

The role of transnational and local migrant networks in women's circular labour migration

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ABSTRACT

In the context of increasing labour market precarity and regional inequalities within the EU, circular migration has become a widespread livelihood strategy for women from Slavonija, a structurally marginalized region in eastern Croatia. While migrant networks are often seen primarily as resources for accessing employment, this article extends that understanding by examining how both transnational and local networks also sustain care circulation across borders. The aim of the article is to explore how these networks facilitate the start and continuation of circular labour migration, and how they act as informal infrastructures that enable bilocal living. 25 narrative interviews were conducted with migrant women who circulate for employment in care work, agriculture, and tourism and hospitality industries in Germany, Austria, and Italy. The findings show that women's circular migration from Slavonija is sustained through migrant and local networks that provide access to work, emotional support, and informal systems of care. These networks help manage the instability and intensity of precarious jobs and the strain of separation from the family. Simultaneously, these networks reproduce unequal expectations, with women continuing to organize care from abroad while receiving limited support in return. They also imbue working abroad with emotional ambivalence connected to leaving home, as caregiving responsibilities persist across distances. Circular migration is thus not solely shaped by economic necessity and individual decision-making, but is socially and affectively sustained through gendered obligations, emotional interdependence, and uneven forms of care circulation embedded in bilocal living.

KEYWORDS: circular migration, migrant network, care circulation, women's migration, Croatia

INTRODUCTION

The transformation of the global labour landscape is driven by processes of globalisation and flexibilisation, which affect both paid and unpaid work across international labour markets and individual working lives. In this context, international labour migration has intensified (Castles, 2016), with migrants occupying low-paid and precarious jobs in the production and service sectors (Kofman, 2013; 2016). These patterns are also gendered through the concentration of men and women in specific sectors, occupations, or job types (Hewison, 2016).

Within the EU and neighbouring countries, women's participation in circular labour migration is shaped both by the labour market but also by the gendered division of labour within the household, as they navigate competing responsibilities related to paid and unpaid work (Morokvašić-Müller, 2002). The jobs available through circular migrations include seasonal and full-time jobs offered in the food preparation and service, the entertainment industry, sex work, as well as certain areas of agriculture (Lutz, 2010; Morokvasic, 2010; Lulle and King, 2016; Oso and Ribas-Mateos, 2013; Verschuur, 2013). Among these, however, the figure of the migrant caregiver has become an emblematic figure of women's migration (Kofman, 2013).

Migrant workers' experiences are shaped by the characteristics of the employment relationship, which include employer-provided accommodation, but also by the broader social context of their migration, which can amplify or mitigate risks related to job insecurity (Anderson, 2010), and by the regional context in which such labour takes place or originates from (MacDonald, 2009). Migrant and local networks are frequently conceptualised as resources in such migration, as facilitating structures that enable women's mobility, and provide a way to understand migration as a socially embedded process shaped by more than just individual agency or structural forces alone (Boyd, 1989). These are networks that maintain links between those who migrate and those who remain behind, by circulating information, support, and mutual obligations (Boyd, 1989). In this process, care, whether emotional, organisational, or practical, can also circulate, especially in the context of sustaining transnational family life (Baldassar and Merla, 2014; Lutz, 2018). Care circulation intersects with broader dynamics captured in the concept of global care chains (Hochschild, 2000), where the migration of women often leads to shifts in caregiving roles and responsibilities across borders.

This article examines the circular labour migration experiences of women from Slavonia, a region in eastern Croatia characterised by high unemployment and demographic decline, where migration to Germany, Austria and Italy has become a common livelihood strategy. While research on migrant networks and care circulation has emphasised their functional role in supporting migration, this article furthers this by showing how such networks, both transnational and local, act as informal infrastructures that help stabilize the precarious nature of work, but at the same time, shape the emotional ambivalence inherent in women's circular migration.¹ By drawing on narrative interviews with women employed in the sectors of care, tourism and hospitality, and agriculture, this article prioritises their perspectives to offer a nuanced understanding of how migrant networks facilitate and perpetuate circular migration patterns and structure lived experiences across borders. More specifically, the discussion focuses on how migrant networks facilitate access to employment opportunities abroad, how they function as sources of practical support and emotional ambivalence, and how they demonstrate the forms of care and collegiality that circulate within them.

CIRCULAR LABOUR MIGRATION: ECONOMIC, SOCIAL, AND GENDERED DIMENSIONS

The concept of circular migration, sometimes also called shuttle or pendular migration, stems from studies of internal migration, where it is understood as a process of repeated departure from and return to the place of origin (Newland, 2009; Wickramasekara, 2011; Skeldon, 2012; Schwenken, 2013). It is shaped by spatial, temporal, and cyclical dimensions, in which migrants are orientated toward multiple locations, move in varying intervals, and repeat these movements over time. Triandafyllidou (2013) frames circular migration primarily in terms of economic activity, including employment, trade, investment, and similar endeavours. While acknowledging that social and cultural ties may be involved, she stresses that circular migration is fundamentally economic in nature. For this reason, migrants who return home solely for extended family visits are not considered circular migrants (Triandafyllidou, 2013).

¹ The article is based on additional analyses done on the data collected as part of the doctoral thesis *International circular labour migrations: experiences of women from Slavonija* (Šarić, 2021).

Hugo (2013; 2015) highlights the existence of a focal point, with migrants maintaining strong administrative, familial, or social ties to one of these places, most often their origin. Despite involving transnational practices and connections developed during periods abroad, this form of migration is typically anchored in a single, geographic, and social space. Such attachment influences not only patterns of mobility but also migrants' long-term aspirations, often limiting the desire for permanent settlement or deeper integration in the host country. The emphasis remains on maintaining a balance between economic engagement abroad and social belonging at home (Hugo, 2013; 2015).

However, circular labour migration is not (only) a series of pendular moves but a process which involves continuous balancing of responsibilities across two locations. Morokvašić-Müller (2002) argues that women participate in circular labour migration precisely because of their roles in the household, using this form of migration to navigate and manage both productive and reproductive labour. Rather than seeking permanent settlement, migrant women often “settle in mobility,” treating migration as a strategy to maintain or enhance their quality of life in their home environment (Catarino and Morokvasic, 2013; Morokvasic, 1999, in Morokvašić-Müller, 2002; Morokvasic Müller, 2024). Circular migration often results in a form of bilocality, where migrants maintain simultaneous attachments, responsibilities, and routines both in their place of origin and destination.

Circular migration is commonly classified into two types: one involves informal, self-directed work-related mobility, sometimes called *de facto* or spontaneous circular migration, while the other takes place through formal bilateral arrangements, often linked to seasonal employment schemes or intermediary recruitment agencies organizing jobs abroad (Newland, 2009; Wickramasekara, 2011; Skeldon, 2012). The employment sector is a key factor in shaping and enabling these different forms of circular migration but so is the skill-level that the employment demands. Newland, Aguiñas and Terrazas (2008) differentiate “seasonal; non-seasonal and low-wage; and, mobility of professionals, knowledge workers, and transnational entrepreneurs.”

Women's circular migration patterns between the EU and its neighbouring countries have been widely researched, whereas intra-EU circular migration has received less attention. Triandafyllidou (2013) examines low-skilled migration patterns, such as Moroccan circulation to Spain for work in agri-

culture, and Ukrainian circulation to Poland, Italy, and Hungary, mainly for domestic work and agriculture. Lutz and Palenga-Möllenberg (2011), along with Amelina and Lutz (2019) study Ukrainian circularity for care work to Poland and Polish to Germany. Vianello (2013) focuses on Ukrainian caregivers in Italy, while Marchetti (2013) studies Ukrainian, Georgian, Russian and Polish caregivers in Italy. Another notable pattern of circularity includes the agricultural work of Romanian women in Spain and Italy (Augère-Granier, 2021). While these studies provide valuable insights into circular migration, most of them involve migration from non-EU neighbouring countries into the EU member states. When compared to Croatia, cross-border dynamics in such migration may involve temporary visa regimes, bilateral labour agreements, and more visible border regulations. These factors shape the circularity, legality, and temporality of migration in distinct ways from intra-EU mobility. Circular migration from Croatia to member states takes place under the framework of free movement, altering the conditions under which circularity, informality, and care infrastructures emerge. This highlights the need to explore how circular migration functions in legally open but structurally uneven labour markets within the EU. Studies focusing on circular movements from Croatia remain scarce, as does a general focus on women's employment in such arrangements. This research aims to address this empirical gap.

MIGRANT NETWORK AND CARE CIRCULATION

Migrant networks refer to social ties such as kinship, friendship, or community which connect migrants with other migrants, as well as migrants with their non-migrant significant others across time and geographic distance. What defines membership in the network is not migration status but the presence of a socially embedded relationship that facilitates or is shaped by migration. Networks play a vital role in facilitating migration by providing information, material support, emotional assistance, and maintaining obligations related to who migrates, who provides help, and who remains in place (Boyd, 1989). New migrants strengthen the network and lower the costs and risks for others, which encourages further migration. Over time, this creates a self-reinforcing process in which migration becomes more common and less selective, eventually forming a social infrastructure that sustains migration beyond the initial economic or political drivers (Massey, 1987; Massey et al., 1993). This social infrastructure not only facilitates one-

time departures but also supports patterns of circular migration, where individuals move back and forth across borders for seasonal, contractual, or care-related reasons, often guided by existing network ties.

Migrant networks are key channels through which emotional, financial, and logistical care is organised and sustained. However, networks are not neutral but shaped by gendered roles and expectations (Boyd, 1989). This complexity is particularly pronounced in the experiences of migrant women caring for dependent children, whose caring responsibilities are shaped by different stages of the life cycle. According to Baldassar and Merla (2014), even though care circulates across space within transnational families, its flow is neither equal nor conflict-free and is constantly shaped by internal family dynamics as well as external social and structural conditions. They highlight that care flows not only through physical and paid labour, but also through emotional and virtual exchanges within transnational families. More specifically, building on Finch's (1989) foundational research on family life, the authors refer to five kinds of support that relatives often share: financial help, housing, hands-on or personal care, help with daily tasks and childcare, and emotional or moral support. These forms of care can also be found in transnational families, though how they are shared and to what extent depends on the specific circumstances (Baldassar and Merla, 2014). Nevertheless, Lutz (2018) warns that focusing too heavily on emotional connectivity risks idealizing kinship and overlooking the structural inequalities that shape who gives and receives care. She furthers that unequal care burdens are central to the transnational social inequality, which highlights how transnational inequalities take shape through inadequate social protection and the racialised, gendered structuring of care work.

While caregiving and its coordination are key features of transnational family life, families can be sources of both support and strain (Baldassar and Merla, 2014). Within global care chains (Hochschild, 2000), the responsibilities of childcare and eldercare are transferred from women in higher-income countries to migrant women from lower-income countries, who take on this work abroad, creating transnational chains of redistributed care labour. This often involves long-term family separation and simultaneous continued involvement in managing households across borders, described as "present absence" (Haidinger, 2008: 127) and transnational double presence (Vianello, 2013; Morokvasic Müller, 2024). These dynamics have prompted a reconceptualization of both the family and household,

shifting the analytical focus from co-residence to relational and emotional ties. Transnational families, though often living apart, maintain a sense of collective unity and kinship (Catarino and Morokvasic, 2013), with technological advances enabling real-time communication, along with expanded and affordable transport networks, playing a crucial role in sustaining these cross-border social ties (Eriksen, 2007).

However, as numerous studies have shown, families and households are not unified decision-making entities. The transnational family is a site of both emotional support and internal power struggles, marked by unequal dynamics among its members (Herrera, 2005, in Parella, 2013). These unequal dynamics, shaped by gender, generation, and age, are central to understanding how caregiving responsibilities and migration decisions are negotiated (de Haas and Fokkema, 2013). Family and kinship structures play a central role in shaping migration decisions, determining who migrates, what form the migration takes, and how financial and social resources are distributed to support it (Pedraza, 1991). These same dynamics also influence how migrant networks and social capital are mobilised (Nawyn, 2010), as well as post-migration outcomes such as integration, the volume of remittances, and the ways in which they are used (Fleury, 2016). De Haas and Fokkema (2013) argue that standard household approaches obscure the role of internal power inequalities, which are essential for understanding the dynamics behind return and circular migration.

As outlined earlier, circular migration involves repeated movement structured by attachment to both the origin and destination. In gendered care contexts, this movement is shaped not only by economic factors but also by obligations embedded in obligations and relationships sustained through migrant networks. For women, the timing and repetition of mobility reflect caregiving responsibilities and emotional ties, with returns often coordinated around family needs rather than contracts alone (Šarić, 2024). These dynamics reveal how care and circular migration are closely interwoven through socially embedded forms of mobility. In contrast to dominant frameworks that view circular migration through the lens of labour economics, this study foregrounds the feminist lens, which emphasizes the affective and relational dimensions that make the repeated mobility of women in precarious work sectors possible.

METHODOLOGY

The aim of the research is to examine the role of transnational and local migrant network in the initiation and continuation of international circular labour migration of women from Slavonia, by focusing on different kinds of support the migrants receive or give, and the ways in which they act as a stabilizing factor of bilocal living. This is approached through narrative research which highlights the perspective of migrant women from Slavonia as they narrate about their circular labour-migration experiences.

A focus on Slavonia² was chosen as this region represents a critical site for exploration of migration patterns and networks due to its prolonged economic downturn and higher rates of emigration throughout its history. During the period of the participants' start of outmigration, spanning from mid 1990s up to 2019, Slavonia was marked by demographic and socio-economic stagnation relative to other Croatian regions, both particularly influential drivers of emigration (Beneria, Deere and Kabeer, 2013). The post-Homeland war period of the nineties has seen economic decline, with rising unemployment, depopulation, and poverty levels (Šundalić, 2006). Issues like depopulation and aging of the workforce were also pronounced, and the region also lagged in overall educational attainment (Živić, Žebec and Cvikić, 2016). Between 1991 and 2011, Slavonia experienced a marked population decline, with a 17,5% drop in the total population and an 11,7% decline in the resident population. These figures categorize the region as facing "extinction-type" and "severe" depopulation, respectively. The scale of this demographic loss was notably higher than in other counties and above the national average (Živić, 2017).

In Croatia, the last economic recession lasted for six years, from 2009, with GDP growth only resuming in 2015. The crisis was marked by a decline in all key economic activities and a rise in unemployment; however, Croatia lagged behind other former transitional EU countries in GDP growth (HGK, 2017). By 2016, the income level of over a quarter of Slavonia's population was below the poverty threshold (Croatian Bureau of Statistics (CBS), 2016). These poor economic conditions and declining living standards have pushed many to seek employment abroad (Župarić-Iljić and Bara, 2014), while Croatia's EU accession in 2013 made cross-border employment easier, further encouraging migration.

² Slavonia refers to the region of Eastern Croatia encompassing five counties: Brod-Posavina, Osijek-Baranja, Požega-Slavonia, Virovitica-Podravina, and Vukovar-Srijem.

Most emigrants continued to move to historically established destinations such as Germany, Austria, and Italy, supported by existing family and social networks abroad (Župarić-Iljić, 2016). Statistics kept by the CBS highlight a long-standing trend of negative net migration and increasing overall emigration from Slavonia, particularly following EU accession (Župarić-Iljić, 2016), showing that four out of five counties within Slavonia, Požega-Slavonia, Vukovar-Srijem, Brod-Posavina, and Virovitica-Podravina, have generated the highest share of emigrants relative to their population. The Institute of Economics, Zagreb (EIZ, 2018) also determined that in 2017, the counties with the most significant net population loss due to internal and international migration were the four Slavonian counties, Vukovar-Srijem, Osijek-Baranja, Brod-Posavina, and Sisak-Moslavina, with negative migration balances ranging from 3 600 to 5 700. However, this pattern reflects a trend of steady increase in outward migration. Most notably, Vukovar-Srijem County saw a 12% decline in its population between 2013 and 2017 due to emigration (EIZ, 2018).

Indirect estimates show emigration from Croatia's post-accession period was approximately 2,6 times higher than the official figures, with Eastern Croatia (i.e. Slavonia) among the regions most affected, "with around 230 thousand people having left Croatia and settled in one of the analyzed core³ EU countries in the 2013-2016 period" (Draženović, Kunovac and Pripužić, 2018). Using Eurostat and CBS records, Mesarić-Žabčić (2017) determined that 65 828 women emigrated to EU countries in the period 2002-2014.⁴ Slavonia is thus a compelling empirical setting for exploring how circular migration is sustained through overlapping local and transnational support networks, and how care, work, and migration are negotiated in contexts of structural marginalisation.

While situated regionally, the main sampling criteria were women's low-skilled work positions abroad, in the sector of care for the elderly in private households, and seasonal employment, in agriculture and the tourism and hospitality industry, provided they participated in circular migration for at

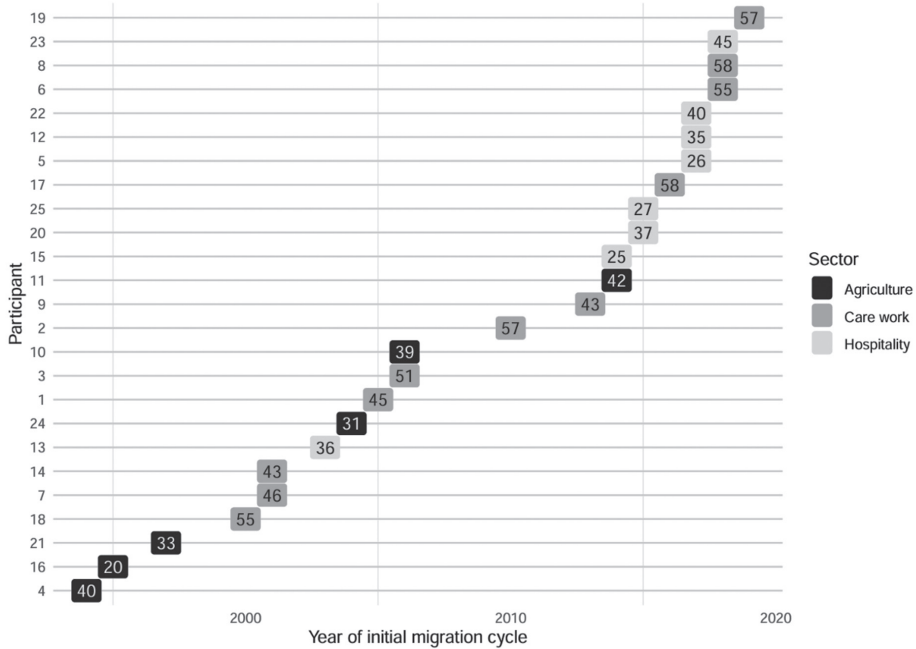
³ Core EU countries in this research were considered Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Sweden and United Kingdom.

⁴ In 2016, the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe established a task force to define and operationalise the concept of circular migration due to its economic and developmental significance. The resulting report underscored the difficulties in producing a uniform statistical definition applicable to its diverse trajectories, and emphasised the need for further assessments of the feasibility and comparability of longitudinal data across national contexts (United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, 2016).

least one year or more than two cycles to grasp cycle repetition. The secondary criteria focused on ensuring variation in the countries of employment and family structure. This sampling approach resulted in 25 narrative interviews with women from Slavonia currently working in private domestic care in Germany, Austria, and Italy (11), tourism and hospitality in Germany and Austria (8), and agriculture in Germany (6). The sample varied in other participant characteristics, such as family and household structure but also start and duration of their migration, and life cycle. The latter is shown in Figure 1, while their ages at the time of the interview ranged from 29 to 76 years. Such variations in characteristics enabled the identification of shared elements in their labour-migration experiences, which sustain circular migration despite other differences between them.

As shown in Figure 1, most participants began their migration journeys between the ages of 30 and 49, while seven migrated for work between the ages of 50 and 59. When considering age in relation to the type of employment, women tend to enter caregiving roles in private households abroad at a somewhat later stage in life, whereas younger women are more commonly employed in seasonal work. Figure 1 also reveals a broader sectoral shift in employment abroad, as there seems to be a gradual movement away from agricultural jobs toward work positions in hospitality and tourism, while care work abroad has remained a consistent form of employment since the early 2000s. While not meant to be taken as representative of the circular migration patterns from Slavonia, it is contextually relevant when combined with the migrants' experiences of the growing or shrinking of their migrant networks in these sectors.

Figure 1: Year of participants' start of circular labour migration by employment sector and age at the time⁵



The narrative interview guide prompted participants to share their labour-migration experiences through a generative question which elicited their free-form narration about working and living bilocally, followed by semi-structured questions on experiences of employment in specific sectors, daily life, maintaining transnational ties, and their reflections and perceptions of Slavonia. Prior to each interview, the participants were informed on the topic and aim of the research, as well as their rights as participants. This included the right to confidentiality, anonymity with regard to the removal of potentially identifying characteristics, not answering any questions they prefer not to, or completely dropping out of the research for any reason. They were also informed that the interview would be recorded and transcribed, and how the data would be used and stored.

⁵ Figure 1 is sourced and adapted from the doctoral thesis Šarić (2021).

Fieldwork was conducted in the period of 2020 and 2021.⁶ Due to quarantine measures and anti-travel advisory aimed against the spread of the COVID pandemic, 20 out of 25 interviews were conducted via telephone. This has proven to be productive and enriching, as these migrants are a population that feels most comfortable with distance communication due to their bilocal living. Moreover, telephone communication facilitated verbalisation during the interview interaction as opposed to face-to-face interviews, where aspects of interaction are left embodied or non-verbal, which was advantageous for the method of narrative interviews.

Narrative interviews were analysed⁷ using a multi-level coding approach based on the framework by Miles and Huberman (1994) and Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2014). The first level, descriptive coding, involved labelling segments of the data with content-focused codes that summarised topics, relationships, or events mentioned by participants. The second level, interpretative coding, moved beyond content to capture participants' meanings, emotions, and perspectives, identifying how they made sense of their migration experiences. At the final level, pattern coding was used to identify recurring themes, relationships among them, or explanations across interviews, allowing for the emergence of higher-order categories (Miles, Huberman and Saldaña, 2014).

The following paragraphs first discuss how women start their circular migration by accessing employment through informal local, mainly feminised, connections. This is followed by presenting how relationships between colleagues are based on the circulation of care, solidarity, and knowledge-sharing, which is, however, not without its emotional burdens. Finally, the discussion turns to the role of the home support network in creating emotional ambivalence and internal conflict while offering external support for the continuation of migration cycles.

⁶ All interviews were conducted in Croatian. The quotations used in this article were translated by the author.

⁷ Due to greater amount of data collected with narrative interviews, the project used case summaries which enabled easier recognition of data richness during data collection (Miles and Huberman, 1994), but also facilitated the organisation of data, sampling variation and notation of analytical insights (Bogdan and Knopp Biklen, 2007; Miles, Huberman and Saldaña, 2014). The interview transcripts were analysed via coding, which is relevant for this article, but also by creating three participant vignettes which more specifically focused on interruptions of circular migration, followed by their continuation at a later time. The role of vignettes is further explored in Šarić (2024).

THE ROLE OF MIGRANT NETWORK IN ACCESSING EMPLOYMENT ABROAD

The start of their migration cycles is economically motivated as participants narrate the destruction of their property in the Homeland war in the 1990s, low pensions, and difficulties in finding work, keeping work, or owning a private trade ("obrt") during the period of transition in the 1990s or the economic recession after 2008. Migration is also mostly considered as a last resort.

I have worked as an architectural engineer for 40 years, almost full-time. I think I went a year early in retirement because it was such a difficult situation in construction work. [...] Pension was so small compared to what I was earning while I worked. I supported the entire family. And in the meantime, as we lost everything [in the war].... (Danijela, 67, caregiver)

There is no work here. I tried, I waited, I suffered through, I always sort of hoped that some job would open up here or there, and it was all in vain. Half of my life has been spent waiting. I applied for a cleaner or housekeeper and then heard that another 30 women applied for the same position, can you believe that. I won't even mention working in my vocation, I crossed that possibility as soon as I finished high school." (Mia, 48, agricultural worker)

These narratives position migration not as a proactive opportunity but as a reactive strategy to long-term familial socio-economic destabilization, either through pauperization or material loss and lack of agency, which ultimately made their migration inevitable. Prolonged periods of instability often result in economic dependence on others (parents, spouses, friends); however, migration as a solution became possible if a point of contact with the migrant network existed. In this context of constrained opportunity, migrant networks act as both channels of employment, and infrastructure for managing migration and employment risk.

Contact is first established locally or regionally, within migrant networks that are both gendered and sector-specific, as women find work through acquaintances, friends, or kin employed in particular sectors. Initial contact occurs with the aim of finding any kind of employment abroad, with little or no criteria, including the sector of employment. This is reflected in participants' use of the phrase "she pulled me" abroad⁸.

⁸ Six participants found work through formal or informal agencies that act as intermediaries in employment abroad, and these women describe their access to work as "I found it" rather than through a metaphor of being "pulled abroad".

Through a colleague. A colleague went before me and pulled me in as well. (Svojtlana, 53, agricultural worker)

My friend here from the village has already worked a few times and pulled me in as well. And that saved me. (Mateja, 32, hospitality worker)

When she learned the language, she fought hard, she always tried something. And then she pulled me as well. (Petra, 76, caregiver)

The repetition of “she pulled me” phrasing emphasizes their reliance on trust, familiarity, and moral obligation embedded in the initial contact. Such entrance into the networks reveals them as gendered infrastructures, which offer employment opportunities but also implicit norms in how the work is to be carried out, which is further elaborated below. Four participants previously attempted to work in the sector of agriculture as it was the only migrant network available to them at the time, however, they did not establish circular cycles due to poor work conditions and accommodations.

As these job positions are low-skilled, sectorial change or even country change is straightforward. Women report that they are familiar with the kinds of job tasks asked of them due to their experiences in their own households, whether it be caregiving or working in the field or vegetable garden:

My mum, when she was 50 she had a stroke, and when she was 66, like me now, she passed away. [...] I have served mum for 17 years because she couldn't open her fist, she went to baths, healing spas 20 times. [...] And also, I was raised by grandmama, she was 69 when I was born so I was constantly around her. (Ivana, 66, caregiver)

None of it is different from what you do in your own home. The only thing is that you are timed. The faster, more, the better. But the plant is the same here as it is in Germany, only there they pay me, and here, it's for me. (Mia, 48, agricultural worker)

I have 24 rooms per workday, that is relentless pace, but cleaning is cleaning. You know how to hold a rag, and if you're meticulous, even better. (Blaženka, 54, worker in hospitality with experience in agriculture)

Even though this fluidity is skill-based in a formal sense, employers, employees, and networks construct it as an extension of women's “natural” capacities through the naturalisation of such labour. Feminist scholarship critiques such use of “natural” femininity as a justification for the devaluation and deskilling of women's labour in transnational care and service economies (Parreñas, 2001; Lutz, 2008). However, while Parreñas (2001)

finds that migration reshapes gender roles within women's own households through a redistribution of domestic labour, women's participation in global labour hierarchies remains constrained by socially inscribed roles. In the case of Filipinas, for example, the strong image of women as wives and mothers.

When formally inexperienced, women entering the caregiving sector rely on experienced caregivers to teach them work organisation and share good work practices. This is reflected in the participants' narrated experiences, where they describe themselves first as "learners" and then as "teachers", illustrating how informal knowledge circulates within gendered support networks. Ana, Dragica, and Monika described these roles:

Well, here I should mention that I'm not a certified caregiver. [...] I came to a private house, and my sister-in-law worked there. Of course, I was really afraid of this work because I've never done it before. However, my sister-in-law was there and showed me everything. (Ana, 60, caregiver)

Well, we talked, we helped in the beginning. When you start, we help each other learn. [...] Then, you teach the ones who only just started. When I started, they helped me with the language, getting around, and everything else. (Dragica, 60, caregiver)

Every woman that comes, I stay one day with her to show her. For example, last time, one woman came [from a town in western Slavonia], she came in the morning, and I told her: "Don't you do anything now. Do nothing, just steal with your eyes, look at what I'm doing, and try to absorb what I'm doing. And later, ask and I'll tell you all." (Monika, 63, caregiver)

Once migration has started, they enter and extend their migration network in a variety of ways, from meeting other circular migrants employed abroad, mostly women, to meeting Croatian women at their places of work, which is oftentimes even facilitated by their employers or superiors, or by travelling together from Slavonia to their destination abroad. The latter was particularly pronounced, since the increased migration from Slavonia in 2010 because of the prolonged recession and Croatia's accession to the EU, interviewees observed the rise of private van services that now regularly transport caregivers and farm workers from Slavonia straight to their places of employment or nearby locations. While these networks may initially be formed along ethnic lines, over time they become less defined by ethnicity. However, they continue to reflect the gendered structure of the occupations involved, as they are primarily composed of female workers. This is further

reinforced by gender-based segregation in accommodation arrangements, particularly in the context of agricultural labour.

As women gain experience working in specific sectors, their roles within the migrant network evolve from newcomers to more active facilitators of knowledge and migration. Similar to their shift from the “learner” to “teacher” role that occurs with time spent working in the sector, these circular migrants quickly become critical points of access to employment abroad for others considering this employment option. Ankica explains:

I earned their trust there, so people would sign up for asparagus picking through me. Season after season, I can say I've sent approximately a busload of people. They stay for a year or two and then give up, because it's hard. (Ankica, 57, agricultural worker)

Ankica's experience illustrates how women move from receiving support to becoming anchors within the network. Their networks become extensive relatively quickly, albeit the ones in agriculture have been shrinking throughout the years (see Figure 1). This sector has lost its appeal since the wider EU labour market and employment in other sectors have become more accessible, and Marta explains: “There's no one from Croatia now here [...] Everyone was from Croatia back then. Later on, the Slovakian women came, then Polish, and Romanian.”

Their evolving roles within the network are marked by the transition from “being supported” by the network to actively sustaining it. As these networks expand, however, they not only facilitate employment, logistics, and migration but also become affective infrastructure in which care, solidarity, and shared coping strategies circulate. However, this circulation is not without its limits, as the emotional demands placed on women can create new forms of burden.

LOCAL NETWORKS: LIFE CYCLE, SUPPORT AND EMOTIONAL AMBIVALENCE

As already established in research on circular migration of women (Baldassar and Merla, 2014; Fleury, 2016; Hochschild, 2000; Marchetti 2013; Morokvašić 2010; Parreñas, 2001), participants here clearly state that migrating would not be possible without the support networks that take on household and caregiving responsibilities in their absence. The local support network is

grounded in familial obligation, helps maintain a sense of belonging and connection to home, and offers reassurance that there is a place to return to.

Furthering findings from European studies of caregiving in private households (Lutz, 2018), this research first identifies familiar patterns of transnational care circulation in all types of circular migration, not only caregiving, which is notably expressed through mutual emotional support between migrant women and their families and kin. Despite clearly relying on their direct practical assistance, the analysis prioritises how local support networks mediate migrants' emotional well-being. The following paragraphs emphasise how care flows between individuals through everyday interactions, communication, and emotional support, shaping the migrants' sense of stability but also contributing to their emotional conflict regarding leaving home.

Dubravka's account illustrates several intersecting aspects involved in perpetuating her migration cycles: the emotional and organisational dimensions of transnational caregiving, the duality of emotional closeness and distance, and the ambivalence that shapes both her absence and return abroad. She reflects on managing parenting from a distance and staying emotionally involved in daily life, even when physically absent:

There's always something when it comes to the kids. Even when there's no homework, they might feel unwell, get sad, or forget they have a test and need reminding. [...] And since they're boys and stubborn, there's always some resistance, negotiating, bargaining, figuring out school and play. [...] It's easier now with WhatsApp, we see and talk to each other, sometimes it feels like I'm really there, but other times not at all. For example, [husband's name] manages everything well, but not quite like me, so he keeps messaging, asking where things are or how to cook something my way. [...] I've been away for a long time, and I miss everything constantly. Then, when I come home, I'm all over them, and they find me annoying because I just want to be with them all the time. (Dubravka, 33, hospitality worker)

While care flows in both directions, toward the home and back toward the migrant, the narratives reveal persistent asymmetries in this exchange. When it comes to family members, the participants' narratives suggest that in communication with their families, children, or parents tends to downplay the negative aspects of working and living abroad. Women often withhold their feelings and work pressures from their spouses and children so as not to burden them. This is especially common among caregivers who

conceal the intensity of the work, the conditions of work, or emerging health problems, which are often minimised or not mentioned to family members. It suggests a form of emotional self-regulation that shields significant others from distress of the labour migration.

Well, we'd talk about things around the house, what, how, what's going on. I was careful. I couldn't talk to them about how difficult it was for me over there, right? But he would tell me what happened at school, what life was like without money, and stressful situations with his dad, with this one, with that one. [...] And so, we have a pressure valve, a woman who also works in Italy and with whom you talk, you complain to her and she to you [...] and when you tell her, you feel better. But you could only do that with a woman who works there. Not with your children, no, no, no. (Marija, 60, caregiver)

Such unequal flow of care reflects gender asymmetry. Migrants continue to care for their household and family members, while the care they receive in return from the family is partial. However, it does not occur from neglect or lack of concern but from deliberately withholding of distressing aspects of their work abroad, topics that might emotionally burden their loved ones, or in some cases, jeopardise migrants' ability to continue working abroad.

Moreover, the life cycle stage of migrants and their dependents shapes how support networks are experienced and mobilised. For participants who had underaged children during their migration cycles, it was especially emotionally challenging to leave home, indicating that life cycle plays an important role in shaping women's migration due to changing care obligations at different stages of life. .

At first, my youngest who is now at university, he was 2 and a half years when I left, and he suffered after me a lot. Then the other who was 4 years older than him would say "Let mum go to work, mum will bring marks, she will bring chocolate, and she'll bring rolling skates." And the younger would take things out of my bag and yell, "I don't want chocolate, I want my mum." It was hard. And then when they got a bit bigger, I raised them one way and my mother-in-law raised them differently. I would tell them to wash their plates and cups and that they had to clean after themselves, and then the younger ones would say, "Go back to Germany when you're harassing us like that, grandma used to do everything [laughing]". (Ankica, 57, agricultural worker)

I couldn't take care of their children myself, but I made sure to pay for kindergarten. I felt inadequate for not being able to look after the children, but I had to earn money. (Petra, 76, caregiver)

Or when I'm not around, there's no one to look after them. Then [my daughter] had to put them in daycare; there's no one else to care for them. So now they're paying for daycare and everything else, and I'm here, but I'm not really here. (Marta, 66, agricultural worker)

Participants' life stage shapes the emotional conflicts embedded in their migration experiences and conditions the type of support needed and received along gendered lines. The support offered by the local network is, however, not always unambiguous, but is rather characterised by ambivalence. On the one hand, it may provide practical and emotional help, but on the other hand, it may also be coupled with reluctance, partial endorsement, or even disapproval of migration. These conflicting dynamics complicate the idea of "support," indicating that while such networks may facilitate migration, they may also impose emotional and social pressure on migrants.

Now I just say: "I'm going", and that's that. I mean, even back then, I said I'm going. But the reaction was: "Well, you don't know the language." And I said: "It doesn't matter, I'll learn it." Then he [adult son] said: "If anything doesn't feel right, let me know right away, I'll come get you." And there was a lot of travel, and I never liked traveling. And then he told me: "Come on, you'd get lost in Osijek, let alone in Germany." And that's how it was. (Martina, 63, caregiver)

This emotional dynamic and migrant's experienced emotional conflict becomes particularly acute during certain life stages. This is most evident when family responsibilities are more intense, such as when having small children or grandchildren or a spouse/partner in poor health. This emotional conflict remains unresolved and carried throughout the migration; however, mitigated by both the local (and migration) network through offers of understanding and recognition of the economic and familial necessity that underpins the decision to migrate.

It is difficult to be separated from your children. I worried about how they would manage without me; they cried after me. I couldn't handle it, not at all. It was hard. It was also hard for me not to go; I had to go. I had no choice. And now, it's not even that I have to go; I just go. [...] My friends tell me: "You know what, go while your legs still carry you, while you're healthy and able, what are you staying home for? And I said: "You're right, what am I doing at home anyway, there's nothing for me here." (Marta, 66, agricultural worker)

These accounts reflect how care circulates not only as labour but as emotion and obligation, further supporting Baldassar and Merla's (2014) argument that transnational care must be understood through both embodied and affective ties, as well as that women's migration is embedded in gendered moral economies of support and sacrifice.

In circular migration, emotional tensions are intensified by migrants' relationship with their home and regional belonging. While circular migrants may live and work abroad for extended periods, their social, emotional, and symbolic attachment is anchored in one primary location. As Hugo (2013, 2015) emphasizes, circular migration is characterised by a singular place of orientation, which clearly manifests in participants' narratives. While they may live between two worlds, they recognise only one place as home. Even when they spend long work cycles abroad, these places remain sites of labour, not belonging, as shown even by the one woman who wishes to relocate permanently but feels unable to because her family and social roots are firmly planted there.

It was always difficult to work there, but I always wanted to live in Germany. Only, I always had to come back here because of family. When I arrive in that [town in Slavonia], it's like I'm going with my heart, and not with my heart. I go with my heart because I'm going to my children and my family, but not with my heart because I know I'm going, as they say, "from a horse on a donkey." I loved going there, but I wish my family was there too. (Ankica, 57, worker in agriculture)

Rather than reorienting their sense of home toward the host country, circular migrants consistently frame Slavonia as their home and their focal point of belonging. These transnational households embody what Haidinger (2008: 127) terms a "present absence", where migrants remain deeply embedded in the familial and emotional life of home despite being physically absent, reinforcing the centrality of place in shaping care and identity across migration cycles.

CIRCULATION AND LIMITS OF CARE AND COLLEGIABILITY

Despite emotional ambiguity embedded in migrant networks of family and kin, such networks nonetheless play a central role in facilitating the start and continuation of women's migration cycles. This research shows, however, that other migrant women constitute significant support in

sustaining circular migration. They function as informal infrastructures of care and collegiality, enabling the exchange of practical support and resources, which aids their efficiency and quality of work and increases safety in migration or employment. Colleagues share information on open work positions, intermediary agencies and transportation, language assistance and learning, share knowledge on how to perform work, and offer guidance for navigating precarious work conditions or workplace conflict with employers, superiors, or managers. This mediates the uncertainties connected to the precarious positions of being employed within a private household and augments the sense of control over their work biography.

And then you meet more of your colleagues, and so that is how I sometimes, they sometimes call you to substitute for someone, so you don't have to pay agencies. (Monika, 63, caregiver)

I found it on my own, through my female friends, and after that, I looked for work myself wherever I went. Of course, you have to work properly so that people get to know you. (Dragica, 65, caregiver)

The interactions are not only logistical but also enable emotional resilience through practices of consoling, venting, and encouraging, and act as a collegial safety net in the context of missing formal protections. Emotional support aids *endurance* of work, whether it is related to dealing with “difficult” colleagues, clients, guests, or intensity and pace of work. From such an experience emerges a type of collegiality as they confide in and rely on each other. However, this emotional support and availability are not limitless, and the emotional labour required to sustain these networks can itself become burdensome. This is particularly evident in caregivers’ narratives, where care within the network is negotiated or at times withheld:

I keep everyone at a distance and have three colleagues with whom I communicate well. Every colleague that I see is having a hard time, I help because I've been through all that, I give her my support, and we do that in our group. You know, she starts crying, and I'm there for her. And we talk, I call her, you know you have to, and you call her and she calls you with “Help me, tell me, send me...” (Jelena, 57, caregiver)

There were many chances to spend time with them, but I simply didn't want to. I didn't want anyone else's stresses because we all have our problems, and now I'll spend half an hour with you, and you will fill my ears with your problems. I'm not interested in that at all, if I can help you I will gladly, but don't overwhelm me with what's happening in the house you work in (Danijela, 67, caregiver)

Much of what is talked about work is implied between colleagues without needing to explain details of the work-related difficulties. This shared understanding creates a sense of emotional safety, as migrant women can assume they will be understood without judgment or misunderstanding. Their shared experiences related to physically demanding tasks, emotional exhaustion, or employer expectations mean that support often takes the form of recognition rather than explanation. This tacit communication becomes a form of solidarity, especially valuable in contexts where their labour is undervalued or invisible to others outside these networks.

I converse more with my colleagues. You know why? Because people who didn't work this, they can't understand like the colleagues who work this job. (Ana, 60, caregiver)

I panicked, wondering how I would manage. The women continued to encourage me. So, I said, I'll go and give it a try. (Martina, 63, caregiver)

Broadening the definition of care beyond physical presence to include emotional or “virtual” support allows researchers to recognize that many more people in extended families contribute to caregiving (Baldassar and Merla, 2013) this volume highlights the agency of family members in transnational processes of care, in an effort to acknowledge the transnational family as an increasingly common family form and to question the predominantly negative conceptualisations of this type of family. It re-conceptualises transnational care as a set of activities that circulates between home and host countries - across generations - and fluctuates over the life course, going beyond a focus on mother-child relationships to include multidirectional exchanges across generations and between genders. It highlights, in particular, how the sense of belonging in transnational families is sustained by the reciprocal, though uneven, exchange of caregiving, which binds members together in intergenerational networks of reciprocity and obligation, love and trust that are simultaneously fraught with tension, contest and relations of unequal power. The chapters that make up this volume cover a rich array of ethnographic case studies including analyses of transnational families who circulate care between developing nations in Africa, Latin America and Asia to wealthier nations in North America, Europe and Australia. There are also examples of intra- and extra- European, Australian and North American migration, which involve the mobility of both the unskilled and working class as well as the skilled middle and aspirational classes.”,”ISBN”:"978-1-135-13225-5","language":"en","note":"Google-Books-ID: 9bS_AAAQBAJ","number-of-pages":"321","publisher":"Routled

ge","source":"Google Books","title":"Transnational Families, Migration and the Circulation of Care: Understanding Mobility and Absence in Family Life","title-short":"Transnational Families, Migration and the Circulation of Care","author":[{"family":"Baldassar","given":"Loretta"}, {"family":"Merla","given":"Laura"}], "issued":{"date-parts":[["2013",9,11]]}}, "schema":"https://github.com/citation-style-language/schema/raw/master/csl-citation.json"} . Despite their strong attachment to home, family, and kin, this research shows that everyday support, especially emotional relief and companionship as forms of care, primarily emerges among colleagues rather than through kinship. Their affective bonds emerge and are formed through labour migration experiences, which then effectively sustain them emotionally and practically.

This finding expands the understanding of care circulation and builds on Lutz's (2018) critique of idealizing kinship reciprocity in transnational care and overemphasis on familial mutuality, which overlooks the ways in which precarious labour conditions and gendered role expectations constrain the possibility of genuinely reciprocal care within families. Notwithstanding family or kin-based care circulation, the existence of peer-based solidarity demonstrates that circular migration creates new forms of reliance and dependency on others, an aspect overlooked in research on transnational care.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this article was to understand the role of migrant networks in sustaining circular labour migration of women by focusing on labour migration experiences of women employed in caregiving in the private household, and low-qualified work positions in the hospitality, tourism, and agriculture industries. Through these cases, the article explores how different forms of social support, from access to job opportunities to emotional and practical assistance, shape both the ability to migrate and the capacity to endure repeated migration cycles.

The main findings indicate that migrant networks act as key resources for accessing employment and mitigating the uncertainty inherent in the precarious working conditions of migrants. However, this research also shows that they are the primary channels through which care circulates transnationally and functions as affective, gendered infrastructures. They

both sustain migration and place additional burdens on women throughout circular migration cycles, as emotional labour is necessary for the maintenance of these networks themselves. Migrant women continue to manage caregiving responsibilities across distances while often receiving limited emotional support in return, particularly from their families. While at times self-imposed, this indicates the existence of gendered asymmetries and affective tensions embedded in support structures that offer external support but can also create internal emotional ambivalence, guilt, or conflict.

The main contribution of this article is that it reveals how migration is socially and affectively sustained, extending the understanding of the perpetuation of migration beyond resource-based and practical support. By examining how care flows through transnational and local migrant networks, this article highlights how these networks do more than facilitate mobility; they also embed the perpetuation of migration in everyday social and emotional life. In doing so, the article contributes to theoretical understandings of informal infrastructures of migration, gendered circulations of care and support, and the bilocality and emotional ambivalence that characterize circular labour migration. This shifts the focus from migration as an individual economic strategy to a socially embedded process structured by care, affect, and gendered expectations. As such, this article challenges the dominant economistic framing of circular migration by demonstrating that its sustainability hinges not only on material resources or labour market access, but also on socially embedded networks of care, emotional reciprocity, and gendered moral obligations.

The main limitations of this research relate to the challenge of equally capturing the experiences of women employed formally and informally abroad. These distinctions likely shape the degree of experience or perceived labour precariousness and access to protection, thereby influencing migrant women's reliance on informal networks. Additionally, the temporal dimension of migration (as seen in Table 1) poses difficulties for comparison between newly arrived and long-term migrants due to shifting migration regimes, labour market dynamics, and technological developments. These changes affect both the structure of informal support and the emotional intensity of cross-border connections both with their transnational and local migrant networks. Future research should consider a more targeted comparison to better understand how affective experiences and informal infrastructure evolve in response to broader societal transformations.

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Uloga transnacionalnih i lokalnih migrantskih mreža u kružnim radnim migracijama žena

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SAŽETAK

U kontekstu rastuće nesigurnosti na tržištu rada i regionalnih nejednakosti unutar EU-a, kružna migracija predstavlja rasprostranjenu strategiju ekonomskog preživljavanja žena iz Slavonije, strukturno marginalizirane regije istočne Hrvatske. Iako se u literaturi migrantske mreže promatraju ponajprije kao resursi za pristup zapošljavanju, ovaj članak proširuje takvo shvaćanje analizirajući ulogu transnacionalnih i lokalnih mreža u kruženju brige za obitelj i značajne druge preko međunarodnih granica. Cilj rada je pokazati kako migrantske mreže omogućuju početak i kontinuitet kružne radne migracije žena te kako djeluju kao neformalne infrastrukture koje podupiru bilokalno življenje. Provedeno je 25 narativnih intervjua s migrantkinjama iz Slavonije koje sudjeluju u kružnim radnim migracijama radi zaposlenja u sektorima njege u privatnom kućanstvu, poljoprivrede te turizma i hotelijerstva u Njemačkoj, Austriji i Italiji. Nalazi pokazuju da se kružna migracija žena održava posredstvom transnacionalnih i lokalnih migrantskih mreža koje i u ovom slučaju omogućuju pristup poslu, ali predstavljaju i mrežu emocionalne podrške te neformalni sustav razmjene brige. Mreže ublažavaju nestabilnost i zahtjevnost nesigurnih poslova te teret odvojenosti od obitelji. Istodobno se kroz njih reproduciraju rodno uvjetovana očekivanja, pri čemu žene nastavljaju pružati brigu članovima i članicama kućanstva tijekom boravka u inozemstvu, uz ograničenu uzajamnu podršku. Rad u inozemstvu pritom je obilježen emocionalnom ambivalentnošću povezanom s napuštanjem doma, budući da odgovor-

nost brige za obitelj ostaje prisutna neovisno o prostornoj udaljenosti. Kontinuitet kružne migracije ne ostvaruje se stoga isključivo iz ekonomske nužde i individualnim odlukama, već se društveno i afektivno reproducira kroz rodno uvjetovane obveze, emocionalnu međuovisnost i neravnomjerne oblike kruženja brige ugrađene u takvo bilokalno življenje.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI: kružne migracije, migrantska mreža, kruženje brige, migracije žena, Hrvatska