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Paulina Pustulka

Bangor University, UK

Polish Mothers on the Move: Transnationality and Discourses of Gender, Care, and Co-residentiality Requirement in the Narratives of Polish Women Raising Children in the West

Abstract

The article examines the phenomenon of migrant motherhood as it is embedded in the broader discourses of gender (personal and political), and the specificities of care provision debates. Transnationalism theory has been utilized to frame the research-driven questions of Polish experiences of parenting abroad, while data obtained through qualitative narrative interviews with women living with their children in the United States, Germany and the United Kingdom constitute the empirical material. The focus has been placed on the requirement of parent-child co-residentiality as it is linked to the idea of contemporary Western motherhood and the role/concept of a 'good mother'.

Key words: female migrants, narrative interview, transnational mothers, managerial patriarchy

Female Migrants within the Transnationality Debates

Female migration in general, and the migration of mothers in particular, was persistently overlooked in the dominant discourses of supposedly male and labour-driven migratory currents from Poland throughout the decades (see: Iglicka, Kraler 2002; Morokvasic 2006; Kaczmarczyk, Łukowski 2005; Kindler, Napierała 2010). Therefore, the analysis of the gender aspect needs to be included in migration research at present, especially in the light of data suggesting equal proportions or even a slight majority of female citizens leaving Poland and settling abroad (more or less permanently) while at the same time raising their families in multi-national contexts (Elrick, Lewandowska 2008; Lutz 2008; Morokvasic 2004). One becomes quickly aware that a quantitative approach is not sufficient to obtain a full picture of contemporary Polish mobility (Garapich 2011), as numerous and highly varied personal trajectories depend vastly on gender relations within the familial contexts of individuals. In attempts to fill the aforementioned void, I have made Polish mothers abroad the subjects in my research, using narrative interviewing to understand their experiences of gender and geopolitical regimes at the intersection of motherhood and migration.

Multi-locality is a trait to be found in many biographies of global transnational migrants in various destinations throughout the 20th and early 21st century history of mobility, Poles included. Developing the argument of the social consequences of transnationalism, Levitt and Jaworsky (2007) point out that only recently has the focus been taken off from living arrangements and housing within kin, remittances, finance, budgeting and the generalized ideas of 'reproduction in the everyday of transnational families'. I strongly agree that in today's research practice we need to comply with it being replaced by examinations of the role of the gendered experiences of parents, children and elderly in multi-generational families and their complicated transnational living arrangements. What is even more crucial for my research is Salaff and Greve's (2004, p. 160) point that 'transnational migration affects women and men in gender specific ways', as it assigns a much greater responsibility to women who 'undertake the meshing of work and family systems'. Levitt and Jaworsky (2007) further elaborate on the paradoxes of the female situation:

women receive multiple, conflicting messages from the public and the private spheres of both the homeland and the receiving context, which they must somehow reconcile [...] Moreover, state policies around welfare, child care, maternity benefits, or voter registration, which affect men and women and their ability to exercise multiple memberships differently, also reflect the gendered nature of migration.

Female patterns of mobility, often marked by strong familial ties in countries of origin, become problematic when we keep in mind Mirjana Morokvasic's (2006, p. 8) claims that throughout the years it was largely believed that keeping in touch and orientation towards the country of origin had negative effects on the life possibilities and achievements of migrants, jeopardizing their potential upward social mobility. This commonly shared assumption was a result of simplistic 'immigration-settlement-integration' scheme, which left short-term transnational mobility hard to capture. The emphasis on the durability and self-maintenance of the transnational ties may dominate the paradigm (Morokvasic 2006), essentially excluding the ephemeral occurrences, such as mobility from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). These migratory flows definitely bear traits of transnationality, yet might not fit into the model entirely. Morokvasic presents the context:

Migration has always been a strategy of risk avoidance for both individuals and households. In the post-communist countries, many persons react with migration as a response to the rapid social and economic change, trying to escape marginalization in the newly transformed societies (2004).

To follow up on that point, let me make a mention of Morokvasic's (2004) recapitulation of her research results from working on East-West migration throughout the 1990s. Focusing on Polish women moving to Germany, she states that they have been minimizing risks and optimizing opportunities for both production and reproduction in the transnational migratory spaces, keeping and maintaining ties on both sides of East-West world division (1984; 1993; 1996; 2004, p. 9). In their journeys, women rely on their transnational networks of friends and contacts,

which they have been reworking via the shared experiences lived by those who have previously worked in the destination country. Helma Lutz (2008) suggested that the most striking feature of Polish women in Germany was not the fact that they were operating the clandestine zone as illegals, but the fact that they have been extremely self-sufficient and completely lacked any kind of institutional tools; namely, their working conditions in the destination country are characterized by significant isolation and invisibility. Moreover, to perform their job-related duties, those transnational transient migrants do not have to leave the networks of their own diaspora. Any competences they gain (linguistic or of another sort) pertain to the temporariness of transnational life, as it is especially visible among mothers who are said to coordinate their productive and reproductive activities transnationally, within the 'extended border-free maternity' role (Morokvasic-Mueller 2003, p. 112). Similarly, researching Poles in Britain, Angela Coyle (2003, p. 111–114) recalls that in literature Polish women are sometimes referred to as 'quasi-migrants' or 'transnational commuters', being far away from the idea of settlement. Women who work abroad may not even be considering themselves as migrants since they view their three- or six-months-long-journey as a sort of work commute. They talk about 'travels' rather than 'migrations', they believe that they are not 'gone' from Poland, and some of them are not remotely interested in assimilation or a permanent move. On the contrary, they focus all their energy on maintaining close relationships with their country of origin and preserving their national identity and the clearly defined gendered roles that come with it¹. An examination of Polish performances of being a mother in a transnational context from amongst recent migrants will follow.

Good and Bad Mothers 'on the Move'

The problem of motherhood in the context of migration, or the examination of the experience of migration paired with becoming a parent, are not common research topic to date. It is yet to be determined how those two chief aspects of identity and everyday life are interrelated. While scholars agree upon them being mutually influential, detailed descriptions of the nature of those events combined are few and far between². Both migration and motherhood have been proven to constitute key events, the 'hubs' in the biographies of women³. It must be acknowledged that there are just as many discourses surrounding motherhood (and an idea of 'a good

¹ I am referring here to a juxtaposition of individual/private female roles and national macro-discourses of women as symbols; Agnieszka Graff (2008), for example, wrote about a connection between gender and nationalism in the Polish context, explaining how an ideal mother was often a personification of the nation.

² Some of the key qualitative studies on motherhood and migration include the here-mentioned works by Pierrete Hondagneu-Sotelo (1997; 2000), Rhazel Parrenas (2005; 2009) and Louise Ryan (2007). Methodological concerns and advancements within the field have been discussed in detail by Ruth de Souza (2004).

³ For motherhood examined through narrative research, see e.g. Tina Miller's book on transitioning to motherhood in the cross-cultural comparative context (2007) or Elija Sevón's study on timing first-time motherhood by women in Scandinavia (2005).

mother') that are shared, communal and group-specific, as there is the presence of individualism in the personal stories of migrant trajectories. In that sense, I am treating these two phenomena as public and private, individual and social, personal and political.

Strikingly, almost all studies conducted on the theme of migrant mothering operate within transnational theorizing (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1997, 2000; Morokvasic 2003, 2004; Lutz 2008; Parrenas 2005; Barclay, Kent 2004; Urbańska 2009). Having analyzed the phenomenon of transnational motherhood, Pierrete Hondagneu-Sotelo and Theresa Avila (1997), as well as Rhazel Parrenas (2005) formulated two major points greatly reminiscent and fitting perfectly with my own discoveries from conversations with Polish women:

1. Leading family life in the transnational context is an emotionally tiring time for both parents and children;
2. New situations of 'care-giving from afar' are challenging Western norms of mothering.

The main axis of looking at performing motherhood is derived from feminist research pointing out a deep conflict between the dominant Western (Euro-US) model and practices of intensive mothering (Katz Rothman 1989, 2001; Guerrina 2002; Miller 2007), and the requirement for the new organization of family structure, family life, care, and child-rearing posed by the consequences of the era of global mobility (Hochschild, Ehrenreich 2003; Hondagneu-Sotelo, Avila 1997; Ryan 2007). The dominant model usually implies the commonality of residence between mothers and children, deeming this relationship of spatial proximity a guarantee for successful or 'good' mothering (Gustafson 2004; Hays 2005; Urbańska 2009). On the contrary, the lack of physical presence among those women who became transnational in their employment strategies is often viewed as 'bad' performance on the part of their motherly roles. Migrant mothers are regarded 'unfit' not only in their role fulfilment towards their children, but also as their behaviours are scrutinized by the mainstream discourses of modern Western societies. In between the two, we have migrant mothers who have decided to out-root their families and move abroad on the one hand (usually for financial reasons), but now share the residence with their children, which gives them the presumed advantage in hopes of being 'good' mothers.

Consequently, migration causes a major rupture, disjunction and incompatibility of mother-role performances and definitions between the country of origin and the destination society. On that note, in their text *I am here but I am there*, Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila (1997) describe the case of Latinas who arrived in California, where they became employed as clandestine servants in middle-class and wealthy American households. The researchers have discovered and documented South American women in the United States reconstructing motherhood by creating alternative definitions and an array of acceptable behaviours. More importantly, they shed light on the somewhat surprising and definitely valid point: the definition of motherhood expressed by migrants is very often contradictory to both the Latina and the US middle class' social constructs of the term. This led them to conclude that a transnational context requires women from various backgrounds to rethink,

rephrase and reconfigure the components of the 'good mother' ideal type. To sum up: the private sphere of being a mother becomes instantly problematic in the isolated situation of living abroad, away from the inherited and internalized roles' definitions (Nicholson 2006; Hondagneu-Sotelo, Avila 1997). Detailed investigations of how Polish women combine motherhood's definitions from multi-national contexts need to be performed.

To my knowledge, Sylwia Urbańska (2009) is the first researcher to translate and theorize advancement of transnational parenting analyzes within the Polish context. She uses media discourses surrounding parental migration and the over-hyped issue of the so called *Euro-orphans* (*Eurosieroty*) in order to expose social reactions and moral panics resulting from transgressing the socially constructed notion of 'mother' by contemporary migrants. Urbańska believes (2009, p. 65–66) that a shared idea of mothering is loosely based on assigning a person to a specific territory, here demarcated as the space of home (residence), which therefore flags those who leave children behind unfit to perform the duties of motherhood to a socially acceptable standard. Following in Gustafson's (2005) footsteps of understanding 'unbecoming a mother' as a process of coming to live separately from one's children, Urbańska concludes that Polish policy, political and even scientific experts seem to perceive the physical presence of a mother at home as a pre-condition, or an actual guarantee, of appropriate care and fulfilment of the motherly role. Moral panics⁴ and the reaction of institutions in Poland show the incompatibility of largely common practices of transnational families and the normative ideal type of mother-child dyad co-residency and live-in care (Urbańska 2009, p. 67). My research looks into the other, not institutional but personal side of the unbecoming mothers' residential separation experiences, as I will now move to recalling the stories of mothers themselves. I believe in the methodological value of giving voice to respondents, showcasing their experiences as they were sharing them, and as they ineluctably exposed gendered ideologies pinpointed here above.

Co-residentiality and Transnationalism in the Polish Case: Selected Research Results⁵

In May 2011, I met with Ania, a 36-year-old migrant from Poland, currently living with her husband, two teenage sons and a toddler daughter in Bangor,

⁴ Moral panics are here understood in a classical Cohen sense (1972, p. 9).

⁵ The data presented in this article comprises of preselected early findings of fieldwork conducted for my PhD dissertation and earlier projects on the same topic since 2009. Around 15–20 interviews for each country of comparison (Germany, UK and US) will be included in the final analysis. I have employed a combination of narrative and semi-structured interviewing, using non-probabilistic deliberate sampling for participants' recruitment. My interview-partners' broad socio-demographic characteristics were as follows: between 20 and 60 years old, born and raised in Poland, married to a Pole (mixed couples are not a part of my study), mothers of at least one child, living abroad in one of the selected Western destinations for at least two years. The project is primarily funded by 125th Anniversary Research Scholarship awarded by Bangor University, where it has also undergone the research ethics review.

United Kingdom. Per my research design, our interview was divided into two parts: a detailed story of Ania's migratory trajectory and a semi-structured conversation about her experiences of pregnancy, childbirth and parenting in the sending and receiving countries within a comparative perspective. I learned about the appalling financial situation that Ania was facing back in Poland in the late 90s and early 2000s, as the long-term consequences of the Polish political transition of 1989 had left her family jobless and massively in debt. My interview-partner has first-hand experienced the marginalization and discrimination⁶. Subsequently, similarly to the respondents in the research of White (2011) or Coyle (2006), Ania recalled the happiness and success her family has been enjoying since moving to UK. The comparison she makes between the experiences of raising children in the precarious conditions of a run-down Polish industrial town versus the security of a Welsh suburban area is striking. During our talk about motherhood, Ania refers a lot to the idea of 'good motherhood', as she additionally demonstrates the pressures of the national mother-Pole model on her own role-performance⁷. Even in the most difficult times, Ania has still put her children first, going as far as staying hungry herself, simply to ensure that her sons did not stand out from amongst their peers. Across the board, respondents in my research shared this view, which is referred to in literature as *marianismo*⁸, mirroring the beliefs of migrant mothers from other sending countries with primarily Catholic populations. Ania has clearly experienced the 'British paradise' Krystyna Iglicka is somewhat questioning (Iglicka 2008), as the financial situation of her nuclear family has completely changed upon migrating to the West. More precisely, it was Ania's husband, Piotr, who took a chance and left for London in early 2004, even before working there was legal, after a high-school friend offered him the possibility to act as his replacement in a construction company run by yet another Pole. The few months of extra-experience had given Piotr an undeniable advantage and an edge, as he was quickly promoted to a senior role, guiding the waves of construction workers who started coming to the UK with the mass-migration boom initiated by the EU accession in May of the same year⁹.

⁶ For the specifics of gendered consequences of the 1989 transition, see e.g. Choluj (2007), Raport (2004), Paszkowski (2006).

⁷ I am using Titkow's definition of 'mother-Pole' (2007, p. 144–145) as 'overworked, self-sacrificing for her family, and certain of her indispensable competences, family life manager'; agreeing with her claim that 'social life practice enforced the activities and attitudes of this role', here identified by me as 'managerial patriarchy'.

⁸ Joanna Dreby (2006, p. 35) explains Mexican *marianismo* in the following terms: 'mothers' care-giving role is especially celebrated and linked to the self-sacrificing characteristics of the Virgin of Guadalupe – likened to the Virgin Mary – who is worshiped devoutly throughout Mexico by individuals of remarkably diverse sociocultural backgrounds. Latin American scholars describe this culturally specific version of maternity as *marianismo*. According to this ideal, women should be self-negating and martyrs for their children because they are spiritually and morally superior to men. A parallel to the Polish devotion to Mary, the Mother of Christ is evident here.

⁹ Extensive research on Polish workers in the UK remains out of the review scope of this paper; nonetheless, detailed summaries of the data can be found in the Polish work of Fihel

Ania quickly decided to follow her husband and started working as a seasonal employee in the British hospitality and leisure sector. In 2008, the family settled down in Bangor, Wales, after Piotr had found employment well enough paid to allow his wife to stay home. Ania openly discusses the wealth she perceives to have here and it does not come as a surprise from someone who within the course of just a few years had undergone the transition from having to beg her family and the Polish state for help, to being able to afford anything she wants, having paid off the debts and mortgage on a house in Poland, owning a house, two cars and a full bank account in the destination country. Ania expressed her joy, while inadvertently linking material attainment with the emotional and ideological aspects of parenting:

At one point in my life I was questioning my decision to become a mother altogether – it was when I was worried that I won't have anything to give to the boys for breakfast the next day... It was very bad and there was no joy in my family in Poland [...] I love my children with all my heart and therefore I only want the best for them. I am so glad that here we can provide and care for them in a way that is right.

Following this clearly successful migration story, Ania also shared her positive experiences of being pregnant again and having a daughter in the receiving country, stating that this time it was a completely different story of motherhood, mostly because of the medical care and financial stability, as well as the social support available.

After learning about the ups and downs in the story of this migrant family, I started to organize my interview notes and knew that something did not add up. As I remembered Ania telling me that her children had started an English school only three years later, I wanted to ask her more questions, having one specific time-gap in mind: what had been going on between 2004 (the year Ania and Piotr first arrived in UK) and 2008, when their sons came to the UK? In one instant, I could see my interview-partner tense and become reluctant to continue our discussion. Luckily, she has decided to tell me more about what I learned to have been an extremely difficult period of family separation, worry and guilt, paired with the remote-management of her children who were left behind. Similarly, in Nicholson's research (2006) interviewees were embarrassed and anxious to have to explain to the researcher that they saw their separation from their children as the type of sacrifice that will lead to the betterment of the living conditions for the entire family, and the children in particular. Many of them pointed out that their primary goal is not to change much (or ideally anything) in the children's lives, managing and maintaining everyday habits, activities and emotional relations, so as they can remain constant and stable. Like many others, Ania was initially opposed to moving her family to the UK but quickly decided to go there herself and supplement the family income. She was worried about her marriage, with her husband being gone in a foreign country full of opportunities, especially since she had her unemployed mother eager to look after her grandsons. Dreby (2006, p. 35) specifies that 'research on mothering, ranging from studies of the social construction of motherhood to those

and Pietka (2007) or the British report of Eade and colleagues (2007).

emphasizing identity work, proves it to be an activity primarily associated with the care of children (see also: Chase, Rogers 2001; Rothman 2001), while the issue of fatherhood is chiefly discussed in regard to providing children with economic, educational, and/or career opportunities. In this context, Ania had been living the transnational life of a long-distance commuter for four years, as she had worked for months in UK, only reuniting with her sons during selected weekends and short visits. Leaving her children behind was an experience full of contradictions. On the one hand, Ania kept being a primary parent-figure, even though she was away. She would use the Internet, phone and other communication methods not only to speak with her children but also to run her household with her mother treated more like a proxy than a person in charge. Ania was using extended, geographically dispersed networks of care, yet made it very clear how she wanted her children raised, disciplinary procedures included. My interlocutor was certain and proud of being a great mother-provider as she took on the role of a mother-Pole, in its full sense and scope of managerial matriarchy, within a transnational context. On the other hand, Ania said:

I do not like to talk about these years as I wasn't a good mum then... I mean, the boys started to have everything they wanted but I was not there. You cannot be a good mother if you are hundreds of kilometres away, if you don't cook dinners and do the washing, play and do homework with them. As a mother, you have to be close to your children. I cannot imagine not living with them ever again.

Clearly, physical presence and having a shared residence were pre-conditions for successful mothering in Ania's opinion. Further elaborating on the situation she found herself in, my respondent indicated that it was as she compared herself to other Polish mothers who were able (mostly for financial reasons) to stay at home on a daily basis, that she considered her own performance insufficient. Blaming the lack of social security in Poland, she is now proud to live in the UK and although she does not exclude the possibility of going back to work, she says never again will she live away from her children, as being there for them signifies the successful performance of her mother-role.

Ania's story is just one example of what other respondents were telling me, regardless of their age, social class and destination country. All the women I have spoken to in Great Britain and Northern Ireland have experienced shorter or longer periods of initial separation, before they decided to settle in one country permanently. As Anne White (2011) stated in her recent book, 'families do not return', thus the big step to relocate one's life must be preceded by careful consideration and a trial phase in which only adults participate. The problematisation of separate residence with one's children was present in every story, as women questioned their decision to go abroad, even when the financial hardship and the possibility of divorce were the justifiable decisive factors. The mother-Pole icon, reinforced by the necessity of intensive performance of motherhood in the Western world, has created an ideal mother that no woman can be, but all aspire to become. Being able to be there for the children more and more often clashes with the equally important demand to ensure economic safety and secure the best possible financial future, and female

migrants seem to be caught in this paradox more¹⁰. Dreby (2006) researches how this omnipotent image of an ideal mother comes to play in the transnational context and comes up with a highly gendered diagnosis:

If financial support is not essential to mothers, emotional intimacy is. Transnational mothers expect that they, and other mothers in their situation, will call home regularly and suffer greatly without their children [...] Mothers who do not suffer without their children are accused of abandoning them [...] Consequently, mothers often expressed guilt over leaving children, whereas fathers rarely did (2006, p. 52).

The above research outcome was similarly present in my study. For instance, one of the interviewees, 29-year-old Ewa, reflected on her two-year-long transnational experience of working as a nanny alongside her gardener husband for a wealthy British family:

Of course you never stop being a mother... But when you are far, far away, taking care of someone else's children, it feels like you had abandoned yours. Even though you speak with them every day, it does not excuse the fact that you live somewhere else. My husband always said I was stupid with all my crying and blaming myself. For him it was obvious that once we both became unemployed, we had to do whatever it took to earn a living. Still, I sometimes wonder if he was keen on eventually bringing children along to his then carefree British set-up. And I was so sad without them.

Transnationality might not have been so popular among those emigrating from Poland to United States but cases of mothers going back and forth were also prominent, especially in the preceding generation. In many cases, the illegality of their stay in the US made mothers wait years before reuniting with their children. In addition, almost half of my American respondents have indirectly pinpointed a global care chain as the reason for being away from their mothers or children. What is noteworthy here is the fact that female care obligation extended beyond having to provide support for their children, as many women who settled in America, have then left their family behind to go back to care for their elderly parents. Such multi-generation trajectory was recalled by Ewa, 39, who explained:

I had just turned 18 when we moved here. My mum always shared her time between Warsaw and New Jersey, and she practically moved back to Poland for two years when my grandmother became sick. Me and my dad had to take care of my three siblings who were then all younger than 11. At that time I said I would never leave my children like that, but I guess life has its way to play tricks on you: my daughter was prematurely born when I was visiting Poland, and because her father was still living there, it took us three years to get her in good health and obtain citizenship papers. I did not have a choice and had to leave her for months at a time to preserve my own status in the US.

Even without such a sequence of family events, many Polish women living across the ocean were caught between two worlds as mothers and daughters bound

¹⁰ Similar research outcomes pertaining to contrasting feelings of economic versus emotional provisions recalled by Polish women leaving their children behind upon going to work in Italy have been briefly discussed in Agnieszka Malek's recent article (2011).

by care provision demands. It is noteworthy that care regimes in both home and destination countries persist to be a fully-feminine domains and Poles around the world are inevitably bound by a global care chain (Charkiewicz, Zachorowska 2009; Hochschild, Ehrenreich 2003).

For the respondents residing in Germany with whom I have spoken so far, it was the language and schooling system that provoked temporary family splits. The female shuttle migrants or those participating in seasonal employment, have often commented on the fact that in their case the temporariness of the trips abroad eventually turned into a permanent state as long separations became unbearable because of the physical distance and little time they had for their families at home (see also: Lutz 2008; Morokvasic 1993, 2003, 2004, 2006). In spite of usually being a primary migrant from the household, thus leaving their children with their fathers, women working in Germany continued to feel unfit as mothers. Agnieszka, a 41-year-old nurse who moved to Bochum, after three years of cross-border commute gave her husband an ultimatum and said she would not work in Germany again, unless the entire family went with her. A quick comparison of the earnings prompted the family to move, even though it effectively meant that the father of the family would not be able to find legal employment.

Complicated gendered relations did not help women deal with their precarious and peculiar positions. One of the contradictions that female migrants find hard to accept is that their economic advancement and success are often happening simultaneously to their sharp social status and prestige decline. Women, unlike men, must work on compromises and cleverly negotiate to overcome the incongruity of traditional social norms embedded in their gender on the one hand, and overruling those norms while becoming sole financial providers or start earning more than their respective husbands on the other. A professional career and working for the family became an internalized norm for Polish women during the communist regime, to the degree that working full-time was integrated into the definition of a 'good mother' (Titkow 2007). However, working migrants women are often no longer able to continue the tradition of labour involvement simply as a demonstration of care for their families. In contrast to men, they have more problems to transform economic capital from abroad into social capital at home, as for women, social esteem is often associated with transgressing moral codes (Morokvasic 2004, p. 9–20). One of my respondents, 32-year-old Kasia based in Belfast, recalled:

Family often bashed me saying that as a mere cook, I was not good enough to have married my husband. He was a sales-rep and therefore his job success relied on his communication and negotiation skills which he only possesses in Polish. When he lost his job in 2005, we quickly went under, especially with the mortgage interest payments on the house. A friend offered me to go to Ireland for the summer, as she did not want to go alone. We were swamped with jobs offers from busy kitchens of summer resorts within few days after arrival. In three months I had made more money than my spouse had made in the last two years [...]. Unfortunately, no employer in Poland cared for this extra-experience and they would laugh at me that this is not Miami and they just need brainless cooking staff that will work for the minimum wage. The family could again say I was useless, and additionally they kept pinpointing yet another bad thing that

I had done: leaving my children. What they said really hurt me as I already felt like a bad mother, going away for an entire summer and planning to do that again.

Kasia's conclusion was that since her move (with her family) to Northern Ireland, the tormenting had ceased, which sharply depicts the difference between migrant motherhood (good, correct and appropriate), and transnational motherhood, viewed as unsatisfactory. The self-perception of female migrants relies greatly on even the shortest and financially indispensable periods of living apart from their children. As the many accounts of migrant stories suggest, co-residentiality is still a major defining factor of good mothering among Poles. I believe it effectively creates the utmost despair in women who have to work abroad, yet their definitions of motherhood embedded in the dominant ideologies question their choices. The concurrent demands of financial provision and shared residence appear to remain an irreconcilable challenge for transnational migrant mothers.

Concluding Remarks

The personal stories of my interview-partners, who followed the paths from transnational periods of family separation to settling abroad as mothers illustrate the tensions and reconciliation-strategies they employ within their roles as mothers. In closely examining the narratives of Polish women who found themselves in the above-described situations, this article contributes to a better understanding of the intersectionality¹¹ of gender (motherhood) and (transnational) migration. It also demonstrates the new spatially dispersed or rather expanded family-life contexts of Polish female identities abroad.

Transnational motherhood is a particular and peculiar form of 'shared motherhood' (Nicholson 2006, p. 14) which is determined by gruesome long journeys, extended periods of mother-children separation, as well as degradation and relegation to the lowest levels of the social and economic ladder. Therefore, I strongly agree with Urbańska (2009) that these new contexts require social redefinitions of intra-family relations, roles and identities. These reconfigurations of strategies and methods of care should eventually defy the powerful internalized model of good mothering today. Static conceptualizations of 'being a mother' need to be replaced by dynamic and processes-based constructions of 'becoming or unbecoming a mother', as a way to depict the experiences of the 21st century migrant mothers (Gustafson 2004; Urbańska 2009). This requires an in-depth discussion of the philosophical, feminist, biological, demographic and economic takes on motherhood to date, as they all contribute to highly-complex sociological notions of motherhood as an idea and practice.

¹¹ I am using the term 'intersectionality' in its general sense of multiple and powerful overlapping identity traits, such as race, gender, social class, having cumulative effect on one's social standing; see ie. Crenshaw (1991).

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Streszczenie

Niniejszy artykuł poświęcony jest fenomenowi macierzyństwa migrantek, w szerszym kontekście dyskursu płci kulturowej (indywidualnej i politycznej) oraz debatom na temat zakresu opieki rodzicielskiej. Przy opracowaniu ogólnych ram pytań badawczych dotyczących polskich doświadczeń rodzicielstwa za granicą wykorzystano teorię transnacionalizmu. Materiał empiryczny przedstawiony w artykule opiera się na danych pozyskanych w jakościowych wywiadach narracyjnych, które przeprowadzono z kobietami mieszkającymi wraz z dziećmi w USA, Niemczech i Wielkiej Brytanii. Szczególny nacisk został położony na rolę/definicję „dobrej matki” oraz wymóg wspólnego zamieszkiwania rodziców i dzieci jako czynnik, który związany jest z ideą macierzyństwa we współczesnej zachodniej kulturze.