

4.4 Fixed gender values and migration

Entrepreneurs have mainly egalitarian norms which do not change, except in exceptional cases. In most cases, we see that gender values are stable among the members of this group due to their stable family backgrounds, and these attitudes remain the same after migration.

One of the care workers came from a prosperous Swabian village located in Baranya County. The woman's labor migration is not induced by economic or family crises; the money she earns abroad is spent on welfare services and renovating a guest house in Hungary. The woman explained that her son started to commute to Austria while she was working there as a live-in care worker. This situation was challenging for her husband; however, according to the woman's narration, her husband has always contributed to the household chores. Despite the egalitarian and cooperative attitude of her husband, she has always tried to bring some relief to him by doing her share of the domestic work.

My other son went to Austria as a car mechanic; he came home only for the weekends, every weekend. It was bad that I was not at home, and his father had to do the laundry and cook for the child on the weekdays while he was abroad. It was very difficult that he arrived on Friday evening, and all his clothes had to be ready for Sunday. [...] [But my husband] undertook [this responsibility]. He said the children should not realize I was not at home. (56-year-old Hungarian care worker)

Labor migration among *entrepreneurs* is not due to pressure or constraints but rather involves a temporary period of 'investment' and enables the household to purchase welfare services. This is why while labor migration has an effect on the division of gendered work, it does not necessarily lead to a shift in established values. Nevertheless, it demonstrates that a stable family background and the motivation for migration can be connected with the degree of changes in gender values.

4.5 Experiencing agency in migration

If a woman considers herself to be independent and capable of realizing her plans, it is inevitable that some decisions will be made without a partner. Labor migration can be one such decision. Krisztina Németh finds that migrant care work is one of the means of self-fulfillment (Németh, 2018). In her case study, one of the respondents constructs her narrative around the themes of professional development and self-fulfillment. The analysis highlights that the root of the narration can be found in biographical elements, in the competences of the care worker(s), and in seizing opportunities to work successfully. 'The background of her work [which she] perceived as self-fulfilling was a stable and emotion-

ally supportive family environment, in which gender roles were flexible from the beginning' (Németh, 2018, p. 120) – as we read about a married woman who was in stable employment before migrating for work. These biographical events are just as important in understanding respondents' narrations as attitudes toward such work.

While the experience of agency can be observed in each group at a certain level, it is more articulated in the group of *overeducated* and *partly drifters*. They talk about their migration in an active way, and their autonomy is emphasized.

The case of a young interviewee demonstrates that migration as a life event is able to activate changes in some attitudes and intensify the demand for independence from men. Migration had clearly improved the self-esteem of one carer in her early thirties, who explained that her work in Austria meant she had achieved her goals without any help or intervention. She had changed her career path within a few years, and after being employed as a domestic worker, she became an entrepreneur in the host country.

Maybe it sounds stupid, but I consider myself to be much stronger than him [her husband]. Mentally and overall. Obviously, not physically, but I can handle obstacles much better. It would have been too much for him. [...] I speak German; I am the one who is a survivor [...]. (33-year-old Hungarian care worker)

While this respondent wants to be seen as a family-oriented, caring mother and wife, the image of a strong woman plays an important role in her self-presentation. As her agency was reinforced by starting a job in Austria, the contrast between her and her husband strengthened. The success she experienced in her labor migration motivated the woman to take on more challenges. It became possible for her to stop working as a carer and have a first child in Austria. Obtaining positive feedback abroad (a manifestation of agency) can amplify emancipatory aspirations and reinforce gender values among women.

The self-presentation of another respondent implies a stubborn, self-centered personality, as manifested in her relationship with her husband and son. This respondent was incited by tension at her office to change her job, but her son also started university at this point, meaning that the expenses of the family increased suddenly.

Care worker: [...] I called my husband and told him, 'Hi, I have decided to go to Austria to work, I called this woman, and I will start next Thursday.'

Interviewer: What did he say?

Care worker: [laughs] Well, he said, 'it does not work like that; if I arrive home, we will talk.' But I had already decided. He arrived home, and he was yelling. [...] I went, the whole family was there because we are a cohesive family; my mom, my dad, my brother, and I received the 'blessing' that 'You are not normal, would you leave your family behind?!' and 'Do you think that you decide this by yourself and you can drop everything?!' I am not a crybaby, but it hurt me a lot. But I thought that I had started, so I would go through with it.

The possibility of confrontation plays an important role in women's evaluations of their situation. The decision described above might have been unexpected for the husband, but the respondent claims that she had room to maneuver and a chance to confront him.

Involving biographical elements regarding migration and gender norms, it can be concluded that the experience of agency and migration as self-fulfilling is present among

respondents with stable economic and supportive family backgrounds. These conditions are necessary for active participation rather than victimhood to dominate the stories about migration.

4.6 Unclear gender values

The literature reveals that egalitarian values are more widespread among younger people than older ones (Lynott & McCandless, 2000; Berridge et al., 2009). However, in Hungary, data show that younger people tend to think in a more conservative way than older generations (Gregor, 2016). The younger respondents in my research deserve attention for two reasons. On the one hand, due to their age, their presence in the eldercare sector is rare. On the other hand, within their own cohort (among labor migrant peers), their choice of occupation is atypical. In my empirical research, *youth before starting a family* are a select group who differ from other groups regarding their life course: they are at the beginning of their professional lives, and their life course is undetermined.

Social and demographic factors such as educational level also influence gender roles. A lower-level education can be associated with traditional values (Bryant, 2003). The members of the *youth* group had various educational backgrounds and typically came from small villages. While some appeared to have rather traditional or mixed beliefs about gender, it was difficult to tell the attitudes of the others. The relatively short life experience of members of this group contributed to the lack of information in this regard. In contrast to older respondents, who rarely hid partnership-related details, these youth were more secretive about their relationship goals or daily routines. This may be because they may not have lived with a partner yet.

Youth care workers do not regard their work in Austria as a means of self-fulfillment, but they emphasize the significance of predictability and the salary they earn abroad. The partners of the youth interviewees did not plan to engage in labor abroad. This does not cause tension in their relationships since online platforms enable them to communicate on a daily basis, and due to working in shifts, they can meet every second week.

One 25-year-old woman respondent came from a small village. After a few attempts at holding down a job in the Hungarian labor market, she started working as a live-in care worker. Her gender norms are rather traditional and do not appear to have changed due to migration. She divides domestic work into male and female duties and feels strong care-related obligations towards her parents.

[In response to the question ‘Who will look after your parents in their old age?’] Well, me. [laughs] It is so simple. I think that it is obvious. I do not want to put them in a care home because it is not nice. If I am healthy, well, I would like to take care of them, definitely. (25-year-old Hungarian care worker)

In certain cases, fieldwork enabled us to obtain insight into the background of the stories of both younger and older respondents; at the same time, many questions remained open. Motivations, gender norms, and the consequences of working abroad on the later family lives of young live-in care workers would be worth further study.

5 Discussion and conclusions

The aim of the paper was to present the interconnectedness of biographies, migration and gender norms through dynamic analysis. I found it important to prove that migration-related decisions should be examined from a much earlier point than respondents' first thoughts about migration. First, I created a typology based on the biographical elements and demographic characteristics of the respondents. The typology contained five categories (*drifters*, *partly drifters*, *entrepreneurs*, *overeducated*, and *youth before starting a family*) and was applied throughout the analysis. Then, I identified the interactions between the three dimensions and found different patterns among care workers and their partners. The six types of interaction where gender values and migration as a life event were taken into account were the following: 1) family unity in migration, 2) fragmented family life, 3) reinforced individualistic gender norms, 4) fixed gender values, 5) experiencing agency in migration, and 6) unclear gender values.

Family unity in migration refers to individuals with stable partnerships and caring family backgrounds, especially when they start working abroad as care workers. Family ties remain supportive later on; these respondents' labor migration does not damage family cohesion but strengthens partners' commitment to each other. We saw this pattern among *drifters*, *partly drifters*, and *entrepreneurs*. The second type, called *fragmented family life*, was identified within the same groups. Based on the interviews, we saw that care migration could deepen traditional gender norms within the household, and the agency of the migrant women could remain limited. The analysis confirmed that gender norms and constraints in migration are related. *Reinforced individualistic gender values* occurred among childless women in their forties who belonged to the group of *drifters*, *partly drifters*, *overeducated*, and *entrepreneurs*. These women gained self-confidence from their migration and did not expect support or help from men. *Fixed gender values* were found among the *entrepreneurs*. In this case, migration did not influence gender norms, and gender values did not shape migration either, which implies that a stable family background can fix pre-existing gender norms, just as we saw with *family unity in migration*. *Overeducated* care workers might *experience agency* abroad, suggesting that labor migration can evoke changes in values and strengthen the demand for independence from men. Women with a higher-level education who are supported emotionally in their relationships might experience their migration as self-fulfilling. The analysis showed that care workers with agency narrate the story of their migration more actively. Thus, gender attitudes and migration affect each other in both directions. Since *youth before starting a family* did not include in their narrations gender-related beliefs, opinions, or experiences (or only rarely), connections between gender norms and migration are difficult to identify. However, care migration as a response to difficulties in life might hinder them from having career or family aspirations.

The analysis described in this paper attempted to employ a method that exceeds regular two-dimensional qualitative analysis and instead involves the dynamic examination of a complex phenomenon. The main argument of the study is that biography, migration, and gender norms mobilize each other, and these three elements cannot be separated if we would like to understand what leads to labor migration under very different circumstances and at differing life stages. The analysis showed that the traditional gender values of

some women may be reinforced, and due to migration, they could find themselves in an even more vulnerable situation at home. As some of the examples showed, care workers are exposed to different kinds of threats and forms of exploitation financially and within their family relationships. It is also important to mention that self-confidence obtained through migration might influence decisions about the future that do not involve men. The biographical perspective draws attention to the role of agency in the context of migration and gender values. I have also demonstrated that women with partners and a higher level of education might perceive migration as a form of self-fulfillment and have a freer self-presentation than their fellow care workers.

Briefly, I would like to reflect here on potential critiques of the method and the theoretical approach of the research. The combination of narratives and semi-structured interviews was considered appropriate for use in the research, enabling respondents to unfold their life histories in detail, while the interviewer obtained rich data from the narrations. However, the method of biographical case reconstruction is a rather time-consuming analytical tool that requires meticulous work. Therefore, it is neither widespread nor frequently applied. One of the key elements of the analysis was the deployment of gender values in the examination. Interviews show that kinship relations have a crucial effect on the realization and perceptions of migration. This is a central and novel observation, as it makes clear how gender norms can dynamize the decisive life events of individuals. We also saw that life events affect gender norms in migration as well, thus, the interaction works in reverse. In certain cases, it could clearly be seen that care migration increased the vulnerability of women within the family.

The growing scarcity of care is an unsolved social problem, both globally and in Central and Eastern European societies. The aging of societies, low fertility rates, the decline of intergenerational family care, the outsourcing of these duties, and labor market constraints are increasing the demand for care and creating burdens. The phenomenon discussed in the study highlights that even though care workers may only cross a single border, their movement is part of an unequal global order, and their positions are framed by hierarchic relations.

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