A Risky Business?
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4 Ukrainian migrant women’s images of risk

The Ukrainian women had to go through a particular thought process before they took their migration decision to go work in Poland’s domestic work sector. What role did risk play as their decisions were being made whether to migrate, where to and what type of work to engage in? The women had to create a particular image of migration as a worthwhile undertaking. To analyse this process, I introduce the notion of the imagined opportunity space (Schiffauer 2006). An imagined opportunity space is tied to reality as a representation of something that can happen in the future. It can be expressed by using unreal conditional sentences, which have four interrelated characteristics: premise, category, evaluation and condition. Since risk involves a similar thought exercise on possible future outcomes, it can also be said to belong to the sphere of the imagined.

The first characteristic of the imagined opportunity space, premise, displays the causal relationship between X and Y, for example: ‘If I go abroad [X], then I will earn a lot of money [Y].’ A premise is created and reproduced through social interactions during which biased information about specific countries is interpreted. Risk is also reflected upon through the use of unreal conditional sentences of the type ‘If X..., then possibly Y may occur.’ What type of premises do the Ukrainian migrant women refer to when evaluating migration risks?

The second assertion of the imagined opportunity space has to do with the category to which a person belongs: does he or she have the qualities required to be able to identify with migrants? If we know someone abroad who is somehow similar to us (and thus belongs to the same category), we can identify with their lot. Such identification makes it possible to consider migration: ‘If she can work abroad, why can’t I?’ The probability of identifying with the fate of compatriots abroad rises with migration becoming a mass phenomenon, instead of an escapade of a few brave eccentrics. Another factor that determines the type of risk imagined is a person’s multiple categories or, better, identities. With whom did the women identify when considering migration? How did this influence their evaluation of migration risks?

The third feature relates to evaluation of the imagined space – in other words, is it good or bad to migrate to a particular country? I address the link between moral evaluation of an activity and the category in which the
person engaging in the activity belongs. How does the category, such as
being a woman, young or old, with a specific marital status, influence their
own and their social circles’ judgement of migration?

The fourth characteristic involves particular conditions that make the
future realisation of the imagined plausible (Schiffauer 2006: 3). What
conditions made the Ukrainian women in this study start thinking about
searching for opportunities abroad? What was the situation of the women’s
households? How did their extended networks function? How do the
conditions in Ukraine influence their perception of risk at home and
during migration?

Having introduced the notion of the imagined opportunity space, I will
now give a brief overview of economic changes in Ukraine in the 1990s
and early 2000.

4.1 Economic conditions in independent Ukraine

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of Ukraine as
an independent state, the country became open to global economic forces.
For Ukrainians, for years accustomed to guaranteed full employment
under Communism, the institutional order began to fall apart. In a study
monitoring social changes in Ukrainian society between 1994 and 2005,
where respondents were asked every year how satisfied they were with
their current job, over 40 per cent were unable to answer the question
because they were unemployed at that given moment (Panina 2005: 105,
table 8). While in 1991, according to official statistics, only 1.2 per cent
of the adult population in Ukraine experienced long-term unemployment
(one year or longer), by 2002, the figure was 6.1 per cent of the population
(Oksamynna & Khmelko 2004: 9).

The systemic changes affected male and female workers differently. In
the second half of the 1990s, women constituted up to 67 per cent of
discharged workers (Pavlychko 1997; Human Rights Watch Report 2003:
10) and women’s unemployment was increasing. During the period
1998-2002, the real rate of women’s unemployment in the 15-69 age
group grew by 10.8 per cent (UNDP 2003: 34). According to local labour
offices, the majority of those registered as unemployed in 2002 were
women: in the oblast of Lviv, it was 59 per cent and in the city of Lviv it
was 73 per cent (Human Rights Watch Report 2003: 10). Overall, more
women than men were registered as unemployed between 1999 and the
first half of 2007. Unemployment levels among women in rural areas
were affected by the reduction of sectors dominated by women, such as
vegetable growing, cattle breeding and beet production (Dudwick, Srinivasan & Braithwaite 2002: 33).

It should be taken into account that women and men respond in dif-
different ways to job loss (Ashwin 2000). Overall, men who become unemployed lose their professional identity and self-esteem. In the case of the former Soviet Union, men often found refuge in alcohol abuse. Women, in contrast, have other strong identities in addition to their identity as workers – namely, their identities as mothers and wives. For that reason, they are said to cope better with new economic conditions (Ashwin 2000).

In addition, in the second half of the 1990s, many Ukrainians worked shortened hours, were on unpaid leave or were only partially employed. Ukrainians experienced ‘hidden’ unemployment, a situation of an employee without work. In 1996, 3.4 million workers (24 per cent of the total working population) were on unpaid administrative leave. In Ukrainian industry, women were proportionally more numerous than men among those dismissed and were more frequently on administrative leave, without receiving any pay (Caceres 2001: 24). One of the reasons for taking leave without pay is that there was little motivation to declare unemployment because the benefits for the unemployed were low. In 2001, monthly unemployment benefits were equal to 85.23 Ukrainian hryvnia (herein abbreviated as UAH) (less than € 12) and did not cover even the most basic living expenses (Jakubiak 2002). Meanwhile, unpaid leave allowed one to keep the social benefits related to being employed, such as health insurance.

In the aforementioned period, almost 50 per cent of Ukrainians experienced shortage of money for daily food and over 80 per cent did not have enough money to buy clothes or shoes (Oksamytna & Khmelko 2004: 7). To survive the economic crisis, people relied on barter, petty trade and private subsistence agriculture (Raiser 1997). By 2002, almost two thirds of the whole urban population was engaged in cultivating small land plots (Oksamytna & Khmelko 2004: 1). Participation in the informal labour market was visible in the expenditures of Ukrainian household budgets, which in 2002 exceeded the households’ income from the formal economy by 15-25 per cent. By 2003, the estimated number of persons employed in the economy’s informal sector was between 2.6 and 4.4 million (12-20 per cent of all the employed) (UNDP 2003: 45).

One should also note that corruption is widespread in Ukraine. According to a Razumkov Center poll in February 2003, only 31 per cent of the general public did not offer bribes or gifts in the medical and educational sphere in 2002; 24.5 per cent of respondents confessed that some part of their income was ‘unofficial’ (Freedom House Report 2004).

Failure of the known social order coupled with the unemployment made people place their trust in themselves and their closest relatives. There was little faith in Ukrainian society in the ability of state institutions to solve economic problems and people searched for methods of coping with the new risks individually or via household strategies. One such
method was engaging in cross-border petty trade and, later on, migrating to work abroad.3

4.2 Ukrainian women’s evaluation of and responses to risks in Ukraine

All of the Ukrainian women interviewed faced shrinking employment opportunities in their place of origin. They were also aware of the political changes and the resultant increase in freedom of movement across the border in the early 1990s. These conditions allowed them to develop a particular imagined opportunity space. However, this involved not only the comparison of the imagined abroad to the period of economic and political transition they were experiencing, but also to the past. In the stories of these women, a shift is visible from a sense of security experienced within the known, predictable institutional and societal setting to the increasing unpredictability, with the women perceiving and evaluating new risks to be coped with.

4.2.1 Images of the Soviet past and of systemic transition

Anxiety triggered by the disorder that followed the creation of newly independent Ukraine, with the systemic transition from Communism to democracy and from planned to market economy, is visible in Svietlana’s story. I met Svietlana in 2006 in Warsaw through a non-governmental organisation, for which she was a volunteer media spokeswoman. She was an energetic person, with thought-through opinions about the situation of labour migrants in Poland and in-depth reflections on her own life. At the time of the interview, she had been working for four years as a care worker and cleaner in Warsaw. For one and a half years, she had held a work permit for her care work employment, while also doing undeclared cleaning jobs. The 40-year-old is a divorced mother of two boys who, until migrating, lived with her parents in T., a town in western Ukraine. She recalled the following:

And in ‘91 there was such... well... the beginning of ...a great chaos, let’s say, great chaos. There was no work, there was no occupation somehow agreed on, the country’s [independent] status was given but not agreed on [what it means], the people’s status was not clear and people did not know in what country or in what system they were living, how to live. ... wages of people, who [...] worked were very low [...] in the organisations where they worked: in schools, at work, in production [...], simply earnings were so much lower than the needs, that this somehow became a terrible, huge [problem].
In 1991, when the Soviet Union disintegrated, Svetlana finished her studies in Russian philology and faced a great unknown. In the opinion of the women I interviewed, political and economic transition brought a great sense of insecurity, making the former Soviet Republic of Ukraine look like a safe, predictable heaven. Among the interviewees who voiced this uncertainty was Ulyana, a 35-year-old divorced mother of an eight-year-old boy living in the town of B., south of Lviv. I met Ulyana through another migrant woman. She worked in Warsaw as a child-care worker. She appeared very young, smiled a lot and frequently referred to her faith in God throughout the interview. Formerly a radio electronics engineer, she had worked in her profession for several years in a factory in Ukraine. Ulyana very emotionally recalled the period of political and economic transition in her country of origin.

After Ukrainians began this...when Ukraine went out of the Soviet Union, terrible problems began. Until then everything was good, but later on we didn’t have any money, because my mom put everything in..., because my father was in Bulgaria and [he] was working [there], we lived in Bulgaria for a while, [so] until then we had money, but mom put everything in the bank, but when this happened with the Soviet Union, we lost everything [...]. And until today no one returned to us this money. We don’t have this money.

At first, Ulyana experienced a high degree of safety and wealth, which disappeared literally overnight. Local institutions, often ill-functioning during Communism, totally fell apart when faced with global competition. People lost their life savings. Many lost their jobs. Unemployment was a new phenomenon, causing great anxiety of falling into poverty. This context of insecurity is similar to that described in the writings of Beck (1992) and Stark (1991), where institutions responsible for the provision of order and security no longer work and the responsibility for coping with risk falls on households, families and individuals. With the loss of prosperity, the sense of security was gone and awareness of new risks increased. As was already visible in Ulyana’s story, the women’s image of Ukraine in the early 1990s often stands in sharp contrast to their comments concerning their lives during the Soviet era. Lilyana, a 30-year-old migrant woman, who originated from a village near the town of K. in eastern Ukraine and who used to come to Poland in the 1980s for pioneer camp in the summer, recalled her childhood as follows:

Life...life was very nice, when we were all countries of the Soviet Union. I, for example, I always had a very poor family, but we lived better than today, much better. Life was better before.
Although Lilyana stated that her family was poor, in the narratives of other migrant women, past security was often associated with prosperity. One of the women studied, Maria, described to me in great detail the story of her village. In her view, it was the richest village in the region during Soviet times. She claimed that the village inhabitants had so much money that they did not know how to spend it, so ‘people were buying adult shoes for children’. The majority of people from the village worked in the local factory producing sugar from beetroot. There were two kindergartens. Maria used to work in a shop and later on as a hairdresser next to the factory. In addition, she earned money by giving haircuts privately. She liked her job and led a peaceful life. With the breakdown of the Soviet Union it suddenly became cheaper to import sugar than to keep the factory working. The factory was closed down and its machinery was sold for scrap metal. One of the two kindergartens was also closed. At that time, as many as five or six persons from her village had migrated to work in Warsaw and she started to consider migrating. During the interview, she claimed that 400 people from her village already lived in the outskirts of Warsaw and worked in the capital.\(^4\) Maria’s story shows a clear-cut transition – from almost unimaginable wealth and plenty, to the death of the village, with the closure of the kindergarten and the factory (it had a literal ‘meltdown’), as well as the ensuing exodus of a large number of village inhabitants. According to her story, she was among the pioneers from her village who created an extensive migrant network. In the context of the former social order having fallen apart, migration became a norm for her village.

For some of the women, the Soviet past became a past imagined space of lost chances, against which they evaluated their situation during the transition period; some of them continued to use this reference point to judge their migration.

4.2.2 **Risks and strategies before migrating to Poland**

The imagined opportunity space of the interviewed women’s was formed against the background of good living conditions during the Soviet era, the subsequent dramatic decrease in living standards and the shrinking employment opportunities, all consequences of the systemic changes. Unemployment, particularly long-term unemployment, was one of the major consequences of the economic transition in Ukraine experienced at some point by all of the interviewed women. The women lost their work either due to group layoffs or closure of their workplaces, most of them state-owned. Unemployment soon became a ‘familiar risk’, as Douglas and Wildavsky (1982) would name it, when the women recalled that declared employment on the Ukrainian labour market was not a guarantee of sufficient earnings nor did it even bring any earnings whatsoever. The
local labour market had little to offer. However, in the opinion of some interviewees, declared employment at least provided one with health insurance. This can be regarded as a rather weak argument, taking into account the quality of public health care in Ukraine, where one has to pay a bribe for treatment. Still, the women did mention this issue. They also stressed the fact that if they had continued to be employed in Ukraine, they would have a guarantee of receiving a pension (however small) in the future.

An analysis of the women’s responses to unemployment allows us to point to different risk assessments and strategies. A spectrum of risk strategies can be seen: at one end there are women with dependents, who remained economically inactive and sometimes reached the point of social exclusion; at the other end of the spectrum are women displaying agency and responding immediately to what they foresee as a potential danger resulting from unemployment.

Let us start the analysis at the end of the spectrum where women were at the greatest risk: these were the women who were the only breadwinners in their families and after becoming unemployed did not search for alternatives sources of income for some time. Long-term unemployment placed them at risk of social exclusion, meaning the inability to participate in society by being unable to satisfy their basic needs, such as buying daily food. For example, Chrystyna, a widowed mother of two children, who used to work as a bookkeeper in Lviv, earning 300 UAH (approximately $80) per month and whose company went bankrupt, experienced a steep deterioration of living standards after losing her job. As she recounted: ‘Either you ate something and did not pay for the apartment and did not wear any clothes, or you did wear clothes and didn’t eat...’. Unable to find work and not searching for other income alternatives in the informal labour market, these women borrowed money at first. As they were unable to pay their debts, borrowing opportunities shrunk. This led to their falling into poverty and placed them at risk of social exclusion. Only then did they turn to labour migration as a last alternative. Another example is visible in the story of Olga, a divorced mother of two school-age children who worked as a dentist’s assistant.

When A. [her son] went to first grade I was dismissed from work with a whole group...24 persons were dismissed from work and I was one of them. I was for ten months without any work then, I was starving, I simply had no money, no money for bread, for the apartment, I was in terrible debt.

Another risk addressed by the women was how they would respond to a situation in which they would have little, if any, income, thus leading to borrowing money and falling into debt. Finally, the women became aware
that they were unable to meet basic living needs, such as buying food or making their apartment rent. Poverty slowly came to the fore in the women’s stories. Another divorced mother with two sons, Zenya, after having worked for 22 years in her job was earning UAH 150 (approximately $40) per month. She said:

It’s difficult even to talk about it, because these earnings were not sufficient to pay for the apartment. [...] So, even today I am still heavily indebted. [...] I don’t know what will happen next, with all those debts [laughing], but somehow my whole life is in debt [smiles]. When my son was ten, he already did not understand how I live, [he asked]: ‘Mom, how can you live like that? Our whole life is on credit. You borrow, you return.’

Later on during the interview, Zenya mentioned that she mainly borrowed money from her female friends. She spoke about her difficult circumstances, being divorced and having to support two sons, the youngest of whom was only three years old at that time. However, she had social capital, in the form of ties to people with enough financial resources to lend her money. Olga similarly said:

I constantly borrowed; my eldest daughter from Russia sent me money four times, I think. And so I lived, constant debts, for the apartment, for light, for gas and…for bread, because I took bread on credit from a woman who had her own private bakery, a small one, and that’s how I lived.

Olga was initially supported by her daughter, a migrant herself. However, the daughter had a family to support in Russia and for that reason could only sporadically send money to her mother. In general, family members did not make a profit on lending money. However, Olga mentioned that informal services as such existed in Ukraine, lending money at a monthly interest of as much as 20 per cent. Borrowing money (having somebody to borrow from) was an important coping strategy; however, it changed the risk position of the interviewed women. Once they were abroad, they had to work irrespective of the working conditions at least to raise the sum they had borrowed. This placed them in a very precarious situation.

In the middle of the risk spectrum were those women who displayed agency by searching locally for alternative sources of income when unemployed or not earning sufficiently. For example, Svietlana recalled that as a Russian language teacher she was only able to buy four kilograms of tomatoes with her monthly income. The interviewed women were often the primary salary earners in their families. This means that they fall into a special category, which has to be taken into account when analysing the
development of the imagined opportunity space. Svietlana was the only breadwinner in the household, where she lived with her parents and two children. She was in conflict with her three older brothers, who assumed she would take sole responsibility of caring for their parents. For some of the women, abusive relationships in the family or with their spouses were the driving force to search for financial independence. Unable to earn a sufficient salary in the official labour market, Svietlana began to search for profit in the informal economy—she traded at the local bazaar. As she said:

...my parents already did not work and that is because they were already pensioners in the year ‘91. So this was such a different situation, I was the only person capable of working, but also without work [...] I couldn’t go to work [as a teacher] to school, because I had two children and I had already divorced my husband at that time. And I began to work in petty trade, because then a lot of people began to trade. I traded and that’s how I made a living.

Another woman who turned to trade was Larysa, a 40-year-old divorced mother of a sixteen year old, who originated from the town of B. in western Ukraine, and supported three members of her family. Her earnings did not suffice, so she learned how to make hair bands and sold them at the local market before going to work. Then at the bazaar, she tried to sell what she called ‘Western sweets’, imported candies that usually came from Poland. She bought them at one market and sold them at another. In the beginning, no one wanted to buy the sweets, but slowly she gained experience and managed to make a profit. She became acquainted with a man at the bazaar who was trading in used clothes brought from Germany. One day she approached him and asked whether she also could try to trade in used clothes. He gave her 100 kg of clothes to have a go, and later on she got 500 kg. She managed very well. She asked a female friend for cooperation (the friend had financial problems because her husband was in prison) and they both traded. For the first time in her life she began to earn large sums of money. She mentioned that she was so rich that people even borrowed money from her. She decided to quit her regular job because she still was not getting paid. When her friend’s husband got out of prison, he joined them in the trading business. However, they began to quarrel over earnings. The couple decided to trade alone. At this point Larysa made a risky investment. She invested $1,800 that she had saved while trading into a pyramid scheme and by the time she realised the firm was a scam, she had already lost everything. She recalled:
I was left at home without work, because I had worked for two years but I didn’t have any money, there was no...for half a year there was no [money] for which I could normally buy food. I lived off my grandmother’s pension.

Larysa was fortunate enough to have a grandmother who was willing to share pension with her. Support from family members was another risk-coping strategy. However, the Ukrainian pension at that time was insufficient to support even one person, so for two it meant living in poverty. At this point, Larysa began to think about migrating to Italy, but had neither the money for the visa nor anyone from whom she could borrow. Now that she was poor, she felt that everyone had abandoned her. The absence of support from friends and acquaintances or, in some other interviewees’ cases, from family, led to a lack of essential ties for survival. This is precisely what placed Larysa at risk of social exclusion. Having no one to turn to for help, Larysa became a Jehovah’s Witness. In the end, one of the Jehovah’s Witnesses who worked in Poland decided to help her. Larysa’s religious network also played an important role for her in Poland, both in terms of emotional and work-related support.

In her story, Larysa points to a particular risk knowledge, which she gained and later on used during migration. First of all, she had worked in Ukraine in an undeclared fashion before: she successfully traded in different products. Larysa, like many of the other interviewed women, had shown that she could manage to earn substantial amounts of money. She displayed agency, not remaining passive when faced with hidden unemployment. She also drew conclusions on how not to lose her source of income again: she claimed she has to fully trust the person she shares her work with. Because she did not come across any such partner, she worked individually as a cleaner in Warsaw, investing trust into the employers, who ‘waited for her’ to return from Ukraine. She diversified her social network by becoming a Jehovah’s Witness. The agency of several of the interviewed women was visible primarily in their flexibility to adapt to the changing circumstances, entrepreneurship and their ability to access different support networks.

Only one woman studied – Gala – engaged in paid domestic chores in Ukraine to cope with financial difficulties: she cleaned the local parish building. This woman had primary education, in contrast to the majority of my interviewees, who had secondary education. Educational status can play a role in being willing to accept work unrelated to previous employment in the country of origin. It seems that the lower the educational level, the easier it was for the migrant women to accept domestic work as an opportunity to earn money and not have a negative influence on their social status. However, Gala was very emotional when telling me about her situation at that time, ending up in tears during the interview.
I wanted to cry! You know! When I was going to Poland, you know, I had worked at home for eighteen years in a bakery. And it so happened that there was not enough to pay for electricity, for gas, everything was shut down. And so it was that my daughter was supposed to give birth in one month. And me, you know, I live next to a church, not far, and from time to time [...] I was washing all of this, those table-cloths and you know, and so I took the job and it was very heavy, and I didn’t have [the money] with which to get the passport [...] And so I borrowed [...].

The migrant woman underscored her dramatic position by repeating that her daughter was about to give birth. Events such as birth, marriage and death, linked to a particular stage in the life course, were often the ultimate trigger of migration. Only at that point did Gala engage in a migration. She lost her long-term job and working in the informal economy did not give her enough money to acquire travel documents necessary to migrate. Earning insufficient income meant she had to borrow.

One of the strategies to respond to not being paid or being underpaid at their jobs used by the women was to take unpaid leave. Ulyana, the engineer now working in care, experienced so-called hidden unemployment and took unpaid leave from her factory.

I took those holidays, they gave them to us for half a year per year. This is on one’s own account, because they did not pay. I went to eastern Ukraine, I worked...I herded cows...I never herded cows in my life...[...] But, what I got there, it was some sort of....we got, there were six people, we got some grain, very poor quality, [...] instead of payment we got it...we were supposed to get wheat, but it didn’t grow. I brought it home and we sold it as animal food, for horses and so on. And so you lived everyday on potatoes [...]. The times were such that we only ate potatoes and those...squash. There wasn’t even any bread. Well, such difficult times. Because I had a job, but I didn’t get money. My mother had a job, but she didn’t get money.

The work Ulyana engaged in during her leave in Ukraine was not only of low social status, but also did not win her any real profits. Ulyana, like a number of people in Ukraine, remained officially employed, although her wages were not paid, because it gave her social security and health care benefits. For that reason, Ulyana mentions later on in our interview that leaving this work, which provided her with at least this basic form of security, was a form of risk-taking for her.

Women also used unpaid leave from their jobs to work abroad. However, in the mid-1990s, the Ukrainian labour law changed and long unpaid leaves were no longer available. One had to either leave the job or contin-
ue working for very low wages. Zenya, who worked for over twenty years for a children’s theatre, mentioned this during the interview.

At that time, when I went for the first time [to Poland] for those two, one and half months for [to pick] apples I was on...[...] unpaid leave, because that was still possible then. Then, maybe half a year later, the law changed and it was no longer possible to take this sort of leave for a longer time. [...] So either you worked or you quit. So, I had to quit. [...] Then I had to look for one job after another to have work. Because it didn’t make sense to return [to the theatre], because... for such small income that I got after 22 years of working in one institution, I made UAH 150, that means 25 to 30 dollars per month.6

After the legal changes in Ukraine, most of the women who worked abroad while taking unpaid leave from their jobs back home decided to quit them. The risk of being forced to work only at home was seen as too high, so they decided to rely entirely on income from undeclared work abroad. This shows the role that external legal and policy-related conditions (such as new policy or legal regulations) plays in the changing perception of the quality of risk involved in a specific activity (in this case, declared employment in Ukraine). It also points to the agency and dynamics of the decision-making process among the women. Zenya mentioned changes to the law, which was what pushed her to leave her job. She said, ‘So I had to quit.’ In a situation of no choice, risks are perceived as higher. An involuntary risk, such as having to quit work, is forced upon a person from outside. Voluntary risk relates to situations where there is choice. People are willing to tolerate much higher risks when they are voluntary. However, they are also more willing to take risks when they have little to lose (Douglas 1992). The interviews show a pattern of decreasing opportunities at home. Having a regular job in Ukraine (even an unpaid one) and working abroad in an undeclared fashion diversified both financial and social risks. On the one hand, one was able to increase one’s financial standing at home via remittances, at the same time increasing the social status in the place of origin. On the other hand, having employment in Ukraine, in accordance with one’s qualifications and skills, meant that the women could perceive their migrant work as a temporary remedy and could disassociate from its low social status. The imagined opportunities abroad triggered decisions, such as leaving employment in Ukraine (which provided a marginal sense of security) for undeclared work abroad.

Practically all of the interviewed women engaged some way or another in subsistence agriculture. Even when living in towns, they had small plots of land next to apartment buildings, hen coops and sometimes even a goat. However, with the ongoing recession in Ukraine, neither subsistence
agriculture nor the informal sector allowed the interviewees to cope with the economic insecurities long term. Svietlana commented that she saw no work opportunities for herself in Ukraine.

I didn’t have any idea how I will survive, I didn’t have any idea how to find work, how, how to feed my family, how to sustain them, there were no prospects...

Although Svietlana, like many other women, presents her migration as a ‘no alternatives’ situation in Ukraine, the reality is more complex. In general, it is not the poorest ones who migrate. Potential migrants still must have certain means that will allow them to initiate the trip. The women had social networks, which allowed them to reach out for work alternatives abroad. The women ‘could have acted otherwise’, for example, by continuing to trade at the local bazaar, as Svietlana’s brothers did.

The least risk exposure was visible among interviewees who had family support and job opportunities in Ukraine, but wanted more than basic survival for themselves and their children. Two interviewees, who were in their twenties when they first came to Poland, separated from their partners and decided to remain in the country. They claimed that they had a chance to work in Ukraine, but the salary would be barely enough to survive, which they saw as a risk. One of them, Irina, an engineer who was the mother of a three-year-old boy, recalled the following:

My situation was that I divorced my husband, and I can’t go back home because I don’t have a chance to find work there to support myself and the child. And then I had... I did not have the need to have food and clothes. I had the need to... to buy some books, and to buy toys for the child and to go for a holiday somewhere and I knew that with work in Ukraine I will not, not... not get such a wage in Ukraine to let my child and me live a normal life... not for food, to survive, I didn’t want to live to exist, I simply wanted to live normally. And I decided that I have to make some savings...

Irina wanted to avoid merely existing in Ukraine, engaging in continual coping strategies so as not to live in poverty. It was a decent life that was at stake for her. She longed for financial independence, which would allow her to start a new life in a new place, leading to personal development and increased social status. Another migrant woman, Marta, lived in Ukraine sharing one room with her parents and her brother. She did not see any chances in Ukraine to earn enough in order to have her own living space. At the time of our interview, she hoped to earn a sufficient amount of money during migration so as to have her own apartment. As she put it:
...if I save something and when I have saved something [in the past],
even when I worked at home, I always dreamed about my own
apartment. Always. Because at home, we have such a small apart-
ment. It is in a house, but still [...] So I always dreamed about my
apartment. It can be a studio.

Longing for financial independence was mainly visible among the younger
migrants, who are divorced, have fewer dependents and/or are in conflict
with their families. These women seem to have higher expectations of
migration than just a strategy helping to cope with financial difficulties.
Higher expectations may place them at higher risk, because there is much
more at stake for them. However, they seem to face fewer material risks
in the country of origin. Their stories are more future-oriented than those
of other interviewed women. Older women I interviewed, who had more
dependents, stressed how they are sacrificing themselves for the sake of
their families.

For the interviewed women, the conditions in Ukraine have changed
from a secure routine to what can be summed as two main features:
limited work opportunities in the official labour market (resulting in the
loss of sense of security) and an increasing ‘normalisation’ of irregular
economic behaviour, including cross-border trade and labour migration.
These conditions meant that the interviewed women’s images of an op-
portunity space extended beyond their national boundaries.

4.3 Migration images

One element that allows development of an imagined opportunity space
is the category we belong to. The studied women’s gendered identity in-
fluenced their evaluation of the degree of risk present during migration.
Women’s gender identities meant that they related to the experiences of
other women, usually their close family members or friends. The informa-
tion and images related to migration travelled along female-based
networks – both before and after having engaged in migration. The
women learned about migration experiences from stories told directly by
returning female migrants or repeated by non-migrants. It was vital for
the women to gain information about migration from persons with whom
they could identify: it was important who the storyteller and the heroine
of the story were. In their stories, the migrants referred to people in whose
‘footsteps’ they followed. For the majority of the interviewed women, it
was other Ukrainian women (their mothers, sisters, aunts, cousins or
female friends) who worked abroad in care, cleaning or other types of jobs.
Under these circumstances, migration did not appear as something
frightful, but as a familiar activity carried out by close relatives and friends.
One such example was found in Roma, a petite, platinum blonde 28 year old whose role model was her mother. Roma was, at the time of the interview, working for the first time as a care worker in Warsaw. In the past four years she worked seasonally picking fruit and vegetables in Poland. She reminisced during the interview.

Maybe that is why I want everything for my daughter, because I had everything. My mom worked as a bookkeeper, I had everything at home, I had prosperity. Dad also worked, he went [as a driver] on buses for long trips. And then mom began to go for excursions. I went with my mom for the first time when I was fourteen years old. This was a trip to Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary, by bus. We traded in everything, such as material, underwear and the like, because it was cheap [in Ukraine]. And then TV sets sold well in Poland. We bought gold, sold it in Cracow at the bazaar. Once we went by bus, all the tourists were trading. And hotels and food were there. But there was no trip, only the bazaar. So I went for the first time. [My mother] went all the time, she was in Romania and in Germany.

The economic situation in Ukraine pushed Roma’s mother to engage in cross-border petty trade. Roma went trading for the first time at a rather young age. She went together with her mother on a ‘tourist trip’, though the main aim was trade, not tourism. Many Ukrainians did so at that time, facilitated by services provided by semi-formal tourist agencies. As Roma remembers, her mother ‘went a lot’. The image of migration as a non- or low-risk strategy was shaped by the mother and repeated by the daughter. As an adult, Roma went to work first in the Czech Republic and later on traded and worked in agriculture in Poland before entering the domestic work sector in Warsaw. Zenya, the divorced mother of two, comments on how her entrepreneurial sister, who found work in Spain (but also used to work in Poland) was an example that encouraged her to start migrating and a connection to enter migrant domestic work.

[The first time]...it was this sister, who is now in Spain, who helped me to go together with some sort of distant family of ours, to Poland. That was the month of August and the contract was for [picking] apples. [...] [The next time] Someone from our [distant] family was [working] in Warsaw, on the street M. [caring] for some granny [...]. And she [the woman from distant family] had to return home for longer and she asked my sister to replace her [at work]. [...] [the sister] only could stay there two months, because she was leaving for Spain and so she asked me whether I could not stay there for one and half months.
It is these women’s experience of migration, either in trade or work abroad, which primarily influenced their images of migration as something positive. It made them develop particular premises, such as: ‘If I migrate, then I will be able to live peacefully.’ The positive evaluation of migration as a step leading to material security and a sense of stability is visible in the narratives. Simultaneously, there is a negative evaluation coming from those who have not migrated. According to the interviewed women, those who did not migrate are jealous of migrants’ rising living standards and ignore the sacrifices that migration also involves, such as family separation and related risks. Some of the interviewed women mention that they are seen by people in their places of origin as making ‘easy money’. They claimed that those who do not migrate doubt the honest character of work done abroad and downplay the efforts of the migrants. This evaluation of migration is partly related to the image of domestic work as women’s obligation, for which they do not receive payment at home. The migrant women claimed that this type of judgement affected more strongly the migrants who went further abroad than Poland because they earned substantially more money and were able to display this change of financial standing at home. However, the studied migrant women’s financial ‘success’ was also visible in their improved living standards in Ukraine, which exposed them to the judgement of those who remained. I observed how migrants’ living conditions changed during one of my trips to Ukraine in August 2005, when staying with Ulyana in a town south of Lviv. As this excerpt from my field notes records:

In the morning we were supposed to go to T., but we have to stay in and wait for the gas men to connect gas pipes to Ulyana’s apartment. The new apartment is on the outskirts of B, in an old ‘Polish’ building, on the second floor. She is renovating it. The kitchen opens to the living room – Ulyana saw this in Poland and liked it, a small bathroom in the back, one bedroom, which will be for her son. There will also be stairs to the attic, if she manages to earn enough money to renovate it. The apartment is almost 50 square meters, she paid € 3,000 for it. The renovation will cost her more than the apartment.7

Ulyana claimed that when she went to the local administration office to try to get things sorted out for her new apartment, she was always forced to pay bribes because the officials knew that she was working abroad and felt justified to expect ‘additional fees’ from her.

According to Schiffauer (2006), the financial ‘success’ during migration evokes various emotions: from jealousy on the part of those who have made the wrong decision to not migrate to the bad consciences of those who have migrated and succumbed to shame or guilt (linked to feelings of responsibility). A tension is visible between images of migration as
something positive for the interviewed women and its negative judgement by their communities at home. This can be understood as a risk threatening the work status of the migrant women, where the work abroad is not regarded as proper work, but as ‘easy money’. According to the interviewed women, people who see migration as ‘easy money’, do not take into consideration the risks the migrating women must take by being away from their families. However, many of the women also stressed that migration was treated as an accepted strategy to cope with the material difficulties at home. They rationalised their decision by saying that ‘everyone who wants to, can go and earn abroad’, and those who do not do it are personally responsible for their own fate. However, this attitude of migrants is generally combined with a feeling of guilt for having to separate from one’s children.

Migrant stories, retold several times, created a reference framework – a mind map of risks for the interviewed women. These stories produced what Schiffauer (2006: 2) refers to as spaces of lost chances and avoided dangers. In this way, the imagined opportunity space underwent a continuous change, with every new story expanding or shrinking the imagined alternatives. The spectrum of migrant stories ranged broadly: from migration being seen as a familiar activity, associated with acceptable risk and moderate expectations of gains (this was often the case when other close family members were migrants), to the local community’s negative judgement of migration (risk of stigma), to stories of great danger, but also great success.

A potential migrant, being convinced that he or she is highly likely to earn more money abroad than at home will be motivated to take risks related to migration. All of the interviewed migrants shared the expectations to earn more during migration than in Ukraine. These expectations were usually realistic, based on experiences of their close friends or family members. However, there were also stories of high financial risk and gain, which placed the image of migration at the high-risk end of the spectrum. One such story was told by Nadya. I met Nadya through another migrant I knew. She is a 55-year-old divorced mother of two adult sons. As a cashier in a circus, she travelled all over the former Soviet Union and has great memories of those days. At the time of our interview, Nadya circulated between her house in a small village south of Lviv and her work in the care sector in Warsaw. She was aware that Ukrainian women farther abroad than Poland can earn even up to four times more for the same type of work. The story she told me recalls the experiences of a Ukrainian migrant woman who went to Italy and worked taking care of pigs at a desolate farm. The employers came to see the woman every two weeks.

... when they [the employers] came, they were very pleased, but they didn’t pay her. Well, she was working and they gave her no money.
So one month had passed – no money, second month, third month, and so almost the whole year passed. She said: ‘The situation is so difficult for me, I will not manage to be with these pigs any longer.’ Well, so she wrote somehow, I don’t know how, what she wrote, but she asked [her family] to send a telegram [to her] that she needs to go home, that she has to go home quickly, because of something. Then she told her signori that ‘I received a telegram and I have to go home’. ‘Alright,’ [they said], ‘No problem, if you have to go, you have to go.’ So, they bought her a plane ticket and gave her an envelope of money. And she – I don’t know if out of happiness or fear – she did not check how much money they put into the envelope, but when she came home and realised what a sum it was, she was upset that she had left Italy, because they had treated her very well, they paid her for everything.

The leading theme in the first part of the story is the risk of not being paid adequately, or not being paid at all. The migrant in the story was at the mercy of the employers due to her irregular status. She was isolated at a desolate farm – left with the pigs – with no access to information about any possibilities of changing jobs. After one year of work, the risk of not being paid and not being able to change jobs passed the threshold of acceptability. It is unclear whether she had agreed to the terms of payment with her informal employers at the start of her work or whether she tried to ask them later on for payment. It seems that she felt she was in such a weak position in relation to the employers that she did not dare ask. That is also why she asked her family to send her a telegram about a false emergency at home instead of quitting the job openly. The culmination of the story is the discovery that the woman’s expectations about the opportunities of work abroad were met – she was paid for her work very well.

Two premises can be derived from the story told by Nadya. The first one is that migration means having to take the risk of investing in going abroad and then not being paid for the work done. There is fear and distrust related to work abroad. This story leads to the imaginary creation of a dangerous terrain. The second one is that migration means earning a substantial amount of money. This money may allow the migrant to rebuild her sense of safety at home. Nadya kept repeating throughout our interview and during other meetings that she would like to go to Italy one day. Positive premises trigger migration, while negative ones can prevent it. Premises are a result of the migrants’ reflections and evaluations. The moral seems to be that the heroine of the story should have stayed longer, that she lost a chance to earn even more money because of her mistrust towards the Italian employers. Stories of earning great sums of money are only played out in Western European countries. I did not come across such stories about Poland in my interviews. Overall, the migration stories
told by the interviewed women were clearly retold several times. They all had their culmination point; on the one hand, they encouraged migration’s dream of ‘great money’ while, on the other hand, they warned of migration’s risks.

4.4 Migrant domestic work risks: Images and experiences

The women’s shared images of migrant domestic work ranged from a familiar activity to a risky business. This is partly due to the fact that, following Giddens (1979), domestic work can be seen as a social practice. Its rules are applied to a new space and transformed through mobility abroad as well as payment. Thus, domestic work, a familiar practice, acquires a new meaning. At home in Ukraine, domestic work was these women’s sphere of influence. Domestic work in Ukraine continues to be women’s work. It is time-consuming due to the limited infrastructure. During my participant observation conducted in 2005 at the homes in Ukraine of women who migrated to work in Poland, a lack of public utilities in the villages continued to affect the number of hours needed for domestic work. During field research in one of the women’s houses, I observed the following:

Recently, they connected the water to the house, meaning that you no longer have to walk to the well on the street, but there is a well and a tap right next to the house. The kitchen is outside the house in a small shack next to the chicken coop. Apart from an old gas stove there is a used fridge that Marta got from one of her employers in Poland. There is no bathroom, so every type of washing requires getting water from the tap and heating it on the stove.8

However, working as a waged domestic worker abroad means having to fulfil the demands of the employers, often other women. Parreñas (2001: 73) rightly notes that the ‘international transfer of caretaking refers to a social, political and economic relationship between women in the global labour markets’. According to Anderson (2000: 20), the female employer ‘has some control over the management of the process, retains an emotional stake in the household [...]’. The well-kept house, children and husband are a tribute to her managerial skills’. In the case of the interviewed women, their employers were Polish women who also did not want to lose their sphere of influence in the household. As Anderson (2000: 16) notes, domestic workers not only do the work of their female employers for them, but they often have to perform chores that the employer would never consider doing. As noted also by the interviewed women, once cleaning becomes paid work, the standards of ‘cleanliness’ rise to service a higher
life style. This change in the character of domestic work placed the women at risk. On one hand, they reinforced the gender division of labour, regarding the quality of domestic services performed as their ‘natural’ skills, something familiar and usually giving them a sense of power and control in their own households. On the other hand, under ‘domestic work’, they experienced a different, more demanding type of labour with tasks difficult to define. They often found it impossible to negotiate their work conditions; what is more, due to their status in the household, it was not they, but the female employer who gained social respect for the cleanliness of her home. Thus, their initial expectations of domestic work often differed from what they actually experienced during migration.

Even with the hardships of domestic work in the village, many of the women found migrant domestic work very demanding. Ulyana was well-informed before migration about the difficulties of migrant domestic work. As she said:

No, I was prepared, cleaning is hard work. She said that it will not be easy, that it will be hard, that from morning till night a person is on her feet, and different people, different demands and so on. No, so...no, I was not surprised. I was prepared for everything, for difficulties. However, I have never worked as [hard as] I do here.

A vision of migrant domestic work as a familiar, manageable activity results from preconceptions about domestic work and insufficient information about migration experiences, leading to the creation of myths about this type of work. In this context, Larysa offered a telling comment on the expectations and the actual difficulties of migrant domestic work.

Before I didn’t understand this, you see? I didn’t understand this work, I didn’t understand how it is done abroad, I didn’t understand how this is, you know. I would even say, now, when I go back to Ukraine, they all think that they give money for nothing abroad, and they don’t understand this work. When I say that I work in someone’s home, no one can imagine what work it is at home, how heavy it is. They all imagine that at home, well, here you dust a bit and clean a shelf and they think it’s nothing. But no one knows what this work is really like.

Nadya commented on her misperception of elderly care work abroad.

I even did not imagine how difficult it is, how difficult, that you cannot go on, every day you wait, wait this hour in the evening so that the day comes to an end, so another one comes, so that there will be less and less of these three months.
The excerpt above illustrates how very different this woman’s expectations of the work must have been. It is mostly the standards of ‘cleanliness’ set by the employer, isolation related to living-in domestic work and being on 24-hour duty that comes as surprise. The ability of the women to cope with the risks related to the new character of domestic work depends on the information they received before migrating.

Visions of migrant domestic work depend on the potential migrant’s access to information. Olena, an eighteen-year-old student working as a cleaner in Warsaw at the time of our interview was the daughter of a migrant woman. Her mother came to Poland for the first time in 1999, when a friend asked her to rotate with her, caring for an elderly person. Olena stayed in Ukraine with her father and her sister, two years younger than her. When her mother was away, Olena was responsible for the housework, the livestock and cooking for her father and younger sister. Olena’s mother did not share the negative experiences of her migrant work, not wanting to worry her family. According to Olena, her mother never planned for her to work as a cleaner or care worker and maybe that is the reason she also did not find it necessary to warn her about the downsides of such work. Olena’s mother met a Ukrainian woman married to a Pole on the bus to Ukraine; the woman studied at university in Warsaw and explained to her all the necessary procedures. In 2004, Olena came to Poland for the first time with the intention to work and learn Polish and possibly apply to university. Olena found out about her mother’s difficulties during migrant domestic work only after having migrated herself. As she recalls:

You know, my mom never told me a thing. When I came to Poland, they told me how she suffered [when caring for] an old woman, but she never told us, because she knew we would worry about her... And no one would... say that it is no good there. On the contrary, I wanted to go to Poland. Oh, so much money. I will earn, clean. And here I clean and no one pays so much, you know...

Olena’s image of domestic work also fits well in overall expectations that migration means ‘big money’. It was the financial success and not the messages of hardship that came to the fore. Olena lived together with her mother in the employer’s house in a small village two hours away from Warsaw. She stayed for one week alone in the house taking care of the dogs and says that she almost went mad from the isolation. That August, her father died in an accident and she had to return to Ukraine together with her mother for the funeral. In September, she returned to Warsaw for the university entrance exam. She passed it, but got accepted for extramural studies, which meant she studied during the weekends and had to pay 3,000 Polish zloty (herein abbreviated as PLN) (approximately € 660)
per semester. Being a student in Poland allowed her to apply for the one-year multiple-entrance visa. At that time, her mother’s employers left for Italy and asked Olena’s mother, who was taking care of their child, to join them.

Olena’s studies were partly financed by her mother, now working in Italy. However, she had to pay for her own stay in Poland. At the time of the interview, she was cleaning two days per week in four houses and also worked as a ‘salesperson’ for Amway cosmetics, which had not brought her any profits as yet. She did not think that finding cleaning jobs was difficult in Warsaw. However, she found the work itself physically demanding. Only through her own experience and having access to migrants other than her mother did Olena find out about the problems of domestic work abroad.

There are several potential reasons that problems related to domestic work were not addressed by the migrants who returned home. This subject was regarded as taboo, because the work abroad was below the migrant’s social status at home, but also because they felt that they would not be understood by those who did not have any migration experience. Access to information about poor working conditions was also limited because the migrant women wanted to be perceived as successful and, for that reason, rarely shared the downsides of domestic work abroad.

The imagined opportunity space involves the creation of specific images allowing comparison. Risk also must be contextualised in those images. Visions of domestic work abroad are linked to the creation of an imagined dangerous terrain. Almost all the stories concerning negative outcomes of migrant domestic work took place in Italy. For the migrant women, Italy was, on the one hand, a land of wages approximately four times higher than in Poland but, on the other hand, it was less familiar and distant, both spatially and culturally. In order to go to Italy, it is necessary to rely on informal travel agencies who were treated with suspicion by my interviewees. The women also feared the potential consequences of informal recruitment to work abroad and their irregular status in the country of migration. The legal status made the migrants excessively dependent on their future employers. The distance to Ukraine, the money invested and the limited support networks meant having to agree to what frequently were exploitative working conditions. According to the women, the risks ranged from being unable to find the type of work expected to not getting paid for work and being psychologically or physically abused. Some of the interviewed migrants knew about such working conditions from stories shared by their female relatives. Ulyana, who is physically rather small, was warned by her cousin about potential abuse during domestic work. She recalled her cousin’s story as follows:
She was caring for an old man in Italy, I even saw a photo, so tall, almost two metres, and he is handicapped, legs… he doesn’t walk and is in a wheelchair. [...] And she had to [carry] … this wheelchair... She took, on purpose, a photo of these stairs – they were very high stairs. Because, below, there was the sea and, above, his apartment – his house. She was simply carrying this wheelchair on her back. And him! [...] First the wheelchair, then him. Well, I would simply... and so, she had to... she said she was heading for a nervous breakdown. He also had a bad temper... [...] And this old man… that means, she had her own room and there was a bell right over her head and he always, a couple of times at night with this bell [he would buzz] zzzzz because he wants to go to the toilet, he wants her to... he was in pampers, to clean him and so on. She suffered terribly. And for that reason she didn’t want me to go somewhere to undertake care work. She said that I would not manage, that it would be difficult for me. And she simply said it was terrible to work so hard...

This hard work described in the story exceeds what Ulyana’s cousin is willing to regard as acceptable working conditions. For her, being in Italy probably meant having to ‘stick it out’ so as to make this trip worthwhile. The limited possibility of quitting this sort of hard work is a risk, both in physical and mental terms. If we compare this story to those of other migrants, we can see a particular spectrum of imagined scenarios in the transnational space, in which exposure to and response to risk play an important role. Ulyana can identify with the person in the story, a close cousin. This information allowed her to think about the risks of migrant domestic work. As a result, Ulyana refused to work in Poland in elderly care and is working now as a caregiver for a small boy and as a cleaner. She also insists on living independently from the cared-for person.

To some extent, these stories show that they were unwilling to take the risks related to migrating to Italy and justified their choice of migrating to Poland. Some of the imaginary risks, such as sexual exploitation, were related to the interviewees being women, based on the assumption of women’s greater vulnerability then men’s to such form of abuse abroad. Some of the studied women told me stories about migrants who went to work in the domestic service sector and were sexually exploited. Nadya, the 55-year-old divorcee who wanted to go to Italy one day, shared the following story:

Another one told me about a man and a woman in a [Italian] family, well so it was and… well, this man began to behave in such a way to her [the Ukrainian woman], well, you know, and she said right away: ‘No, no.’ But, when they took her passport away and she had nothing and didn’t have a place to go, she had to sleep with him. [...] and the
woman said that his wife knew and didn’t say anything. Do you understand? And later on it so happened that when she was leaving for home, he gave her an envelope – ‘this is the money you earned, and that is for the treatment’ [said the man]. [I asked: ‘And what was he ill with?’] AIDS... [...] Well, I don’t know how she returned, how it went with her husband, well, briefly, she has two grown-up daughters, but they are still in school, tenth and eleventh grade. And she hanged herself.

The storyteller identified with the heroine of the story: the woman, like Nadya, came from a small town near Lviv and was the mother of two children (she had daughters while Nadya had two sons). Nadya is also like the woman in her story because she works on a living-in basis. Nadya pointed to the fact that the informal employer took the woman’s passport away and thus turned her into their slave, who was unable to refuse giving sexual services. The culmination of the damage done in the story occurs when the employer pays the migrant for her work and additionally gives her money for health treatment; only at this point is the migrant woman informed that she almost certainly has been infected with HIV. In that story Nadya pointed to the high vulnerability of migrants with an irregular status: working in someone’s private household, isolated from other migrants and unable to ask for external help. In contrast to this story, Nadya can regard herself as working in a safe environment. Although she earns less money than Ukrainian women working in Italy, she does not feel trapped in her job should her working conditions change because Poland is close and she can easily return home. The story gave her a warning sign about the power of the employers over a migrant.

After hesitating for some time, the aforementioned Roma told me about her neighbour, who went to Italy to work in the domestic service sector. Her story went like this:

This was a neighbour, a close one, I knew her because she was a teacher in our school, not in my class, but in the parallel one. And she went to Italy. She was a very pretty girl, so nice. In school [in Ukraine] they didn’t pay, so she went. A woman whom she knew arranged the trip [...] she called this teacher [and said]: ‘Do you want to take care of someone?’ Good, they sold a car, to pay for the cost of the visa – 1,500 dollars. She [the teacher] was away for two years, she didn’t give any indication of where she was. And then she came back...she was there in a bordello, the woman put her there. This neighbour [who arranged the trip] put her in a bordello and she [placed] many people this way... but when she [who arranged the trip] returned, she claimed that she never put anyone anywhere. This husband of the teacher went to the militia [police], but there was no
They commented, and the wife went crazy and she threw herself from a bridge and committed suicide and left two children. And she [the teacher] was my neighbour...

Roma can clearly identify with the migrant woman, who was her neighbour, a teacher at the local school and a mother, like herself. It is a story of betrayal, where a woman, whom the heroine of the story knew, deceived her and instead of providing her with a job in the domestic service sector, made her work as a prostitute. Roma stresses the graveness of the phenomenon: ‘she [placed] many people this way’. The Ukrainian authorities and the closest family are shown as helpless. Again, the outcome of migrating for the sake of domestic work is dramatic: the woman takes her life.

The migrant stories are well structured, with a spectacular culmination point. They have probably been retold several times. Such stories are essential to create a mind map of potential risks and responses. They create what Schiffauer (2006) refers to as spaces of lost chances and avoided dangers, thus providing background for self-identification.

The association of migration with prostitution is still very much present in today’s public discourse. One aspect of the public discourse is anti-trafficking campaigns. The side effect of these campaigns is that they turn every female migrant into a potential victim of forced prostitution. A tension exists between being empowered via migration and simultaneously being perceived by the surroundings as a person at risk due to migration, without any power to exercise control, but rather being controlled by particular institutions. The migrant’s risk position shifts with new migration experiences. One of the migrant women I interviewed commented angrily on an anti-trafficking pamphlet by Caritas she came across, claiming that ‘someone’ wants to stop women from improving their lives by going abroad. She perceived the information about the dangers of falling into prostitution contained in the pamphlet as propaganda similar to that from Communist times, when a negative picture of the West aimed to prevent people from going abroad. The woman’s reaction to the pamphlet is in line with Kempadoo’s (2005: xxiv) statement that the concept of ‘victim’ robs the individual ‘from any notion of agency and subjectivity’. Migration gave the woman a sense of agency and the pamphlet seemed to negate her experience. Describing such a pamphlet as propaganda means ignoring it as a reliable source of information and thus ignoring the risks mentioned in it.

4.5 Migrating to Poland: Images of familiarity

In the interviews, the migrant women portrayed Poland as generally ‘safe’. They mostly commented on how easy it is to find a part-time job quickly
and the low cost of the trip to Poland. Four main risk-related themes appear in the images of Poland: spatial distance, entry, cultural distance and working conditions. When it comes to the first three characteristics of migration to Poland (spatial and cultural distance, as well as entry), the migrant women perceived them as acceptable risks or as non-risky. However, working conditions (including payment and treatment by employers), made migrating to Poland a risky undertaking in the opinion of the interviewees.

Let me first turn to the non-risky images of migrating to Poland. For the migrant women interviewed, Poland’s proximity to Ukraine was a safety measure. The journey by bus from Warsaw to the Ukrainian border takes approximately six hours, a fact that made Poland familiar in the eyes of the interviewees. As Roma remarked:

No, to Poland it is somehow normal. I feel safe. Even when I went for the first time, it is close to home. I feel safe.

Svietlana also commented on the easy entry to Poland during the 1990s and its spatial proximity.

[pauses] Well, I, it’s difficult to say now [...] how I went to Poland because it was close, no visa was needed, that’s it first of all. It didn’t cost much, the ticket for the journey wasn’t expensive and the fact that, that it was so close, so it didn’t involve such great expenses. I [...] simply decided that when I realise that there is no work waiting for me there, or there are some sort of unacceptable [work] conditions [...] Some [word incomprehensible], some doubts, I will immediately leave. I was worried if there would be no, well, some sort of indecency...

In contrast, trips farther abroad – for example, to Italy or Portugal – were not characterised by the ease of returning home, which Svietlana mentions when referring to Poland; financial investment was much greater and the migrant, even when faced with poor working conditions, had to ‘stick it out’ at least for several months to repay the costs of travel and the visa. The interviewed women placed the images of Poland on a spectrum of risk along with other countries. In general, migrating to Poland was regarded as safer compared to migrating farther – to Italy or Spain. The closeness of Poland and Ukraine allowed migrants to return quickly home if there was a need to do so. For some of the women who continued to be employed or insured in Ukraine, this offered a possibility to return for treatment to their country of origin if ill.

Still, for almost all of the interviewed migrant women, migration to Poland was their first trip abroad. During Communism, the Soviet gov-
ernment restricted contact between inhabitants of the different countries in the bloc (Burant 1993: 410). No wonder that for some of the women Poland, although spatially close, seemed unreachable. As Marta recalled:

Poland was once for me the end of the world. I remember when I was standing at the border in Hrebenne [border-crossing point between Poland and Ukraine] for the first time and I thought that... I don’t know... ‘Where am I going?!’ That there is nothing there, that this is the end of the world!

Proximity is visible in the symbolic ties that have appeared in stories of migrant women whose Polish employers had been born or raised in what is today Ukraine and could relate to places known to the migrants. As Ulyana said:

I say, this world is big, but it connects people, I never thought it could be that way. So it is that here I cleaned and Miss L. gave me work – to earn some extra money – at Mr. K.’s and it turned out that his father was studying in C. and my mom is from C.

Although Poles have been, and to some extent continue to be, viewed as former colonisers by Ukrainians,12 this theme did not arise in my interviews. It seems that the ties to Poles were too important a source of social capital. For that reason, the interviewed women used their knowledge of the past selectively and tried to find common ground with their Polish employers.13 The migrants drew on the common Communist past and the fact that Poles also suffered poverty and had to migrate. As Ulyana mentioned during the interview, Poles had ‘empty shelves’ in shops and even had to migrate to trade in Ukraine; even today there are Polish women who continue working abroad, for example, in Italy.

According to the interviewed women, language skills were one of the basic advantages that decreased the risk of not finding work when migrating. They saw the ease of learning Polish as an advantage that increased their chances of finding work and negotiating working conditions. With a good command of Polish, the migrant had a broader choice of jobs, especially in care work. Cleaning did not require a good command of Polish. Still, the ability to communicate in Polish usually made it easier to meet Poles and to build a social niche outside the migrant community, at least for those who felt the need to do so. It is to be remembered that Polish and Ukrainian are both Slavic languages, which facilitates learning. As Chrystyna, a 50-year-old widow from the oblast of Lviv with two children, who had worked for many years as a bookkeeper and was a care worker in Warsaw at the time of our interview commented:
Well, it is a different country, different customs [...] language [...] firstly, however, with Polish one can manage somehow in terms of speaking, even in those first few days and one can understand, because this is a lot...well, you know Ukrainian a bit, so you know yourself, how many similar words there are [...] Here you have *doshch* and *deszcz* [meaning ‘rain’ in Ukrainian and Polish, respectively] [...] I would certainly need some more money, but no matter how much you have, it is always not enough [...] Well, but it is firstly the language that scares one, because I am already used to the Polish language and somehow, it is easier than with Spanish or Italian or some other language, learning some other language...

The majority of the interviewed Ukrainian women came from the Ukrainian western borderland, where they came in contact with the Polish language. Chrystyna had Polish roots and her home in Ukraine was close to the Polish border.

First of all, my great-grandfathers were Polish. Secondly, as I already said in the beginning, we lived very close to the Polish border and during the time of the Soviet government, there were no foreign TV channels, and we had everything in Polish. [...] Yes, Polish television [...] and so I knew the basic words and in addition, [...], the Ukrainian language and Polish language have a lot in common. The accent is different, different pronunciation and there are words that I do not know, for example, but I have a Polish-Ukrainian dictionary, so I can find them.

Symbolic ties to Poland of the interviewed migrant women played an important role in creating imagined closeness through linguistic familiarities. Ulyana commented on how she knew Polish already, living close to the Polish border and how this made her mother decide that it was safe enough for her to go to Poland. She evaluates Poland in opposition to the imagined dangerous terrain: Germany. As Ulyana put it:

When I got divorced, so then I wanted simply...[it was] hard, so I wanted to go to Germany. I started the procedure to get a visa, but my mom says that [...] they can destroy women there, take away your passport and mom said: ‘No, you will not go. And here is Poland, close, here you can go.’ I know Polish.

However, having to learn a new language was more difficult for some of the interviewed women. Larysa recounted a different experience from that of Chrystyna and Ulyana when first confronted with the Polish language during migration.
I was just starting to say something. This was for me, you know [...] I was so speechless, I thought that I had lost the ability to speak, I saw that I would not be able to speak in any language, neither in Ukrainian nor in Polish, so this was hard. I was like this sheep, you know [...], like a stupid human being, I felt like [...] the worst thing was that I couldn’t speak, because, when it comes to understanding, I understood when they spoke to me. I understood everything when someone spoke slowly. Because when [they spoke] fast I couldn’t [understand] too well.

In addition, the migrant women claimed that because they spoke Polish with an ‘eastern’ accent they had difficulties finding accommodation: landlords, due to negative stereotypes of Ukrainians, were unwilling to rent them apartments.

The image of Poland as a safe country was accompanied by the prospect of working for substantially less money than in Western European countries. Thus, less risk meant less gain. This fact, however, could place the migrant’s social status back home at risk. Chrystyna mentioned the reaction of her Ukrainian acquaintances when they learned that she was working in Poland. As she recalled:

To come here to Poland, well, to work, well, some feel pity and some seem to have an impression that you go and ‘do [work] for someone [for free]’, because they know that the earnings are small [...] that it is not the right money for such hard work. Well – and some react with laughter – that you ‘work for someone [for free]’ for so little money. Well, but in general my friends and neighbours are not so sarcastic, they understand.

Work in Poland was often compared by the women to the images they have of work farther abroad, for example, in Italy. When asked what Ukrainians fear mostly when coming to Poland, Chrystyna claimed that migrants worry about poor treatment; she offered an interesting comparison between Poland and Italy.

...treatment. Human treatment, they treat us here as a second-category nation [...] eh, I have not been to Italy, I haven’t been anywhere else for zarobitky ['labour migration'], apart from Poland, but I have a lot of...my friend, a close friend of mine, my cousins, were everywhere. I told them about my life, how I was treated and how my friends were and what they did. Well, no one would have agreed to do something like this in Italy, for example, to come here, earn pennies and work like I work [...] In there, you have the Sunday off, obligatory, you work from hour to hour, obligatory. [...] In there, they
do not degrade us.... Well, I myself, thanks to God, did not have any bad experiences with Mrs. M. and I hope that I won’t. Because I say, she is a very nice person, very wise and I like her....

Chrystyna claimed to have good working conditions at the time of the interview, but overall, she was very critical of the situation of labour migrants in Poland. Partly, this could have been an expression of her need to voice in front of me the necessity of changes in this area (I was speaking to her as a Pole coming from an institution dealing with migration). At this point, the comparison has two different aspects. According to Chrystyna, not only was the treatment of Ukrainian women worse in Poland than in other countries, but the payment for the work they do was much lower, too. Sufficient remuneration is part of the expected treatment of the migrant worker, a prerequisite of decent working conditions. Throughout the interview, Chrystyna claimed that she was very poorly treated during her first work as a care worker in Poland. The person who told her about this job opportunity said ‘prepare for hell’. Chrystyna’s explanation for the poor working conditions was discrimination (‘second-category nation’). She claimed that Ukrainians would never have been treated by Italians the way they are treated by Poles. However, for all her complaints about Poland and praise of the positive aspects of migrating to Italy, Chrystyna continued to work in Poland. At the end of the day, she preferred the stability and familiarity of her social environment and working conditions in Poland to the opportunities of unknown Italy. The other migrant women I interviewed made a similar choice. The low earnings and the degrading treatment received in Poland made some of the women place Poland at the high-risk end of the risk spectrum. Nonetheless, this is not a dominant pattern: overall, when comparing their wages in Poland to the situation in Ukraine, the interviewees regarded the opportunities to be much higher than the risks.

Despite the working conditions, migrating to work in Poland was still regarded as an opportunity and Poles as a reference point by some of the migrant women in Poland. The community inhabiting the new opportunity space may become one’s new imagined community. For Svietlana, Poles embodied a longed-for way of living.

Well, I did not have any idea how to earn normally, calmly and in a decent manner [in Ukraine]. And I saw [in Poland] that you can live in peace, earn in peace, spend that money in peace. I really liked the fact that I am living among people who also cope somehow, that there are many people who are successful...

At the same time, maintaining a sense of identity with those who remained at home was increasingly difficult. It was an element of the culture of
migration to stigmatise local alternatives as second rate. The distance to Ukraine was also present in the migrants’ utterances: they expressed disappointment with reforms at home, complained that they cannot earn a decent wage in their own country. The lack of opportunities at home proved that they had made the right decision by migrating to work abroad; this was especially the case with those of the women who decided to take their children with them to Poland.

According to the women, undeclared work was not criminalised in Poland: although laws to curb this type of work exist, they are not usually well enforced. This is crucial, because it is the undeclared character of their work that made migration worthwhile for these women; it gave them a competitive advantage in the Polish labour market. Working in an irregular fashion guaranteed higher earnings, though obviously at the expense of social and working rights.

4.6 ‘Bad’ migrating mothers: Gendered risk

Although engaged in paid employment, women in the Ukrainian Republic of the Soviet Union were also seen as primarily responsible for domestic work and care (Brown 1968). Ukrainian women’s identity was summed up in the term ‘working mother’. According to some researchers, the ‘working mother’ gender contract was abandoned in the 1990s, with the state no longer providing support and guarantee of employment (Zhurzhenko 2001: 30). However, woman’s obligations continue to be linked to the family, while men are still seen as less bound by family responsibilities.

The migration of parents, especially mothers, was regarded as controversial by the Ukrainian public. Ukrainian newspapers address the situation of the children of migrant parents, in particular migrant women. The main idea presented in the articles is that the absence of parents, especially mothers, leads to the moral deprivation of children. In addition, young girls are burdened with domestic chores in their mothers’ absence. Since many of the Ukrainian women have been migrating since the mid-1990s to Italy, the term ‘Italian orphans’ is used by the media in Ukraine to describe labour migrants’ children, seen as deprived of proper family socialisation. Similarly, the writings of some Ukrainian scholars reinforce the view that migration leads to the disintegration of family. In general, such analysis fails to take into account the overall state of family as an institution in Ukraine: in 2003, for every 1,000 people, the average number of marriages was 7.6 and the average number of divorces 3.7 (Derzhkomstat 2003). In a study conducted in 2006 on children of Ukrainian labour migrants, the interviewed experts claimed the ultimate consequences of migration for the children are more negative than positive
or entirely negative, due to the fact that the children are left without proper parental care (Halustyan, Doroshok, Kovalchuk, Levchenko, Trubavina & Shvab 2006: 12). All in all, as one of the scholars claims, migration leads to:

emotional distancing and even aloofness between family members [...] This, in turn, ruins family connections and often results in divorces and the collapse of marriage. Furthermore, it increases the risk of children becoming social orphans and may lead to juvenile delinquency and criminalization of children. (Tolstokorova 2007: 39)

This excerpt sums up all the themes related to the effect of labour migration on families that are present in the public discourse in Ukraine.

Most of the interviewed Ukrainian women left behind their families, particularly children, when engaging in labour migration. It seems to be a rational decision in view of costs and risks involved in migrating to another country and working mostly in an undeclared fashion. However, this line of argument becomes debatable when we assume that the family is an important emotional and material support network, which is largely absent during migration. Also, the migrant women were well aware of ‘blame’ put on migrating mothers by the society, as I discussed in previous paragraphs. This discourse of blame has been addressed by Keough (2006) in her analysis of the trope of ‘mothers as the key to social order’ in post-socialist transnational labour practices. As Douglas would say, these risks of migrating mothers were ‘advertised’ by the public and for that reason cannot be ignored. Ludmila, the married 45-year-old nurse who had a daughter at university and a son in the army, spoke during our interview about the ‘moral burden’ of being away from her family. Even Sviatlana, who stressed that migration was her path to independence, at first did not want to migrate because of family obligations. Sviatlana recalls:

This [family] situation of mine did not allow me to leave because, when leaving, I had to leave two children, two parents – this was unacceptable.

The responsibility of women for social reproduction was a space for negotiation between two conflicting needs: the need to socialise their children by staying in Ukraine and the need to improve future chances for their standard of living and pay for their studies with money earned away from home. When presenting their migration decision, the woman placed it between the need for material care, their families being at risk of falling into poverty and the need for moral care, of which their children were to some extent deprived while they migrated. Gendered identity played a
crucial role here: on the one hand, the women felt responsible as breadwinners for their family’s well-being; on the other hand, they believed their main responsibility as women was family care. The migrant women claimed that they sacrificed themselves for their children and, because of that, were better mothers than those who stayed. At the same time, by engaging in migration, they were insisting on a new social order. Their decision was not rationalised in financial terms; rather, it was the good of their children that came to the fore. Migrating ‘for the family’ was an important rationalisation. As Ludmila said:

No one goes for oneself, to earn for oneself, no one goes. It is always for someone else.

The more the studied women were involved in their life in Ukraine (in terms of reproduction, work or other aspects of life), the higher they evaluated the risks related to migration because there was more to lose. Due to their family roles, the interviewed women can also be placed in a risk spectrum of least to highest exposure. Elderly women with adult children usually felt the least risk of failing in terms of family care. Those most at risk seemed to be women with teenage children. Women who no longer had any care responsibilities themselves felt free to migrate. One of the interviewed women, a pensioner, said the following about her children and her migration decision:

They [the children] have their families, they should stick to their wives and husbands. I am old, so I have to go [...] Some [people] say that it is unnecessary [to migrate], others say: ‘She is schooling her son – she has to go.’

Older women, who were already retired and had grown-up children, claimed to be sacrificing themselves for their families; they felt that they ‘saved’ their children’s marriages from falling apart because their financial support prevented the next generation from having to migrate. Another woman, who was already retired, commented on supporting her adult son’s studies with the money she made while migrating to Poland.

[The studies] cost UAH 2,000 – that is, 2,000 per year – that is, 500 dollars, and that is a lot. The money I make here in three months, I have to give it to him, because he has a small child. If there were no children, maybe my daughter-in-law would work [...] he doesn’t work much, only from time to time, there is no work.

The woman’s justifications include not only education, but also the good of her son’s family: he has a small child and for that reason neither her
son nor his wife should, in her eyes, migrate in order to work. In this way she reinforces the negative moral judgement of those parents who migrate leaving their children behind.

Ludmila began to think about migration when her daughter was about to enter university. At the time of the interview, Ludmila had been circulating for two years between Ukraine and Poland, taking two to three months of unpaid leave from work each time. She worked as a caregiver for an elderly person, while her family remained in Ukraine. Neither her husband’s earnings nor hers were sufficient to pay university fees and financially support her daughter’s stay in Lviv. They decided together that she should try to earn in Poland as a care worker, although her husband had to be convinced by her. Ludmila rationalised her migration decision using the welfare of her children as an argument.

Paying for the studies of children was one of the dominant pro-migration arguments among the interviewed migrant women with older or even adult children who did not have a stable income. The migrant women, who mostly had secondary education, wanted to invest in their children’s higher education to improve their social status and future chances of finding work in Ukraine.

Zenya justified her labour migration to Poland by saying that ‘I am spending all my earnings on my own children’ while she herself leads a ‘beggar-like living’ in Poland. She continued by presenting herself in a context where it is a norm for families with children to go and earn abroad.

As you see, almost one in three families that have children, right, goes where they can, because I am sure you know that our situation is much worse than that of Poland at this moment [...] And for me it is sad because, for example, I have two sons, one has finished university, Pricarpathian, he is a physicist and he has studied economics as well, he has a post-graduate diploma in economic studies. And he has two qualifications and it is sad, because he is without work [...] Well, and so, I have to stay here now, because there is so much money [needed], I am investing so hugely in my sons, and even now, when he is 24 years old, I still have to work by myself [to support him].

Her sons were her ‘investment’, but they had little prospects of finding work in Ukraine, so she hoped to raise her social and economic capital by working in Poland to finance the emigration of her sons. Leaving her sons in Ukraine, with the present economic situation, was too much of a risk in her view. At the same time, if you read between the lines, the message is that her sons – who cannot find work or exit Ukraine – are presently a burden, placing their mother at risk of very low living standards.

The greatest fears about children going astray were voiced by women
with teenage children, such as Larysa. After we had finished the interview, she continued to complain about problems with her teenage daughter, who ‘changed’ while she went away to behave as though she is ‘no longer hers’. Among other things, her daughter borrowed money from friends and Larysa also had a huge phone bill to pay upon her return to Ukraine. As she recounted:

She [her daughter] simply,...[...] when I leave money at home, when there is more money she no longer values it, you understand. So, on the one hand, I would like her to work a bit. But [on the other], I don’t want my child to work as I do. Maybe she would [...] learn and understand [...] that one has to study, because she does not want to study. [...] At [her] school, they laugh at those who learn well, they think that they are stupid. But this is not stupid. When I was studying, this was different. Everyone wanted to study and go to university. Now children don’t understand this. They laugh at those who study. So she should come and try to earn with her own hands.

Larysa attempted to teach her daughter to respect her work by making her experience the difficulties of migrant work. This was a new form of socialisation, a ‘life lesson’, which was to make the child realise that one should study.

Larysa’s daughter was not aware of the conditions in which her mother earned. Larysa hoped the migration experience would push her daughter to study so as to avoid being among the hard lot of migrants.

The perception of care, particularly child-care as women’s ‘obligation’ towards their families, meant that a household without a mother was regarded as incomplete. It diverged from societal expectations, which demand that mothers and children should live under the same roof. This placed the interviewed migrant women with small children at the greatest risk of blame for being ‘bad mothers’.

The absence of a mother means, among other things, a changed division of labour in the family. Although Ludmila felt guilty for leaving her husband alone ‘in charge’ of the household, as it became clear later on, it was actually her daughter who took care of the household chores.

My daughter...it is hard, because [...] when she comes [home] on Friday in the afternoon, it is necessary [for her] to wash and clean everything, to cook something for herself, for her father and it is hard for her. When she comes [home] ...she wants to relax and not to be responsible for everything...

Particular gender roles are reinforced when women migrate: it is women – daughters, grandmothers or female neighbours – who take over the
household work of the ‘missing’ woman. As mentioned earlier, a similar case is Svieta’s. She had three brothers, who lived in Ukraine, but none of them regarded it as his responsibility to care for their parents. She had to pay a female neighbour to care for them, especially for her ill mother.

In general, the migrant women did not mention receiving any support through domestic work carried out by their husbands, brothers or sons. However, the fact that husbands were not mentioned is also due to the fact that the majority of the interviewed were divorced. For that reason, it was mainly the women’s daughters and mothers who took over household chores. When her mother migrated, sixteen-year-old Olena, who was left at home in Ukraine with her younger sister and uncle, was also responsible for the housework and the livestock. As Olena recalls:

We had a cow I had to milk before I went to school. So the mornings were terrible, because I went to the barn, milked the cow and then took a shower, because [if I didn’t shower] I would come to school and they would say ‘what a pig’. I took a shower and then went to school. Then I came back and again went to [milk] this cow, then cooked something because, you know, that mom wasn’t there, so I didn’t waste a lot of time studying, because I wanted my sister to study and later in the evening, when everything was already done, then I could read something and in the morning again; so I was so fed up with this cow that I couldn’t look at it any more. I was so fed up that when I was on my way to Poland I was jumping for joy that I was leaving this cow behind.

It was rare for the interviewed women to admit being relieved by having a ‘holiday’ from their own domestic obligations when migrating. However, some women commented on how domestic chores would prepare their daughters to better cope with life.

The women with young children mainly expressed a sense of loss. As one named Marijka said, remembering her first trip to Poland:

...I was very homesick [...] Very homesick, because I left my child, who was then thirteen years old, a girl. [...] she lived with her grandma in the village [...] so that was very hard – the longing – mentally, it was difficult.

Migrant women with young children usually left them in the care of their own mothers. Some of the migrant women were not pleased with the way their mothers raised their children. One of them, whose daughter was five years old at the time of our interview and was left with her grandmother at age one, claimed that her daughter no longer recognises her and instead calls her grandmother ‘mom’. This woman saw her absence as a risk of
losing an emotional bond with her child. However, when imagining what would have happened if she had not migrated, she decided she had made the right decision.

In general, the migrant women felt that they partly compensated their absence in the life of their children with material goods, for example, fashionable clothes. According to Marijka:

...I could not make ends meet so I had to go on zarobitky ['labour migration']. But, the child was also longing and cried and said: ‘Mom, come back.’ And when mom came back, she said: ‘Mom don’t leave’, but with time, she grew up. So she knew that mom would come, bring something and bring money and bring clothing and she was pleased with this [...]. Because earlier, it was all from humanitarian [help], we bought [things] second-hand. And later when she grew up to become a girl, there were already boys coming and she went to discos. So she coped with it all [laughing].

In saying ‘I could not make ends meet’, the woman signals that the economic conditions in Ukraine did not provide her with sufficient opportunities to support herself and her daughter financially. She presented her migration decision as a ‘no choice’ situation. The expressions ‘Mom, don’t leave’ and ‘Mom, come back’ show the emotional difficulty of separation between mother and child. Throughout the interview, she repeated, as if to reassure herself, that the daughter ‘grew used to it’. Similarly, Marijka mentioned how migrants and their families, in general, ‘get used’ to the risks of separation related to migration.

Well, people are afraid of something, I know, the same it was [the] first time [for me], the same, it was horrible and all this longing, it was difficult: morally and mentally, but then people get somehow used to it.

With time, certain risks become familiar and possible consequences are feared less. As Bourdieu (1983) claimed, the acculturated nature of risk-related actions results in a routine-like, habitual behaviour. ‘Getting used’ to migrating means that fears are decreased and the judgement and response to risks become habitual at some point. The avoidance of risk or risk-taking is present in everyday routines, unreflexively incorporated into our bodily actions. In the women’s evaluation of migration, risk characterised by successively short negative outcomes (such as the potential effects of a poor financial situation) outweighed risk characterised by consequences that were distant in time, such as the possible effects of alternative forms of children’s socialisation. Those of the interviewed women who were single or divorced mothers and received little parental
support decided to bring their children to Poland. In this case, emotional risks related to family separation were traded for financial costs (having to support the children in the county of migration) and an increased risk of a failed migration.

A reason Poland was chosen by the women to begin with was that, in their opinion, it allowed them to combine waged work with childrearing and domestic duties, circulating between Poland and Ukraine every three months. However, the short-term trips nonetheless amounted to the migrant women spending most of the year abroad. As Victoria, who started circulating between Poland and Ukraine in 2001, said:

First year, I was here longer than 200 days, next year even longer. My daughters told me: ‘Mom, you are rarely home.’ The following year it somehow happened, that I was longer in Poland, because, they counted: ‘Mom, you have been some three months home!’

Long absences from Ukraine were notable for the majority of the interviewed women whose earnings from abroad were the main source of income. In those cases, family separation as a risk thus receded to the background, while financial support of the family took primary importance. These women also felt to some extent empowered by the fact that they could influence their own and their families’ future. They were aware of the conditions in Ukraine: one of the women was sure she would be worse off if she had not migrated.

The studied women engaged in new forms of socialisation and cultivated emotional ties with their families at a distance. As one of them explained: ‘With my children I send text messages everyday, sometimes several times and I call every second, third day [...] devotedly – every week devotedly.’

Apart from overall fear of failing as a mother, only one woman expressed concern about her marriage. This may be influenced by the fact that the majority of the women were divorced before leaving Ukraine. Ludmila, whose husband was a journalist and remained in Ukraine, was convinced that a marriage can fall apart if the wife is separated from her husband for too long. She not only evaluated migration as potentially leading to a couple’s breakdown, but also said: ‘You can earn more money and lose a lot in marriage.’ In Ludmila’s eyes, greater financial benefits stemming from a longer stay abroad put the well-being of married life at stake. She regarded migration as ‘safe’ until a certain point in time. According to Ludmila, cohabitation was needed for a marriage to function. Circulating between Poland and Ukraine allowed Ludmila both to provide material care for her family and be present at home. Proximity of the countries played a role in the length of separation. Migrating any farther from Ukraine than Poland did not belong in Ludmila’s imagined opportunity
space. For Ukrainian labour migrants, migration to Italy or Portugal meant a separation from their families and spouses for at least one year due to the travel expenses.18 Meanwhile, commuting between Poland and Ukraine was financially feasible and, following Ludmila’s reasoning, did not place the migrant’s marriage at risk.

However, Ludmila’s belief in the clear-cut link between migration and the breakdown of marriage was not shared by all of the women. According to the interviewees, when the husband was a migrant, it was more acceptable for the wife to migrate, too. Victoria noted the following about her relationship with her husband, who worked in construction in Russia:

He also goes...to Moscow to work, it often happens that we do not see each other nine months, half a year [...]. You see, it’s like that: I go there for a month or something and now he is in Moscow, then he comes and I am here, so we don’t see each other. [...] So we don’t even quarrel; I always joke: ‘Oh, like a honeymoon!’ And that’s how it goes.

According to the women, men also migrated to large cities within Ukraine, such as Kiev, to work in construction. Among my interviewees, there were women who joined their migrant husbands and yet still ended up divorcing them. For other interviewed women, extramarital affairs of their husbands during their migration were a good justification for divorce and offered escape from an unhappy marriage. Others actually met their future husbands – both Ukrainian and Polish nationals – during their migration. However, the majority of the interviewed women were divorced and did not count on their ex-husbands’ support when it came to raising children. Not only did they not count on receiving any child support from them, but some women also went to court to strip their husbands of parental rights. This way they did not need the father’s consent for the child to move abroad.

How Ukrainian men’s situation has influenced the migration of their wives might be worth mentioning here. According to Vianello (2009) Ukrainian migrant women who returned home from working in the domestic work sector in Italy claimed that having the primary responsibility for family care made them more reliable and stronger than their husbands. The women decide to migrate due to their unemployed husbands’ apathy and reluctance to engage in labour migration for fear of losing social status. According to Vianello’s study, it is sometimes on the request of husbands or children that the migrant women return to Ukraine and give up migration. Once home, the women have to face husbands who are suspicious of their fidelity and angry that the woman took over their role of ‘head of the family’. The returned migrant women attempt to challenge this negative stereotype and social disapproval of female migration. In one
case, women who returned from Italy to Ivano-Frankivsk created a non-governmental organisation to provide support for returnees and provide the local community with an alternative picture of migrant women in Italy: as martyrs who self-sacrifice for their children (Vianello 2009).

A gradual evaluation of the imagined opportunity spaces is visible among the interviewed women: the more experience they had, the easier it was to decide what exactly is beneficial and what is potentially dangerous. The process of self-identification either reinforces the known pattern of mothers or expands to more self-centred forms of identification.

4.7 Conclusions

The studied Ukrainian migrant women developed a particular imagined opportunity space – Poland’s domestic work sector – with risk images playing an important role. It developed against conditions of systemic risk in Ukraine, resulting in the women’s long-term unemployment and the opening of borders between Ukraine and Poland.

The studied women also belonged to several categories, which influenced their perception of migration risks: they were women of different age, marital and parental status, having rather limited financial resources and social ties. Their social networks were either rather small or they shrank due to the decrease in their social status related to unemployment. This meant that they did not have sufficient social support to learn about the opportunities of migrating farther than Poland and to borrow the money to do so. The younger migrant women had other women with migration experience among their family members, some of whom migrated to Portugal, Spain or Italy. However, rather than encourage further migration, these family members claimed that it was safer to stay closer – that is, to go to Poland.

In general, the women acted on the following assumption: ‘If I migrate to Poland, I can easily return should there be trouble.’ Migration to Poland is seen as safe and posing little risk. Only in one case were Poland and Poles heavily criticised for degrading treatment and low earnings: in this testimony, the interviewed woman said she was exploited in her first migration job.

The risks the women faced in Ukraine due to unemployment, among other factors, were, following Douglas (1985), so-called involuntary risks placed on them by an external force. They balanced these risks – declining living standards, leading potentially to poverty – by various means, such as engaging in trade or borrowing money. In the end, they diversified the risk in Ukraine by taking a voluntary risk: engaging in irregular labour migration. Overall, the women responded to the systemic risks by migrating to a place with low travel costs that seemed familiar, as well to a
specific type of work – domestic work – which brought with it an association of the safety of home (even if not their own). Again, these expectations of familiarity and safety, when unmet, increased the sense of insecurity.

The women’s different risk exposure at home led to the creation of specific migration images. The women who were working-age, divorced and had children and parents to support regarded migration as a way to gain financial independence. The potential costs of not migrating were very high for them because they were either unemployed or experienced hidden unemployment, which indeed made staying at home almost impossible. They saw the possibility of earning decent money abroad as rather attractive, pointing to the wide range of examples of people migrating and making their way. For women who had children and were married and/or supported partly by their parents, the main justification for migration was their responsibility towards their families; it was the ‘good of the family’ that held highest value for them (and which could, paradoxically, also be threatened due to migration). Beliefs about the gendered order at home meant that when a woman became a migrant she risked her reputation as ‘good mother’ and/or ‘good wife’. Those women who had retired and had since fewer family obligations (their children were adults) did not believe that migration placed their family lives at risk. Furthermore, due to their age, they did not regard themselves as a main target for sexual exploitation, as was the case with younger women.