2 Risk, migration and migrant domestic work: Selected theory and research review

In the vast body of research on risk, it is rare to encounter a study on migration risks. The notion of risk has not been used extensively in migration studies, either, and even less so in research concerning migrant domestic work. This is surprising given the fact that migration very often is a gamble on a vector of unknowns. Migrants have to cross an international border, face the set of employment opportunities and work conditions in the destination country, and prove that they are capable of withstanding separation from home. Migrant domestic work seems to be especially risk-loaded due to its largely undeclared character, low wages, low social status and no upward occupational mobility.

2.1 Analysing migration through the risk lens

Why analyse migration from a risk perspective? The notion of risk has already been used in migration theories and research, but the work done so far has almost solely focused on economic aspects of migration. It is therefore of interest to use the notion of risk as an analytical tool, on the one hand, to understand the aspects of migration experience that go beyond financial considerations and, on the other hand, to find out what risk means for migrants. Is there potential ‘space’ for risk analysis in the current research on migrant domestic work? To find an answer to this question I provide an insight into the notion of risk, sociocultural risk theories as well as the role of the concept of risk in migration theory.

2.1.1 The notion of risk

When the notion of risk was first used in the late Middle Ages it was a spatial concept, related to voyage and maritime insurance. At that time, risk was understood as a phenomenon beyond human control: a natural disaster or a divine act. The meaning of risk changed with industrialisation in Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when it came to be seen as a result of human action, an event that is calculable and therefore manageable. The twentieth century saw a redefinition of risk and attempts to control it, largely due to new scientific and technological
developments. There appeared risk analysis institutes and agencies dealing with occupation and consumer safety, as well as traffic and environment safety (Giddens 1999). However, in the second half of the twentieth century, risk began to be seen again as less manageable: its causes were perceived as less identifiable and its effects as more serious than in the past (Lupton 1999: 9). Currently, risk is a popular notion not only among experts, but also among the lay public. According to Lupton (1999: 10-11):

[...] it may be argued that the contemporary obsession with the concept of risk has its roots in the changes inherent in the transformation of societies from premodern to modern and then to late modern [...]. These changes include the end of the Cold War, the breakdown of the socialist and communist states, the spread of communication technology and changes in familiar relationships and the workplace brought by the feminist movement, economic decline and growing secularism.

At present, risk is seen as a temporal notion: it is linked to an uncertain future. At the core of risk is not what is happening, but what might be happening. A quick glance at the dictionary definition of risk may leave us with more questions than answers. Risk is defined as ‘a situation involving exposure to danger’, as well as ‘the possibility that something unpleasant will happen’ (Compact Oxford English Dictionary of Current English 2008). A person or thing can ‘cause a risk’ to someone and a person can incur risk on himself or herself by engaging in an action. Acting ‘at one’s (own) risk’ means taking responsibility for one’s own safety or possessions. And ‘running (or taking) a risk (or risks)’, means acting in such a way so as to expose oneself to danger. So what is risk? Is it something external to a person (a source of danger that we are exposed to) or the result of an activity that one engages in (a risky venture)? Is it something that will happen in the future or something that might happen, but might also be avoided? Does taking a risk involve thinking about the possible negative consequences or ignoring them and concentrating on the possible positive outcomes?

2.1.2 Defining risk

The definition of risk can be seen as comprising three elements: 1) undesirable outcomes, 2) possibility of an occurrence of undesirable outcomes and 3) how these outcomes are acknowledged (Renn 1992: 61). I would add a fourth element defining risk: desirable outcomes, which are often the motivation behind engaging in so-called ‘risky’ activities. For example, when thinking about how to define irregular labour migration risks, we
can assume that the desirable outcome of such migration is to improve or keep one’s financial standing. Conversely, an undesirable outcome would be a failure to do that. The negative outcome can be caused by, for example, getting caught by state authorities for working without a permit. To assess that risk, one would have to consider the likelihood of getting caught working without a permit in a given country’s informal labour market sector. The individual would then need to decide whether it is possible to estimate the probability of this occurrence and how accurate the possible estimate would be. It is possible, then, to discuss expectations of potential migrants – that is, how they evaluate the chances of reaching or failing to reach the wanted and valued outcome of migration. These expectations are structured by the communal context (shaped by social and cultural norms), the demographic characteristics of the individual and the household, their individual traits, as well as the different regional opportunities. The different scientific perspectives disagree on how these elements of risk are to be understood and, consequently, how to define risk. The different branches of science also disagree on how far human knowledge reflects reality. Do our calculations reveal what is ‘out there’ or are they merely a reflection of ‘what we think is out there’ (Renn 1992: 62)?

The approach to risk in social sciences ranges from the realist approach, which claims that risk is real and observable, to the social constructionist approach, which introduces social and cultural factors when defining risk. The constructionist approach, in turn, ranges from ‘weak’ to ‘strong’ At the ‘weak’ end of the constructionist spectrum is the risk society theory, regarding risk as socially interpreted actual dangers (Beck 1992, 2000; Giddens 1999). Cultural theory falls somewhere between the ‘weak’ and the ‘strong’ constructionism (Douglas & Wildavsky 1982; Douglas 1985, 1992; Adams 1995), arguing that risk is culturally constructed and there is no guarantee that the dangers people seek to avoid are those that will actually harm them most. At the ‘strong’ end of the constructionist spectrum is the ‘governmentality’ approach, based on the writings of Foucault (1991). Its proponents assume that nothing is a risk in itself; rather, risk is seen as a product of historically, socially and politically biased views. According to this perspective, the identification of behavioural norms in populations, a process that Foucault refers to as ‘normalisation’, leads to voluntary self-regulation in relation to risk. Proponents of this view focus on the change of social structures and meanings as well as the relations between power and knowledge in the construction of risk.

2.1.3 Risk in migration theories

Few migration theories feature risk as the key notion. In general, these theories derive from economic studies and are based on the assumption that the migrant is a rational actor. According to this perspective, the
migrant acts to minimise or avoid risk.\textsuperscript{6} Risk aversion means preferring safer returns, even if they are, on average, smaller. Thus, a rational actor prefers less risky projects to more risky ones (Kuper & Kuper 1996). This approach to risk in migration was criticised by, among others, authors who introduced the notion of bounded rationality (Simon 1957; Wolpert 1964; Wolpert 1966). The rationality of the actor, for example, during the migration decision-making process, is limited not only by the lack of information, but also by insufficient experience, emotions and inability to evaluate risks lying ahead. Therefore, migrants or potential migrants differ in their aversion to risk. The principles of rational choice are only applicable to situations in which choice is institutionalised (Jaeger, Renn, Rosa & Webler 2001: 29). A rational actor approach to risk assumes a ‘linear relationship between knowledge of a risk, developing the attitude that one is at risk and adopting a practice to prevent the risk happening to oneself’ (Lupton 1999: 21). In reality, the ability of the migrant to calculate the outcomes of his or her actions is limited by their social framework.

One of the currently best-known theories using risk as the key explanatory factor is the new economics of labour migration (NELM). It defines the migrant and his or her household members as rational and thus risk-averse actors. The authors of NELM present the additional source of income gained through temporary labour migration of household members as a strategy to diversify the household’s income risks related to agricultural production in the place of origin (Stark & Bloom 1985; Katz & Stark 1986: 137).\textsuperscript{7} According to NELM, people engage in migration even if there is no guarantee that the level of earnings will be higher than in the place of origin or even if they have no guarantee of employment in the place of destination. This is explained by the assumption that the risks associated with agricultural production will be higher than risks associated with urban employment, which will diminish with time (Katz & Stark 1986: 135-136). NELM also points to institutional underdevelopment (market failures, inefficiency of welfare institutions) as a necessary condition for the shifting of responsibility of coping with risk from the level of the state to that of the household (Stark & Bloom 1985). Thus, in such conditions, a migrant’s household acts at its own risk.

The notion of risk is also addressed in other research dealing with temporary labour migration or circulatory labour migration (Chapman & Prothero 1983-1984; Chapman 1978). However, in contrast to NELM, the other approaches take into account not only income-related risks, but also broader opportunities and risks of political, religious and matrimonial character. Researchers point to the importance of security associated with the place of origin, such as access to resources and a continuation of social affiliations. Chapman and Prothero argue that the critical factors are not the time, distance and effort of migration, but ‘the nature of opportunities
and the risk involved in grasping them’ (Chapman & Prothero 1983-1984: 564). The nature of opportunities and risks is related to the different degree to which individuals who circulate commit themselves to specific places and communities. The degree of commitment, in turn, depends on their location in the household hierarchy, type of land owned, proportion of savings sent back and social capital available, where social capital consists of ties to people who have access to resources useful during migration (Chapman & Prothero 1983-1984: 598).

Risk is future-oriented, but so is migration. Thus, contrary to Chapman and Prothero, I would argue that time plays an important role in risk and migration. In neo-classical theories, time was considered important. The theories inquired into the issue of when one has to pay the cost for migrating and when one will receive benefits. However, those theories portrayed migration as a static phenomenon. When it comes to analysing the dynamics of migration, the following features need to be taken into account (they also have an impact on risk exposure and response):

- The decisions made by an individual at different moments in time (the influence of past decisions)
- The moment in the life cycle and within particular external conditions when one engages in migration
- The person’s experiences of mobility thus far (is it the first time or has the individual migrated before)
- The long-term influence of migration on socio-economic relations in the place of origin.

The success of pioneer migrants changes not only the income situation of migratory households in relation to other households in the community, but also the perception of migration (from one of stigmatisation to an ethos of migration culture) and the amount of motivation encouraging additional mobility. Massey and others (Massey, Arango, Hugo, Kouaoci, Pellgrino & Taylor 1993) defined such influence of mobility on other persons’ decision about migrating as cumulative causation. Thus, the migration decision of individuals and households changes the balance of costs and opportunities as well as the balance of risks in the place of origin. With time and development of migration processes, the conditions under which migration occurs change (Kritz, Lim & Zlotnik 1992). The pioneer migrants experience a different risk from those who follow and can use the already extensive social networks to gain information about how to enter and find work abroad, thus reducing the costs and risks of migration. With time migrants create ethnic enclaves or immigrant niches in the labour market (Aldrich & Waldinger 1990; Waldinger 1994), which may increase the security of migration, but may also lead to undercasting (Hoffman-Novotny 1981). During migration, motivations change with new aspirations for mobility and thus, new risk.
Risk or risk-related notions, such as uncertainty, also appear in migration network theories. Massey and others define networks as ‘sets of interpersonal ties that connect migrants, former migrants, and non – migrants in origin and destination areas through ties of kinship, friendship, and shared community origin’ (Massey, Arango, Hugo, Kouaoci, Pallgriino & Taylor 1993). Several authors analysing the theoretical aspects of migration claim that networks are structures that lower the costs and risks of mobility and increase the expected gains (Gurak & Cases 1992; Massey et al. 1993; Guilmoto & Sandron 2001). Thus, networks are institutionalised uncertainty reducers. This is similar to what some risk theories argue: for example, Giddens (1984, 1994) points out that social networks allow the maintenance of a sense of ontological security, which is a necessary precondition for agency (see section 3.1. in this book). They provide a certain routine and, combined with cultural rules, allow an individual to cope with uncertainty. Also, Douglas (1985) points to the network as an important source of information on what risk is and what it is not.

Based on the theories and research analysed above, in this study I will adopt a sociocultural perspective on risk. I will not search for an answer to the question of how much risk is present in temporary labour migration, because this would entail assuming a realist approach to risk. Instead, I will ask how migrants perceive, evaluate and respond to risks, and how this shapes a particular migration pattern. I define risk broadly, as a potentially undesirable outcome that is mediated by social interpretation. This ‘weak’ constructionist approach implies that risk in this study involves a social definition and sometimes a social construction of reality.

2.2 Migrant domestic work research: A ground for risk analysis?

Having briefly described the complexity inherent in the definition of risk and reviewed the role of risk in migration theories, let me now turn to research on migrant domestic work in an attempt to find a space for the notion of risk. Migrant domestic work is shaped by three main factors: gender, legal status and character of work. Firstly, domestic work is socially construed as ‘women’s work’; secondly, it is not treated as proper labour; thirdly, it is carried out in an intimate social sphere – the employer’s home. This intimate character of domestic work leads to the development of a peculiar relationship between the employer and the employee, which is very personalised, often emotional and characterised by mutual dependency (Lutz 2008). The majority of migrants working in the domestic sector are women. Although there are men present in this sector, they are an exception rather than a rule. Gender also influences the mode of legal entry, stay and work. Migration policies create fewer opportunities
for women than men to enter a state via legal migration channels. For example, one of the criteria for who is allowed to enter a country as a migrant worker is the number of years of his or her past employment. This creates a barrier for women, who have left the labour market to care for their families (Boyd 2004: 2). The state is also slow to regularise domestic work as proper labour because domestic work is carried out in private households.

So, where does risk enter the picture? I would argue that the intersection of gender, legal status and character of work influence the evaluation of risk by migrant women, as well as their exposure and response to risk. It is along these three dimensions that the interaction between family, state and labour market occurs. Women’s migration experience differs from men’s in terms of how their families, state policies and access to the labour market affect them. I believe the risks migrants have to evaluate are gendered. Moreover, greater pressure not to migrate is placed on women than on men due to the perception of women’s migration by communities as a threat to the integrity of the family or a risk of sexual exploitation. It can also be assumed that women are exposed to different risks than men owing to particular legal and economic conditions: in general, women have less access to the labour market in their place of origin and fewer chances than men to enter the migration destination as migrant workers. Let me continue by reviewing the main conclusions from selected research on women’s migration and domestic work and suggest where risk could potentially be used as an explanatory tool.

2.2.1 Family and household: An obstacle to or a trigger of women’s mobility?

The 1980s saw the beginning of research on women’s migration together with the recognition that their mobility differs from men’s and that migrants end up in sex-segregated sectors of the labour market, such as domestic work (Morokvasic 1984). These studies confirmed that women’s migratory opportunities are more restricted than men’s due to social norms and particular gender roles, which demand that women, among other things, be part of the family structure.

The family can be defined as a gendered unit of reproduction and cultural transmission or a space for gendered social relations (Anthias 2000). The family plays a contradictory role in women’s mobility. Due to the particular legal and economic context, ‘migrating as a family entails the greatest risks and monetary costs, especially for those families travelling with young children’ (Pessar 1994: 75). Thus, in many instances it is not the whole family, but a family member who migrates to work abroad.

In migration research, the decision-making process related to migration is frequently analysed in terms of a family or household strategy.
(Hugo 1998; Stark 1991; Sik 1993; Wallace 2002). However, this approach to the migration decision-making process often fails to acknowledge that the household is a contested area (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994: 53; Boyd 1989). Those most in power in the household decide who will migrate, but their decision can be questioned and even resisted by other household members. Some can decide to migrate against their family’s will. Overall, when having already engaged in migration, women whose social status in the place of origin has been low to begin with are less pressed to return home than are their male counterparts whose social status declines upon migration (Parreñas 2001; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994).

Although for many women supporting the family is a main motivation for engaging in labour migration, families can become a barrier to women’s mobility. The migration of mothers to the domestic work sector is particular to modern migration. According to Sarti (2008), single women and men for centuries have migrated to the domestic work sector, serving either before they got married or simply not marrying. Since women are regarded as the primary caregivers, migrant domestic work is sometimes analysed as a form of ‘care-drain’, with the migrants’ children potentially experiencing a care deficit ( Ehrenreich & Hochschild 2003). The resistance to women’s migration is based on a conviction that migration leads to the disintegration of families. Divorce, children’s poor school performance and their moral delinquency are also attributed to the migration of women (Hochschild 2003). Such beliefs result in the stigmatisation of migrant mothers (Parreñas 2003: 44). Not only do such convictions prevail in migrant communities of origin, but they are also present in the media and advanced by some migration scholars (Tolstokorova 2007). These public and academic discourses usually fail to take into account either the perspective of the migrating parents or the socio-economic context. In addition, they also ignore the overall divorce rate and family problems of non-migrating families in the given community, failing to see migration as a potential result and not the cause of marriage breakdown. For example, such factors as violence in the family or in marriage and an inability to get divorced may trigger women’s migration (Sørensen 2005).

In contrast to understanding the family as a group (who has to interact in close geographical proximity, sharing common living space), transnational migration studies regard families as a form of ‘imagined communities’ (Anderson 1983). Transnational families or households can be defined as those whose core members are located in at least two nation-states. Migrants create transnational households to maximise resources and opportunities. They balance the unequal levels of economic development between sending and receiving nations, the legal barriers that restrict their participation and settlement in the receiving society and the rise of anti-immigration sentiments (Parreñas 2001: 84). Transnational households are considered ‘broken’ because they diverge from social expecta-
tions of cohabitation among spouses and children. Neither do they meet the expectations of the division of labour in the family nor those of socialisation. Nevertheless, members of transnational families continue to interact, communicate and develop intimacy; they also have to deal with inequalities among its members across a spatial distance (Parreñas 2001, 2005; Mahler 2003). Family members are linked by emotional and financial ties and stay in contact by circulating between the countries of origin and destination or even a third country. They also use new technological means of communication.

There is an ongoing debate among researchers regarding the provision of long-distance care and the role of transnational care strategies (Escrivá & Skinner 2008; Baldassar 2007; Parreñas 2005; Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila 1997). Migrant women often come from a culture that lacks a social safety net (Ehrenreich & Hochschild 2003: 25-26). They develop different forms of child-care substitutions, leaving children under the care of grandparents, female kin, fathers and paid caregivers (Parreñas 2005; Gamburd 2000; Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila 1997; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994). Transnational mothering involves, on the one hand, pride these women take in performing paid work and, on the other hand, having to deal with stigma, guilt and criticism for leaving behind their children. The migrant women’s identities as wives and mothers are often deeply rooted personal attitudes and a primary focus on work can lead to their feeling increasingly insecure and make them question their identity. At the same time, the economic independence in relation to their husbands may result in migrant women’s increased dependency on exploitative working conditions (Morokvasic 1984: 895). For example, migrant women from the Dominican Republic working in the US recommit themselves to patriarchal family systems because it gives them power as mothers over their children (Pessar 2003: 28). The process of women’s migration is therefore full of contradictions and inconsistencies.

On the other hand, staying in the country of origin may mean that women have to face new financial and social challenges. According to Hondagneu-Sotelo (1994: 53), Mexican women who remain in the place of origin when their husbands migrate to the US, receive scarce remittances and little information from their husbands, while finding themselves forced to take over men’s responsibilities at home. These women want to join their husbands to make them economically and socially responsible to their families. However, according to other research, Ecuadorian women whose husbands have migrated are empowered due to their role in remittances management (Pribilsky 2004).

The reluctance of families to send women abroad also results from linking migration to sexual promiscuity, exploitation and prostitution (Kempadoo 2005; Pessar 2003: 24). This is why families are often against the migration of single women. Evidence from research carried out in the
US shows that none of the Mexican women who migrated while single was sponsored or sent as part of a family or household strategy (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994: 83). In general, the families disapproved of their migration and these women did not receive support from the family members. However, these migrant women did send remittances. Paradoxically, it is this sense of family obligation of migrant women, which seems to encourage families in other researched cases to send their daughters abroad. Daughters were less likely to spend money on their own needs and more likely to remit money to the family than were sons (Boyd 1989). In societies where women’s mobility is restricted, women who have lost an acceptable social status may actually be pressured by the family to migrate. This transgressing of socially accepted gender roles includes, for example, having a child when unmarried. These non-economic factors are closely linked to limited access to the labour market (Morokvasic 1984: 898).

One of the possible responses to mobility barriers is to become part of a transnational network. Transnational networks involve social, symbolic and material ties between places of origin and different migrant destinations (Anthias 2000). Networks used by women are generally women-centred. Hondagneu-Sotelo (1994: 72) analyses the role of women’s networks and claims that ‘by the 1970s and 1980s women who wanted to migrate to the US after their husbands were more likely to rely on the direct assistance of other women to subvert or challenge their husbands’ resistance’.

Migration studies addressed issues such as the establishment of transnational ties of migrant domestic workers from the Philippines to, among other places, the US and Italy (Gamburd 2000; Parreñas 2001). As already mentioned earlier in this chapter, social networks reduce uncertainty and play an important role in decreasing risks related to mobility. Still, many women do enter the destination countries on the basis of family reunion. Those women’s residence status depends on their husbands, and those who arrive as fiancés or whose marriage breaks down within a specific time period face deportation (Boyd 2004: 8).

Another factor that might trigger women’s migration are changes in the way the family functions in the migration country. Currently, many women in migrant destination countries are entering the labour market. In a research project carried out in Spain, Sweden and the UK, women employing domestic workers, although engaged in paid work, continued to have strong identities as mothers. This was particularly well shown in research done in Madrid and London, where women expressed a strong belief that hiring another woman for in-home care is the best solution as it allows them to work outside the home while still fulfilling their duties as a mother (Williams & Gavanas 2008: 20). This opens an important employment niche for migrants.

Overall, the family or, better, the household can be both a risk to
women’s migration and a source of support in coping with risks. The family may seem to reduce risk, with the household members ‘sharing’ risks in the place of origin and during migration by supporting each other. However, the risks faced by the household are not shared equally by its members, with women migrants having to cope more often than men with negative stereotypes and the resulting lack of support on the side of their families. Absence of the family support network may mean engaging into migration at one’s own risk. On the other hand, remaining in the place of origin may mean (though does not have to) increased risks for women. Women can respond to risks in the place of origin (such as violence in the family or unemployment) by migrating. They can overcome the challenge of having to migrate at one’s own risk by developing or joining women-centred networks. They also reduce the risks resulting from their absence in their households by developing alternative forms of care.

2.2.2 State entry, residence and labour market policies towards migrant domestic workers

Currently, the opportunities of legally entering a country and accessing the domestic work sector are limited. It is rare that countries have recruitment policies and regulations making it possible to work in the domestic work sector on the basis of a work permit. In the year 2006, only nineteen out of 64 countries analysed in a research had regulations dealing specifically with domestic work (UNF PA 2006: 52). Also, regulations of the domestic work sector differ from country to country. Southern European countries recognise the domestic sector as an area of employment, with Spain establishing annual quotas and Italy allowing the regularisation of domestic workers (Fasano & Zuchini 2002; King & Zontini 2000). The UK has also carried out a regularisation programme for domestic workers (Anderson & Davidson 2004). In 2002, Germany introduced a special recruitment programme for care workers for the elderly; however, recruitment covered only Eastern Europe and was just for up to three years (Lutz 2008: 46). Belgium, Italy, Germany and France have produced collective bargaining agreements, a result of negotiations between trade unions and employers (ETUC 2005: 17). However, efforts to professionalise domestic work carried out in private households via state regulations do not bring expected results, either because they are too expensive for employers or they do not respond to the demand (Lutz 2008: 43). Special programmes, like that for au pairs, for ‘work and travel’ or for volunteer service as created by some states (including Germany and Austria), make it possible for migrant women to enter a country for a short period of time and work in a declared fashion. However, entering a country with one of such programmes means that the migrant is not recognised as a worker and
thus has no labour rights. In this way, states attempt to bypass the labour laws (Anderson 2001). State’s policies do not encourage settlement of migrants working in the domestic work sector. Domestic work programmes, such as the Live-in Caregiver Program in Canada, which are a bridge to the permanent residence status, are a rarity. Due to lack of official channels of access to the domestic work sector, migrant women often engage in so-called temporary migration.

In context of this policy, migrant women in the domestic work sector often experience so-called ‘lasting temporariness’. Their migration lasts for several years, but their ‘tourist’ stay or fixed-term residence status in the migration country does not change. Meanwhile, their households in the place of origin become increasingly dependent on their earnings. Thus, domestic work that can initially be an opportunity, in the long-term may become a ‘trap’ for the migrant. In risk terms, ‘the chance’ is to earn a satisfactory sum of money compared to wages in the migrant’s country of origin. The ‘danger’ is getting ‘stuck’ with a precarious status of residence and with a job that is often undeclared and below the migrant women’s qualifications. This is especially true of modern migration, where the education level of migrant domestic workers is higher than in the past (Lutz 2008).

Through its policies and official discourse, the state shapes the meaning attached to the notion of ‘migrant domestic worker’ and thus the migrant women’s social status. The official discourse of the key state actors may result in denying migrant domestic workers the right to be treated as workers. For example, Filipina and Indonesian domestic workers are presented in the state discourse as ‘economic soldiers, criminals-prostitutes, pariahs, girls-slaves and/or commodities’ (Chin 1997: 353). Filipina migrant women are also referred to as ‘modern-day heroes’ of the Philippine economy; however, they are neither rewarded nor protected for playing that role (Parreñas 2001). Labour attaches (officials in the diplomatic mission who monitor the situation of labour migrants) also often use hierarchies, claiming that the quality of migrant women’s work depends on their nationality, with subordination and obedience presented as national characteristics (Chin 1997: 366). For the benefit of potential employers, employment agencies also portray domestic workers according to national or ethnic stereotypes, with Filipina women at the top and African women at the bottom. Eastern European women are seen as more hard-working, while Latin Americans as more loving, but slow (Williams & Gavanas 2008: 22). In the United States, a shift is visible from white foreign-born women being identified as the main representatives of the servant population by the end of the nineteenth century, to black Americans in the first half of the twentieth century and Latino women today (Sarti 2008: 80-81). Kofman, Phizacklea, Raghuram and Sales (2000: 38) underline the fact that immigration policy leads to the institutionalisation
of racism, by stating which nationalities are or are not allowed to enter the country and what type of work they are allowed to engage in. For example, Germany allows only citizens of specific countries from Central and Eastern Europe, among them Poles, to work in the domestic work sector (Ayres & Barber 2006: 27). Parreñas (2001) refers to this experience of women shaped by state law and discourse as a ‘dislocation’. Migrant women either subordinate themselves or resist the external force in society (in this case, governmental policies or employment agencies’ strategies), attempting to displace their identities; they find the resources necessary to resist or negotiate dislocation in the dominant social structure. In attempting to do that, migrant women may actually recreate or reinforce the existing hierarchies, for example, when migrant women take over domestic work they may reiterate the gendered pattern of domestic work as being ‘women’s work’.

Few sending and receiving countries have bilateral labour agreements protecting workers’ rights. In general, migrant domestic workers in the EU fall under the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, which prohibits slavery and servitude (article 4.1) and discrimination (article 14), as well as the European Convention on the Legal Status of Migrant Workers of 1977. In 2004, the Council of Europe issued Recommendation 1663 concerning domestic servitude, demanding a charter of rights for domestic workers. In 2002, the European Parliament passed a resolution on ‘regulating domestic help’, acknowledging migrant domestic workers as an especially vulnerable group in need of protection and providing recommendation on how to improve their working conditions. However, neither the European Parliament nor the European Commission has acted on this resolution. In addition, the European directives explicitly exclude domestic workers from being recognised as workers. Exclusion from legal protection places the migrant at a risk of exploitation (Cyrus 2008). A breakthrough came with the development of a convention on decent work for migrant domestic workers by the International Labour Organization, which was adopted in 2011. Migrant domestic workers are organised in some countries, such as the UK, in non-governmental organisations that defend their rights. They are also a concern for trade unions in such countries as Italy, Ireland, Netherlands, Spain, Switzerland and Belgium (Anderson 2001; Lutz 2008: 6).

Very few countries have enforced standard contracts for domestic workers that specify working conditions and protect basic rights. A legal contract provides for specific work time and job responsibilities, which should limit the employer’s power to command. However, according to research carried out in the UK, the arrangements are loose and constantly renegotiated, with the position of the worker being often too weak to enforce the contract (Anderson 2000: 173). There is strong evidence of
dependency on employers of migrants working in a declared fashion. In the UK, the context of declared migrant domestic work is characterised by coercion, which ranges from migrants being in debt (financial dependence), being dependent on the employer for their immigration status, being emotionally pressured by the employer and even experiencing death threats (Anderson 2000). The most common abuses suffered by domestic workers in the UK included: denial of time off, psychological abuse, not being paid regularly and/or less than agreed in the contract, having their passport withheld, not being provided regular meals or a bedroom (ETUC 2005: 14, 16). In the UK, domestic workers are excluded from the Race Relations Act and, as a result, are not protected from racial discrimination. The negotiation of workload in migrant domestic work and potential exploitation has also been addressed in the research on live-in migrant care workers from the former Soviet Union working in Turkey (Akalin 2007). Another researcher, Degiuli (2007), refers to this phenomenon in her article on elderly care in Italy. In Southern Europe, the migration status of migrant domestic workers is similarly not separated from their work permit (Anthias 2001: 156). If those migrant women decide to leave an employer, due to poor working conditions or the preference to work in a different job, they could be deported. In Italy, the residence status of so-called guest workers is not tied to the employer; however, the workers are limited to the domestic work sector (Parreñas 2001: 49). According to Parreñas, contracts bind migrant domestic workers from the Philippines to stay with their employer regardless of working conditions. They are not protected by labour laws and thus vulnerable to sexual harassment and abuse, excessive work hours for no additional payment and poor living conditions. In Hong Kong, those migrant workers who flee abusive employers face deportation. In Singapore, migrants are prohibited from marrying or cohabiting with native citizens. In the Middle East and Asia, they are prohibited in the contract from becoming pregnant. In Taiwan, they cannot enter with their spouse and children (Parreñas 2001). For migrant domestic workers, the economic gains achieved through migration often result in the loss of civil and political rights: they are not present in the state of origin and their rights are limited to none in the country of migration (Parreñas 2001: 48). It seems that migration and labour policies, along with the political discourse of some states, fail to provide migrant women with any protection. Thus, migrant women are encouraged to migrate at their own risk.

The area of research into the way legal status affects working conditions and access to labour rights in migrant domestic work seems to be prominent (Chin 1997; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2003; Schwenken 2005; Anderson 2006). Status dependency resulting from entering via family reunification or having their residence status tied to the work permit may lead to women falling into so-called irregularity. Irregular migration de-
develops when a state sets limitations on legal migration and it ‘occurs when a person does not fully satisfy the conditions and requirements set by a state other than his or her own to enter, stay or exercise an economic activity in that state’s territory’ (Bilsborrow & Zlotnik 1997: 41).

The majority of migrant women working in the domestic work sector are irregular migrants. In their case, irregularity occurs primarily through undeclared work and overstaying the official length of stay in the receiving country (Donato, Gabaccia, Holdaway, Manalansan IV & Pessar 2006: 7). According to a survey carried out in 2001 by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, it was estimated that from 70 to 80 per cent of jobs in the domestic sector are undeclared.\textsuperscript{17} Undeclared work in the EU is understood as ‘any paid activities that are lawful as regards their nature but not declared to the public authorities [...]’.\textsuperscript{18} Work can be undeclared due to: ‘undeclared hours’ as part of a declared job, a worker having one or several additional jobs that are not declared and the main job held by the worker being undeclared (Jølstad 2005). In France, the ratio of declared to undeclared workers in the domestic work sector was 5:1, in Italy 3:1 (ETUC 2005: 11). Undeclared work increases the migrant’s dependency on the employer and his or her vulnerability to exploitation. Undeclared work means lack of social and health insurance, unstable conditions of work and, usually, low-paid jobs (according to standards of the receiving society) (Boyd 2004: 9). Migrant domestic work is also frequently coupled with the irregular residence status. This is the case for the majority of domestic workers in the US. In Canada, women represented half of the total applicants who sought admission after residing for five years with an irregular status (Boyd 2004: 6). Migrant domestic workers in Israel also work in an undeclared fashion and overstay their tourist visas, thus making their stay irregular (Rajiman, Schammah-Gesser & Kemp 2003).

One could assume that the risk in migrant domestic work increases as the migrant’s status irregularity grows. For example, a migrant who has a residence permit, but works without proper documents, would seem less ‘at risk’ than one who does not have a valid residence permit and still less ‘at risk’ than a migrant who is trying to enter the country without proper travel documents. However, the degree of risk exposure depends, to a large extent, on the level of tolerance for irregularity, the degree of stateness, as Zolberg (1981) would have phrased it. Also, the risk of ‘falling into’ irregularity changes as the state introduces new regulations. Migrants attempt to respond to the newly implemented laws, based on information and experience they possess. In that sense, I believe, irregularity can become a reflexive strategy aimed at avoiding risks related to migration. However, the longer the irregular stay lasts, the greater the migrants’ interest in attaining a regular legal status, due to health risks and the prospective inability to continue to work. Concerns about lack of health
insurance and old age pension increase (Cyrus 2008: 188). Another reason why migrant domestic workers may want to work in a declared fashion is that this would facilitate receiving a visa and thus improve their mobility across international borders, allowing them to maintain ties with their family remaining in the country of origin (Näre 2003).

2.2.3 The character of the domestic work sector and service

The development of the domestic work sector depends to a large extent on institutional social support systems provided by the state and the market. The support systems in question cover areas such as child-care and elderly care, policies towards maternity, paternity and parental leave, cash provision to pay for care, as well as a particular ‘care culture’ discourse on what constitutes appropriate care (Williams & Gavanas 2008: 15). Four types of welfare regimes can be distinguished: conservative, liberal, sociodemocratic and fundamental. Particular countries tend to lean towards one of those regimes, but in reality apply a mixture of welfare solutions. So, for example, France, which is generally regarded as a conservative regime providing service-based care, has recently introduced some forms of cash provisions to buy care, which is characteristic of the liberal regime. The liberal regime leaves its care solutions to the market, with the state providing very few services and relying on cash-based solutions as well as tax incentives to pay care providers. One of the countries opting for the liberal approach to welfare provision is the UK (Kofman, Phizacklea, Raghuram & Sales 2000: 141). The state policy whereby individuals receive cash payments to buy home-based care is regarded by some authors as leading to an increased commodification and marketisation of care (Anderson 2001; Lutz 2008; Williams & Gavanas 2008: 14). The sociodemocratic regime prevails in Scandinavian countries and is characterised by a high degree of decommodification and access to well-developed child-care facilities. The fundamental regime (Spain, Portugal, Greece and, to a lesser extent, Italy) features little state welfare provision but calls for the support from extended family (Kofman et al. 2000: 141). At the supranational level, the EU developed a directive on parental leave. Also within the EU, there is an increased participation of mothers in paid work and the development of child-care policies by states. State policies that provide extensive services and cash support to working mothers, attempting to equalise the opportunities among men and women, may be accompanied by a gendered division of household chores in the families (Kofman et. al 2000: 143).

The domestic work sector can be divided into employees living with their employer (living-in) and those living separately (living-out). Living conditions affect working conditions. Living-in can be understood as a form of low-risk entrance in migration at first glance. According to
Anderson (2000: 40), living-in minimises expenses, secures work, accommodation and often food. It also gives shelter from the police and facilitates adaptation to the new language and culture. This is important for women who initially do not know the receiving society’s language, have few migrant ties, are sometimes in debt and have an irregular residence status (Momsen 1999: 6). However, living-in has many drawbacks. Combined with the nature of care work, it means spending most of the time inside the household, which can lead to isolation. Permanent availability – being constantly ‘at work’ – is highly psychologically strenuous. Migrant women have little control over their working hours. As Anderson puts it: ‘to have to work twenty-four hours at an ill-defined job risks serious exploitation’ (2000: 43). The migrant is caught between the public and the private domain where, on the one hand, working and living in the employer’s private sphere she is treated as ‘part of the family’, and on the other, she remains a worker. In addition, migrant women have few opportunities to meet other migrants, exchange information and create their own networks. Living-in is also characterised by a lack of privacy. A migrant is dependent on the employer for her work, accommodation and her free time. She is an easy target for labour exploitation, including physical and psychological abuse. Moukarbel (2009: 159) wrote about the employer engaging in ‘symbolic violence’, to use Bourdieu’s concept. They manipulate the migrants into accepting as ‘natural’ the employer’s dominance and treating migrants as their ‘possessions’.

Living-out is characterised by having several jobs or additional part-time work on top of the main job (Anderson 2000: 44). Migrants who live-out initially have to respond to higher risks than workers who live-in. They must learn about housing and work possibilities, often without knowing the language of the receiving society. They have to cut expenses by accepting poor living conditions. Another drawback is the time and cost related to travelling to various employers (Anderson 2000: 46). In addition, those migrants often have their own domestic and family responsibilities when they return from work. However, they have more independence and better-defined work duties than those who live-in. According to research, migrant women in this sector often start as live-in domestic workers and, having gained experience, move to live-out (Anderson 2000: 47). In Southern Europe (Greece, Spain and Italy), the majority of migrant domestic workers live-in while in Northern Europe (Germany and France), migrant domestic workers seem primarily to live-out, with many agencies in France dealing with migrant domestic workers (Anderson 2000: 66-79).

Domestic work means engaging in a work relationship in a household. Working in someone’s household requires from workers an ability to integrate into the employer’s home, respecting the different personal spaces and habits of employers (Lutz 2008: 2). A tension exists between the need
to employ someone to carry out domestic tasks, on the one hand, and the
need to preserve the intimate character of home, on the other. This tension
results from the belief in the home as ‘private’ remaining in opposition to
the market-productive as ‘public’. The market, although associated with
rationality and modernity, is also imagined as having self-interested actors
who compete for resources. Relations between actors on the market are
amoral, governed by contract. In contrast, home is based on moral norms
and characterised by relations guided by emotions (Anderson 2006: 9).
The woman is stereotypically regarded as more affective than the man.
Thus, employing a woman to carry out domestic services, to some extent
exacerbates the tension of having an employee in one’s home.

Currently, domestic work is constructed as ‘women’s work’. The percep-
tion of domestic work as women’s work results mainly from the
gendered division of housework, with unwaged domestic chores con-
tinuing to be primarily women’s responsibility (Anderson 2001; Andall
2000). It is more common for men and women to share child-care, but
these changes are slow. Men also work in the domestic work sector in
Europe; however, this is an exception rather than a rule. Remunerated
house and care work partially replaces or complements work done without
financial compensation. Paid domestic work is a response to an assump-
tion built into the welfare state that women ought to combine waged work
and unpaid domestic work. Employing someone to perform domestic
work changes it into a remunerated activity, but the cultural understand-
ing of it as ‘women’s work’ remains. Domestic work is also primarily an
exchange between women. A migrant woman takes over the chores of
another woman. Women who are the employers of migrant domestic
workers are part of the so-called post-feminist paradigm, with women
outsourcing domestic chores to reconcile their waged work and family life
(Andall 2000).

In general, women receive low wages for working in jobs labelled as
women’s work. Authors representing the so-called devaluation perspective
claim that the low wages in women’s occupations, including care work,
result from a cultural bias, which depreciates women and thus the work
they do (England 2005; Anthias 2001; Anderson 2000; Aronson and
Neysmith 1997; Murray 1996). Murray (1996) claims that the assumed
moral value received when caring for someone is often regarded as
compensation for the low payment received for this type of work. Another
false justification for accepting poorly paid jobs is presenting migration
as the only chance for those women to engage in waged work, ‘a blessing
of modern societies to the Third World woman’ (Morokvasic 1984: 889).
In fact, as Morokvasic (1984) argues, migrant women often had a higher
participation rate in the labour market in their country of origin than
women in the country of destination. According to her, there is no evidence
that migration results in the improvement of migrant women’s status –
both in financial and social terms – and in a more egalitarian relationship between men and women migrants. However, other authors claim that migration for women may also mean the chance, if not to emancipate from a patriarchal system, then at least to weaken patriarchal relations. A redefinition of gender roles and division of labour in the household occurs: during migration, women acquire a degree of economic and social autonomy that they previously lacked (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994). This was the case, for example, of Dominican migrant women in the US (Pessar 2003). The low wages paid for domestic work increase migrant women’s access to this type of employment. As Massey wrote (1993: 443-444):

...the negative qualities that people in industrialized countries attach to low-wage jobs, for example, may open up employment opportunities to foreign workers, thereby raising their expected earnings, increasing their ability to overcome risk and credit constraints, and enabling households to achieve relative income gains by sending family members abroad.

The devaluation of wages in domestic work can be explained by ethnicity and class. The migrant women who perform remunerated care work and who are generally of a different ethnic and class background from their employers are paid the lowest of all care workers (Misra, Merz & Woodring 2004; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2003; Romero 1992). There are also differences among the migrants, with some ethnic groups having higher wages and better working conditions than others. In general, it seems that the fewer ‘similarities’ between the migrant and the native worker, the higher the risk of being at the low-end spectrum of the domestic sector in terms of income and social prestige.

With regard to services provided by migrants, we can talk about the interaction of three groups of women of different ethnicity and class in the two countries: firstly, women who are the employers and belong to the middle or upper class; secondly, migrant women who work as domestics; and thirdly, women who work as domestic workers in their own country because they cannot afford to migrate to work abroad and therefore care for the children and parents of those who migrate (Parreñas 2001: 73). The continuity of domestic work and the link between social inequality and care work is visible in the fact that some of the migrant women who work as domestic workers also themselves employ care workers or housekeepers in their countries of origin. For instance, this is the case with Filipino migrant domestic workers. Lan (2003) refers to this phenomenon as the ‘maid/madame’ boundary.

The work relationship between the employer and the migrant worker is characterised by reproduction and negotiation of structural inequality, based on such aspects as ethnicity, class, gender and citizenship (Parreñas
The relationship between women of different legal, social and material status creates particular dependencies. These dependencies can result in migrants being excessively ‘managed’ by the women who employ them, thus opening grounds for labour exploitation with an increase of workload without a concomitant increase of wages. Anderson (2000: 6) points to the fact that since the worker is located in the employer’s home, she is dependent on the employer for more than employment only. What is more, this work exchange between the two women requires a peculiar type of control of emotions. Women who employ migrants in their household do not want to be emotionally ‘replaced’ by the nanny and they do not want their position in the household to be questioned (Lutz 2008). In her work on Latina immigrant domestic workers in Los Angeles in the mid- to late 1990s, Hondagneu-Sotelo (2003: 63-65) analyses the role of power relations between the migrant and the employer, their unequal social roles and the resulting conflict in this type of work. Migrant women themselves may also recreate ethnic and national hierarchies imposed on them by the employers. They claim to be better domestic workers than migrant women from other countries (Parreñas 2001: 152). While the employment of a domestic worker in some cases does allow women to enter or continue pursuing a professional career, there are also those women who, while employing a migrant worker, remain themselves in the domestic sphere. In some cases, it is because of their age and inability to run the household without help; in others, it is due to a need to reaffirm their social status and lifestyle by, as Anderson (2000: 17) refers to it, ‘not doing the dirty work’. Working mothers wanting somehow to be the ‘ideal housewife’ without quitting their jobs on the labour market require a certain ‘invisibility’ of the migrant worker, who takes over some of the women’s responsibilities in the household. This is similar to the findings of Rivas (2003: 73) in her research on care workers or so-called ‘personal attendance’ of persons with disabilities. She points to the social invisibility of those workers, who have to ‘disappear’ because those who are taken care of want to be regarded as ‘independent’. This relationship leads to the construction of two identities: caregivers are seen as invisible and care receivers as independent. The ‘invisibility’ of migrant domestic workers was also analysed in a study on Sri Lankan maids in Lebanon. Racist treatment by employers, who were ‘disgusted’ by their employees, stemmed from power relations in the household. The dominance of the employer and the vulnerability of the migrant women was due to the fact that they were poor, had little opportunity to contact their families at home and depended on the employer for their legal status (Moukarbel 2009: 154).

Employers often resist treating housework as labour. This is related partly to the perception of cleaning and other domestic chores as unskilled work that anyone can manage. Housework is also regarded as an activity
involving tasks that are difficult to define. This means that working hours are rarely precisely delineated and flexibility is required. According to some authors, not treating care work as proper labour stems from the belief that it is an emotional need, in other words, we care for those whom we love. Care work is structured as a woman’s vocation, which requires not so much skills, but rather an input of emotions. This so-called ‘care myth’ is thus based on the conviction that care does not require physical and psychological work, only emotional engagement (England 2005: 389; Anderson 2000). Emotional involvement is one element of the process of ‘familiarising’ the domestic worker. The notion of the domestic worker being treated ‘like a family member’ was originally developed by Anderson (2000: 122). According to Anderson, this type of treatment is characterised by expectations for the worker to take interest in the employer’s family, but there are few or no expectations that the employer will display interest in the migrant woman’s family. The migrant worker’s own family is symbolically ‘erased’ by the employer’s not addressing the issue, as if the migrant women did not have their own lives (Anderson 2000: 125). The emotional engagement can, in turn, lead to increasing workloads, which are to be carried out not for payment, but out of emotional attachment, thus placing the migrant at the risk of labour exploitation. Although the household protects the undeclared migrant worker from the police and labour inspections, at the same time it excludes the worker from external aid, such as labour unions, in case of exploitation. However, migrant women also use intimacy to de-emphasise servitude (Parreñas 2001).

Domestic work is characterised by particular occupational hazards. According to a study conducted among professional elderly care workers in Northern Ireland, the home care workers experienced health hazards, injuries in moving and handling (related to hygiene and infection), verbal abuse and physical harassment from the cared for person, but also exposure to the cared for persons’ pets and unsafe home equipment (Taylor & Donnelly 2006: 245). In studies of home care workers in the US, 85 per cent experienced at least one work-related injury, from which 15 per cent reported verbal or physical abuse (Zechter & Guidotti 1987 in Taylor & Donnelly 2006). In contrast to the domestic work of natives, however, migrant domestic work is characterised by the precarious immigration status. Combined with the isolation of domestic work and insecurity of employment, this fact apparently leads to many cases of mental illness among migrant women (Anderson 2000: 54).

To sum up, the migrant’s exposure to risk is determined by the character of the domestic work sector and service. The gendered character of this job facilitates the migrant women’s entrance into the labour market abroad. However, migrant women working in that sector have a low social status and are paid low wages in the receiving society. In general, this does not permit them to settle with their family, so this work does not allow
them to reconcile paid work and family life. The migrant domestic worker is, in general, also excluded from legal protection. The domestic sector can be divided into two types of workers. On the one hand, there are workers who live-out; these are workers of a ‘preferred’ nationality who have more ability to respond to risks related to domestic work. On the other hand, there are those who live-in, are more isolated and often depend only on one employer.

2.3 Applying selected sociocultural risk theories to migrant domestic work

Having reviewed migration theories and migrant domestic work literature from a risk perspective, I will now address selected sociocultural risk theories. Through analysing their approach to risk, I will show how such understanding of risk is applicable to research exploring the experience of migrant domestic workers.

2.3.1 Cultural theory: Risk perception and response

The realist perspective on risk, with its claim that risk is an objective hazard and can be measured independently of social and cultural contexts, has come under heavy attack from the cultural theorists. Representatives of cultural theory argue that risk is a socially constructed interpretation of an actual hazard and cannot be analysed outside social and cultural processes. They claim that, first, risk perception is a selective process and, second, that in contrast to the realist approach, risk aversion is not the only rational response possible (Douglas 1992, 1984).

Regarding the selective response to risk, cultural theorists argue that some dangers are identified by people as risk, while others are not. According to Douglas (1985), the reasons for choosing to acknowledge some risks and ignore others are found in the importance social groups and societies attach to the process of maintaining and redrawing boundaries between self and other. Specific dangers are selected for attention by society by being named ‘risks’ and may result in attributing the blame for the danger to a particular group. The perception of and response to risk also involves mutual obligations and expectations, with individuals helping each other avoid particular dangers. According to this perspective, individuals use culturally learned assumptions and weighing when it comes to estimating risks. Risk is therefore a politicised and morally loaded notion; as such, it plays a particular social function.

Douglas and Wildavsky (1982) reject the realist view that only experts can assess risks, while lay people have a distorted perception due to social and cultural influences. According to the cultural theory, both lay people
and experts are influenced by culture. However, they base their understanding and response to risk on different cultural contexts; in other words, they have different ‘cultural biases’. This approach assumes that competing rationalities exist within society, accounting for the existence of diverse perceptions of risk. Risk perception differs from society to society, it changes together with different social norms that influence behaviour and affect the evaluation of ‘what dangers should be most feared, what risks are worth taking, and who should be allowed to take them’ (Douglas & Wildavsky 1982: 7).

Another feature of the realist approach to risk – the risk aversion of individuals – has also been criticised by cultural theorists. According to Douglas, risk aversion is only one possible type of response to risk, even if it is at present the dominant one. Another potential behaviour towards risk is risk-seeking or risk-taking. For example, a risk-taking attitude in young men is often perceived as necessary to prove their courage – they are seen as ‘courageous’. In contrast, women are usually associated with safe everyday life. A risk-taking attitude in women can be associated with a sense of guilt connected with crossing societal norms. Responses to risk influence the process of self-identification: a person is classified as ‘careful’ or ‘daring’ based on whether he or she engages in or avoids risk, often attempting to conform to group norms.

In an attempt to explain the phenomenon of risk-seeking, the cultural theory introduces a distinction between acceptable and unacceptable risks. Acceptable risks do not pose a cultural threat to a social group, while the unacceptable ones undermine important cultural assumptions and, consequently, a sense of security. Risk acceptability is related to whether certain rewards are offered to the risk bearers. Some researchers refer to it as ‘risk compensation’; other researchers claim that it is important whether a person’s behaviour is socially approved or whether he or she fulfils social demands (Douglas 1985: 50). Cultural theorists distinguish between voluntary risks, where there is choice, and involuntary risks, placed upon a person by an external force. People are willing to tolerate much higher risks when these are voluntary risks. According to Douglas and Wildavsky (1982: 16), ‘people will either refuse a known risk or seek additional compensation for assuming it. Thus an involuntary risk due to ignorance is by knowledge converted into one that is averted or into a voluntary risk’. In other words, people may not be aware they are taking or facing risks. The moment they become aware they are taking a risk or are exposing themselves to a risk, they can employ two strategies. They can either try to avoid the risk or find out how they can balance the gains and costs related to it, thus turning it into a voluntary risk.

According to the realist approach, a rationally acting person is consciously averse to risk. In contrast, cultural theorists argue that acceptance of certain risks is part of a specific cultural pattern and does not have to
be conscious; the responses to risk can be habitual and only after realising the results of an action may a person realise what risks were at stake. Risk aversion or risk-taking can be adopted in everyday routines and incorporated into our bodily actions without any special reflection. What is more, without additional information and conscious reflection, a person is able to categorise certain behaviours as risky. It means that certain assumptions and intuitions are present before the development of cognitive and moral judgements. These are based, among others, on acculturated stereotypes. Very early in their life, children are taught that through rational and responsible behaviour they can and should avoid certain dangers. We are acculturated to be responsible for controlling risk. As Douglas (1985: 33) writes: ‘the culturally learned intuitions which guide our judgment for any of our fields of competence teach us enough probabilistic principles but they are heavily culture-bound’. Acculturated nature of risk-related actions results in a routine-like, habitual behaviour.

People often think that they can cope with risks related to familiar situations: they underestimate these risks, feel immune to them, believe to be more in control even though the reality proves to be different. According to Douglas (1985: 59), people who estimate risk focus on middle-range probabilities, overlooking high-probability dangers, such as road accidents and low-probability dangers, such as earthquakes. Risks that are seen as low-probability ones and those of everyday character are usually downplayed. This process enables us to select risks; otherwise, we would not be able to act (Douglas 1985: 30). In a familiar context people can easily engage in probabilistic thinking.

The advice a person receives on how to respond to risk depends on the characteristics of their social network. The more isolated a person is, the weaker his or her network and the less he or she can consult about decisions; thus, he or she has to set the norms of what is and is not a reasonable risk (Douglas 1985: 69). The context of how socially embedded a person is influences the risk strategies adopted: either group-based strategies or more individualised ones. Douglas introduced a model that categorises responses to risk and is known as the grid/group model. The model is based on two ideal types of social organisation in terms of the group’s approach to risk. In the first type, members of a community have strong commitment to strengthening and maintaining internal bonds. They are unwilling to work out the risk-related situation via internal conflict; instead, they will tend to exclude from the group those who have challenged the group’s norms through risky behaviour. For that reason, they place the responsibility for disasters on victims of the disaster and their families. Blame and punishment play a leading role in this form of social organisation. In the second type, the members of a community have strong dedication to individual activity and fair competition; the interaction in the group is based more on internal conflict than on solidarity.
When faced with disaster, the response of the community members is neutral; they perceive it as chance or fate (Douglas 1985: 61-62). Douglas expanded these two ideal types into a four-cell model of risk rationalities. She equipped the model with the notion of group ethos, which can be high or low, pointing to the strength of the group’s external boundary. Another new concept added to the model was the grid index comprising all other distinctions and social constraints related to gender, ethnicity, social class and other characteristics (Douglas & Wildavsky 1982: 138). The grid/group model’s four ideal types of risk response are: 1) hierarchs (high group and high grid) who respect authority, conform closely to group norms and expectations relating to risk and believe in establishing organisations; 2) egalitarians (high group and low grid) who identify strongly with their group and blame outsiders for risk; they tend to be distrustful of externally imposed norms and supportive of social equality issues and a participatory approach to risk; 3) individualists (low group and low grid) who are individualistic and entrepreneurial, support self-regulation of risk, trust individuals rather than organisations, believe in market forces, see risk-taking as bringing benefits as well as dangers with it and resent external constraints; and 4) fatalists (low group and high grid) who lack strong cohesion to a group but are otherwise highly constrained in their behaviours and tend to trust luck and fate in relation to risk, seeing themselves as having little personal control over it.

However, it is to be remembered that the grid/group model with its ideal types of risk presents a static picture or risk, while risk responses are in reality very dynamic. Risk perception is more complex than these categories would suggest, with people belonging to a number of cultural groups and playing different social roles (as determined by their life experience and the risks associated with different activities).

Applying the above to migrant domestic work, I make the following assumptions. A specific cultural bias influences the migrant women’s risk perception and selection, as it was shown by examples given in the chapter reviewing migrant domestic work research. Communities saw female as more at risk than males during migration, which led to restricting women’s mobility. On the other hand, women were regarded by their families as more reliable when it came to sending remittances. In addition, it is clear that migrants pay attention to risks ‘advertised’ by the public. For example, they feel concerned that their migration might have a negative impact on the upbringing of their children. Still, where a mother is not able to provide for the material well-being of her children, there is more acceptance for her migration and thus for seemingly taking higher risks than usual.

Regarding responses to risk, a crucial role is played by the awareness of being exposed to risk. A migrant worker’s awareness that she is exposed to poor working conditions will lower her risk acceptability. On the other
hand, a migrant who lacks awareness that his or her payment is substantially below that of others providing similar services will continue working for such wages. Lack of or inadequate information increases the migrant’s risk of being exploited. The choices one has can also be analysed from the perspective of the location of a person within his or her social circle and access to networks providing information. This can be referred to as different ‘risk positions’. For example, care work is constructed in such a way that it isolates the female migrant, giving her little chance to develop a social network and thus have access to information; a man working with a group of both migrants and native workers in the construction sector will have a different ‘risk position’ in that sense.

When a person has access to information, he or she not only perceives risk differently, but the degree of their risk acceptability also changes. Access to information in managing risk during migration is crucial. A person who has more reliable information faces less uncertainty when making choices. On the basis of available information, they will be able to estimate or evaluate the probabilities of gains and losses. However, being more aware of risk does not automatically lead to more cautious behaviour. It is also linked to the location within the social network, which gives a person resources to act on. These ‘risk positions’ also serve in some cases as a means of self-identification and help develop a group membership. For example, it can be assumed that migrant women in the domestic sector who are concerned about similar risks will tend to create temporary alliances and networks to stay well-informed about potential threats.

Certain social groups are, due to their positioning, categorised as being ‘at risk’ in terms of a number of dangers; they are seen as vulnerable and powerless or harmful to themselves or others. Irregular migrants are regarded as more ‘at risk’ than migrants with a regularised status, but also as more ‘of a risk’ to the host society than the latter. In general, women are regarded as more ‘at risk’ than men and thus tend to be socialised into high-risk awareness (Douglas 1985: 70). Those who are ‘at risk’ are regarded as likely victims and are at times blamed for their own misfortune (Douglas 1985: 56). For example, a female work migrant who leaves her family due to the lack of local labour market opportunities is blamed for ‘abandoning’ her children.

2.3.2 Risk society and risk culture

Risk society is another theoretical approach, which emerged as a critique of the belief that risk can be measured and managed. Its main proponents, Beck (1992, 2000) and Giddens (1999, 1994, 1991, 1990), understand risk as ‘incalculable insecurities’. According to them, it is only possible to talk about ‘risk scenarios’ because, in the modern world, risks are charac-
terised by non-localised nature and long-term consequences. The globalisation of risks makes it difficult to attribute risks to particular events, activities or even localities (Adam & Von Loon 2000: 1). Risks are no longer local in impact; they are not bound to a specific space, group or time (their results may be felt by future generations). It is increasingly impossible to hold someone accountable and responsible for what Beck (1992) refers to as the ‘manufacturing of risks’. Human beings develop technology, the potential consequences of which they are not able to fully predict. The past risk experience or ‘risk knowledge’ is thus useless – it actually encourages the anticipation of the wrong risks, while the disaster strikes from factors that are incalculable and unknown. This is similar to Douglas’s and Wildavsky’s (1982: 7) writings, where they claim that although risk should be seen as a joint product of knowledge about the future and consent about the most desired prospects, the knowledge is uncertain and the consent is contested. The irony of risk is that one has to expect the unexpected (Beck 1992: 3) and, if the outcomes are irreversible, there is no possibility for compensation. According to the risk society theory, the primary risk is ‘social dependency upon institutions and actors, who may be alien, obscure, inaccessible to most people affected by risks in questions’ (Beck 1992: 4). The scale of risk is a direct function of the quality of social relations and processes. Instead of ‘progress’, it is the production of risks that dominates.

The main axis of Beck’s (1992: 88) analysis is the opposition between scarcity, characteristic of class society, and insecurity, characteristic of risk society. Social class becomes dissolved in contemporary capitalism. According to Beck (1992: 36), with the production and division of labour spread across the globe, we share a common set of risks and thus we are all members of a risk society. In this way, risk is qualitatively different from scarcity. Beck has been criticised for claiming that risk is shared in a ‘democratic’ way by, among others, Scott (1992: 35) and Adams (1995). These cultural theorists argue that insecurity is a function of scarcity, i.e. uncertainty results from shortage, whether material or emotional. Scott claims that Beck’s motto for the risk society – ‘I am afraid’ – is also appropriate for the class society. He undermines Beck’s notion of risks being ‘democratic’: according to Scott, wealth continues to provide, at least to some extent, protection from risks.

Beck himself offers a counter-argument to his own claim about the ‘democratic’ character of risks, giving examples of the higher vulnerability of certain groups or individuals. He discusses how the ‘freeing’ of work relations is related to gender status: women have freed themselves from the traditional family network, through individualisation, but they have also lost a form of support network. At the same time, their position in the labour market is uncertain, with unemployment among women being much higher than among men (Beck 1992: 89; 93). Beck argues that since
women have currently more equal education opportunities and an increased awareness of their position, they have built up expectations of more equality and partnership in work and family relations. However, the developments in the labour market and men’s behaviour run counter to these expectations (Beck 1992: 103).

According to Beck (1992: 94), in modern-day society, the sense of community is ‘dissolved in the acid bath of competition’. He gives examples of such individualisation when analysing the situation of the ‘free wage labourer’ who has been ‘liberated’ from the constraints of the labour market in modern capitalism, which results in the loss of the sense of security and the necessity to face new risks. According to Beck, individual mobility contradicts the preservation of social bonds in the forms of ties to family, neighbourhood and friends. The traditional support network of the individual is lost. Beck does not critically reflect on the relation between mobility and the development of ties across time and space, which Giddens (1990) refers to extensively as a new form of reflexivity, the point I will discuss below. Beck goes on to claim that the flexibilisation or ‘freeing’ of work relations results in the expansion of fuzzy zones between declared and undeclared employment (including the work of housewives, youth and early retirees), as well as between employment and underemployment (Beck 1992: 87).

For Giddens (1999), the key features of modernity that increase the awareness of risk are institutional and individual reflexivity. Reflexivity describes an active response to conditions that arouse fear and involves a continuous monitoring of action and its contexts. Reflexivity is accompanied by the reorganisation of time and space and the expansion of so-called disembedding mechanisms, such as systems of expert knowledge or money. The concept involves an awareness of the conditional nature of expert knowledge and social activity as well as an understanding that they are likely to change as new information becomes available. While Beck underlines the lack of trust in institutions as the reason why risks now have to be dealt with in an individualised manner, Giddens points to the trust in abstract expert systems as a new way of coping with risks.

In general, individuals operate within clearly established routines that create and recreate a sense of ontological security, meaning ‘the confidence that most human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action’ (Giddens 1990: 92). The stability of social routines is central to the continuity of personality and institutions. The routines are bound to a particular, familiar setting and thus an important element of safety routines is the creation and/or recreation of trust. With increasing trust, risk becomes ‘acceptable’ because the perceived danger becomes less serious. Trust is necessary to undertake action in response to risk. However, routines can also lead to a situation of closure or exclusion from informa-
tion, which is necessary in order to respond to risk. When things go wrong, the routines are called into question and reflected on so that new solutions can be sought. When everyday routines are no longer available – as is often the case during migration – individuals have to make conscious decisions about their preferences. Giddens (1999) argues that ‘a risk culture’ is created, requiring a continuous negotiation of trust, with individuals and institutions interacting in a reflexive relationship.

In an attempt to relate risk society theory to migrant domestic work, I would analyse first of all the place of origin of migrant domestic workers. Migration can be understood as a response to the experience of new risks resulting from systemic and political transformations, such as unemployment and failure of institutions that used to provide trust in society. Also, particular new labour relations develop, which leads to workers becoming mobile. In addition, going against Beck’s argument about democratic risks, migrant workers are able to influence positively or negatively their residence status, depending on their material standing. Those who can prove they have a regular income stand a better chance of obtaining a temporary residence permit in the country of migration. Those who do not, face overstaying and all the possible consequences of an irregular stay, such as lack of payment due to no work contract, health risks due to no insurance and/or deportation.