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By
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This article, based on five years of ethnographic fieldwork, describes the strategies for the presentation of the Self employed by Eastern European immigrant women in the Italian northeast. These middle-aged women migrated alone, are employed as live-in care workers, and often lack legal status. For them, migration is a deeply felt trauma, which they narrate as being forced upon them by the collapse of the USSR and the failures of the transition to a market economy. They perceive their life in Italy as degrading, their work is stressful and undignified, they miss their children, and they are often seen as poor mothers with questionable morals. Consequently, they seek to dilute the social stigma, presenting positive images of their selves and claiming respect from a variety of audiences. The women continuously endeavor to define their current condition as accidental and temporary and to assert their right to a better future.

Keywords: female migration; Italy; carework; former Soviet Union; gendered identities; presentation of self; respect

How do women who recently migrated from the former USSR to a northeastern Italian city try to achieve a modicum of respect and recognition in their new environment? The lives of immigrants are never focused solely on practical survival. Making ends meet is a pressing issue; immigrants are often forced to make tragic choices by their poverty. The migration process, however, cannot adequately be understood without paying attention to immigrants' attempts to restore a modicum of social status and to present themselves in ways that can be perceived as decent and worthy.

Urban ethnography has always acknowledged the importance of sociability in the context

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of spatial displacement and social discrimination (Thomas and Znaniecki 1918; Whyte 1943). More recently, it has been quite effective in stressing how feeling disrespected and being unable to perform respectability is a key problem in the social lives of minority group members. Even cruel and self-destructive actions become understandable by taking into account shared moral codes, standards of decency, and the search for recognition (Bourgois 1995; Anderson 1999). This article extends this argument to newly arrived immigrants.

In doing so, I question two widely held assumptions in current studies of international migration. First, although current research on international migration pays great attention to issues of social networks and sociability, it often interprets them in a rationalistic and overly instrumental way. Most scholars focus on personal networks largely as a source of social capital, as ways of gaining access to material opportunities (Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993), and devote only residual attention to issues of social recognition, moral support, and respect (Bashi 2007; Tilly 2007; Cvajner and Sciortino 2010). In this article, I document how personal networks, even when unable to provide access to significant material resources, play an important role in supporting and protecting their members' sense of self-worth.

Second, migration scholars have tended to presume that issues of recognition and respect arise only among long-term, settled immigrants and, particularly, their descendants. According to a significant body of literature, recently arrived migrants, particularly if they think of their migration as temporary, focus nearly exclusively on material incentives. Their life is instrumental, and they seek economic resources that will be converted into social status back home. In Michael Piore's well-known formulation, the recent immigrant is "a true economic man, probably the closest thing in real life to the homo œconomicus of economic theory" (1979, 54). Contrary to this view, I document that a key concern for the women in this study, most of whom had migrated alone quite recently, was to be recognized as morally worthy and that they strongly resisted arrangements and stereotypes they felt were degrading.

Studying Migrant Women in Northeastern Italy

The place I call Alpinetown is a small city in northeastern Italy that is well known for its economic development and quality of life. Over the past two decades, like most other cities in Italy, it has experienced a substantial demographic change. The number of legal foreign residents is thirty times what it was in 1990 and, as a proportion of the population, among the highest in the country. As in many other Italian regions, a large segment of the immigrant population, currently estimated at one-fifth of the foreign workforce, consists of women employed as careworkers or housekeepers. Many of them have arrived recently from the territories of the former USSR, particularly Ukraine and Moldova. Although nearly absent a decade ago, today they are among the top ten

nationalities in the foreign resident population of Italy and the only two that are still predominantly female.

Based on fieldwork conducted from 2004 to 2009, I analyze the experiences of the first wave of Ukrainian and Moldovan women who migrated to Alpinetown. As a group, these pioneers exhibited some important characteristics that differentiated them from other careworkers, especially the long-established groups originating in Latin America and the Philippines. The immigrants who I met were often middle-aged women who left areas that had no previous history of emigration to Western Europe. They had been part of the college-educated clerical and lower professional strata of Soviet society, which was hit most severely by the political and economic collapse of the Soviet Union (Judt 2005). After 1991, most of them had tried new jobs, usually some sort of shuttle trade or other commercial activity. For many, the 1990s had been a period not only of downward economic mobility but also of personal hardship, as many couples had separated under the strains imposed by the economic transition and many women had become their family's primary breadwinner. Among the women who I observed, nearly all were legally or de facto divorced. All their efforts to achieve financial stability had been destroyed a second time by the economic crisis that hit Ukraine and Moldova at the end of the 1990s (Szczepanikova, Čaněk, and Grill 2006; Tolstokorova 2010). Coincidentally, the European Union liberalized its visa policy for Ukraine and Moldova (Finotelli and Sciortino 2006). The combination of crisis and opportunity triggered a sudden, large-scale flow of women from these countries to Western Europe, particularly Italy and Spain. Most of the women who I met had migrated alone, outside any established migratory chain, by purchasing a tourist visa. Once their tourist visas expired, they become irregular residents.[1]

Starting fieldwork with these women was easier than I had initially anticipated. As a Russian speaker in a city where their native language was rarely heard, I found it easy to start conversations through simple encounters in the streets. After a while, I established a small network of contacts and began to meet with these women, at first weekly and then daily. As nearly all of them lived with their employers, I conducted many of my observations during the few hours when they gathered with their compatriots in various public spaces. Beside chatting and drinking, I was involved in a variety of group activities, such as selling goods; sharing Italian recipes; and taking part in barbecues, church functions, and nights out at the disco. I brokered medical appointments and provided ad hoc legal counseling, visited dime stores and discount supermarkets, and attended the new, informal Eastern European open-air market supplied by regular minivan traders. After a while, the women took my presence for granted.

I occupied a liminal position in the group, neither an insider nor an outsider. My personal background was Yugoslav, not Soviet; I spoke Russian, but it was not my mother tongue; I was an immigrant, but I had arrived much earlier; I had been a careworker myself, but at the time I met these women I had a university degree and was employed in a white-collar job.[2] I had initially feared that those two aspects of my life might be interpreted as placing me in a higher social status

than my subjects. In reality, because I was younger than most of them, still single, and without children, my professional achievements did not really matter. One of the women pointed out that at my age she already had a 10-year-old child. Another, more cheekily, declared that at my age she had "already been divorced twice." In short, they considered me in need of womanly help and advice. I gratefully embraced this status of novice, as it gave me ample room to ask "silly" questions.

I had originally intended to study how the women were scraping together a living in such a difficult situation. An early draft of my doctoral project, titled "Survival Strategies of Irregular Immigrants," focused on issues of income, housing, and avoiding the police. Very early in my fieldwork, however, I realized that a significant portion of these women's energy and creativity was devoted to developing ways to dilute what they perceived as their social stigma. In various ways, these women continuously tried to present themselves as decent, to define their current conditions as accidental and temporary, and to claim their right to a better future. They regarded their current life as polluted (in a Durkheimian sense) and exerted quite a bit of effort in finding grounds for claiming respect.

Immigration as an Experience of Humiliation

Why did these migrant women find their position so polluting? Migration experiences may be recounted in a wide variety of literary styles, ranging from dramatic to comic, from pathetic to ironic, and from millenarist to picaresque (Cvajner and Sciortino 2010). During my fieldwork, I was puzzled that nearly all the women adopted a tragic frame for their life histories. They saw themselves as victims of an unjust fate that had blindly destroyed their natural position and middle-class way of life.

Given their utter poverty, we spent much of our free time chatting while sitting in the waiting room at the bus station. On good days, we pooled our money to buy cheap wine to be drunk directly from its box. The women repeated their stories endlessly, and I quickly discovered that they followed a common pattern. They were mothers and had endured all their tribulations to fulfill their duties toward their children. They were morally worthy individuals who sought to regain the status they had lost, or at least to ensure that their children would do so.

Maria, a middle-aged Ukrainian former teacher, was one of the very first to arrive in Italy. She was always keen to tell her story to the newly arrived. In Soviet times, her family had enjoyed a stable, middle-class status; they owned a car and every year spent a week vacationing on the Black Sea. After the collapse, they had difficulty merely subsisting and eventually sold all their property. At the end of the 1990s, Maria accepted a "middleman's" offer to immigrate to Western Europe. She was not allowed to bring any luggage, and she crossed borders in a hidden compartment in the back of a van. She entered the European Union wrapped in blankets and clinging to the bottom of a train. When Maria told her story, even

though years had passed, she was still shocked, not so much by the risks she had taken as by the inhuman conditions she had been exposed to. She kept insisting that she resented having been forced to travel "like a ghost," although she had tried to explain to the middlemen that she was "a mother and a teacher." Her mode of travel had made her "feel like a criminal, a prostitute. But I was only a mother who wanted to help her family to survive." Maria's story was not typical, as most of the women who subsequently arrived had entered the EU legally with a tourist visa and subsequently overstayed. But they perceived her story as epitomizing the sense of humiliation all had felt. The constant reference to sacrificial motherhood as a key element of their identities allowed them to root their experiences in deeply felt Slavic symbolic values, making them martyrs and saviors at the same time.

Their humiliation did not end with their journey; it was also associated with their current occupation. To add insult to injury, the women felt offended by the widespread European stereotype that portrays women from the former Soviet Union as immoral, promiscuous, and cheap (Lemish 2000; Cvajner 2011).

The women I spoke with all perceived the work they were doing as socially and symbolically polluting. Nearly all were employed in the least attractive form of domestic work, as around-the-clock, live-in careworkers for elderly people. They felt that this job was inherently lacking in dignity. They understood "work" as a job within an organization, while employment in a private household seemed a degrading form of personal service. Olga, a newly arrived former brewery manager, was quite happy to have found a job caring for an elderly man who was in comparatively good health. Still, she kept insisting that there was something wrong. She had been forced to leave her village, entrusting the care of her children and elderly parents to someone else. But she also blamed her own employers for having hired her, as she thought that elderly people should be taken care of by relatives, not by paid personnel. Housekeeping and carework were morally acceptable only as a labor of love. Moreover, she pitied herself because she felt that "serving" a family, performing domestic chores, and taking care of its elderly members "for a salary" was utterly degrading. When talking about carework, many women in the group defined themselves as "slaves," people who depend entirely on another person for whom they are forced to provide unconditional service.

Their feelings of humiliating dependence were exacerbated by their irregular legal status, which entailed a constant fear of the police and, above all, made it impossible for them to return home to visit their children and relatives. They were constantly telling stories about women who had been unable to see their dying parents. While this had actually happened to only a few, the possibility frightened everyone. As Italian immigration policy allows for regularization only through the application of an employer, the women's hopes to "get their papers" were entirely contingent on their bosses' goodwill. From the point of view of the women, working as an irregular migrant was part of a moral economy in which they exchanged faithful service for the promise of being regularized as

soon as possible. During my fieldwork, I witnessed many successful regularizations, but I also saw quite a number of women whose hopes were betrayed. Other women often mentioned these cases as proof of their utter humiliation.

The force of the symbolic frame of "slavery" played a crucial role in communication among the women. Whenever a woman felt the need to express her pain and humiliation, all of the other women were expected to support her, share their own pain, and praise her for the sacrifices she was making for her children. I quickly realized that an opposite norm was also tightly enforced: women should never show that they were happy with their jobs or with their employers. The same women who would boast proudly to me individually about having received some token of appreciation from their employers were very careful to keep silent about it while with the group. It was acceptable to speak affectionately about the elderly people they were taking care of, to whom they claimed to behave like respectful daughters. But employers, usually the daughters of the elderly clients, had to be described as "spoiled brats," as well as mean-spirited and occasionally cruel. This norm was strongly enforced; the few times someone happened to portray her employer favorably, she was immediately treated by the others as incurably naive or, worse, as lacking any dignity.

For many women, the entire experience of migration appeared as a pattern of systematic humiliation, a feeling that was deeply resented but also constantly reinforced by the group. One Sunday morning, I was standing in the parking lot where the vans from Ukraine arrived weekly. Hundreds of women gathered in their best attire, chatted with drivers, had a beer with dried fish and pumpkin seeds, picked up photos and letters from loved ones, and sent goods or money back home. Besides the shuttle vans, there were vendors selling clothes, drinks, snacks, and newspapers, or simply chatting. These experiences represented very important moments in their lives, when they could get "a breath of fresh home air." That morning, however, I heard the police arriving, and the vans were seized. The rationale for the raid was that the goods sold by the traders did not comply with EU customs and food safety regulations. In the process, however, the police also seized the boxes ready to be shipped home and the remittances the women had entrusted to the drivers. Because the system was informal, nobody had any proof of ownership and consequently any legal way to reclaim their property. Women began complaining, crying, and shouting, and a very lively demonstration ensued, with the women claiming that the police were "stealing from their children." When the police officers ordered the drivers to follow them with their vans, I moved to the riverside park where most of the protesting women had gathered to cry over their losses and express their frustration.

A woman next to me kept repeating that they had been punished enough already by being away from home and working as *sidelki*.[3] If the police were to begin stealing the meager fruits of their painful labor, it was simply too much. The worst thing, she kept insisting, is that she was unable to do anything about it; she could not say anything because "they [the police] had power" and she did not. Another voiced similar anger, stressing that the women were slaves who

worked in places where they needed permission even to go to the bathroom. She resented the fact that many women had left the square instead of participating in the protest. She kept insisting that they were afraid "because we are nothing, nothing. No papers, no person." We were later joined by Olga, a former mechanical engineer, who was visibly in tears. She shouted that she knew she was just a *sidelka* now, no longer the person she had once been in Moldova. But she wanted to be respected for the work she was doing and for the reasons she was doing it. What troubled her was that although she had been able to become a legal resident and had recently moved to a daytime job that paid an hourly wage, she still did not feel respected. She kept repeating that she was not a "whore" and that "they did not consider us human beings." After hearing their lamentations, I realized that for those who had lost goods and money destined for home, this day, when they had expected to perform their most cherished roles as mothers, had turned into a demonstration of their abject condition.

Claiming Respect in the Workplace

The adoption of a tragic frame allowed the women to make sense of their experiences. They saw themselves as brave women who could endure anything for the welfare of their children. Embedded in this shared narrative was a strong claim for respect: women who were able to do such things should not be ignored or treated coldly; they should have the sympathy of those who were more fortunate. But they did not feel such sympathy around them; and they blamed Italians, especially their employers, for being unable to understand the injustice of their fate.

An implicit norm in the group required depicting employers as exploitative or mean. Many employers did not evade legal regulations; many paid above-average wages and even filed to legalize their status. Still, the women insisted that their employers did not care about them as human beings, seeing them only as workers. My own experience in carework notwithstanding, it took me a while to understand the logic of such a claim. In carework, the boundaries between "worker" and "person" are inevitably blurred, and the negotiation of reciprocal trust is a key part of the job. Employers worry about the quality of the work, but they are even more concerned about the moral character of the worker. In turn, the women must trust employers to pay them properly, allow them some degree of autonomy, and, when the time comes, file the papers necessary to adjust their status. These negotiations are carried out day after day, often in unpredictable situations. Carework is a tricky business, which requires that the women learn how to manipulate appearances in ways that reassure prospective employers about both their skills and their moral trustworthiness.

While congregating in the park, it was common for the women to be approached by newly arrived migrants who wanted to know how to behave in their initial contacts with Italian families. They were instructed to use props and

tell stories to suggest that they were bona fide careworkers. For instance, they were advised to wear wedding rings, so that the prospective employer would think they were married women with children accustomed to domestic chores. Talking about their children was another way to suggest reliability and trustworthiness. In contrast, flashy clothes and heavy makeup, which these women cherished as a sign of femininity, were to be avoided. They felt they had to appear not as what they are—strong, independent, well-educated urban women—but rather as what they despised—old peasant babushkas who are docile and ignorant. One night Anja, a former store manager, stated her advice concisely: "They expect you to dress like you were still in Soviet times!" All the women laughed, and her statement become a maxim that others repeated.

Even when they settled into the job, the women lamented that they were not respected. Although they were often requested to behave like members of the family in emergencies, their employers treated them in purely instrumental terms, reminding them that they were only workers, and highly replaceable ones at that. When sharing their workplace experiences, these women always distinguished clearly between themselves—good people, loving women who were truly concerned with the frail elderly who had been entrusted to them—and their employers, whom they represented as selfish and uncaring, interested only in minimizing the money they spent for their elderly parents' care. They always phrased their problems with employers in moral terms. Zena, a former math professor, said that her employers "stink, they are all farmers, just out of the stable." To stress how stingy they where, she often explained that they had criticized her harshly for having taken off too much of an apple with the peel. According to Vika, who had been an army officer, her employer was just "waiting for the relative to die to inherit the property." Jena, a women in her 40s who had previously been a teacher, said that her employer had "never heard of Tchaikovsky."

The women often stressed the differences in education between themselves and their employers. Using Soviet-era criteria of social stratification, they saw education as the only legitimate way of assigning social status, so they were eager to emphasize that they were better educated than their employers. They deeply resented the fact that many Italians did not believe that they were actually college-educated. In the beginning, I held the same suspicions. I discovered my error when, in response to rumors that a temporary employment agency would select foreign women with a proper dossier,[4] many women asked me to help them in preparing and translating their résumés. Nearly all the women, while handing me their original diplomas, told me sometimes jokingly, sometimes harshly, that I could double-check their educational credentials myself.

The women went to some lengths to employ such differences in their everyday activities. Kira, a former university professor of physics, insisted that she enjoyed reading Russian poetry to the elderly woman she was taking care of. She knew the woman would not understand a word of it but claimed that listening to the "tingling of words would be enough to understand that I was not just a careworker but rather a highly acculturated person who knew poetry, music, travels."

Her friend Nadya stressed how she had been thrilled to travel to Italy, as her father had raised her singing the arias of Verdi and Puccini. She could not afford to buy opera tickets, while her "rich" employers had never been inside an opera house and did not even know who Puccini and Verdi were. These women often grounded their claims for respect in self-reported differences of cultural capital.

Escaping Carework

Once they had paid the debts incurred for their migration and their papers were in order, many of the women tried to find ways to restore the status they felt entitled to. Given the importance they ascribed to education, many women sought to obtain Italian credentials. Indeed, visiting training centers was one way in which some women resisted resigning themselves to their fate. As a graduate student, I was a natural reference for these attempts, and I accompanied several women to various offices, translating transcripts, collecting leaflets, and talking with the staff. Some of the more ambitious even enrolled in the local university, which (like all state-run universities in Italy) has no admission criteria and charges very little for tuition and fees. Enrollment was a great achievement, and the women were thrilled. They were hoping to become "real workers," as they kept repeating. Attending these programs while working full-time was not easy. Still, several were able to complete the required courses. The problem was that, while Alpinetown has a large demand for careworkers, the demand for middle-level positions is limited and de facto reserved for natives. As far as I know, none of the women who attended these courses has been able to find a white-collar job. Most are still working as live-in careworkers, while the "luckier" ones have been able to move to cleaning for a pool of employers. Their failures reverberated throughout the network, feeding into the narratives of humiliation and exclusion.

Other women tried to escape from carework by starting a small business. Nearly all had some experience in the informal shuttle trade, and they regarded it as a legitimate activity that endowed them with social status. For example, the very first activity of a newborn association for Russian-speaking women was an evening course titled, "Let's learn how to sell."

When I became friends with Tetyana, a 35-year-old former army officer who had arrived in Alpinetown a couple of years earlier, she was working as a housekeeper and selling cosmetics on the side. She had no problem enrolling me as her "assistant," to act as porter, sales agent, or model. Tetyana was the only foreign-born person among the more than two hundred Avon salespeople in the region, and she was very proud of the position she had attained. When she spoke about herself, or when she introduced herself to my Italian acquaintances, she always presented herself as a salesperson. She usually sold her goods in the waiting rooms and parks where migrant women congregated. She was very popular among them, thanks to her marketing strategy. When I started working for her,

she instructed me to tell all the women who were interested in a bra or a skin cream that we understood perfectly that they had little money and they had to think of their children first. However, because that bra or cream was so becoming to them, she was willing to accept an advance payment and collect the remaining money in several weekly installments. This strategy worked wonders and earned her the esteem of many women who otherwise would not have dared to spend money on unnecessary, yet desired, goods. Tetyana always spoke of her sales in strictly economic terms, as a way to increase her income and an avenue for upward mobility. Still, the more I spent time with her, the more it become clear that selling was more important for her self-esteem than for her wallet. Her customer base was neither large nor prosperous, and she had to spend considerable time collecting payments. When I estimated the income generated by Tetyana's sales, I quickly realized that she had made less money than she would have done working the same number of hours as a housekeeper. Even today, that remains Tetyana's primary occupation.

Building a Community of Recognition

Eventually these women realized that their efforts to gain respect in the wider community through education or occupational mobility were unavailing. Some became fatalistic, assuming that it was hopeless to try to improve their standing in Alpinetown. Once they had acquired their papers and could travel, many quietly stopped participating in migrant social life in Alpinetown and concentrated all their emotional and economic efforts toward making periodic trips back home. Others, in contrast, seem to have slowly concluded that, since investing in education or entrepreneurship does not pay off in terms of social respect, it is better to focus on obtaining recognition from those "like us." These responses have produced what seems a paradoxical combination of provocative, hyperfeminine performances and participation in the activities of Russian-speaking religious institutions.

The value of hyperfemininity has strong roots in post-Soviet society, where flashy clothes, heavy makeup, and the conspicuous display of the body has evolved as a mark of distinction from peasant life and a symbolic reaction to the bleak lifestyle under Communism. As I observed many times during my trips to Ukraine and Moldova, these conspicuous performances are never perceived as an obstacle to these women's claims to be good mothers and faithful wives.[5] In fact, on the many occasions they sought to explain to me why I was still single and had no children, they consistently referred to my lack of femininity, which they saw as a consequence of my having become too "Italian." In Alpinetown, even though they were well aware that they were playing into the popular stereotype of Slavic women hunting for old, wealthy, and naive Italian men, many embraced an active strategy of resistance, claiming respect as a living embodiment of the true feminine spirit (Cvajner 2011).[6]

One day Tetyana and Alla, a former director of a training center, invited me to have coffee with them. The women's experiences in local cafés were always a bit problematic, because many thought that waiters and other customers never treated them properly. When we sat down, Tetyana immediately showed Alla the new Avon catalogue, hoping she would buy some lingerie. When the waiter came to take our order, Alla asked him provocatively, "What bra would you like for me?" Having made him uneasy, she partially opened her blouse and said, "Any of those [bras] might not be enough to contain it all." Tetyana laughed, and the waiter slowly retreated without taking the order. Alla concluded by remarking, "All the Italians are the same: they get scared when they see that I am proud of my attributes." I witnessed these provocative performances on several occasions, and the women involved often emphasized that no Italian woman would ever be able to "set the record straight" so easily.

These hyperfeminine performances were not mere fun. They were also a way of resisting what they perceived as the "desexualizing" and thus "dehumanizing" preferences of Italian employers. The women knew their employers—usually women—frowned upon flashy clothes. They submitted to a sober dress code to keep their jobs, but during their free time they overcompensated for it. One day in the riverside park I met Nadya, to whom I had been previously introduced, who was having trouble walking the paths in her stiletto-heeled shoes. I told her that I was amazed by her ability even to stand in such high heels. She immediately lectured me on the importance of always being well dressed and wearing makeup. As a former teacher, she had always done so as a sign of respect for the people she met in school and to set an example for the pupils. In Alpinetown, however, the first thing her employer had told her was that she dressed "like a cheap woman." She had to adjust her wardrobe for the workplace, yet she tried to dress "properly," albeit impractically, in her free time. During my fieldwork, I observed hundreds of performances of this kind.

These performances, and the makeshift sociability in which they were grounded, triggered other reactions to the humiliation and lack of respect in their lives as migrants. When I started my fieldwork, the women had no place in the city they could call their own. They were meeting in parks and waiting rooms, and the only infrastructure of their community was gossip. Alpinetown is a strongly Catholic city, and the local church is very active concerning migration issues. Two places of worship soon emerged, one Greek Catholic and another Russian Orthodox, where Masses and social activities were regularly held. The increase in opportunities to meet resulted in a social cleavage between those who attended church regularly and participated in related social events and those who continued to spend their free time chatting and drinking in public. In the beginning, the women participating in church activities were primarily drawing a boundary against their employers. They spoke of themselves as "true" Christians, fortified by decades of Communist persecution, while their Italian employers were nominally Christian but had been spoiled by consumerism and materialism. Soon the church attendees started to draw a second boundary, internal to the women's

community. As a "decent place" (*dostoĭnoe mesto*) was finally available, those who maintained their previous routines were increasingly defined as "indecent," "ignorant," or, sometimes, "whores." These terms did not refer to prostitution as such, but rather to the hyperfeminine performances, long chatting and drinking sessions, and tolerance for casual sex that had become, in their view, incompatible with the claim to be educated mothers interested only in the welfare of their children. The Sunday open-air market, which all had attended in the earlier phases, quickly became an icon of degradation.

To fight "indecency," the women who were active in the churches organized special events, the most important of which was a party celebrating Ukrainian Mother's Day. Here the superior infrastructure and respectability of the church could be employed in full. A traditional dance group consisting of three Ukrainian boys, two Ukrainian girls, one Albanian girl, and three Italian girls was founded, and the participants trained for months. The ceremony was a great success on one dimension and an utter failure on the other. Several hundred women attended and felt a tangible current of emotion in being together, in a specially reserved theater, to celebrate their culture. At the same time, it was evident that few, if any, Italians were in the audience, although a great deal of effort had been made to reach out to them. Both the religious functions and the church-sponsored cultural activities were much more important in offering these women compensatory recognition than in fostering intercultural contact. Since then, "respectable," church-based sociability and makeshift sociability have coexisted, with some controversy but also with the acknowledgement that, no matter how sharply polarized their narratives may be, the two networks still largely overlap.

Conclusion

Considerations of social status and respectability are crucial for understanding the lives of migrants. The female careworkers I spent time with were torn between a daily, polluted work routine and the need to be recognized by others as decent women worthy of respect. Analyzing the various and sometimes contradictory ways in which these women sought to forge an image of themselves as respectable individuals, I found that migrants' interests in maximizing disposable income are always embedded in a larger moral economy regulated by notions of personal and occupational worth. These women were intent on drawing a clear boundary between their identities as good middle-class mothers beset by an unjust fate and the carework they did for a living. The considerable efforts they devoted to activities aimed at gaining respectability in their own terms would appear absurd, and sometimes counterproductive, if evaluated in terms of strict economic rationality. Through all these activities, however, the women enacted a form of resistance, seeking to detach themselves from degrading social roles and to reaffirm their commitment to a morally worthy life.

Notes

1. These findings resemble those of other ethnographers who have studied Ukrainian and Moldovan women in other Western European cities; see Hellerman (2006), Solari (2006, 2011), and Näre (2011). A detailed study of foreign domestic workers in Italy revealed a similar profile for Ukrainian and Moldovan interviewees; see Catanzaro and Colombo (2009).

2. When I arrived in Alpinetown in 1994 holding a refugee visa, the immigration flow had just begun. Foreigners were often met with curiosity, and it was not unusual to be asked if I had ever seen a television or a refrigerator. I spent two years as a live-in careworker for an elderly couple, one of them affected by Alzheimer's disease. The experience was challenging, for it involved many responsibilities and unpleasant tasks. After I was able to leave the job, thanks to a fellowship to study literature at the local university, I did not think much about it. After finishing my degree, I worked for a few years as the manager of an educational program. It was only in 2004, when I started my fieldwork, that I realized how many things I had learned during those early years.

3. The women hated the word *badante* (literally, somebody who takes care) that is commonly used in Italian for their occupation. They found it servile and demeaning, as signifying to be always at another's disposal. They had coined for themselves the name *sidelki*, which may be translated roughly as "sitter" or "chaperone." Eventually, *sidelki* become the name of a documentary on the migration of Eastern European careworkers (see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RplplqYzMY4).

4. This agency turned out to be a scam.

5. Studies in other migrant destinations have found similar patterns; see Korotchenko and Clarke (2010) and Remmenick (2007).

6. The women never denied their wish to date Italian men. The few women who had actually left the household service sector had done so through a romantic link with an Italian man, and the others regarded this option as legitimate. The women did not find anything predatory in it; nor did they talk about it in instrumental terms. Receiving help and economic support was simply the natural consequence of their being "true women" who were willing to take care of their men.

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