

11. Young Moldovan Women at the Crossroads: Between Patriarchy and Transnational Labour Markets

Kristina Abiala

Post-Soviet Moldova is an emigration country and supplier of transnational labour markets. The narratives of young women from this country, asked about their dreams for the future, show how the creation of a gendered identity is based upon the coping behaviour of individuals. The present study explores the way migration and other determinants have an effect on gendered identity formation. Reflecting a construction of Moldovan women as mirrored in their own aspirations and quoting them in a text like this, it is hoped, makes their voices heard and provides a supportive frame of reference about their own situation that might be emancipatory. These women's stories are part of a worldwide narrative about inequality – in particular gender inequality – that has a bearing on the situation in Western countries. Making these Moldovan women invisible through a stereotypical account would mean obscuring the socio-economic conditions that constitute the foundation of inequality in other parts of the world as well. Thus, acknowledging the experiences of young Moldovan women is a way of reflecting back stereotyped projections and understanding general mechanisms of inequality.

Identity formation on the individual level is intrinsically interwoven with gender relations, and it is negotiated in specific societal contexts. The Republic of Moldova became independent in 1991, after having been one of the Soviet Union's Socialist Republics for 51 years. During that period women and men were discursively constructed as *tovarisch*, that is, as equal comrades. For Moldovan citizens of today traditional and patriarchal norms, as well as mass migration form the background of problem solving in everyday life, and for the construction of a gendered identity.

In the early 2000s, Moldovan women were often described as victims of sexual trafficking (cf. Abiala 2006). Perceptions circulated about them as deceived or even kidnapped, as naive and uninformed. Experts from abroad were engaged to help repatriated young women get back on their feet and find a job in Moldova. The prevalent stories contained a grain of truth, but they represented a minor part of the experiences of migrating women. Nevertheless, ‘the Moldovan woman’ became a projection surface representing poor victimised and sexualised women who were different from ‘us’ Western women. Against this backdrop, a second look was cast to facilitate a deeper understanding of the Moldovan ‘other’.¹

Doing gender and nation

Due to the weakness of the Moldovan state, women’s protection by men in a classical family structure is often seen as essential in Moldova. In view of many women who emigrate to provide for their family, a complex or contrarious process of gender identity is conditioned on various levels.

Gender research has shown that men and women have obligations and rights that are deeply rooted in society, its history and culture. As pointed out by Yvonne Hirdman, a stereotypical, to some degree negotiable, gender contract codifies that the man is responsible for supporting the woman and that the woman given such support is tied to home and family. The man’s obligations are mainly located outside the home, where he enjoys some freedom of action. The narratives about the stereotypical ‘he’ and ‘she’ have to be identified in order to understand how gender contracts are built, how they develop, and how they perhaps disappear in a particular context (Hirdman 2001: 26, 84–90). Another researcher to have addressed the issue of contracts, as expressed by classic contract theorists, is Carol Pateman. The latter viewed the social contract within society as dependent on a sexual contract – a story of submission: “Women must enter into the marriage contract. But the sexual contract requires that women are incorporated into civil society on a different basis from men” (Pateman 1988: 180–1). While the social contract includes patriarchal rights and gives men power over women, the sexual contract establishes men’s systematic access to women’s

¹ The first part of the study was based on field work conducted in 2003 and concerned prostitution and trafficking in Moldavian women (Abiala 2006). The second part dealt with women from Gagauzia in the south of Moldova who worked in Istanbul as domestics in 2007 (Abiala 2013a). The third part, based on interviews with young Moldovans carried out in March and April 2008, is partly reflected in Abiala (2013b) and partly in this chapter.

bodies. A husband may exploit his wife who has been established as subordinate through the marriage contract. In patriarchy, differences between women and men are seen as essential natural differences with far-reaching implications. Men's patriarchal power over women is presented as arising from the essential order of nature.²

Gender is also construed in terms of national identity, and how women's bodies are negotiated has consequences for the national project. According to Maud Eduards (2007: 14), a national frame of reference is crucial for what women are allowed to do and not to do. Generally believed to be controlled by their body and associated with gender and sexuality, women are made responsible for realising which man is trustworthy and whom they are to mistrust (Eduards 2007: 17, 22). In contrast, the male body is imagined as de-gendered and concealed, and at the same time elevated as universal. In such a gender construction men have the duty to protect the borders of the nation, women and children, freedom and honour. This protection appears both as an act of paternalism and patriotism (Eduards 2007: 17, 21). The nation's reliance on gendered categories of citizens appears as natural, and their conception is significant for how societies organise themselves morally, socially, and politically. Eduards (2007: 18) connects this to phenomena such as violence and sexual trafficking.

A particular question with regard to Moldova is how the fact that many women and men emigrate influences gender construction. Women show strength by travelling abroad, trying to find a job that will enable them to earn more than the salary that is offered in their country of origin. Many married women leave their family and the male head of the family behind, and their freedom will usually increase with emigration. The money they send home improves the situation of the family and they become (one of) the breadwinners, a circumstance that might change the gender contract in their case, as compared to more traditional ways of families staying in Moldova. However, going abroad also means being exposed to the stereotypical image of 'the Moldovan woman', being victimised and sexualised as a 'poor European other' (see also Augustin 2003; Cheng 2003; Demletiner 2001; Kapur 2002; Kofman et al. 2000; Lemish 2000; Ålund 1999).

² In addition Pateman and Shanley (1991) discriminate between the private (the domestic, the familial, the intimate), and the public (in terms of the economy and the state), thereby emphasising the political significance of differences among women (1991: 3).

Moldova in 2008 and later years: Poverty, migration, and gender

The interviews on which this chapter is based were held in 2008. The situation for people in Moldova has presumably changed since then and the question is whether the generated data can be assumed to have a bearing on the situation today.

A report on the realisation of the UN millenium development goals, published in 2010 by the Moldovan government with the assistance of UN agencies, targeted poverty and gender equality. As a background it referred to the first decade of transition, 1991–2000, when the country’s economic recession caused increasing poverty. While the economy has grown by two thirds in the period 2000–08, the discrepancy between urban and rural areas that emerged after 1990 lingered on. In terms of consumption, income, and welfare the report maintained that, “as recent research suggests, Moldova displays one of the highest degrees of polarization of economic life in Europe” (Government of Moldova 2010: 14). Economic growth, based – to a substantial proportion – on remittances from emigrants, led to a fall in poverty rates in urban, but not in rural areas. Moldovans did not benefit equally from support from abroad, but rather “[f]amilies benefiting from remittances are least exposed to the risks of poverty” (2010: 27). The global financial crisis in 2009 translated into a decrease in Moldova’s GDP. Repeated droughts, floods in rural areas, and export restrictions worsened the situation (Government of Moldova 2010: 14, 19). And “[t]he poverty rate in rural areas continued to grow in 2009, widening the gap between rural and urban areas” (2010: 8). While the Moldovan economy recovered in 2010 and 2011, the country slipped back into a recession in 2012 (World Bank 2013).

The current situation in Moldova is characterised by segregation into gendered spheres, similar to other countries. In the field of education a vertical segregation into different disciplines prevails. Female pupils and students tend to study social sciences while males prefer technical subjects. About 51 per cent of pupils and students are women, but their share in higher education is larger. The average marriage age is 24 years for women and 26 for men (National Bureau of Statistics n.d.). Women and men report that they spend their time differently with regard to work and household activities. Whereas men spend some more time in their working life than women, the latter spend substantially more time on household chores and with family care (National Bureau of Statistics 2013). Households headed by women are probably at greater risk of poverty. They tend to come from urban areas, are often formed by a single person with children, and fre-

quently rely on social payments and remittances (National Bureau of Statistics n.d.).

Working life is another arena for the construction of gendered relations. In the interviews of this study the wish to get a higher salary – sufficient to support a family – is often mentioned.³ The unemployment rate is an unreliable indicator in Moldova, where many of those not working are not registered as unemployed. In 2012 the unemployment rate was estimated to be 5 per cent for women and 7 per cent for men – however 54 per cent of the women were categorised as belonging to the ‘inactive population’ (National Bureau of Statistics n.d.).

The number of emigrants is difficult to estimate, as Moldovans tend to travel undocumented and become irregular migrants. Before 2009 there was “a mass exodus of people”, with at least one-fourth of the active population leaving the country for abroad. Most of the migrants who returned home in 2009 made efforts to re-emigrate the same year or in 2010 (Government of Moldova 2010: 28). Table 1 shows that the emigration – out of a total population of approximately 3.5 million inhabitants – was high in the period 1995–2000 and even higher 2000–05, and that it decreased after that.

Table 1: Net number of migrants, both sexes (Source: UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2012)

	1985–90	1990–95	1995–2000	2000–05	2005–10
Moldova	-85,000	-132,000	-250,000	-317,000	-170,000

The Moldovan government report from 2010 claimed that migration “will in the long term have disastrous impact on the country’s economy and demography” and suggested that issues “such as the so-called brain drain and the emigration of those with other skills will need to be addressed” (Government of Moldova 2010: 28). On a global scale the very young emigrate too, and it seems likely that a significant proportion of children and young people do this on their own (cf. McKenzie 2007, referred to in *World Migration Report* 2010: 117). There is also regional variation, and women are, in general, particularly represented among highly skilled

³ In 2012 the average monthly salary in Moldova was 3478 MDL (the equivalent of 217 EUR or 1869 SEK); available from: <http://www.statistica.md/newsview.php?l=en&idc=168&id=3975> [12 Jan. 2014].

migrants (United Nations Development Fund for Women 2008, referred to in *World Migration Report 2010*: 117).

The persistence of gendered cultural models and socio-economic data like that presented above suggest that the interview survey of 2008 is still relevant to the current situation. The rural–urban development cleavage and the divide between poor and rich might have increased even further.

Fieldwork parameters

The present chapter is based on a study that was conducted during a seven-week stay in Moldova in the spring of 2008. The aim of the study was to investigate the dreams of young people in Moldova in the context of large-scale emigration. Particular concerns were the informants' situation, their expectations about the future, images about Moldovan women, and if and how their experience of migration was connected to the process of gender construction. Informants were meant to belong to the 16–25 years old age group and to represent varied levels of education, and both urban and rural backgrounds. Based on these criteria two local research assistants found informants and booked the interviews.

In practice, informants varied in age from 14 to 22, being somewhat younger than planned, and displayed an overrepresentation of the well-educated with an urban background. Most of the informants lived in the capital Chişinău. It proved difficult to find informants in the countryside, but a group interview was held in a village 30 kilometres from Chişinău. In all, 22 semi-structured interviews were conducted, of which four were with experts in the fields of gender, migration, national economy, and women in the labour market. Six interviews were carried out with groups of up to twenty pupils or students; one with four participants; four with two people and seven with a single informant. The interviewees responded to questions such as: Could you tell me something about yourself and your life? What is your special dream for the future? Can you describe 'Moldovan women'? Follow-up questions varied depending on the course taken in different interviews.

The interviews were held in English and Romanian, relying on the translation services of two female university students. A disadvantage of working with interpretation is that it changes the wording and to a degree the content of what has been said. Simultaneous translation from one language into another during an interview is a demanding task and the interview quotes in this chapter had to be edited in some cases so as to cite

the informants at an adequate linguistic level. An advantage of working with native born interpreters was their familiarity with the Moldovan education system and their helpful eliciting of collective images in group interviews that the interviewer might not have noticed. The interpreters formed a significant part of a triangle of social interaction, in which the interviews were conducted with me as the ‘skilled observer from outside’ and them as ‘insiders and cultural consultants’. Apart from informing them about my research questions and methodological guidelines, I also interviewed the interpreters. This helped me to understand their frames of reference, and it was an opportunity for them to reflect on the material they helped to gather (cf. Jentsch 1998: 287).

International designer or getting married

One of the group interviews was held with four female and three male social science students aged 20 to 22. Two of them started by setting the scene: The male student imagined himself as a national hero in a leading position in the Moldovan government, doing something to be remembered by. The female student explained how she felt subordinate in her discipline and that she was contemplating continuing her studies abroad.

Two other students had an argument about gender, based on the dreams of one of them. The female student described how she had studied abroad for several years to become a designer, something she liked very much. For family reasons she had to come back to Moldova, where she felt angry and did not know what to do. “I had to give up everything, my friends and my way of thinking, but after four years I am not sad. I got used to it.” The interviewer asked her what she wanted to do now, triggering a dialogue between her and one of the male students. When the woman answered laughingly that she did not know, the man forcefully suggested “She is going to marry. Will marry.” As if she did not hear him the female student continued her answer by saying that she might perhaps become an international designer and added, referring to the male student, “Yes, he is joking.” His response was loud and clear: “Not a joke! Stop dreaming, get married!” Softly, but with some determination, the female student insisted that this was her dream and that she wanted to be an artist: “That is what I want. When I do something I want to do it will all my heart.” On the interviewer’s follow-up question she talked about painting and sculpting, but a bit resigned she proposed that it might be too late for her, being twenty-two years old – she had to finish university. However, she concluded: “No, it’s

not too late ... I would like to start painting again.” During this conversation the male student remained determined as if he knew what she ought to do and would eventually do. Without explicitly going against him, the female student clearly stated her right to cherish her own dream and to make it happen.

A whole group discussion emanated from the interviewer’s question about gender equality in Moldova. One female and two male students started a discussion on whether women in Moldova were treated as inferior or not. One of the male students stated “I don’t think that Moldovan women have problems.” A female student laughed, whereupon he argued that they had equal rights and that there was “no problem here”. If a woman was unable to do something it was her own fault, not the fault of the society, he continued. “Or the fault of the man”, another male student added. The female student maintained that women in Moldova were treated as inferior and made clear that “I respect that men are men, but they have to respect women and not say shut up because you’re a girl or a woman.” The relation between work and private life for women and men was exemplified by the different use of mobile phones. A male student suggested that men usually bought two, one for work and one for friends, whereas women were not used to having both work and home relationships.

Another theme was about who was the head of the family, the main rule being that the one who earns money is the boss. The son and not the mother was said to become the head of the family if there was no father. One of the female students disagreed in favour of the mother for being wiser and more experienced, continuing “Maybe I am wrong, but ...” A male student talked about the role of woman as housewife: “I don’t see why she shouldn’t be a housewife. She does everything she wants and everything for the family.” Another male student added “She may even have her own money. For some women this is a very good position.” “But”, one female student argued, “there are different families. I know families where the woman is the breadwinner while her man’s work is not so important for the family budget.”

The question about gender equality was discussed in a societal context. A male student explained “our society is still a bit conservative. Men are, in some circles, considered superior. Women have their areas where they are superior.” A female student related the view on gender and sexuality back to

the Soviet times of Moldova.⁴ She referred to “the communist mentality” with permanent fear, lack of education, and no talk about sex, “so we don’t talk about that”. At the same time, gender equality was taken for granted in the Soviet Union: “They said that there is no difference between men and women. We were all equal, ‘tovarisch’, on an equal scale.” But she added, a girl was nevertheless educated how to cook and only later did a woman realise that she could do something else.

Both in this group and in another group of somewhat younger students the researcher mentioned an observation of a couple in the city, a pretty, slim woman with very short skirt, high heels, and long hair holding on to a big muscular man with shaven head and a black leather jacket. In the group of the younger students the following explanation was given: “This is the Moldovan ideal. A lot of girls envy that girl. Women in Moldova want to find this man who is a superhero who would take care of everything. Women will have to be beautiful, provided for or offered money, even [if it means losing] willpower, and self-initiative. People think that she is a happy woman, having found this man. Even women in villages ... would like to be this girl.”

Another student added that “the attention this young woman gets is believed to be lost later on in the relationship. Men show attention to women only at the beginning. In the end she is just like an object that remains in the kitchen or takes care of the children.”

In the older group of students the topic was rather that of prostitution or escort services, and marital infidelity, although the way the couple’s appearance reflected issues of money and safety – physically and financially – was also seen. A male student commented that the woman was dressed like a prostitute, and a female explained that she thought of how rich men in their forties go out with very young girls. A male student commented: “Something normal, they cheat on their wife.” On the interviewer’s question about prostitution in Moldova a female answered: “Here? I don’t know.” A male student replied “What do you mean by prostitution? We have prostitutes, it’s normal and in a small country everybody knows, but it is forbidden, hidden.”

⁴ Moldova became independent in 1991 when these students were three to five years old. It is not likely they were much aware of the gender relations of Soviet times themselves except for the attitudes that were evident from their parents and grandparents, through stories or behaviour.

Potential victims of sexual trafficking or future academic professionals?

The youngest girls in this study were fourteen to fifteen years old, and were interviewed in groups both in a rural school,⁵ and in a school in the capital city Chişinău.⁶

In 2007, Catholic Relief Services implemented a 'Jobs plus program' in Moldovan villages with young, unemployed female teenagers as beneficiaries, a group considered most at risk for forced labour migration and sexual trafficking. This course suggested rural women were more traditional and more at risk of sexual trafficking than city girls. While the course helped rural girls with labour market orientation, it also confirmed the image of them as more vulnerable than others. The teaching seemed to balance two different aims. On the one hand, it intended to open the girls' eyes to university studies, and on the other, it was meant to channel them into the blue-collar work available. The pupils were asked to think of different professions that they were interested in and to anticipate what kind of person an employer would want to hire. The teachers emphasised the 'external look'. The message was that those badly dressed and giving a not-so-clean impression would not be employed. Finding a job required getting references and good advice from people who were already working in the respective area. They were told that they could "go abroad with a degree and a profession". Migration after having obtained a degree was seen as something to counter the risks of trafficking.

In a group discussion with the researcher the pupils laughed when I asked how many wanted to travel, the answer being "Everybody!" To Italy, Spain, Egypt, the entire continent of Africa, Israel, the whole of Europe. One girl said she would like to go to Asia or Africa as a charity worker in order to help people in less developed countries. Another girl wanted to go to a professional school to learn cooking. The teacher added, "to be a good housewife" – a statement apparently positioning the girl in Moldova. She said she did not know where she wanted to work.

The topic of building a family came up. A woman in Moldova was believed to be "18 or 25" when marrying. "It's not like in Europe, where they get married at thirty years old." One of the respondents explained that in Moldova "women are not totally without rights, but in our society men are always superior to women. And females themselves accept this. In rural

⁵ Where I attended a lecture, held a group discussion, and performed several group interviews.

⁶ Where I performed one group interview.

areas the main point is becoming a housewife. The majority of women in Moldova are closer to family than to career.” According to the girls, Moldovan women assumed a balancing role in their families and one fostering quality. Perhaps, it was believed, they made sacrifices for the family and for the happiness of the husband, or for the best of the children. The girls characterised Moldovan women as “friendly, elegant, simple, and modest.” The latter point was explained as meaning that they would not claim they were better than someone else. However, there were limits to the modesty of Moldavian women: “They are beautiful, and everyone in the world knows it. For the woman it is very important that people are giving compliments to her. Girls and women care very much about their looks.”

Dancing in Paris – some city girls’ dreams

Another group interview was held at the Colegiul National de Coregrafie in Chişinău.⁷ These city girls were not regarded as a conventional risk group in terms of trafficking. Compared to the group of rural girls, their education had a clear direction and their dreams appeared unfettered by worries about finding a good living, something that might also be a consequence of their social class background, a factor not investigated here.

Several girls expressed dreams about dancing and living abroad. Becoming a famous dancer was part of the plan for some of them. One example was a girl who wanted to dance “on a big stage in a faraway country like America, or Paris. Concerts all day long.” Earning a fortune was mentioned, for example, in connection with wanting to “live in New York in my own house” or to “live in my own apartment with a few colleagues”, feeling very happy. One girl wanted to travel to Egypt; another one said she would “try to see my family in Moldova every month”. Becoming a dance teacher could also entail going abroad: “I want to teach children dancing in Rome.”

⁷ The future dancers also studied languages, mathematics, history, biology, and other subjects. According to the headmaster they could all be expected to find jobs and already performed at the opera, ballet houses, and clubs, both classical and traditional Moldovan dance (called Joc). They had visited numerous countries, including Sweden. A group of 13 girls was interviewed for one and a half hours at their school in the absence of a teacher. It was striking that no one was permitted to answer freely without suggestions being made from the group. To the researcher it felt like talking to a group mind. To get an idea of their dreams the girls were asked about how they imagined their situation in two years and also about emigration – something here referred to only when connected to issues of identity formation.

For other girls – often those involved in the traditional dance Joc – their future belonged to Moldova. Although they wanted to live there, they also mentioned travelling abroad. Thus, one girl explained she wanted to learn a foreign language and presented alternatives to the dancing profession, such as becoming an airline stewardess or running her own sports business. While wanting to “live in Chişinău with my parents, go to the sea, and the mountains”, one girl also wanted to travel abroad. Another girl wanted to become a dance teacher and live in an apartment in the centre of Chişinău with her mother.

University students and ‘the Moldovan woman’

A group of female university students had precise ideas of how Moldavian women were perceived abroad. They believed that people in Spain realised “that Moldovan women are very kind-hearted”, in the sense of staying with the father of their children, regardless of circumstances. The female students were aware that the image of Moldovans held by people abroad was rather limited. For example, they pointed out that people did not expect to hear that their domestic helper had daughters enrolled in higher education. “My mum [told them] that she wants to see her girls with a university degree and that she needs to pay the tuition. People were very surprised about this.”

Almost like a mantra, most of the girls and women used the words beautiful, hardworking, and courageous when describing Moldovan women. Other characteristics were perseverance and the pragmatic dealing with what life offered to them, knowing that they could not expect help from someone else. One student explained that being courageous was forced on Moldovan women by their living conditions. At the same time, descriptions also included a lack of will and power. According to this more self-critical picture, Moldovan women lost confidence quickly when confronted with a challenge and they lacked the ability to fight, something that was also related to the financial situation in Moldova. One student suggested a paradox: “Women of Moldova have dreams and ideals about staying at home and being provided for by their husbands. This contradicts the view of women as powerful, being the one who works and takes care of everything.”

A difference between rural and urban women was described, the former being the general referent. Rural women were seen as the backbone of the family. In the villages women were believed to work more than men,

without receiving the appreciation that they deserved. “The man is considered to be the leader of the family, but the woman works more.” Women were also regarded as often being the ones heading abroad in order to earn money. In contrast to this ambiguous picture, the women of Chişinău were described as dependent on men, “so they are weaker”. According to the students, urban women were to a higher degree out for attention and support from their husbands. “Here in Chişinău we have more young ladies with short skirts that search for a man with money”, was one observation. According to another one, “women in the city know their price and they cherish themselves”. City women were not believed to go abroad to an equal extent as rural women.

Emigrating women also met suspicion: “Migrate? Why does she need to go abroad? Why doesn’t the money the man brings into the family suffice? She might meet an Italian man there and marry him, and forget about her family and husband.” Another female student objected: “I don’t consider it a problem that women go abroad. The state doesn’t permit them to find a good job and build a better future here in Moldova.”

Prostitution was a difficult issue for the interviewed women. “We must not destroy the image of Moldovan woman because of some women who work as prostitutes. My personal opinion is that they do this out of need, not for pleasure.” The respondents tried to avoid being explicit about prostitution. One of them found it “very difficult to pronounce the words” and added “Yes, they offer sexual services abroad.” One female student maintained that many women “step on their dignity to earn money”, to provide for a better life for their children and for their entire family. Their work abroad was to “offer undignified services”. One explanation for this was that they were forced to do this, however, they “didn’t choose the safest way to go abroad”. There they were believed to be controlled by men giving them strict orders that they were to “cheat on their husbands and even to sell themselves for work”. The interviewer’s question, whether this referred to prostitution, was answered in the affirmative. And it was explained that the bosses knew that the women could not go back to their country, because it had cost them a considerable sum to have left it illegally.

Gender equality or discrimination

According to the respondents, there were manifest differences in the view on gender at an early age. “A boy always says, I am a boy and you are a girl – whereas you are supposed to stay at home, I am supposed to go out and

have fun. And the girls around him also believe that.” Such attitudes were said to prevail into adult life. Even if women had plans for their lives, they tended to give them up out of a lack of courage and patience, students said. One woman gave the following explanation: “There is a stereotype that the man is the head of the family and whatever he will do, the wife will follow. And the woman will always say, he is my husband and I will need to help him with his plans. I will abandon my plans. And the man thinks that my wife should stay at home and take care of the children.”

Some of the female students commented about the lack of equality in their country: “Here the first place is [reserved] for the husband. No law exists saying that men and women are equal. A woman must listen to her husband. In some cases men subordinate women and humiliate them.” According to another view “women are a little bit discriminated against because they don’t have the same rights as men, or these rights are not respected”. At the same time women might long for ‘a man in the house’. One student talked about her boyfriend who lived with his mother. “What I really like is that he understands that his mother has no husband, and he is like the man in the house. He understands that a man should never fight with a woman, beat her or doing anything aggressive.” One student had come to the conclusion that she was equal to men: “I started having fears that I am not attractive or beautiful so I would have to wear a short skirt and high heels. But I don’t like that. I don’t see myself running up to my husband in high heel shoes and short skirt for him to give me money. I clearly see myself as equal to my husband.” However, gaining employment was regarded as easier for men: “The boss fears that the woman will marry and have children”. One student reminded us that there were some women in leadership positions in Moldova.

Being assaulted in the city at night, or in the family, is a problem, not only in Moldova. One student provided an intense overview of domestic violence: “Different cruel stuff happens like the killing of a wife, of the husband beating the wife, or divorce. A lot of problems. My father didn’t actually beat my mother, but a little bit (demonstrates pinching). I know it is not good.” Another story went as follows: “We have a family acquaintance, who is abused by her husband. She has three children and says ‘How will I take care of them without my husband?’ She is just like that.” The students had heard that abroad Moldovan women were treated as subalterns: “They like Moldovan women a lot, but take them as slaves and treat them badly. And I can tell you why, because Moldovan women are beautiful and they think that since we are poor we will take any job to get some money.”

These women interviewed were students and their dreams do, of course, encompass finding a job commensurate with their educational level. Becoming a social worker or an interpreter “would allow me to communicate with many people and to give them advice regarding someone’s life”. One female educational science student aimed at making a career and advancing to a position of responsibility. “I want to be a director of a lyceum or college, why not vice-chancellor of a university?” Another one wanted to work with fashion and “to have my own shop / atelier where I can sew the clothes”.

One of the interviewees reflected on how both her parents’ wishes for her future entailed different paths, one to a feminine coded work and one to the breaking of gender norms: “I haven’t decided about university or the police academy. I think I will finish my education in pedagogy because mother wants me to do this for her.”

However, the more enticing choice was the police academy favoured by the father. “There are some criteria, I don’t know if they accept girls. It’s very dangerous work.” She did not believe that it was an advantage to be a woman in this job, but would nevertheless like to interact with many people and be able to defend her country.

The stereotypical image about Moldovans is one of poverty and migration. The interviews often expressed a wish to go abroad, but not necessarily a desire to migrate. “I want to go to Disneyland. I would also like to travel over the whole world and if I love a country, to stay there. I would like to go to Paris, with my family, and all my relatives.” One student said “I would like to go to Brazil for the carnival. In Latin America there is a day of tomato fighting. I would like to go to Egypt or Turkey to see professional belly dancers.” Travelling is also described as an element of future work. A student of psychology would like to do research abroad and help suffering people. Another student mentioned her wish to become part of a delegation and to travel a lot.

Many interviewees expressed love for Moldova with different connotations such as the countryside, flowers, and being with relatives. Often they considered remaining in Chişinău, in a big house, as the most attractive future. However, they regarded it as unaffordable and migration as a means, hopefully, to be able to build a home in Moldova. However, worries about difficulties and deprivation were also connected to the idea of staying in the country. “I have values and ideas about life that are not respected here in Moldova. They tell me that it only happens in movies: ‘In real life you have to fight for it and have hardship like in Moldova.’ I would like to go back to the US; here I begin to lose my self-confidence.” There

was also fear of migration reminiscent of the discourse on trafficking. “I hear of different stuff that happens, making me kind of worried a bit. The young girls that live abroad, some of them come back, and some don’t. From what I hear it is not always good. I read different stuff. It worries me. I want to believe that this will not happen to me.”

Another important theme was marrying and building a family. “I want to have a good family, good children, and a good husband.” Migration might become necessary: “I think I would leave Moldova if I didn’t have a job with a salary that would allow me to have a decent life, to provide for me and for my family.” Here the extended family is included. Helping relatives is connected to a wish that Moldovan society, described as encompassing not only many poor people struggling for food, but also numerous rich people, would provide better welfare. Under the prevailing conditions it is regarded a necessity to support family members: “If something happens to a member of my family and I will need a big sum of money I will work abroad to do that, of course I will. If a member of my family will need an urgent operation that will cost tens of thousands of Euros or dollars ...”.

The description of a ‘good husband’ included him being somewhat older and a bit taller than the woman. Upon the interviewer asking why he was expected to be taller, everybody laughed and one of the women replied: “Maybe it is the mentality of women. When I go on a street I’d like my husband to be taller. It’s not nice if I’m short and he is even shorter.” Both appearance and personality were described: “He must be handsome, but not very handsome. Just to be able to go out with him without getting embarrassed.” Another request was him having “not too dark skin, white skin, dark hair, and black eyes.” The husband of the students’ dreams was often respectful and understanding in the relationship. He was not jealous of other boys and friends, and had interests and values similar to the ones she had. The ideal husband would also care for the family, the children and help with the household chores. For him, family had to be the most important thing in life. Husbands could also be seen as compensating for one’s own weaknesses: “He has to be freer than me, more courageous. Sometimes I’m shy, and I’d like him to be able to help me express myself.” Having a university degree and a well-paid occupation was seen as desirable “so he can provide for me as well”. The ultimate husband was the one who was “able to deal with any problem”.

Having children was an obvious choice for these women, despite the low Moldavian birth rate. Two children was the norm, first a boy and then a girl. As the following statement shows, the proper sequence might some-

times be connected to a corresponding order of attention. “I want a boy and a girl. To be like a mother, carry him, educate him, and him being like a flower in my hands.” A more traditional view of the adequate size of a family was also expressed: “I haven’t thought about the number of children. Maybe two, four, six, or ten. Previous generations used to have twelve children, so if it is possible, why not. It is said that many pregnancies make a woman more beautiful.”

Conclusion

This study on young Moldavians’ narratives seeks to contribute to an improved understanding of the construction of gendered identities in the context of traditional and patriarchal norms, mass migration, and individual problem solving in everyday life. Its informants provided manifold examples of traditional ways of thinking and stereotypical gender contracts. The women and men interviewed did not seriously question the man’s task to support and provide for his wife and family. The two sexes were assigned different life spheres starting with boyhood – going out to have fun – and girlhood – staying at home in the family. This was, apart from a few exceptions, apparently seen as the consequence of an essential natural difference. The prevalence of traditional norms was also highlighted in female students’ description of the ideal husband: taller, protecting, and mentally and materially supportive of his family.

The question is whether there are indications that it is possible to negotiate the traditional gender contract. This is clearly the case in regard to women’s participation in higher education and in the process of migration. Moldovan women are often stereotyped as naive and uninformed victims, but after independence in 1991 roughly half of the numerous emigrants from the country have been women, engaged in making a decent livelihood for their extended family. Thus, many of them have become (one of) the breadwinners of the family and that gives them an improved position from which to question and negotiate their gender role. Such material changes are likely to alter the situation of women in Moldova. The dispute between young men and women in one of the group interviews results, perhaps, from the male apprehension of women entering the educational arena and obtaining higher positions, both at home and abroad.

It is not so clear how the construction of a gendered identity is connected to the Moldovan national project of today. In the beginning of the 2000s, Moldova received much financial aid and practical support from

experts and NGOs from other countries in order to stop trafficking, mostly of women. The government had the difficult task of balancing the national economy and welcomed this help. Human trafficking is still an issue, but remittances from migrants and the stabilisation of the economy have improved the Moldovan situation. At the same time, the reluctance to become overly dependent on foreign experts has led to increasing unwillingness to assume the role of 'the poor European other'.



Crossroads in Chişinău, 2006 (Photographer: Richard Fairbrother)

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