

BETWEEN TRAGEDY AND REALITY: ARMENIAN WOMEN'S LABOR MIGRATION IN THE POST-SOVIET PERIOD

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In Armenia, as elsewhere in the former Soviet Union, women – who had entered the working world in vast numbers after Sovietization and enjoyed the benefits of a socio-economic safety net – have suffered most from the difficult economic transition. Currently, they constitute nearly 70% of the unemployed and when they are employed, women's wages are generally 50% less than men's earnings (Gyuzalyan 2000: 36).¹ Despite the harsh economic conditions that have characterized post-Soviet life, however, women did not turn to labor migration as a survival strategy until 1997. Instead, in the early post-Soviet years men were more likely than women to travel abroad as wage laborers. This practice is called "*khopan*" [working abroad] and in the traditional pattern of *khopan* migration, men would travel to work abroad leaving their wives to tend to the children and home.² In the Armenian model of kinship, where the mother is "idealized" and seen as "sacred," she is considered to be the hearth (*odjakh*), pillar (*syun*), or lamp/light (*jrak*) of the family.³ The current pattern of women's *khopan* migration, which supplements rather than supplants male *khopan* migration, upsets the traditional family structure and the division of labor within the household.

In this paper, which is based on fieldwork I conducted in Los Angeles and San Francisco from August 2000 – July 2001 with Armenian female labor migrants, I examine the narratives of migrants and the public discourses surrounding women's labor migration in the post-Soviet period.⁴ First, by studying the responses and accommodations of these women, some of whom I had met in the "original" field site, to the global economic forces, I examine the continued reliance on traditional cultural ideologies (e.g., sacred motherhood) and moralities for representing oneself and making sense of one's experiences in a transnational and constantly shifting context. Second, by examining the public discourses surrounding migration, I demonstrate how these discourses, which often refer to the same cultural understandings and ideologies migrants use to

construct their narratives, ignore the voices and experiences of migrant women. In this context, women's migration becomes the currency in a complex set of exchanges regarding the impact of globalization on Armenian society and culture.

Theoretical Perspectives

Economists who examine labor migration often argue that migration is caused by the "push-pull" of economic scarcity and opportunity (W.R. Bohning and M.L. Shloeter-Paredes 1994, Brochmann 1993). In this scenario, the citizens of poorer/developing countries are pushed out by the lack of jobs and they are drawn/pulled into richer countries that need their labor. The most avid supporters of the "push-pull" theory are the rational choice theorists who explain migration as being caused by people rationally choosing to increase their income by exploiting the wage differentials between sending and receiving countries. These scholars tend to ignore the cultural narratives, logics, and rationalities (cultural, economic, and political) that support and "normalize" migration. Michael Burawoy argues that this perspective of the global economy and migration leads to the objectification of global forces and the belief that these forces are both natural and inevitable. He advocates ethnography as an alternative means for examining how global forces are resisted, avoided, and negotiated in specific locations (2000: 29). He argues that in order to avoid postmodern pastiches or fragmented vignettes, it is important to ground the ethnography in local historical and cultural traditions (2000).

Similar to Burawoy, Aihwa Ong argues that our cultural insights and our attention to everyday practices and the relations of power can illuminate how the operations of globalization are translated into cultural logics that inform behavior, identities, and relationships. She argues that, since our focus, as anthropologists, is primarily on human agency and imagination, we pay attention to how subjects are shaped by structures of power and how they

respond to these structures in culturally specific ways (1999: 22). She adds, “whereas globalization has been analyzed as consisting of flows of capital, information, and populations, it is now imperative to also tease out the rationalities (political, economic, cultural) that shape migration, relocation, and all transnational processes” (1999: 3).

In writing about the rationalities that shape migration, Saskia Sassen, contends that migrations “do not just happen” (1998: 116). On the contrary, she argues, they are only one outcome or one tendency in a more general dynamic of change that has come about as a result of the economic restructuring in the last twenty years which has led to the decline of the manufacturing-dominated industrial post-war complex and the rise of a new, service-dominated economic complex that depends on and thrives off of the labor of low wage workers from the developing world (1998: 154). Anthropologists and sociologists have begun to examine the motivations and rationalities of migrants and how these migrants contest, manipulate, and accommodate the impact of the global through reliance on local interpretations, cultural ideologies, and strategies (George 2000, Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001, Kohpahl 1998, Parrenas 2001, Salzinger 1991). In these accounts, the migrants are seen as active agents who are aware of economic limitations, opportunities, and strategies.

In Armenia, where migration is a response to growing post-soviet poverty and hopelessness, permanent or temporary migrations do not “just happen”; there is a process of rationalization that accompanies the “normalization” of labor migration as an acceptable survival strategy/life option as I discuss in the next section.

Migrants’ Experiences and Narratives

Talin was one of my key informants in Armenia. I had met her in Yerevan during my first field season in 1993. During my later dissertation fieldwork (1996-97) I often found it useful to discuss my findings and observations with her since she seemed to be aware of discourses and trends that I missed. In 1996 she had a high-ranking research position in a museum and later that year she was promoted to an administrative post in the museum. But despite her education and professional achievements, she only earned 15,000 drams a month (\$30 USD) and was often paid only once every three- four months.

In the early post-Soviet years Talin lived off of money sent by relatives living in the US. As inflation continued to grow in Armenia, the dollar lost its value, and while \$100 was a great deal of money in 1993, it was barely enough to survive on

in the late 1990s as prices for food, utilities, and common necessities had significantly increased. To supplement the remittances they received from abroad, in 1997, Talin and her husband Grigor began renting their three-room home (quite large by Armenian standards) to some foreign NGO workers. They earned \$400 US a month and were able to live quite well on this sum. After some unfortunate events related with her husband’s family, Talin and Grigor were forced to sell their home in 1998 and to buy a smaller home in a less prestigious neighborhood. With the money left over from the sale of their home, they bought a booth and set up a shop in the underground metro passage in the Parekamutyun Station. They worked at the booth for a few months, but felt ashamed of the work they were doing, so they ended up leasing their booth to a butcher who paid them in kind by providing them with meat and sausages. Following the booth fiasco, Talin and Grigor created an NGO in 1999 that would provide artistic and cultural outings and experiences for orphans. They applied to the Soros and Eurasia Foundations for support, but both proposals were rejected. When all these local survival strategies failed, Talin decided to come and work in the US. In June 2000 she was awarded a three-month US tourist visa and she arrived in Los Angeles in August. She bought her ticket with money that they had saved from the sale of their home. Talin stayed with relatives until she found work, which she did after only being in the US for two weeks. Prior to beginning her job, Talin and I had many conversations about why she had decided to migrate and during one of these she said,

When women return to Armenia from having worked abroad, they never tell you the real things that happened to them. They might tell their husbands, but never anyone else since they are often ashamed of what they did there. I am not talking about the prostitution, but just even regular work such as cleaning and taking care of an old person is shameful. The women want to save face so they avoid telling people about how they cleaned toilets. This then drives more people to go since they hear about how you can earn \$1000 - \$1500 a month and then they don’t care about what they have to do to earn this, since this is more money than they can earn in a year in Armenia! They think, like I did, “I’ll just go and work for a while and who cares what I do, no one knows me there.” That is why people who would never dream of working in a restaurant in Armenia are happy to find such jobs in the US. The shameful aspect isn’t there. No one knows you and no one cares. It is different here [in Armenia].

You are always concerned with what people will think so even if you are desperate, you don't take just any job.

Talin was hired by a Russian-Jewish couple to take care of their 3-year-old daughter. As a live-in nanny, she moved in with the Spirovs and was paid \$800 a month. Her duties included caring for the Spirov's younger daughter, doing light cleaning around the house, and preparing meals. After a few months of working for the Spirovs, Talin started giving piano lessons to their older daughter for \$15/hour. She was quite content with the situation and often spoke about how lucky she was. She said,

At least I am in a good family. They have been very kind to me and they buy me certain things that I like to eat, even when they don't eat those same things. I can't complain. Even though this is so far from what I did in Armenia, I feel no shame in it. I am proud that I am supporting my family back home. And I am doing it honestly.

Talin's story reflects two key issues that exist in all the narratives I collected: 1) the women are working for the "good of their families" and 2) the work they engage in is honest and/or clean. When the migrants talk about themselves, the stories are always about how they have met with hardships and worked hard to overcome them. These hardships include a) getting a visa to come to the US, b) finding a good job, and c) enduring the difficulties of the job. Most of the women feel that their greatest achievement is that they are able to send money to their families in Armenia. For example, Lena, a migrant who worked at a large hotel south of Oakland, said,

I feel so independent now. I can work and make money and I feel powerful every time I go to the Western Union office and money to my mother and kids. They know I am thinking about them. What else is there than children in this world? So what if my hands are cracked from all the chemicals I deal with. I don't let myself see or feel that pain. I focus on what I am accomplishing. It wasn't always like this you know. I once had a decent job as a teacher, but now, I still can hold my head up high. I am doing decent, clean work, not selling myself like the women who go into prostitution in the Emirates.

The domestic work is justified or made sense of by the fact that while women are working as servants to others, they have not really diverged from the tasks or duties they complete at home as mothers— that is cleaning, cooking, washing, and nurturing/caring for the children and their parents or

in-laws. The women describe their work as "clean" (*makoor*)⁵ even though their jobs required them to work with "dirt" (human excrement and garbage) on a daily basis. They often contrast the work they do to the "dirty" (*keghtot*) work done by the women who have been forced into prostitution in Dubai or elsewhere in the Middle East. In this context, "dirty" work is not that which involves the handling of fecal matter or garbage, which in other contexts are considered "dirty" or "polluting,"⁶ but rather refers to sex work. As Lena, whom I quoted earlier, said, "I am doing decent, clean work, not selling myself like the women who go into prostitution in the Emirates," another woman I interviewed explained,

The work with the elderly is pretty tough. You have to have a great deal of patience to survive it. They [the elderly patients] are cranky, dirty, and they smell bad. But if you can think of the future and what your work is doing for your family you get through it. But I don't know how the women who go work as prostitutes do it. How do they survive? At least I have kept my honor. But they, they have lost everything. There are limits to what I would do for money and that [prostitution] is one of the things I would never do (Anna).

By explaining all actions in the narrative trope of sacred motherhood and emphasizing the difference between their "clean" work and the "dirty" work of prostitutes, the women seek to justify and make sense of their "non-traditional" behavior and their fragmented lives. They insist that they are sacrificing themselves for the sake of their children and that even though the work they do (e.g., housekeeping, babysitting) is considered "shameful" in Armenia, their motivations cleanse the work and protect their status as the sacred/moral mother.

Women's Labor Migration -- A Tragic Consequence of Globalization or a Pragmatic Post-Soviet Survival Strategy?

In the last ten, years numerous survival strategies have arisen in the post-Soviet sphere, including working in the NGO sector, engaging in various types of trade/market activities, and migrating to the West. As women's labor migration has increased so have the public discussions and debates over what this migration will mean for the nation (*azg*), the state (*bedootyoon*), and the future generations (*apaga seroontneruh*). On one end of the spectrum are sociologist and political activist Lyudmila Harutyunyan,⁷ who argue that Armenians should not "emotionalize" the issue of migration and that migration should be seen as a "normal" adaptation to the global economy. Harutyunyan contends that one of the positive effects of migration is the,

Obtaining [of] considerable material resources by the population of Armenia, in the form of remittances sent by forced migrants from abroad to their families. It is thanks to emigration that a great number of families have been able to survive during such a difficult period (2001: 62).

She supports her claims by pointing out that remittances from Armenian's abroad have accounted for a significant portion of Armenia's GDP in recent years (67) and that on average Armenians in the diaspora send around \$350 million US dollars annually to family and friends in the homeland.⁸ Although Harutyunyan recognizes migration as a survival strategy, she goes on to argue that because of the "radical-liberal" policies the government relied on in the early 1990s that supposed that the market would balance the migration flows, the political and socio-economic consequences of labor migration are only now being recognized and addressed. She contends that although labor migration was encouraged, directly or indirectly by government officials in the early post-Soviet years, the unrelenting out-flow of human and entrepreneurial resources is fast becoming a "serious negative phenomena" (67).

On the other end of the spectrum are scholars, such as ^{Armenian sociologist Meline Harutunian}⁹, who take the argument much further than L. Harutyunyan and suggest that migration is not simply leading a loss of human and entrepreneurial resources, but that migration threatens the survival of the Armenian nation.

Among other problems currently facing Armenia, the issue of emigration is stands out by its very destructive nature and serious causes... In this difficult stage for our country, *women largely strengthen the sustainability and moral image of the Armenian family, and consequently, of Armenian statehood*. However, emigration has its own negative impact on institution of the family. Separated families have emerged. Departing husbands establish new families and do not come back. Grandparents raise children alone when their mothers leave. Young women avoid marriage as they sense there is only a meager future for their families (M. Harutunian 2001: 46 - 47). [My emphasis]

M. Harutunian's argument is informed by and speaks to the discourses about gender roles and the nation. The following excerpt is from the 1998 United Nations Development Program (UNDP) Human Development Report titled, *The Role of the State*. It provides an example of official political discourse about the family and the role of women within the family in Armenia.

...Family has been more than just a basic societal unit. In Armenian national mentality, it has traditionally been perceived as being of the highest value in its capacity as an intermediary, situated in between the individual and the state. In the absence of statehood, the concept of "Nation-as-a-Family," a *sui generis* "familism," has evolved in Armenian society. The core and the unifying power of these ideas has traditionally been the Armenian woman, whose role is unique and decisive in the national history and culture. A history replete with war, invasion, massacre, genocide, and natural disasters shaped the Armenian family into a basic unit for viability and self-preservation (17). [My emphasis]

The important points in the above paragraph include, first, how the family has become a substitute for the state since Armenia has been stateless for many centuries, and, second, that women play a major role within the family and nation (family writ large). Stephanie Platz suggests that Armenians conceive of traditional kinship as being an enduring model that is distinctly and uniquely Armenian and that kinship is a central part of what it means to be "Armenian" (2000: 118). Susan Pattie also contends that in negotiating outside changes, the Armenian family has changed and continues to change, but the strong value its members place upon it remains (1997: 143).

M. Harutunian describes migration as a threat to the nation because it opens the way for the "introduction of European values and institutions that are foreign to Armenians" and which "devalue national [Armenian] culture" (2001: 46). For Armenians, this fear of disrupted family and cultural reproduction is often represented in the trope of genocide. The memory of the Armenian Genocide of 1915 at the hands of the Ottoman Turks is such a critical part of Armenian national and cultural identity, that it shapes multiple discourses and interpretations of events. The current migration from Armenia is referred to by many in Armenia and in the diaspora as the "white genocide" (*spitak chartuh*). As one of my informants said, "What the Turks did not do, we are doing to ourselves by fleeing the homeland."

Conclusion

An examination of the public discourses surrounding migration demonstrates how women's labor migration while understood and explained by the women as a survival strategy, has become the currency in a complex set of exchanges regarding the impact of economic globalization and the post-Soviet transition in Armenia. In some intellectual

circles in Armenia, there is a tendency to regard the impact of globalization as one in which global (i.e., Western, American, or European) values and cultural ideologies will destroy, absorb, or “devalue” local cultural ideologies, values, and beliefs (Harutunian 2001: 46). As Renato Rosaldo and Jonathan Inda point out, however, discourses of cultural imperialism that view globalization as the imposition and dominance of Western culture over the rest of the world fail to adequately capture what is going on in the world (2002: 25). They suggest that while the center (i.e., West) to periphery (i.e., developing world) flow is certainly a crucial component of globalization, it is not the only thing that globalization is about. On the contrary, they argue, peoples of the periphery do not simply absorb the ideologies, values, and life-style position embedded in the Western imports, rather they customize and interpret them according to local conditions, cultural ideologies, and values.

Finally, whether women’s labor migration is described and understood by public figures and scholars in Armenia as a “normal” survival strategy or “white genocide,” it is important to recognize that migrants adapt, negotiate, and accommodate the effects of economic and cultural globalization. They do not abandon their worldviews, values, morals, and beliefs when they migrate; rather, these become the anchors that tie them to a particular place, a society, a community, a history, and a culture. Therefore, what emerges is not so much a loss of culture, but rather a dislocation or decentering in which the migrant women, who are the bearers, vehicles, and representatives of these values and cultural ideologies (e.g., sacred motherhood), attempt to hold onto and preserve them outside the traditional boundaries of the home/hearth. There is the hope that these values and ideologies will remain untouched by the life-journey of the women who traverse conceptual and real spaces and that all will return to “normal” upon their eventual return to the homeland and/or reunion with their families wherever that may be.¹⁰

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Notes

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1 According to Armenian sociologist Hayk Gyuzalyan the average monthly salary for women in Armenia is 10,000 drams (\$20 US) compared to the 22,000 (\$44) men earn.

2 I am grateful to Khachig Tölölyan for pointing out how the origin of the term is also an indication of how migration patterns are established. The term "khopan" means barren land, and it entered the Armenian migration lexicon in 1957-9, when Nikita Khrushchev invested huge sums in the development of hitherto barren but potentially fertile agricultural lands in Kazakhstan, and insisted that each non-Central Asian republic send 'volunteer' laborers to the region. According to residents I interviewed in the villages of Horom and Anooshavan (1993) khopan migration of men occurred during the agricultural slow seasons and was a way in which men could earn supplemental income. The term is now used to describe any form of labor migration.

3 "Sacred motherhood" refers to the Armenian belief dating from Armenia's pre-Christian past when the primary deity in the pantheon was Anahit, the goddess of fertility, morality, and maternity. Sona Zeitlian writes, "Anahit was supposed to be a morally pure, virtuous

goddess who nurtured her worshippers, provided them with guidance, and comforted them in their times of need" (viii). She maintains that the belief in Anahit demonstrates the importance of the "mother" role in ancient Armenia. She claims that even after Armenia adopted Christianity as the state religion in 301 C.E. and became more patriarchal, the importance of Anahit continued as the beliefs related to Anahit were transferred onto the symbol of **the Virgin** Mary (Astvatazin). She adds, like Anahit, the mother of the Armenian family is the keeper and embodiment of the sacred light because of her willingness to sacrifice her own needs and desires, to dedicate herself completely to her family and to be loyal and virtuous (viii). As the lamp of the family (jrak), Zeitlian contends, the mother becomes the light for the future of the Armenian people.

4 For a longer discussion of these issues please see, Ishkanian, Armine. "Mobile Motherhood: Armenian Women's Labor Migration In the post-Soviet period ." In *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, forthcoming.

5 "Makoor" also means honest and sexually clean, neat, tidy, and pure.

6 Mary Douglas argues, "Our ideas of dirt express symbolic systems and the difference between pollution

behavior in one part of the world and another is only a matter of detail. . . . Dirt then, is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements.”(35). If we apply Douglas’ system of classifying “dirt” and differentiating it from “purity” in this context, then “dirt” refers to sex work and “purity” refers to housework and caring for others (children or adults).

7 Harutyunyan is the president of the Armenian Democratic Forum NGO and the co-director of the Center for Regional Integration and Conflict Resolution.

8 In 1998, this figure represented almost nineteen percent of the GDP (\$1.85 billion) in Armenia.

9 “Haroutounian,” variously spelled, is a very common surname in Armenia. In this article I have chosen to use two different spellings of the name because these are the spellings preferred by each of the authors.

10 I use “and/or” because increasingly many temporary labor migrants, especially those with grown children, choose to remain in the US and begin the process of becoming legal residents in order to facilitate the emigration of the children to the US. Since this is a very costly and long legal process, only those women who have adult children resort to this strategy. Most of the of the women who have children younger than age eighteen tend to return to Armenia after a year or two of working in the US. Immigrant run employment agencies (e.g., Worldwide) in Los Angeles are now beginning to offer immigration services to the labor migrants.