

# Grandmothers migrating, working and caring: Latvian women between survival and self-realisation

Russell King<sup>1\*</sup> and Aija Lulle<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract:** This paper describes the circumstances surrounding the migration of older Latvian women and their multi-dimensional lives as economic migrants and as distant carers and supporters of diverse family members who remain in Latvia. In post-Soviet Latvia, especially since the 2008 financial crisis and the austerity measures which took away hope for a decent old-age pension, older women migrate abroad in order to salvage their economic wellbeing and support their multi-generation families, which can run to four generations – their children and grandchildren plus, often, their elderly parents. Migration enables these women to maintain multidirectional flows of care and also to achieve economic and psychosocial independence. Therefore, care practices that reach four generations put the figure of the grandmother at the core of transnational care relations. Research evidence for this paper comprises 50 in-depth interviews with older Latvian migrant women aged from their mid-40s to their late 60s in the UK and elsewhere. The paper demonstrates the complexity and richness of these women's working lives, built around enhanced economic wellbeing, multiple and transnational caring responsibilities, and a new sense of self-worth and empowerment.

**Keywords:** Older women as migrants, Latvia, Care, Financial crisis, Wellbeing

DOI 10.1515/pophzn-2016-0003

Received 6 May 2016, Accepted: 4 October 2016

## Introduction

The ongoing ageing of the European population – by 2020 a quarter of all Europeans will be over 60 years of age – produces a spatially differentiated range of challenges across the continent. In the post-Soviet states of Eastern Europe, both those which are in the EU (notably Latvia and Lithuania) and those that remain outside (notably Ukraine and Moldova), particular challenges face the ageing population (Chłoń-Domińczak 2014). The result is increasing levels of emigration of women who are not perceived as young any more: they are in their 40s and older, they usually have significant care responsibilities, most are already grandmothers and they also seek

better lives for themselves as workers in richer European countries such as the UK, Germany and the Nordic states.

Several factors help to explain this migration, but the overriding push is economic. In their home countries there are fewer jobs for ageing women. In the market-driven economic system of the post-Soviet era, many of the routine jobs previously done by women in offices, stores, farms and factories have been abolished, outsourced, or prioritised for 'younger bodies' and modern skills. For most, pensions will be small due to low incomes, and the financial austerity measures taken in the wake of the financial crisis in the late 2000s. Particularly for those middle-aged and older women who are widowed, divorced or separated,

\*Corresponding author: R.King@sussex.ac.uk

<sup>1</sup>Professor of Geography, School of Global Studies, University of Sussex, and Visiting Professor of Migration Studies, Malmö University

<sup>2</sup>Post-Doctoral Research Fellow, School of Global Studies, University of Sussex, and at the University of Eastern Finland

a life of poverty beckons if they stay put.

Emigration offers them an escape, which is often necessary for their very survival, both as individuals and as financially supportive carers for other generations in their families. But emigration is not only about economic salvation, it also enables these women to restore their sense of self-esteem. In migration women can achieve an enhanced level of psychosocial wellbeing through their access to meaningful work and a more independent lifestyle. Many are also able to rediscover their sense of a feminine identity and enter into new romantic relationships abroad.

Most importantly, most of these women often carry multiple care responsibilities to their children, grandchildren and their own, older parents. In this paper we examine the specific case of Latvian women aged in their 40s, 50s and 60s who have migrated elsewhere in Europe, mainly to the UK, Ireland or Norway. In-depth interviews were carried out with 50 such women, providing rich qualitative evidence on their lives. Our main research aim in this paper is to understand the ways in which women are able to discharge multiple cross-generational care duties, often stretching across four generations and across transnational space.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. The next section elaborates on what we call the 'triple nexus' of ageing, migration and care, where the figure of the 'grandmother' is positioned at the centre of conceptual and symbolic inquiry. Section 3 sets out necessary background on Latvia and its recent history of economic fluctuation and migration. Section 4 is on methods and choice of case-studies. Section 5, the longest, presents results from our empirical research material. Section 6 concludes and sets out some future avenues in researching ageing and migration in the context of changing gendered roles and imaginations.

## **Positioning the 'grandmother' in the triple nexus ageing-migration-care**

As Hopkins and Pain (2007) stress, a biographical approach is particularly appropriate for research on ageing, given that older age cannot but be affected by what has happened beforehand. In particular, these authors point out, the life-course transition from 'middle' to 'older' age can provide 'rich seams of conceptual understanding' (2007: 291). The age-

group we are studying, the economically active 40s to 60s, is often overlooked in age-specific studies of migrants. Economically active or job-seeking migrants are usually constructed as younger-adults; meantime the transnational care literature tends to 'fetishise' the socio-demographic margins of young children and the frail elderly (Hopkins and Pain 2007: 292).

With our focus on material transfers and transnational care, we are also alive to Hopkins and Pain's entreaties to follow a relational approach to the study of older people. We particularly privilege the relational dimensions of gender and intergenerationality, which are the keystones of transnational care (2007: 288).

What is distinct about the demographic group we are researching – middle-aged and 'young-old'<sup>1</sup> women who are economic migrants – is not only that they have been rarely studied in-depth before, but also – and this is the particular emphasis of our article – that they are embedded in multiple care relationships. Let us spell these out. The typical young or early-middle-age economic migrant, either a geographically single person (yet married/partnered with children), or a married/partnered couple, is commonly described as being part of a three-generation family. Care responsibilities extend in one or two directions: to his/her/their children or to their elderly parents, usually back home.<sup>2</sup> But for the migrant women we interviewed, these transnational, intergenerational care responsibilities may be more complex, since they often find themselves supplying support and care to their now-adult children, to their grandchildren, and to their 'old-old' parents. Some also supply transnational support to their husbands/partners, even when they are divorced or separated from them. Additionally, through migration and working abroad, women learn to care for themselves – to take a closer interest in their health and wellbeing, both physical and psychosocial. Finally, in this spectrum of care, there is the Latvian tradition of caring for the deceased ancestors through the careful and ritualised maintenance of graveyard plots.

---

1 With 'young-old' we here describe people who self-identify and are categorised also socially and culturally as ageing but who pursue an active life in all its domains, in contrast to the 'old-old' who often need hands-on care due to frail health (Neugarten 1974).

2 If the migrants' parents are looking after the migrants' children, these cross-generational support mechanisms supplied by the migrant – eg. remittances – will be directed to a single household.

Literature on transnational migration and care is fast-expanding, and we note only a few key studies in order to demonstrate where the gaps lie, and therefore where this paper makes its particular contribution. As noted above, the standard ‘model’ of research on transnational care implies the existence of young-adult or middle-age migrants who have care duties either to their ‘left-behind’ elderly parents in the home country, or to their ‘left-behind’ young children who are being looked after by other family members in the country of origin (see, for instance, the various contributions in Baldassar and Merla 2014a). Baldassar and Merla introduce the notion of ‘care circulation’ across borders, noting that much of this intergenerational care is governed by ‘generalised asymmetrical reciprocity’ (2014b: 8). Bryceson and Vuorela (2002) apply the concepts of ‘relativising’ and ‘frontiering’ to intra-family transnational relations. Relativising refers to ‘the ways in which individuals establish, maintain or curtail relational ties with specific family members’, whilst frontiering denotes that these transnational relations are not always harmonious. Indeed in some cases the criss-crossing of personal relations, migration, and changing societal and cultural values results in tensions and confrontations between genders, generations and individuals within the transnational family (2002: 11-14).

Based on her work on Italian migration to Australia, Baldassar (2007; also Baldassar et al. 2007) has led research on long-distance transnational care administered by working-age adult migrants to their elderly parents – in this case back in Italy. For Baldassar’s research participants, the globe-spanning distance is overcome (not without difficulty) by visits and by various arrangements whereby the migrants ‘manage’ the care of their parents. Other case-studies reveal different outcomes. King and Vullnetari (2006) reveal the case of the ‘abandonment’ of some older people in rural Albania by the mass migration of the younger generation; the elders become ‘orphaned’ by the loss of their migrant children who, whilst they remain undocumented abroad, cannot visit them. Different again is research by Da (2003) on transnational grandparenting and care arrangements among Chinese migrants in Australia. A common pattern for these migrants in their 30s was to ‘import’ their own parents from China in order to help with childcare when the children were very young. But then, also common, was the practice of the grandparents to return to China with their grandchild(ren) after one or a few years.

However, another fascinating strand of literature on migration and grandparenting has emerged in recent years. Not surprisingly, Central and Eastern Europe, as a fast changing and migration-hit region, has attracted the most attention. The ‘transnational grandmother’, who travels herself or is often visited by her family, exemplifies ‘solidarity and existential security as women age’ (Horn and Schweppe 2016: 8). Her symbolic role of unconditional love and kindness, based on her taken-for-granted responsibilities of helping to bring up her grandchildren and supervising the household, is shaped through ongoing changes in transnational migratory contexts (Tiynen-Qadir 2016: 85; see also Fogiel-Bijaoui 2013; Tolstokorova 2013).

Our Latvian case-study presented in the rest of this paper departs from the norm of the extant ageing and migration literature, but also from studies on grandparenting and migration, in three main ways.

- First, it looks at the migration of older women as economic migrants, i.e. as workers, as well as their care obligations.
- Second, it challenges the ‘vulnerability’ trope of most existing studies on ageing migrants, which tend to stress the difficulties they face from the ‘double jeopardy’ of being both old and migrants (cf. Giuntoli and Cattani 2012). Instead we show how migration for work at a mature age can be a source of material and personal empowerment.
- Third, it looks at the phenomenon of transnational care not in a simple dyadic model (between one generation and another, eg. migrant-to-parents, or migrant-to-children), but in a multi-generation and gendered research optic.

## **Gender and ageing in post-socialist Latvia**

Like other transition countries in Central and Eastern Europe, Latvia is a society of conflicting ageing and gender regimes and ideologies (Novikova 2006). In the background are Soviet ideals of gender equality in the pre-1989 era, which many of our interviewees had direct experience of in their early working lives. Later came EU policies and regulations on gender equality and age discrimination which Latvia has signed up to, but which are shaping into societal attitudes at slower pace. In between these two regulatory social ideologies, the reality of life for older women in Latvia is very different. The shrinkage of stable employment openings for ageing people after the end of the Soviet

period, and more recently in the wake of the economic crisis as a result of neoliberal restructuring and welfare cuts, has left many women, especially those over 40, with fewer job opportunities and reduced pension prospects. For instance, one of our interviewees, Elvira (aged in her 60s), described her difficult and eventually impossible working life in Latvia, highlighting the widespread issue of age discrimination: 'I was an engineer in a radio factory [in Soviet Latvia], but then it was closed. For a time I got short-term jobs in various shops... But then when I looked for work I was told, "We do not offer jobs to women over 40"'. A kind of neo-patriarchy has reasserted itself in which older women are consigned to the margins of society as 'uneconomic' and 'unattractive'.

Sommers and Woolfson (2014) provide an unmasking critique of what they call the 'neoliberal Baltic model' and of its 'contradictions of austerity'. Rising inequality and increasing poverty, especially amongst older people, could be regarded as the sacrificial lambs of fiscal recovery after the deep and sudden financial crisis of 2008-09. Compared to its Baltic neighbours, the crisis was most severe in Latvia, and the austerity measures were likewise more draconian in this country. Whilst the macro-statistics of recovery have at one level been impressive (GNI per capita rising strongly after 2009, and unemployment falling, although still above 10 per cent in 2015), other indicators reveal the social price paid: 40 per cent of the population at risk of poverty, and continued out-migration that, at its maximum extent during the crisis years, removed 1.2 per cent of the population annually. Over a longer time-span, emigration and a falling birth-rate have caused the population to decline alarmingly from 2.7 million in 1987 to 2.07 million in 2010.<sup>3</sup>

Quite apart from shrinking employment opportunities for ageing women, the most devastating element of the austerity package was the issue of pensions, removing the prospect of a financially secure old-age for most Latvian women, especially those who were widowed or divorced and unable to inherit or share their husband's pension. The average old-age pension during the crisis and immediate post-crisis years was 230 euros per month. Since then there has

been a moderate increase to 264 euros (2014), reaching close to 300 euros per month in 2016. This still means that most Latvian pensioners do not receive enough to pass the poverty threshold as defined by the 'minimum income basket' of goods and utilities deemed necessary to survive. Faced with such bleak prospects for their pension-age future, some of our interviewees were often stark in assessing their choices: either go abroad to find a job or, to quote two of them, 'find a rope to hang myself' or 'get a spade and dig my grave'.

## Methods

In-depth interviews were carried out with 50 mature-age Latvian emigrant women during the period 2010-14. Most were living and working in the UK, but a few were in other European countries: Ireland, Norway and Austria. Interviews were face-to-face, except a few via skype. Within the main destination country, interviews were clustered in three locations: London, the agricultural and market town of Boston in Eastern England, and the Channel Island of Guernsey.<sup>4</sup>

Potential interviewees were contacted via the personal networks of one of the authors, social-media sites, or community and employment networks, as well as snowballing out from some of the initial interviewees. In order to avoid the well-known disadvantages of the snowball method – namely the danger of reproducing the same 'type' of respondent – snowballing was curtailed after two onward links. Some people were interviewed on more than one occasion. All potential interviewees were given an information sheet and an 'informed consent' form to sign or agree to verbally; likewise, recording the interviews was done subject to interviewee consent. Very few refusals were encountered. Most of the interviews were conducted in the interviewees' native language (Latvian or Russian); a small number were partly or wholly in English.

The structure of the interview was deliberately kept open. Whilst we kept in mind our general research question about how migration changes experiences and perceptions of ageing, and the more specific questions about material and psychosocial wellbeing and care responsibilities, we left the agenda flexible in order for other important experiences and themes to emerge.

<sup>3</sup> According to Sommers (2014: 31) the 2010 census figure of 2.07 million could be an overestimate, designed to reassure the Latvian public that the population had not fallen below the 'psychologically significant threshold' of 2 million. Suppressed demographic reports originally showed a figure of 1.88 million for 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Guernsey has a special relationship with Latvian migration, with mainly female workers systematically recruited to work in the horticulture and hotel industries since the 1990s (Lulle 2014a).

Most interviewees nevertheless opted to order their narratives in a more-or-less chronological account which encompassed the following stages: life in Latvia before emigration; the circumstances of the departure abroad; experiences of work, leisure and caring whilst abroad; and prospects for the future, including possible return to Latvia. Our analytical approach has been thematic rather than biographical: looking for systematic patterns of responses and of experiences which were consistent and meaningful across the sample, or sections of it, whilst selecting and tracing case-histories which are typical of the thematic patterns observed. We cannot be certain of the representativeness of this sample of interviewees, but our close knowledge of this group, and of the evolving dynamics of Latvian emigration, give us confidence that the sample, and our interpretation of the interview data, are not significantly biased. Names given are pseudonyms.

## Findings: the multi-dimensionality of care

Here we stress the *multi-dimensionality* of care duties exercised by Latvian older migrant women. These care duties extend simultaneously in different generational directions, and may span four generations, taking in two or more of parents, children, grandchildren, spouse, siblings and self, as well as the care of ancestral graves. In what follows, we try to make a systematic analysis of each generational direction, but this is inherently complicated by our key point about simultaneous multi-directional care, so our case-histories present various combinations of care types. The multiple care axes that we deal with are also set within certain structural contexts: traditional Latvian principles of intra-family caring, the switch to a more neoliberal regime of motherhood and care (Lulle 2014b), and the rupturing of spatially compact family structures in a small country by the transnational migration of a particular demographic cohort – middle-aged and older women. At the end of this section we discuss the ambivalence of return in women's narratives, in the light of multidirectional care.

### Mother, her children and grandchildren, and herself

Our first case-history, Alma (60s, interviewed in Guernsey), encompasses four generational directions

of care: her mother, her children and grandchildren, and herself. Alma had experienced some tensions – 'frontiering' in Bryceson and Vuorela's (2002) term – over the care situation of her mother, and some disagreements with her children about whether she should return 'home'.

The back-story of Alma is typical of many migrants to Guernsey: some initial years of short-term contract work in the glasshouses followed by a diversity of jobs in the hotel sector, cleaning, and finally, at the time of second interview in 2014 (she was first interviewed in 2010), in the care sector, looking after old and disabled islanders.

Before migrating, Alma had worked for more than 30 years in the retail sector, but was made redundant and her husband died around the same time. Left with no income and a teenage son (her two daughters were grown-up and had left home to get married), Alma had little choice but to emigrate to survive, leaving her son in the care of her mother. Later however, her mother became very ill, and this was when the first dilemma arose: to return home to look after her mother (but with no income whatsoever), or stay in Guernsey and earn money to pay for her mother's care in a residential care facility. In her first interview, Alma told how hurt she had been by criticism from some Latvian relatives and friends that she did not care sufficiently well for her mother – but in reality she hardly had any choice.<sup>5</sup> By the second interview, her mother had died.

The second dilemma concerns her reaction to the entreaties of her daughters to return to Latvia:

My children say 'Come home!' They say that I have worked long enough abroad. But my pension is still too small, and prices in Latvia are crazy now. I have my work here [in Guernsey] and I am scared to lose it, even if I go for holidays, I am scared to lose my job. And what will I do back home?... [But] I also long to be with them [her children], and the grandchildren grow so fast. I see them dressed up in pictures, on skype, happy, smiling. They grow so fast; I know it from the clothes I buy them here.

So Alma continues to work, having made the economic calculation that her current pension entitlement from

---

<sup>5</sup> At the root of this dilemma is the differential interpretation of the regulation in Latvian civil law that individuals have the legal responsibility to support their ageing parents and grandparents financially if they are in such need. Individuals can be exempted from this duty only if they can prove in a court that their parents or grandparents did not provide care and support for them when they were children. For more discussion on this see Lulle (2014b).

Guernsey would not yet enable her to live comfortably in Latvia. As with the previous dilemma, there is a trade-off between economics and care. Her daughters want her back (ostensibly so they can look after her, but also perhaps – not mentioned in the interview – so they can benefit from her traditional ‘grandmother’ role for their children), but Alma derives a strong sense of satisfaction from her financial earning power. In her own words, ‘Grandma will still work here so they can be happy there’. This is the source of her sense of self-worth; it is almost as if she is addicted to care. Or, to quote a biological analogy, Alma and others like her are ‘worker bees’ who go out in the world and gather pollen (money) to bring back to the hive or extended family (Lulle 2014b: 243).

### **Father’s testament: one-way ticket to England**

For all participants, the key motivations for emigration are to get a job, secure an income to support oneself and one’s family, and for many – to accumulate some years of entitlement for a foreign pension, as in the case of Alma above. Another typical case was Ilze (late-50s) who came to Boston in 2009 to work in a bakery:

It was clear to me that I had to leave Latvia, because my work was not appreciated, and badly paid – a ‘poverty pittance’, barely managing to stay alive. It was terrible. I paid the bills and nothing was left. My father, a pensioner, saved some money and paid for my trip... I came here with just one suitcase, with a couple of changes of clothes... When I got my first £100 wages I cried, out of pride and happiness.

Ilze’s concern in the above quote is the immediate access to a ‘living wage’. She, like many others, and despite objectively unpleasant and even exploitative conditions and low-wage work, responded to the challenge by seeing it as a source of pride, physical strength and empowerment.<sup>6</sup> Here is what she says about her work in the bakery:

<sup>6</sup> For more details on this aspect of ‘ageing well’ through migration and work abroad, see Lulle and King (2016). Other studies of the migration of post-Soviet older women do not reach a similar conclusion. For instance, Cvajner (2012) finds that older women from Ukraine and Moldova who get jobs as care-workers for the elderly in Italy experience ‘trauma’ and ‘humiliation’ in their work, which they see as slave-like, stressful and degrading. The difference is probably due to the fact that many are live-in carers in an irregular status who may be abused and exploited by their employers.

Most of the time I spend working. It is hard, it is still hard; sometimes I have to work round the clock. We are all the time paying bills. But we have food to eat... my English is very poor but my business partner saves me, he has good language skills, and I know how to make good cakes! We are working together all the time.

[...]

Slowly other relatives have joined me. My granddaughters have started school here, the smallest grandchild is still a baby. I cannot imagine my life back in Latvia anymore.

From Ilze’s interview, we get an idea of the reciprocity and multi-directionality of care. Her father helped her financially to migrate in the first place and now she, in turn, is able to help her daughter and grandchildren who have followed her to Boston. As Tiaynen-Qadir (2016: 91) has observed, grandmothers and great-grandmothers who move between Russia and Finland evaluate the success of their lives against the fact of how much they have helped their daughters and granddaughters. Ilze also draws pride from being able to help her own younger generations. However, she was not the initial figure in the chain of help: her 80 years-old father, who cannot move abroad himself anymore, enabled Ilze’s move and encouraged her to care for herself: from ‘barely managing to stay alive’ in Latvia she was able to launch a business, cooperate and work hard, despite her age and lack of language knowledge.

### **‘My people’: caring for self, mother and an ex-husband**

Three themes dominated the accounts of women’s earlier working lives in Latvia: the hard and long-hours nature of the jobs that they did; the shock of redundancy or short-time when the crisis struck; and a parallel narrative about various problems with their husbands. With the increasing marketisation of the economy under neoliberal principles in the post-Soviet era, exacerbated by the fierce austerity measures implemented in the crisis period, the narratives of the participants switched to stories of unemployment and struggle to make ends meet. Often there was a reinforcing interaction between economic difficulties on the one hand and spousal relationship tensions on the other.

This interaction is well illustrated in the account of Gita, aged in her 50s, who was interviewed in

England. She had been working in a tourist guest-house in a small town in Latvia whilst her husband was unemployed; arguments ensued, which threatened to become violent. When the crisis struck, Gita's income was drastically reduced and she feared for her pension too, so she took the courageous step to take a bus to England to find work. We quote at length from Gita's interview as it combines elements from several others' accounts.

I was working in a very respectable concern, in the tourism sector... I really liked my job; however, it was not easy. We had 45 rooms and just three staff... All the work in the kitchen, in registering the guests, in administration – all fell on the shoulders of me and my assistant [the other employee did the accounts] ... Sometimes, when the place was full, I went to bed at 2am, then at 4am I had to wake up and start preparing for breakfast... What kind of life was this, working so hard? Of course my husband was angry that I had to work so much... there were constant arguments at home... But then the crisis came, and the boss said that we have to take the minimum wage; a drastic cut, it felt like a huge humiliation... [And so] I quit that job.

[...]

At first I thought I would be able to find some work in Latvia... but as I had no English – I had studied Russian and German at school – I could not get any new job in tourism... So I was out of work, my husband was already unemployed for some time, and it was getting really bad at home... I was worried that we could start physically hitting each other...

[...]

So then I did my crazy thing and left for England... I went to a recruitment agency and got a job picking raspberries... Already on the bus from Riga to England I suddenly felt a sense of freedom – like a bird freed from its cage.

Gita experienced a tough working life doing various jobs in the farming industry: first, seasonal work picking raspberries and flowers, then more permanent work on a chicken farm, and finally in a poultry packing-house where she was included in a pension plan. For her, access to a pension was crucial to her own longer-term wellbeing:

Honestly, I do not trust the Latvian pension system. Maybe I will get a tiny amount there; but I can only rely on the English pension... Things

are getting worse in Latvia... I see what's going on with pensioners there – many people have worked hard, but they do not have enough money to earn a pension. These people, of my age, will be pensioners in about ten years. But many people get ill: they try to survive whilst battling chronic illnesses because they don't have the money to get doctors or buy medicines. Here I see that people are much healthier at my age.

This connection between material and physical wellbeing was noted by most of the participants, who found that the combination of regular work, a decent income (by Latvian standards), respect for what they do/produce, and free healthcare, made them feel 'healthier', 'younger' and even 'sexier'. Tiaynen-Qadir's study of Russian transnational grandmothers found that many women caring for children and grandchildren were often able to simultaneously spice up their private lives by dating men in Finland (2016: 96).

However, in case of Gita, emotional transnationalism (Nesteruk and Marks 2009) and re-discovering a new sense of warmth were expressed in different ways. Parallel to the sense of freedom that Gita experienced the very first day she left Latvia, she saw her duties of care extending to three people: her mother, her estranged husband, and herself. Although distanced from her husband as intimate partners, he continued to live in their jointly-owned rural house and she, like several other women in similar 'separated' relationships, continued to support him and developed a compassion, almost as a mother would. This is how she put it:

Now we have a good, friendly relationship, but I am seldom at home anyway. I gladly support him because I understand that it is my house after all, I have to support *my people* [emphasised].

By becoming the breadwinner transnationally, she also redefined the meaning of family in terms of household and 'our people'. In her view, an estranged husband remained a part of 'her' household.

Later in the interview she talked, like many others, about the inefficiency of the state health system in Latvia and the necessity to 'go private' to get good service – which she did both for her mother and herself:

State health-care is in a very critical condition in Latvia. Whenever I go back, I notice how many pensioners have untreated chronic illnesses, like various cancers. People do not have money to go

to private doctors, and in the state health-care system they have to wait in long queues to get treatment, even for years... Now I have my own money, I can afford to buy medicine for my mother and pay for her visits to private doctors. I myself go to private doctors in Latvia because I can afford it now; it's fast, high-quality and I get detailed feedback for further treatments.

## **Dying husband, teenage son, daughter and grandchildren**

Let us now observe the simultaneous multidirectionality of care in a different situation: the transition from the obligated care of a dying husband in Latvia to an enabled situation of migration, facilitated this time by a daughter already resident abroad.

Gunta (late-50s) had worked for 33 years in Latvia in the confectionary trade. She had a daughter, aged late 20s, with children of her own; but Gunta also had a late child, who was at secondary school in Latvia. Her husband became seriously ill, and she worked harder to earn and support him. When he became very weak, she gave up her job to constantly care for him. A month later he died. Widowed, and without work, Gunta remembered her situation in Latvia in 2013:

I was left with my 15-year-old son in a rented apartment... The Latvian economic situation was terrible and we had debts mounting up. That's the reason why I went to work abroad.

Gunta migrated with her son to Norway, where her daughter was already living and paid for their air tickets to join her. Meanwhile, in Norway, Gunta was also involved in multiple care relations. She had moved in with her daughter and grandchildren and was also looking after her own teenage son. Her daughter had helped her find a job and fixed her up with a Norwegian language course, as getting a paid job outside the home was a priority for Gunta. Between her job and language classes, Gunta helped care for her grandchildren. She summed up her situation in the following positive terms:

Here I feel alive, I can't describe it... There's fresh air, hills, it's just beautiful. I have a really good relationship with my daughter; we take care of each other. Since I am so happy here, I don't regret leaving Latvia. In the beginning I struggled to decide whether to leave or stay because I'd been my whole life in Latvia... [but now], since I have

all my family here, I am not really thinking about returning to Latvia. Here everything is beautiful and nothing is missing.

Leaving paid work for care duties and but later searching for employment abroad is common in post-Soviet societies with well-developed migration networks. As Tolstokorova (2013: 41) found in the case of ageing Ukrainian grandmothers, women who left their jobs to care for small grandchildren were able to find employment proposals quickly when they moved abroad; however, these were in unskilled jobs and in care services. There are growing labour-market segments that are not only open to, but prefer, women who are not young any more, especially in the care sector.

What we found in Gunta's multidirectional care situation, and in similar narratives of our other participants, is an emphasis on 'we take care of each other' in terms of supporting an ageing woman's desire and need to find a paid job. This does not exclude the role of grandmother but certainly empowers a woman's autonomy as a paid worker and as a future pension receiver.

## **Emplaced caring: maintenance of their graves in Latvia**

The final dimension of care, which emerged in a few of the interviews, was the Latvian practice of caring for deceased parents and relatives through the meticulous maintenance of their graves, and the attendant 'graveyard days' and festivals (Ryzhakova 2010). Nowadays, graveyard festivals are among the most important annual gatherings and homecomings for extended families living transnationally. In depopulated provincial towns, these events attract visitors to their relatives' graves and boost local trade, albeit briefly. This centuries-old tradition prescribes that graves should be well-kept and decorated for the graveyard gathering and the banquet that often follows.

Astrida (early 60s, London) was one of the participants who discussed this issue, which for her seemed rather important as she mused on where she would be buried and who would tend her grave. Astrida moved to London, aiming to work for 10 years in order to secure a UK pension. Unable to work as a teacher, her profession in Latvia, she works as a cleaner and does voluntary work for her local church. She has not married and has no children, but she is close to her



sister in Latvia, her children (her godchildren) and their children (her surrogate grandchildren).

Astrida visits Latvia several times a year, often linked to the deaths of former school friends.

I always get news when friends or classmates pass away. Then I always go to Latvia, help to prepare funerals; we have very close relationships with classmates, we are like a family, and care for each other... In the summers, I always go to my family's graveyards; I make sure that the graves are always cared for and tidy.

One can suggest here that Astrida compensates for lacking her own nuclear family by maintaining close links to her sister's family and by channelling care to her former classmates, and to the preservation of the family graves. However, she doubted that her sister's children and grandchildren would bother to tend *her* grave. Instead,

When they grow up, they will remember us as two elderly sisters in our 70s, walking to the graveyard, caring for and knowing about the family ancestors. So I say that my ashes will go into an urn and from the urn into the Baltic Sea.

This last statement, rather shocking to her relatives, represents a dual symbolism, according to our interpretation. The first is about migration and the resultant uncertainty about 'belonging' and where one's final resting-place will be – in Astrida's case in the Baltic Sea, neither Latvia nor England. The second represents a commentary on the neoliberal undertone to contemporary Latvian society where every individual is responsible for him/herself and cannot expect therefore that the state, or another person, even a younger relative, would care for him/her, especially after death.

The care for graveyards and re-connecting with enclaved family roots extends our thinking of the multidirectional role of grandparents. This was vividly pictured in Anna Matyska's doctoral research on transnational Polish families in Finland: 'Through being buried in Poland after they die, grandparents also constitute an everlasting physical anchor and a reason for transnational visits' (Matyska 2013: 250).

And yet, our participant Astrida brings in new subtleties to this imagined 'everlasting' stable anchor of ancestors' graves. She concluded her narrative with the definitively ambiguous statement about the future: 'I am with one foot in Latvia and the other in England, and I don't know what to do'. As we saw from the

wider discussion of this case, her ambivalence is not just about her own immediate future (whether, and when, to return to Latvia), but also reflects a deeper uncertainty about traditions and generational change. Does she represent the last generation faithful to the 'care culture', both of other family members and of ancestral graves?

## Future ambivalence

There are also more pragmatic reasons for this uncertainty. For many of the research participants, who migrated soon after EU accession (2004) or as a result of the financial crisis (2008), it was still too early for a decision. The general view was that return will take place only after a decent pension had been secured by many years of work contributions. Astrida was under pressure from her nephews and nieces to return to help with the care of her surrogate grandchildren but her reply was firm: 'I do not have a full pension yet... I can babysit only after I have earned my pension'. Nora (late 40s, Guernsey) had rather idealistic perceptions of her future return: 'In my old age I will definitely live in Latvia with my grandchildren, in a peaceful, beautiful place – life is too harsh here'.

In many other cases, the return decision had been compromised by the migration abroad of other significant family members, especially children and grandchildren, usually (but not always) to the same town/country where the interviewees were living. Recall how Ilze, in Boston, where also her daughter and granddaughters have joined her, concluded her narrative: 'I cannot imagine my life back in Latvia anymore'. Likewise Gunta, in Norway, said:

Maybe I would return to Latvia if I had more friends there, but most of my friends are working abroad. One of my best friends is in England, another in Ireland – friends of my age. They are abroad, they are not in Latvia anymore.

A few other interviewees were unlikely to return for good because they had developed new romantic relationships abroad – illustrative of their rediscovery of their 'erotic agency' (Sheller 2012), which had been suppressed by Latvian society's rejection of the 'value' and 'desirability' of older women. Elga (early 60s) had separated from her abusive, alcoholic husband before emigrating to Guernsey in 2004 to work as a cleaner in hotels. She needed to earn money to support her four children through their studies, but was ambivalent about her return.

I was thinking that I will go home as soon as my children finish their studies. But my thoughts are changing and it seems to me that this will never happen [...] It's a good feeling, great satisfaction that I can help them... and then, later, let the children care for us. But [quoting the words of a popular Latvian song], 'It is not easy, it is hard to live in this world'.

The other significant event in Elga's life was that she met a local Guernsey man and they got married. Their plan is to buy a flat in Latvia and, when Elga reaches pensionable age in a few years' time, retire and live the three summer months in Latvia and the remainder of the year in Guernsey – a translocal life, also dictated by Elga's wish to see her granddaughters growing up and eventually getting married.

## Conclusion

Ambivalence about return is not unique to these older Latvian women migrants in Europe; it seems to be a fundamental characteristic of voluntary migration the world over (King 2000). Maybe it has more poignancy in the case reviewed here because of the advanced age at which the return would take place and the consequent air of finitude surrounding the question of where the last years of one's life should be spent and what the best prospects of reciprocal care would be.

Through the various interlocking care practices of ageing migrant women, we have demonstrated how diverse care can be, stretching across multiple generations and across 'transnational care spaces'. Furthermore, we have unveiled many interesting variations of trans-generational care and solidarity. For Ilze, her 80 year-old father gave his material 'blessing' for his ageing daughter to move abroad to pursue a better life for herself; whilst for Gunta, it was her daughter in Norway who paid for her move there and arranged her language classes and her first job. Further diversification of care was illustrated through Gita's case, where her resentment towards her unemployed estranged husband metamorphosed into friendly familial relations. Thus, different ageing and migration contexts can shine light into new changes of what is understood as a family in post-socialist societies. Even more: as our case study shows, we can learn new insights into changing understandings and practices of femininity and masculinity, where a man can stay at home and care for a household while a woman is earning money abroad. Female labour migrants from Latvia who hit the emigration trail when

they are already ageing are able to improve their lives, starting up a belated second career, often very different from their earlier working experience. Women are able both to improve their economic status through access to jobs, income and, eventually, pensions, and to enhance their psychosocial wellbeing through the satisfaction of becoming autonomous breadwinners capable of supporting themselves and various family members. They emigrate to survive but also manage to improve their sense of self-esteem and human dignity.

As a final multidirectional care interaction, we discussed the practice of caring for deceased parents and relatives by tending graves. Although graves could be perceived as eternal and stable anchors of familial roots, when we place a working migrant woman at the centre of inquiry, we are able to trace new subtleties of discontinuity and change. But even with the permanence of death and its physical manifestation of the grave, changes are afoot, as Astrida questions the sustainability of the graveyard tradition as well her own wish to 'belong' to somewhere 'between' England and Latvia.

Our findings reinforce the notion of ageing as *historically and culturally produced* (in this case through Latvia's history of Soviet ideology succeeded by neoliberal patriarchy and age-discrimination), and as an *embodied and emplaced process* (McHugh 2003: 169), by which migration enables the protagonists to shift from one culture of ageing to another, more empowering one. In focusing explicitly on the multi-dimensionality of care responsibilities engaged in by the participants in our research, we have followed the recommendation of Hopkins and Pain (2007) to adopt a *relational approach*, especially in terms of *gender* and *intergenerationality*. The women whom we interviewed were at the centre of the ageing-migration-care nexus, largely as the providers rather than the receivers of care. In this sense, our findings are rather different from those of a more mainstream literature which emphasises the view that 'successful ageing' amongst migrants means staying close to one's family and being cared for by them (cf. Gardner 2002 on Bangladeshis in London, and Zontini 2015 on older Italians in Nottingham). In the post-Soviet space of Latvia, where state pensions are minimal and spousal separation rates are high, family solidarity and care increasingly depend on the labour-migration projects of women who act as the bastions of multigenerational family survival.

Lastly, we point to the policy implications of our findings, based on the complexity and multi-

directionality of care dynamics experienced by migrant women. The women we have studied are caught between conflicting processes: on the one hand their historically and culturally embedded duties to care for the younger and the older generations, and on the other the realities of individualisation within the post-socialist ‘crisis economy’. The labour migration of older women from relatively poor European countries like Latvia is a reality that needs to be addressed in many policy spheres: social integration for an ageing and working migrant population, welfare, pensions and work-life balance, just to name a few.

## References

- Baldassar, L. (2007) Transnational families and aged care: the mobility of care and the migrancy of ageing, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 33(2): 275-297.
- Baldassar, L. and Merla, L. eds (2014a) *Transnational Families, Migration and the Circulation of Care*. New York: Routledge.
- Baldassar, L. and Merla, L. (2014b) Introduction: Transnational family caregiving through the lens of circulation, in L. Baldassar and L. Merla (eds) *Transnational Families, Migration and the Circulation of Care*. New York: Routledge, 3-24.
- Baldassar, L., Baldock, C.V. and Wilding, R. (2007) *Families Caring Across Borders: Migration, Ageing and Transnational Caregiving*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bryceson, D. and Vuorela, U. (2002) Transnational families in the twenty-first century. In D. Bryceson and U. Vuorela (eds.), *The Transnational Family. New European Frontiers and Global Networks*. Oxford: Berg, 3–30.
- Chłoń-Domińczak, A. (2014) *Population Ageing in Europe: Facts, Implications and Policies*. Brussels: European Commission.
- Cvajner, M. (2012) The presentation of self in emigration: Eastern European women in Italy, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 642: 186-199.
- Da, W.W. (2003) Transnational grandparenting: childcare arrangements among migrants from the People’s Republic of China to Australia, *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, 4(1): 79-103.
- Fogiel-Bijaoui S. (2013) Babushka in the Holy Land: being a Russian-Israeli grandmother in Israel today, *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 44(6): 725-739.
- Gardner, K. (2002) *Age, Narrative and Migration: Bengali Elders in London*. Oxford: Berg.
- Giuntoli, G. and Cattani, M. (2012) The experiences and expectations of care and support among older migrants in the UK, *European Journal of Social Work*, 15(1): 131-147.
- Hopkins, P. and Pain, R. (2007) Geographies of age: thinking relationally, *Area*, 39(3): 287-294.
- Horn, V. and Schweppe, C. (2016) Transnational aging: current insights and future challenges, in V. Horn and C. Schweppe (eds) *Transnational Aging: Current Insights and Future Challenges*. New York: Routledge, 1-18.
- King, R. (2000) Generalizations from the history of return migration, in B. Ghosh (ed.) *Return Migration – Journey of Hope or Despair?* Geneva: IOM and UN, 7-55.
- King, R. and Vullnetari, J. (2006) Orphan pensioners and migrating grandparents: the impact of mass migration on older people in rural Albania, *Ageing and Society*, 26(5): 783-816.
- Lulle, A. (2014a) *Time-Space of Possibilities: Translocal Geographies of Latvians in Guernsey*. Riga: University of Latvia, PhD thesis in Human Geography.
- Lulle, A. (2014b) Shifting notions of gendered care and neoliberal motherhood: from the lives of Latvian migrant women in Guernsey, *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 47(B): 239-249.
- Lulle, A. and King, R. (2016) Ageing well: the time-spaces of possibility for older female Latvian migrants in the UK, *Social and Cultural Geography*, 17(3): 444-462.
- McHugh, K. (2003) Three faces of ageism: society, image and place, *Ageing and Society*, 23(2): 165-185.
- Matyska, A. (2013) *Transnational Families in the Making: The Polish Experience of Living between Poland and Finland during and after Cold War*. Tampere: Tampere University Press.
- Nesteruk, O. and Marks, L. (2009) Grandparents across the Ocean: Eastern European immigrants’ struggle to maintain intergenerational relationships, *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 40(1): 77-95.
- Neugarten, B. L. (1974) Age groups in American society and the rise of the young-old, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 415: 187-198.
- Novikova, I. (2006) Gender equality in Latvia: achievements and challenges, in J. Lukić, J. Regulska and D. Završek (eds) *Women and Citizenship in Central and Eastern Europe*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 101-117.
- Ryzhakova, S. (2010) Representations of holiness and the sacred in Latvian folklore and folk belief, *Forum for Anthropology and Culture*, 6: 144-174.
- Sheller, M. (2012) *Citizenship from Below: Erotic Agency and Caribbean Freedom*. Durham NC: Duke University Press.
- Sommers, J. (2014) Austerity, internal devaluation, and social (in)security in Latvia, in J. Sommers and C. Woolfson (eds) *The Contradictions of Austerity: The Socio-Economic Costs of the Neoliberal Baltic Model*. London: Routledge, 17-43.
- Sommers, J. and Woolfson, C. eds (2014) *The Contradictions of Austerity: The Socio-Economic Costs of the Neoliberal Baltic Model*. London: Routledge.
- Tiaynen-Qadir, T. (2016) Transnational Babushka: grandmothers and family making between Russian Karelia and Finland, in V. Horn and C. Schweppe (eds) *Transnational Aging: Current Insights and Future Challenges*. New York: Routledge, 85-105.
- Tolstokorova, A. V. (2013) Gender implications of care migration for the operation of Care Diamond in Ukraine, *Diversities*, 15(1): 37-50.
- Zontini, E. (2015) Growing old in a transnational social field: belonging, mobility and identity among Italian migrants, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 38(2): 326-341.