6 Risks and risk strategies in migrant domestic work

Poland’s demand for home-based care is due to a limited provision of institutionalised public and private care services. In large urban centres, such as Warsaw, cleaning services are also sought after. Ukrainian migrant women have learned that the Polish domestic work sector, with its need for care workers and cleaners, provides opportunities to earn sufficient wages to be able to support their families in Ukraine. However, work in the domestic work sector exposes the migrant women to particular risks. On the one hand, the risks result from the character of domestic work: it is undeclared, unstable, related to low social status and yields insecure income. On the other hand, the risks taken by domestic workers depend to a large extent on the attitude of the informal employer. To gain insight into the Ukrainian women’s opportunities to respond to risk present in their relationships with informal Polish employers, I use the notions of patron-client relationship (Tarkowski 1994) and everyday forms of resistance (Scott 1985, 1990).

The patron-client relationship is an asymmetrical relationship characterised by a domination-subordination division (Tarkowski 1994: 45). In the case of migrants, this is especially visible when analysing those with an irregular legal status. Such a relationship is generally voluntary, with both engaged parties expecting gains from the exchange of goods and services. The individuals involved have access to different and unequal types of resources, a result of their positioning at different levels of the societal hierarchy (Tarkowski 1994: 47). This exchange differs from an economic exchange because there is no equivalence. When one side does a favour for the other, that party has a right to expect reciprocity in the future, though the character of reciprocity may not be determined; there are no formal rules or legal guarantees. The reciprocity norm defines the rules of behaviour. Thus, it is not about the obligation to repay a debt, but about ‘being grateful’ (Tarkowski 1994: 48). The exchange, based on the interest of both sides, ought to be hidden; instead, it takes the form of a favour. The actual underlying aim and function of offering a gift has to be concealed.

The paradox of patron-client relationships is that they are based on personal ties of solidarity and, at the same time, ties of subordination and inequality, thus creating ground for potential exploitation. This calls into
question the voluntary character of this relationship: it is in fact the person with higher social standing – the patron – who decides whether and, if so, how the relationship will be created. Meanwhile, the client tries to find favour with the patron. Patrons can force clients to engage in a relationship. This is related to the norm that does not allow one to refuse a service – a tactic called ‘aggressive charity’. The exchange between the patron and client is unequal, making the client more and more dependent (Tarkowski 1994: 90-92). In that sense, the relationship becomes a risk for the dependent party.

Everyday forms of resistance involve the struggle of relatively powerless groups to reach their basic objectives (such as physical safety or income) vis-à-vis the various forms of exploitation by those in power. They can involve inventive practices such as dissimulation, false compliance, stealing, feigning ignorance, evasion or deception (Scott 1985: 29). These small modes of resistance are persistent and require little coordination or planning; they constitute forms of individual self-help. The idea is to reach immediate gains and at the same time avoid any direct symbolic confrontation with authority or the elite norms. As Scott (1985: 33) writes: ‘The success of de facto resistance is often directly proportional to the symbolic conformity with which it is masked.’ The character of resistance is influenced by ‘the existing form of labor control and by beliefs about the probability and severity of retaliation’ (Scott 1985: 34). The more individualised the resister, the greater the risks. The more collective the grievance, as shared through stories, the less it is only a fantasy and the more it can become a collective act. What matters is the meaning given to their acts by the resisters.

A demystification of the relationship with the power-holder by the resister occurs in the so-called hidden transcript. The hidden transcript is what is said offstage. It is produced for a special audience and under different constraints of power than the public transcript, which is a performance of deference and consent by the subordinate, who attempts to foresee the intentions of the power-holder (Scott 1990: 3).

The work relationship between the Ukrainian migrant and the Polish employer in the domestic sector can be generally described as a patron-client relationship. It features personal ties, with the exchange guaranteed by norms of reciprocity and not by a formal contract. Moreover, it occurs between individuals with unequal access to political, economic and social resources, placing the employer in the dominant and the migrant in the subordinate position. Both parties enter this relationship aiming to achieve particular gains. At first glance, the employer simply wants a clean house and well-cared-for children or parents and the migrant seeks a decent wage. However, the relationship is more complex than that. Three main aspects of working in the employer’s household influence the exposure and management of risk in this work relationship: 1) irregular legal status
of the migrant, 2) social status of the migrant and 3) trust as a structural feature of domestic work.

6.1 Development of a niche for migrant domestic work in Poland

The Polish domestic work sector provides Ukrainian migrant women with certain opportunities. What was the development of migration from Ukraine to the Polish labour market, including migration to the domestic work sector? What is the character of the domestic work sector and why is there a need in Poland for such workers?

Wage differences between countries are an important (although not the exclusive) pull factor for labour migration and, with time, lead to the development of a work niche. To provide some background about the economic disparity between Ukraine and Poland, let me quote some figures. In 1993, the real buying power of the GDP per head in Ukraine was 5.2 times lower than that of the EU-15 and 1.8 times lower than Poland’s. Between 1993 and 1996, the real GDP per head in Ukraine fell 1.6 times and, by 1996, amounted to 12 per cent of the EU average and 30-35 per cent of Poland’s (Revenko 1997). Ukrainian GDP per capita in 2000 was equal to $ 639.90, while in Poland it was $ 1,836.00 (in 2005, the figures were $ 4,456.50 and $ 7,967.70, respectively).¹

In the early 1990s, Ukrainians started to engage in cross-border petty trade. Stuck between the socialist legislation and new (but rarely implemented) market regulations, Ukrainians and Poles each responded to discrepancies between supply and demand. These individual responses created a new set of social relations between ethnic groups, neighbouring countries and between producers and consumers (Stola 1997). According to border guard statistics, between 1990 and 1993, ‘suitcase importing’ was at its peak: approximately 37 million foreigners crossed Poland’s border with bags full of goods to sell on the street (Stola 1997: 7).

At the time, Ukrainians involved in trade learned to respond to various risks, among them those related to the changing legal regulations. For example, the introduction of customs controls, import and export tariffs, taxation and licensing of traders were major risks to their trading activities. To avoid paying customs while also keeping under the capped value one could carry out of Poland (€ 400), Ukrainian migrants only brought a small amount of goods over the border. With the introduction of trading licenses in Poland, Ukrainians faced the risk of being blackmailed by those collecting the dues, which would mean having to pay more than the required fee due to their irregular status.

Traders also had to respond to risks resulting from structural economic changes that could influence profits from trade (Wallace 1999). Up until
1992, traders bought goods in Ukraine, brought them over the border and then sold them at Polish bazaars. By 1993, prices of goods were higher in Ukraine than Poland due to inflation and economic crisis. The supply of goods decreased, in so doing diminishing opportunities of the known trading arrangements. Wallace (1999: 36) and Stola (1997: 11) point to traders’ incredibly fast adaptability to the changing circumstances. Ukrainians involved in trade introduced a new strategy: entering Poland to buy goods and reselling them at home or in Poland at a higher price. But selling goods in Poland meant a longer stay in Poland and the need for accommodation.

At the time, Ukrainian traders began to develop ties to Poles – something important for the development of labour migration, including to the domestic work sector. The development of a minimal social niche, some sort of social anchoring, gave the traders a sense of security. Later this would also be an important feature of the risk strategies employed by migrant workers. The economic terms of exchange were cemented by ties of friendship, using the existing business friendships or creating an asymmetrical patron-client relationship (Wallace, Bedezir & Chmouliar 1997: 35). Social capital in trade was characterised by enforceable trust, where moral pressures were upholding economic transactions. Wallace points to the ‘trader’s dilemma’, where a trader risked the obligations towards others outweighing the profits. Still, traders from Eastern European countries did not have to rely on ties to their compatriots to the same extent as some other foreign traders, for example, those from Asia. Wallace claims that the traders’ ethnic ties were rather weak, unless they overlapped with family or friend relations. She puts forward the hypothesis that the importance of the ethnic community is dependent on how far one had to travel and how conspicuously ‘different’ one was from the local population. This hypothesis seems to be valid when looking at the case of Ukrainian traders and migrants. Family networks facilitated particular stages of the trading process such as storage of goods, accommodation, drivers and potential sources of financial and social capital, but it was mainly the family – the household in Ukraine – that had to be supported by the traders and not vice versa (Wallace et al. 1997: 33).

Apart from structural political and economic features, the traders also had to respond to risks related to the character of their economic activity. Stola (1997: 27) points to the ‘legality layers’ of trade as a feature exposing the foreign traders to different degrees of risk. In general, the goods sold by traders were legal, but the actual trading was not. Stola refers to this unregistered and untaxed trade in Poland by migrants from the Eastern European countries as a form of tolerated semi-legality, which also characterised labour migrants, who entered legally but engaged in undeclared work.

Since the introduction of visas for Ukrainians in 2003, the border
traffic has changed, with fewer people being engaged in petty trade. The structure of the traffic has changed, too, and now more Poles, who do not need visas to enter Ukraine, are shuttle traders instead of Ukrainians. The shrinking role of cross-border traffic has been accompanied by more Ukrainians travelling farther from border agricultural regions in order to work in agriculture and to reach larger cities, mainly Warsaw (IOM 2008: 16).

But what about attitudes of Poles towards the presence of Ukrainians on the Polish labour market? According to an opinion poll from 1999 by the Public Opinion Research Centre, more than half of Poles saw the presence of Ukrainian workers in the Polish labour market as negative (CBOS 1999b). Interestingly, almost half of the respondents were against a foreigner being a nanny to their child. But, according to an opinion poll from 2002, Poles were either generally or relatively satisfied with the work of Ukrainians (Konieczna 2003: 8). For many Poles, the work relation was their first face-to-face contact with a Ukrainian. By 2006, only 13 per cent of respondents were of the opinion that foreigners should not have any rights to work in Poland (31 per cent in 1999), while 34 per cent claimed that they ought to have the right to undertake every type of work (CBOS 2006).² Over half the respondents claimed that foreigners should earn the same wages as Poles performing the same type of work. It seems that, in the eyes of Poles, work partly legitimised the presence of Ukrainians in Poland.

Turning now to the domestic work sector and reasons for the demand of care work and cleaning, there are three main reasons behind the growing need for home-based elderly care in Poland. Firstly, the Polish population is ageing: since the 1980s, Poland has been experiencing a decrease in fertility and a reduction in mortality, especially among elderly men (Perek-Białas, Ruzik & Vidovicova 2008: 560). In 2004, the share of those aged 65 and older in the total population in Poland was 13 per cent (Eurostat 2005).³ Population ageing occurs more rapidly in Poland than in old EU member states (but the shares of older age groups are smaller).⁴ In 2003, 60 year olds (living in cities in Mazowieckie Voivodship) were expected to live, on average, 17.89 more years in the case of men and 22.61 more years in the case of women (Stępień 2006: 216). From the point of view of this research, what matters is the fact that large cities, such as Warsaw, are demographically the eldest, with the population being even older here than in rural areas.

Secondly, there is limited state support for underdeveloped institutional elderly care solutions. Having the biggest foreign debt among all of the post-Communist countries, Poland was forced in the 1990s to cut its social spending in health care expenditure, which includes financial support for elderly care institutions (Rutkowski 1999).⁵ The availability of care services is limited and their quality questionable. Although the
number of medical personnel, especially of nurses, is increasing, it is linked to vocational migration abroad and does not improve the quality of services offered in Poland (Nunckowska & Perek-Białas 2004: 17).\(^6\) State institutions and non-governmental organisations fail to provide adequate elderly care. State institutions have insufficient financial means, while non-governmental organisations operate on a rather small scale (Perek-Białas & Ruzik 2004: 36).\(^7\) In 1999, there were 904 residential care institutions in Poland (providing places for 79,000 persons). Approximately 10,300 people were on waiting lists (Krzyszkowski 2002). Privatising some social care services, such as residential homes for the elderly, meant they became expensive and thus no longer affordable for the majority of those in need (Frątczak 2002: 7). By 2001, there were twenty public and eleven non-public elderly care institutions in Mazowieckie Voivodship (Halik 2002: 158). This amounts to 635 care treatment institutions and 89 nursery care and hospice institutions. All the underdeveloped care institutions in Mazowieckie Voivodship made the demand for private care solutions high.

Thirdly, the elderly prefer to be left to live in their own homes. In 1997, 68 per cent of respondents claimed that even if they were unable to care for themselves independently, they would not want to leave their home. Only 6 per cent would prefer to move to a care institution (Frąckiewicz 2002: 18). This negative attitude stems mainly from the Communist legacy of poor-quality services that were provided by care institutions at that time as well as their persisting bad reputation. Polish receivers of domestic care services have little trust in institutional solutions; they prefer to have someone recommended by a trusted informal source. This gives them a sense of privacy and independence, with someone coming regularly to help out and bring meals or being willing to share the apartment with someone who can provide such help. Over half of the respondents (57 per cent) in the Public Opinion Research Centre’s research said they preferred to stay in their own apartments and to be occasionally helped by relatives and friends (CBOS 2000).

Home-based child-care was practised in Poland before the political transition in 1989 and continues to the present day. There are various reasons for this state of affairs. First of all, institutional child-care support in Poland is characterised by a declining availability of nurseries and kindergartens. In 2006, for every 1,000 children aged three or younger, 28 were in nurseries in Mazowieckie Voivodship (GUS 2007: 648). As a result of local governments’ unwillingness to subsidise nurseries and kindergartens, some institutions were closed down and others introduced user fees. It is important to note that there was little opposition to the closure of nurseries because, during Communism, they were of rather poor quality, tending to be over-crowded and inadequately staffed (Heinen & Wator 2007: 194). In addition, admission to nurseries is also often
conditioned by the requirement of both parents being employed. Free-market solutions are not very common: in 2002, private nurseries ‘comprised only 4.7 per cent of all nursery places and by 2005 they had dropped to 3.8 per cent’ (Saxonberg & Szelewski 2007: 359).

Second of all, with the decreasing number of nurseries, a shift from nursery care to parental leave occurred (UNICEF 1997: 54). Parental leave, known in Poland as child-care leave, lasts up to 36 months, but has to be used before the child turns four. It can be extended if the child has a disability or chronic illness. However, by 1997 more than two thirds of women with higher education returned to work early, not using the full parental leave (UNICEF 1997: 54). One of the reasons for women’s unwillingness to use more time was their professional career. Although women were working on the labour market during Communism, they were rarely in executive positions. After 1989, this began to change, with women constituting 32 per cent of all managers and chief executives in Poland in 2006 (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions 2007: 5, table 3). Even though the number of women using parental leave is declining, parental leave continues to be almost exclusively used by women and care work remains their responsibility.

With the state providing little child-care support, Polish women, who did not manage to place their child in a nursery, have two choices: either quit their work or search for private care solutions so as to be able to return to the labour market. When looking for care for their children, they have to rely on their families, depending on non-working or retired relatives, or on the informal market by employing a domestic care worker. According to some authors, Poland, with its declining public provision of care, is characterised by a ‘private maternalism’, where the market and the family are becoming the primary institutions responsible for welfare provision (Glass & Fodor 2007: 325). Between 1985 and 1995, the percentage of women who relied on family help increased from 10 per cent to approximately 60 per cent. In terms of child-care, the policy changes have increased women’s dependence on their husbands or, in general, female relatives. According to Siemieniak (2002: 193), a new informal system of care appeared, based on ‘an intergenerational resource flow’, with non-working mothers and grandmothers caring for children. However, the context of demand for care workers in Warsaw is peculiar: it is the destination of internal migrants, who leave behind their family support networks, such as grandparents, and it is also dominated by single-person households, far removed from the intergenerational household providing support for family members. The solution for these people is engaging care workers – among them migrants – to complement or replace their care work.

In general, remunerated domestic work in private households belongs
to the informal sector of the Polish economy, both for Poles and foreigners. According to a study on undeclared work in Poland, 1,019,000 households received service from undeclared workers (GUS 2005: table 4.1) in 2004. Of these, 377,000 used the service of cleaners and 195,000 of care workers (elderly care and child-care) (GUS 2005: table 4.3). What is important in this study is the fact that the majority of 485,000 women working in an undeclared fashion did so only one day per month; thus, for Polish women working in this sector it was only an additional source of income. In cities, 171,000 pensioners used the services of undeclared workers. Households in cities used services of undeclared workers primarily for cleaning and household maintenance (on average four times per week), but also for renovations and care work (GUS 2005:26).

Since the mid-1990s, Ukrainian nationals have been working in the domestic work sector predominantly in an undeclared fashion. In Poland, as in many other countries, domestic work is part of the informal economy. According to the most recent representative household survey carried out in 2007, approximately 80,000 Polish households – that is 6 per cent of all in the country12 – employed foreign workers on both regular and irregular bases in the previous two years (Grabowska-Lusińska & Żylicz 2008). However, migrants generally work for more than one household, which leads to the estimated 40,000-60,000 foreign workers in the domestic work sector.

Taking into account the fact that Mazowieckie Voivodship has a high concentration of immigrants, the discrepancy between the number of work permits given to foreign women and the number of foreign women having registered their temporary stay goes some way to prove that these women undertake work without a permit. In 2006, 19 per cent of all the permits issued to foreigners in Mazowieckie Voivodship went to women.13 Only 237 work permits were given to foreigners working in the domestic work sector.14 In the same year, 6,292 foreign women who arrived from abroad registered for a stay of more than three months in Mazowieckie Voivodship (Kępińska 2007: table 20).15 It seems that the majority of Ukrainian migrants remain in the informal sector of the Polish economy as work permits are not suited to the temporary character of their migration. The requirement of a separate work permit for every employer did not correspond to the flexible employment demands of domestic work, where the migrants had to provide service to a number of clients. Taxes and financial payments related to declared work make the contract financially unattractive for both the worker and the employer.
6.2 Risks of undeclared migrant domestic work and related strategies

Overall, the interviewed migrants evaluated potential negative outcomes of undeclared work as low. Housework and care work were generally perceived as safe and there was little danger of injury. There were no cases of being caught by labour inspectors and being penalised for these types of work. However, the following three issues were mentioned by the interviewed women as risks in relation to the informal work contract in Poland: being without work, being paid below the agreed rate (or not being paid at all) and not being able to rely on health insurance when ill.

6.2.1 Lack of work

In general, the Ukrainian women interviewed tried to arrange a job in Poland before leaving Ukraine. They received information from their friends or acquaintances working in Poland, who searched for new workers on behalf of their employers. The women’s social networks in Ukraine played an important role in ‘getting their foot in the door’ of the migrant domestic work sector. The quality of the social networks differed. Not all were useful for migration purposes. As Chrystyna, the 50-year-old bookkeeper, said:

When a person comes here to work, she has to have work already. It does not happen that I go and I do not have work here, I do not have a place to live, I go and somehow I find something. No one will help you. [...] And no one will let you stay overnight. Someone goes to someone else, for example, I call a friend, give her an address, give her a contact. She calls there and they meet her there. Well, it’s also important to know at least a bit of Polish [...] because this also helps.

Chrystyna points here to a basic element increasing the security of migration: a particular type of social capital. In order to enter the domestic work sector, the migrant needed to have ties to migrants who could provide recommendations or, if trying to find a new job, recommendations from former employers. A recommendation system developed into a migrant institution, which helped to reduce the risks related to an undeclared work environment. Interaction between the potential employer, the migrant and the intermediary occurred when arranging work from Ukraine, as well as when searching for a job after arriving in Poland.

Trust was a necessary element for this process to function. Firstly, the potential employer had to trust the person who recommended the new worker. For example, Chrystyna had worked in Poland as a care worker
since 2000 and claimed to be a trusted source of information about future employees for her former employers and service receivers.

...yesterday I had a call from this Mr. M., I once took care of his mother. She died already. And he was so grateful to me, well, and he called, [saying] that his friend [...] wants to have the same [care] experience like with me taking care of [his] mother and that he wants me to give him advice. I know him, so I will send a friend of mine there, but what the mother [of his friend] is like I don’t know. Is this mother nice or not nice, what will he treat her like? So I am worried about my friend. It was [through] me that they employed her, so then she will complain [to me].

Chrystyna is empowered by the trust of former employers, but also feels responsible for the migrant for whom she has found work. This brings us to the second point: the person searching for work had to trust the intermediary to recommend a job with decent working conditions. To some extent, this allowed migrants to avoid exploitative work relations. However, the person who acted as an informal job intermediary also had to trust the recommended migrant worker not to ruin her reputation as a trustworthy intermediary by meeting the expectations of the employers. Marta, who had already worked in the domestic work niche for three years at the time of the interview, explained it like this:

Someone calls, they say, ‘Listen, find me a girl to take care of my mother.’ [...] Then of course I do not look for a person who asks me about work, but [I search] for someone who I know is honest and will be working. She can do it slower, but it will be an honest person, so that I will not be ashamed for that person...

Marta knew that when she recommended people who were reliable, she strengthened her own position in the eyes of the employers. The potential migrant had to fit the requirements of the employer: the migrants who acted as intermediaries followed the employers’ expectations, thus the employer exerted indirect control over the process. The intermediaries, as seen in Marta’s aforementioned quote, had control over the information: they could share it with those whom they believed would fit the requirements, and they were not necessarily those who asked them about work. However, there were also jobs that were easily ‘given away’ to fellow migrants they did not personally know because of the poor-quality working conditions and lack of usefulness of the employer within the migrant institution.

In some cases, the migrants who were ‘established’ in the domestic work sector also entered into a type of patron-client relationship with the
new migrants searching for work. The migrants providing information to a new migrant had a particular interest in keeping the employer satisfied: the employer usually had access to his or her current employer-based network. Another migrant institution used to find work in Poland was the self-organised rotation system. The rotation system consisted of a migrant replacing another migrant domestic worker in her job while the latter returned to Ukraine. It developed as a response to the risks of losing work in Poland versus overstaying. For the majority of the interviewed migrants, rotating every three months was their work routine. But it was also a strategy for new migrants: by replacing another migrant, they could develop ties to yet more migrants as well as Poles and find work and accommodation. The rotation system was used by those who were unwilling to take higher risks related to an illegal stay and those whose migrant capital was not great enough to arrange for a stay longer than the three-month alleged tourist visit.

The rotation system, similar to the recommendation system, required mutual trust between migrants. The character of ties between rotation partners introduces risk in the rotation system. Weak ties involve relationships between acquaintances, while strong ties reflect relationships between close friends and relatives. Weak ties maximise information flows and social mobility opportunities. They require less commitment than strong ties (Granovetter 1978). With multiple weak ties to Ukrainian acquaintances, migrants increased their access to information. Information spread mainly via ties to distant friends, migrants met in public spaces (at the bus stop, at a bazaar or in a shopping mall) or while commuting between Poland and Ukraine. Apart from hearing the familiar language, there were non-verbal signs — bodily reference schemes — that allowed the interviewed Ukrainian migrants to recognise other migrants: gold teeth, certain types of clothes and pink gold earrings, a type of gold more commonly found in Ukraine. Weak ties to Poles were also sometimes ‘gate openers’ to the domestic work sector. For example, Larysa’s landlady found her two cleaning jobs in private households through a friend. However, when it came to the rotation system, weak ties increased the risks. Conflicts arose around the self-organised rotation system when employers were more satisfied with the replacement worker than with their usual employee. Chrystyyna found work in care while replacing a migrant she did not know personally.

This was through a friend who told me about it ... [a woman] from Ukraine worked there before me, she worked nine months and she was tired, because it is heavy [work] and she wanted a change, well, for a month or two. So this friend called me, and I had already had a rest [after a former job] and wanted a job [...]. So she called me: ‘Don’t you want to come for an exchange for two months? Here, the
woman is leaving and you can come.’ Well, I agreed, and when I came here, Mrs. M. liked me and she didn’t want the other one and she allowed me to stay [laughing]. [...] It was not pleasant, because the other one also wanted to work [...] but it is not my fault.

Chrystyna’s story of searching for work via the rotation system refers to the period before the introduction of the visa requirement, because the woman she replaced stayed in Poland nine months and decided to return to Ukraine for ‘holidays’. Before the introduction of the visa, the rotation system was less important because migrants were willing to spend most of the time in Poland, returning only for several days to Ukraine to validate their stay. Chrystyna quit her job in Ukraine to be able to migrate to work and she was determined to succeed.

The rotation system showed the complexity of how a migrant institution develops. It was first a response to the risk of losing work that migrants faced if they did not overstay the allowed period and circulated between Poland and Ukraine. Trust was an element of the migrant institution that allowed it to function: the migrant acted within the institution at a distance, over time and space, exerting control over her relations with the employer while staying in Ukraine. However, the rotation partner was also a source of risk, a potential competitor for the job. The employer, who has the power to decide whom to employ, is often unaware of his or her role in the migrant institution. The rotation system thus introduced certain new elements of risk to the migration experience. As Chrystyna’s story illustrates, when dealing with a less intimately known rotation partner, the migrant may find herself without work upon returning from Ukraine. Instead of being a work partner, the ‘replacement’ could turn into competition, taking over the job full time by overstaying or by introducing a different rotation partner. Migrants with limited useful ties and social networks had difficulties finding a trusted rotation replacement.

The quality of jobs received via so-called weak ties was rather poor. Irina, who came to Poland to join her husband and did not have a job arranged, had bad experience with information received via weak ties to migrants.

...I met this T. [...] she was to help me to find work. And she gave me a couple of phone numbers where I should call and search for work. In general, these phone numbers were hopeless [...] [These other jobs] were hopeless because T. gave me phone numbers where they either had someone already, or there was something that I didn’t want, because the work was once every two weeks or once a month. And this for me...it was so fragmented. It was unstable. She [T.] had a stable job and later on, when she left, she gave me her work and her sister’s work. But this was only for one month, because
then she came back and took it, although the people wanted me to stay very much. [...] And for a long time I did not have stable work... I didn’t manage to save money...

In her story, Irina mentioned three issues: quality of information, the already mentioned conflict in the rotation system and work routine. Regarding the first issue, migrants who knew each other through weak ties often shared information or handed over contacts that were no longer useful to them. These contacts provided access to jobs of poor quality: lower paid or unstable ones, meaning that instead of working every week for the same employers, the migrant worked for them on an ad hoc basis, once a month or once in two weeks. Such jobs did not give the migrants a sense of stability of income. Jobs received through weak ties meant that migrants went through periods of an abundance of work (e.g. before holidays) and lack of work (e.g. during holidays). The development of a stable work routine was mainly dependent on complementing the weak ties to migrants in a patron-client relationship with the employer.

In general, the studied migrant women were able to create a reliable work schedule through ties to employers. Entering a patron-client relationship with Polish employers gave the migrant access to the employer’s friends and family as potential new employers, where the former secured a tried and tested standard of employment. To access the employer’s resources, migrants displayed helplessness or explicitly asked for help with finding work. This form of subjection was the price the employer provided for the patronage. Using the employers’ network guaranteed a certain routine and stability of employment, which was essential for the sense of security felt by the migrant domestic worker in the climate of insecure, undeclared work. In addition, the employer was able to provide the migrant with assistance in the event of health-related, financial or even legal emergencies.

According to the interviewed migrants, the informal employer’s trust in the honesty of the migrant, as well as the quality of services provided by the migrant, are two important resources allowing the migrant to keep a job. Larysa claimed that her employers depended on her because of the good-quality cleaning she provided and she thus did not lose her jobs when leaving for Ukraine. In her words: ‘[T]hey all wait for me, now I’ve changed jobs a bit, but I always leave for one month [to Ukraine] – and they always wait for me.’

The ties within this migrant institution that allowed the migrant to find work in the domestic work sector were not limited to the strong-weak ties division; the interaction was based on a patron-client relationship. A complex system of protection and recommendation developed in an irregular work environment in an attempt to decrease the risks of exploitative working conditions.
6.2.2 Non-payment or underpayment for work

When analysing the risk of receiving a lower payment or no payment at all, one must keep in mind that the majority of interviewed women had experienced a lack of wages when working in a declared fashion in Ukraine. Compared to the risk of not being paid on the Ukrainian labour market, the migrant women regarded the informal economy in Poland as more predictable in that respect. Still, the women employed various strategies to guarantee being remunerated adequately for their work.

In the domestic sector in Poland an informal wage list existed and both employers and migrants knew how much a migrant domestic worker could earn. This list offered a sort of benchmark that allowed the migrants to evaluate whether they were being paid fairly or being exploited. It gave them grounds on which to negotiate with the employer and it was also a basis for the selection of jobs, eliminating those where the pay failed to reach the expected level. Larysa’s story shows how information about the changes in wages in the domestic sector travelled via weak ties.

Later on I met one [woman] on the street, at the Stadion [...]. And they spoke in Ukrainian so I said: ‘Hi, girls, what are you doing? How much money do you get?’ What, and for how much, you know, this interests me a lot. And I asked about cleaning and at that time I didn’t have the same rate – ten zloty [€ 2.5] and I was very upset. When I heard (...) that the girls get ten zloty [per hour], and I still got five (€ 1.25), my heart ached and I thought: ‘God, why is that so?’ [...] Initially, I was very, very upset. Because I thought: ‘Why is that so? I work like an ox, from dawn to dusk, this girl earns twice as much and me nothing. I save money, put it away, do something and see nothing. [...] Later on I started to change work. One woman was offended that I left her. But I told her: ‘I can’t work twelve hours for 50 zloty [€ 12.5] [...].

Exchange of information is of great importance for the reduction of risks related to undeclared work. In contrast to the low quality of information about jobs received via the weak ties mentioned in the previous section, information about the level of payment seemed reliable according to the interviewees. Awareness of being ‘underpaid’ motivated the women to take action and change jobs. To reduce the risk of not being paid, Ukrainian women also diversified their sources of income by having more than one job. Having more than one job allowed the migrant to leave work with unfavourable conditions as well as minimise the risk of being unemployed. In addition, more than one informal employer was equal to more than one trusted source of information on new jobs. According to the information provided by the interviewees, workplaces recommended
by those employers who provided satisfactory payment could be expected to
offer a decent standard of working conditions. Larysa said that only
access to the ‘right’ employers allowed her to earn PLN 10 (€ 2.5) per hour
and, at the time of our interview, all her service receivers paid this rate.17

Cleaners were also paid per cleaning session. The wages offered by
employers ‘per cleaning’ were in the range of PLN 35-100 (€ 9-25). The
earnings in undeclared migrant care work, both for children and elderly,
were in the range of PLN 600-1200 (€ 150-300) and PLN 700-1,500
(€ 175-375) per month, respectively. In 2006, the average level of earnings
on the Polish labour market was equal to PLN 2,477 (approximately € 620)
(GUS 2007: 172, table 3 (99)).18 In rare cases, the migrant women were
paid at the end of their stay – that is, after three months. The form of
payment involved less or more risk. Daily payment or payment for a
specified workload involved less risk than being paid on a weekly or even
monthly basis. Care workers were usually paid on a monthly basis. Their
earnings depended on the difficulty of the case, the financial situation of
the employer and his or her willingness to spend money on care.

Many of the women refused to depict their work solely as a ‘financial
contract’. During the interview, they presented themselves as offering a
necessary service. They showed moral superiority over the employer, often
a woman, whom they perceived as not being able to perform her household
duties. In this way, the migrant women reinforced the pattern of domes-
tic labour as ‘women’s work’.

The migrant women displayed agency by claiming to evaluate the fi-
nancial situation of their employers, which gave them a basis to decide
what payment they were willing to work for. Lilyana told me that she
cleaned for a woman who was raising her son alone. She knew that the
woman’s financial situation was unstable and, for that reason, did not
want to ask for more money. However, Larysa was rationalising her selec-
tion of employers in a different way.

Maybe two months ago I left this lady, a very good one, all my ladies
are very good. But I will say this. I understand that a person is very
good, that they treat you well, but everyone has to understand that I
am here to earn something, and not because I want to. I don’t want
to. I would rather sit at home behind a desk and do nothing […] this
is such a lesson for me now, such hard lesson […]

Larysa refuses to engage in moral economy, and calculates whether it is
in her interest to continue working for a particular employer. Although
the ‘goodness’ of an employer is important in an irregular work situation,
Larysa points to the fact that ‘all’ her employers were ‘very good’ and so,
with that sort of network, she can afford to select jobs that increase her
financial security.
Women who legalised their employment and stayed in Poland for longer than three months faced higher living expenses than those who continued to commute every three months. Being away from Ukraine for most of the year also meant additional expenses at home, such as paying someone for the care of children or parents. Some of the interviewed women with younger children and lack of family support in Ukraine decided to relocate them to Poland, thus increasing their living expenses. At the same time, however, they decreased expenses related to arranging travel documents and a trip to Poland at least twice a year and were able to stay longer, thus maximising their work opportunities.

6.2.3 *Illness and injuries at work*

Undeclared work meant that the interviewed migrants did not have social or health insurance. Nevertheless, cleaning and care work could cause serious health problems. As Zenya remarked:

*And, in general, every person takes a risk that when they have an accident or die, then no one will pay one kopieika. There is no social insurance and this is a great risk because, for sure, each one of us goes after a piece of bread [...] .*

Chrystyna claimed that she nearly died due to health problems during her care work in Poland. She was lifting the cared-for person, who was ill, and she became ill herself as a result.

*I carried her, lifted her, sat her down on her potty, carried her from her potty and so on a couple of times per day and something [a gland] broke. [...] . It’s a long story, but I won’t go into details of what I lived through. In one word, blood was flowing from my inside ... for seventeen hours without stopping...*

Two hospitals refused to send an ambulance because Chrystyna was not insured, did not have Polish citizenship and was unable to pay PLN 2,000 (€ 500) for the service. Finally, the personnel of one of the hospitals agreed to send an ambulance after hearing that her life was in danger. After having been admitted to the hospital, Chrystyna was not treated because she lacked insurance and had no money to pay for the treatment. She managed to call a migrant friend who was replacing her at the time of her hospitalisation and, through her, asked the elderly person whom she was looking after for help.

Then Mrs. M. [the care charge] called her cousin, and this cousin called the director of the hospital and asked him, she told him her
last name, her first name and asked them to treat me, give me all that I need, she told them that she would pay [...]. For four days they said 5,000 zloty [approximately €1,250]. Well, they checked me out [of the hospital], and then this cousin went to the director of the hospital for so-called negotiations, [...] and she explained that the person for whom this woman who was hospitalised works, that she doesn’t have money and the Ukrainian woman came here to earn money, so she has even less money [...] because I earn kopieikas here. I would need half a year without food, without sleep to…And no one can pay. So give a sum that is normal, that one could pay – so that the hospital will be satisfied and that she can pay by herself. Not more than, for example, about 1,000 [Polish] zloty, not more [...]. Well, so we paid 1,200 zloty [€300]. That was later on for everything, for medication too, but for the treatment in the hospital it was 1,000 zloty.

As seen in Chrystyna’s story, the informal employer or cared-for person can become a form of support in the event of emergency. The migrant woman managed to motivate the cared-for person to use social capital (her cousin) to enable her treatment at the hospital. The cared-for person was also dependent on the good health of her care worker. In addition, the story reveals specific information about the nature of the Polish health care system: informal ties between the cared-for person’s cousin, the director of the hospital and further ‘negotiations’ about the price for the treatment point to a grey zone that allows agency to take shape where there is access to good-quality social capital. This example shows the existence of a particular opportunity structure for irregular migrants in a state that has – from a democratic point of view – weak institutions that tolerate informal arrangements.

In instances of serious health problems, the migrant women returned to Ukraine for treatment. However, receiving fast treatment in Ukraine necessitated bribing the doctors. The informal employers also played an important role in lending money to the migrant for treatment. Receiving such financial support from the employers, although initially positive, may ultimately pose a major risk to the migrant. This is what Olga, whose employer lent her money for an operation in Ukraine, said:

... but, unfortunately, I work there without money and [her employer] does not pay me at all and I asked one day, ‘How much money do I owe you? Until when am I supposed to work for nothing?’ And she got so terribly mad and screamed at me: ‘You will owe me money until the end of your life!’ Well, I say, I understand that I am indebted with my life, because if I had not gone immediately when I got money from her I don’t know how this would have ended [...], because I had bleeding inside my stomach. [...] I worked already two
years [without payment] [...] and I reckoned that I already long ago managed to pay her back with my work, because this is a two-storey house and I worked there every Friday...

In this story, Olga presented herself in a position of subjection, not opposing the increasing demands of unpaid work by those to whom she was indebted. What was played out in her story was a form of emotional blackmail and the resulting labour exploitation. At that time, she was unable to get out of this patron-client relationship because her employer had also supported her on another occasion: she lent her money to fulfil the minimum bank account balance requirement in order to apply for a fixed-term residence permit. In the end, however, Olga left these employers.

Those women who had a fixed-term residence permit through marriage though no work permit were also uninsured and returned to Ukraine in instances of serious health problems.

I went privately [to a doctor] here in Warsaw a couple of times because I was ill a few times and couldn’t get to a doctor [in the public health care system] because I did not have a work permit and did not pay taxes. Although I am married now, I still have problems with this because I do not work in a declared fashion [...]. Being insured through the husband is also a problem because you have to get some sort of an identity card or something like that. Well, and I don’t have such...[...] such possibility to pressure someone to help me somehow [...] so I have to go home, because if it is something more serious I have to go home, because here it is very difficult and expensive.

In Ukraine, although unemployed, the migrant women still were able to use the public health care service. However, in general, they had to bribe for treatments. Still, the expenses were much lower than in Poland.

Some of the migrant women’s employers were doctors, so if ill they asked them for informal advice and even got health check-ups. This was the case with Marta. At the time of our interview, she already had a work permit and was insured, but she recalled how she had relied on her employers in the past.

...I worked for some doctors and I asked them when I had problems, when I wasn’t feeling too well and they helped me [...] They helped to do some check-ups [...] They helped me to do this, to what extent it was legal or illegal, I didn’t think about it, didn’t think that it was something so extraordinary. I paid for some check-ups [...] for some, I didn’t. They arranged it somehow, insurance and well, I don’t know what the problem was, I felt terrible, was ill, I was weak, then it came out that I have a weak immunity system. They said it is possibly
related to Chernobyl [the nuclear plant explosion], but I couldn’t do such check-ups in my village...in the end, thanks to those check-ups I at least know what defects I have [...].

However, Marta, who was in her thirties, was rather an exception when it came to the health problems mentioned by the younger part of the interviewees. In general, the older the women were, the higher they perceived the risk of their health problems.

During the interviews, other migrants mentioned health risks they were exposed to while cleaning. As Zenya commented on her job:

This is very dangerous. You can [...] fall out the window when you clean windows [...]. No one will be responsible for you, you have no insurance here. This is the most dangerous thing there is, the ‘weak spot’ for us Ukrainians, because when something happens then you are the first to lose out and you not only get old illnesses, but new ones as well. Because you do the same work every day, for example, with those chemical detergents one has allergies, oh, on the skin and in the lungs, and for the whole [body] it is destructive [...].

This excerpt highlights the notion of self-responsibility in facing the consequences of risk during migrant domestic work that accompanies Ukrainians’ lack of legal and social protection in Poland. Some of the women refused to return to work for employers who lived on higher floors and expected them to clean their windows.

Apart from extreme life-threatening situations, the women also had accidents that rendered them unfit for work; inability to work was prolonged due to lack of proper treatment. Larysa, who hurt her knee while cleaning, did not see a doctor in Poland. As she recalls:

...You know what the costs are. I went to the landlady, where I live and showed [it to her]. [...] So she gave me some ointment to put on it. I put it on, but it was still had one month before I could go home. When I got home, the knee hurt and hurt, for half a year it hurt and hurt. I went to a doctor [...] in Ukraine. It’s also very expensive there... Here you work hard for your money and then give it away to a doctor...

6.3 Risks of labour exploitation and social marginalisation and their related strategies

One could argue that Ukrainian women working in an undeclared fashion in the domestic work sector in Poland face similar risks to Polish women
also working in there, for example, the risk of non-payment. However, migrant domestic workers differ from Polish women in terms of possibilities to balance such risk, due to their particular legal and social status in Poland. As a result, they also face other types of risks than Polish women. There are five main reasons that migrant domestic workers are more at risk than native workers.

First of all, the migrant women often depend on the employer for their migration status, as was analysed in section 5.3.2. The employer facilitates the migrants’ entry and stay. He or she can influence the degree of irregularity of the migrants’ status. This gives them a particular power over the migrants, which they may abuse. As Marijka said:

...one person will understand you well, the fact that you came here to earn money, she sees that you are trying and she appreciates your work. And there are people who will [treat] you like ‘Hey, you – Ukrainian! You can work, but we can even refuse to pay you, because you are Ukrainian.’

The majority of the interviewed migrant women treated domestic work as a temporary remedy, even though for many it had been the main source of income for several years, thus making them very dependent on their migrant job.

Second, the migrant women have, at least initially, a very limited social network in Poland. Such social networks provide information about jobs, as was discussed section 6.2.1. To make their migration worthwhile, the migrant women had to find work quickly after their arrival. It often meant that they initially had to accept very poor (if not exploitative) working conditions.

Third, a sensation of temporariness due to both their unstable legal status and weak, if not lacking, social anchoring was present during their migratory experience. An example of this is found in 35-year-old Ulyana’s story. She had been working in Warsaw for the past three years at the time of our interview, cleaning and caring for her employer’s child. As she said:

[...] And I really had this feeling that I am not needed, that I was a ‘thrown-out’ person. But this passed; now I have some friends. But... there continues to be such a sensation of instability here. Everything is temporary. It is all temporary. It’s just that I have to survive and my home is waiting for me. I already can ‘smell’ my home, seriously.

Fourth, the migrant women are usually qualified workers, with secondary education and some with even higher. Working in a job below their qualifications places them, in the long term, at risk of deskilling.

Fifth, as qualified workers in Ukraine they were used to having jobs
with a higher status than that attached to domestic work. They were thus affected by the risk of decreased social status should they stay longer than what was foreseen in a job of temporary migration. Due to these factors, the migrant domestic workers were in a precarious status, which placed them at risk for labour exploitation and social marginalisation, among other things.

Insecurity stemming from the precarious legal and social status made the potential benefits stemming from the relationship with the employer especially important for the migrant. As Tarkowski wrote (1994: 88), the patron-client relationship is a mechanism to adapt and protect oneself from the sensation of vulnerability and constant threat due to weak legal, economic or political guarantees of security. The development of personal ties between the migrant and the employer helped partly neutralise arbitrary decisions and produced a higher degree of predictability as well as a sense of being more in control.

The degree of trust involved in domestic work placed the work relationship somewhere between familiarisation and depersonalisation. By familiarisation I refer to the development of a personal relationship and display of familial interest between the migrant and the employer or the cared-for person. Depersonalisation is understood as a lack of emotional involvement and keeping a social and spatial distance between the migrant and the employer or the cared-for person. The more mutual trust in the relationship, the closer the migrant and the employer are to the familiarisation end of spectrum; the less mutual trust, the closer they are to depersonalised work relations. These types of relationships are not mutually exclusive. They were often used interchangeably by migrants when working for different employers, depending on the context of the interaction.

6.3.1 Living-in: Context of the risk of labour exploitation and social exclusion

The migrant’s status within the household (living-in or living-out) influenced the degree of exposure to risk of exploitation. Availability is one of the basic features of care work, thus the majority of the interviewed care workers were living with the cared-for person. A care worker had to be available to intervene as needed. However, the continuous presence of the migrant in the household increased the demands of the employers or cared-for persons, diverging from the working conditions and remuneration that were earlier agreed upon. When the migrant was living with an employer, boundaries between her and the employer’s family blurred. The migrant became part of their life.

The demands and expectations of the employer severely limited time off work in the cases of several interviewed migrants. The interviewed live-in migrant domestic workers were generally not allowed to leave and return to the household however they pleased. Having to ask for permission to
leave the home, being asked how long she would be away and being checked up on when outside the home was constraining for an adult who was not a family member. As Irina said:

Officially, I had days off...I had those days off but, as I said, those days somehow got entangled into their life, that in the end...these were not my free days. I remember, at the beginning it was terrible, then I didn’t know that it was terrible, only now I understand this. For example, on Saturday, I remember, I asked for permission to go shopping. I asked for their permission. Of course they told me: ‘Yes, but when will you be back?’ Only now do I realise this...Also, when I went shopping they ...I would forget about everything and...a phone call: ‘Why aren’t you back yet?’

This interview excerpt points to the psychologically strenuous part of being a living-in care worker whose personal space and time are very limited. The live-in care worker Ludmila had a similar experience. When she left the apartment on her day off, the cared-for person, as she put it ‘was very displeased that I didn’t tell her when I will come back’.

The importance of having time off from work was also stressed by migrants giving elderly care. Forty-eight-year-old Zenya, who worked as a cleaner at the time of our interview though had prior been a care worker, said the following about living-in:

Well, you have to watch out how they treat you financially [...] And, when – that is already from my own experience [...] – you have to defend your [rights], so that even when you are in a living-in job, you must have one or two hours per day to go out [...] because it is psychologically very hard, because a person toils there and has to have some rest somewhere with her thoughts, somewhere on the street or where one will find [a place], in the shop or somewhere one likes. So that’s what I could recommend to someone, to warn those [people], that they [the employers] can say, ‘Don’t go anywhere’, and you have to stay.

It is to be remembered that free time was essential for migrants to build up their social capital and find out about different jobs and working conditions from other migrants. The living-in migrants I interviewed were isolated from people other than their employer and his or her family. They had little chance to meet other migrants, to develop ties, to create their own network or to exchange information on their working conditions. This isolation limited the migrant’s opportunities to find new employment, so as to leave an unfavourable working environment. They tended to rely on very few weak social ties. Apart from the employer, they had no or very few
contacts with Poles. They retrieved news only during their occasional shopping excursions to the bazaar and during social gatherings for one or two hours on Sundays with other migrants who lived in close proximity. The circulation of migrants also meant that social connections with other migrants could be tenuous, as people frequently returned to Ukraine.

One of the options for women who did cleaning jobs was also to find accommodation in exchange for cleaning or providing companionship to an elderly person. However, this also included the risk of increasing dependency and additional, unpaid workload. According to Nina, the retired 57-year-old trade specialist who worked as a cleaner in Warsaw and lived with an elderly lady whose apartment she also cleaned in exchange for a room:

...I do not [have any] rest, do not rest. If I manage to open the visa again or to prolong the visa and enter, I do not want a free [of charge] apartment anymore. I am very tired: this is a house [where she lives now], there are two floors to clean, you need to cut the grass in the yard […] and the woman wants me to give her some of my attention, because she is old […]

Since apartments in Poland tend to be small, live-in migrants often lacked their own living spaces. On the one hand, this could mean more egalitarian relations in the household. On the other hand, it could mean more pressure on the migrant to become ‘invisible’. Svietlana lived in the common room of her employers for two years.

...I do not have my own room, because the apartment there is not big. It is simply not a big apartment, there is a big hall and there, for example, like here [in the apartment where the interview took place], there is the kitchen and right away the room [the kitchen combined with the living room], it is also like that. And there I have my bed. And the mom with her children, she has also two bedrooms on the second floor, also small ones. So it is all quite small and problematic and we suffer and we are all together.

Later on, Svietlana mentioned that because she did not have her own room she was forced to witness all of the family’s conversations and quarrels. She commented that she sometimes felt reduced to an object, a piece of furniture, because the employers did not feel embarrassed to argue in front of her.

6.3.2 How familiarisation can lead to labour exploitation

All the women stressed that a good rapport with the employer was essential for the work relationship to function. To the migrants, an
emotional tie meant that in an irregular work environment, without an official contract, the employer seemed more trustworthy and predictable in his or her behaviour. As Nadya said:

The most important thing [in the migration experience] is the person with whom I work [...], what the family is like where you are going to work. Well, so that they are... well... a bit nicer, docile [...] so that, you know, you can get on with them, just get on with them.

According to the migrants, both they themselves and their employers tended to familiarise the work relationship. The majority of the interviewed migrant women claimed to be treated ‘like family members’ by the employers. As Ulyana said about her work-relationship: ‘So now I am also taking care of this boy. It is very good there, I cannot complain. Because they treat me like a family member.’ A similar case was that of Marijka, who initially cared for a small girl for two years and, at the time of our interview, was the nanny of a small boy: ‘I lived there with them, I worked. Well, I was “theirs”, simply like a member of the family, I was part of it.’ What Marijka described was a form of ‘inclusion’ through friendly relations (but also through subordination) with the children and the children’s mother. Familiarising the domestic worker was, among other things, a strategy of the employer to mask their domination in the household. The employers attempted to – in what Scott (1990) refers to as the public transcript – adjust their power, treating the migrant as supposedly an ‘equal’, although aware of the migrant’s subordinate position.

The employer and the migrant engage in familiarisation for particular interests. For the migrant, a familiar relation with the employer means higher predictability of working conditions (payment, workload, etc.). This proved to be an important source of migration social capital, resulting in access to privileged information (e.g. about new jobs), housing, opportunities to borrow money and protection when needed. All this leads to reducing risks of irregularity and labour exploitation. For the employer, an interest to familiarise the migrant falls on a spectrum: from simply having a reliable, trusted worker to friendliness and familiar interest in the employer’s life (though this often results in additional, unpaid work). Through familiarisation, the two parties involved in the patron-client like relationship hide their particular interests and instead behave as though rendering each other favours. The purpose and function of giving someone a gift in this type of relationship has to be concealed (Tarkowski 1994: 48). In some cases, familiarisation made the employer more sensitive to the migrant’s or her family’s needs; in others, it meant pressure on the migrant to put the care needs of her own family aside in favour of that of the employer’s. Friendliness towards the employer is generally the result of the employer’s domination, as Hochschild (in Scott
1990) wrote on power relations between people of different status:

‘[T]o have higher status is to have a stronger claim to rewards, including emotional rewards. It is also to have greater access to the means of enforcing claims. The deferential behaviour of servants and women – the encouraging smiles, the attentive listening, the appreciative laughter, the comments of affirmation, admiration, or concern – comes to seem normal, even built into personality rather than inherent in the kinds of exchange that low-status people commonly enter into.

The motivation behind offering access to social capital can be instrumental when reciprocity is expected. By helping the migrant, the employer holds a form of power over her or him. But the migrant is unable to return the favour due to a lower social and economic status. The migrant is initially in an unfamiliar environment, lacking migration experience, and the employer is an influential position vis-à-vis the migrant. One could assume that in the early stages of the work relationship, the employer set out particular rules, most of which were accepted by the inexperienced migrant. The employer accepted the migrant domestic worker’s subservience as a norm and tried to ‘gain’ the most from his or her work. This places the migrant at risk of labour exploitation. This phenomenon is visible in the story of Irina, the 30-year-old migrant from Lviv who worked as a live-in nanny for a small boy in the suburbs of Warsaw. Her employers were owners of a family business and they tried to ‘include’ Irina into the family. However, as she noted:

A foreigner, who comes for the first time to a country, goes for the first time to work, is not familiar with this and, as a rule, agrees to everything: ‘Yes, I will do’, ‘Yes, of course’, ‘Yes, I have time’, and later, when at some moment he realises that he wants to do something for himself, he wants to have some private time, somehow and sometimes refuses to come during the weekend to [work for] someone, then there is great offence, great unhappiness [on the side of the employers]. And sometimes there is such exploitation for small payment and it is not worth it. And then it [the additional chore] turns into a duty.

Interestingly, Irina pointed to the subtleties of power relations and justified her employers’ behaviour: ‘No one dictated anything. It was, you know, they were as they were, but the problem was they would ask whether I could [do some additional work] and I was stupid for I always agreed to everything.’ Irina’s subservience was related to her dependence on the employers. Firstly, she was dependent on accommodation, living with the
employers. Secondly, she needed to earn money, having recently divorced her husband and wanting to support her child, who was left in Ukraine in the care of her parents. Thirdly, at that time she had a limited social network in Poland. She was initially not aware that by accepting the increasing workloads she placed the aim of her migration at risk. Clearly, the weaker the position of the migrant, the higher the dependency on one employer and the higher the risk of labour exploitation.

It was the employer who was the consumer of services, the one who demanded, set the rules and decided when the work of the migrant started and when it ended. The lack of clearly defined tasks in domestic work gave the employer more freedom to judge the migrant’s work as not completed or not carried out well enough. During the interview, Irina described the increasing expectations of the employers.

At that time, they paid me one thousand zloty [per month] [approximately €250] and I was available from early morning. I ironed, cleaned, washed the windows, the bathrooms... and cooked for the child on their terms. Also the grandma praised me a lot, saying that I am the only one who can cook for the child, and so... The child was taken care of with all his medications, and the house and the child were very well taken care of. Everything was always washed and ironed. That’s just the way I am, I don’t feel well in a house when there is disorder. And it was always like that [...]..., you see they had catering, then there were sometimes a lot of dirty dishes and a lot of dirty and clean table-cloths to separate, so this was additional work. And sometimes they were angry that I was not following an educational programme with the child, because I could have done it. But when was I supposed to do it? When? I also did their shopping, I had this on my shoulders, so when?

Irina’s lack of control over her workload was an example of how living conditions affected working conditions. As a live-in worker, Irina was constantly ‘available’ to the employer’s demands, thus continuously on duty. By living-in, she initially did not feel in a position to oppose the employer’s increasing demands. However, Irina made attempts to empower herself: during our interview, she claimed that she did set some of the standards of cleaning and care. With growing experience, the migrant introduced her own work standards, in terms of how she fulfilled the tasks. Having solidified her work position, she was also able to reject some of the additional new chores.

One of the strategies the interviewed women used in order to improve the working conditions was to shift from living-in to living-out. Living-out meant having more control over one’s work hours than when one lived with the employer. This is what Marijka said comparing the conditions of
living with the employer and on her own:

It’s better psychologically, much better [...] [to live-out]...that you are not under [someone’s] supervision, that you are not... that [when living with the employer] you have no control over yourself, that... [...] there is someone above you, that you do not have the right [to go] anywhere you want to, this and that. And so [when living independently] I went to work when I wanted, went here or to my home, or someplace for shopping or simply to sit in the park or something else, or I met the girls, because my sister and a friend are here, one, two [friends]. So I have someone to meet and to talk with. So, it was nice, we met on Sunday, went to the old town, took photos, we were together. That is great, nice, relaxing.

The cyclical character of migration meant having to return to Ukraine for a particular period and also gave the migrant a chance to reflect upon his or her situation in a safe, familiar setting. While she was in Ukraine, Irina decided to change her working conditions and, after returning to Poland, moved out of her employers’ home. The employers were eager to continue employing Irina because she was a good care worker and they were dependent on her services. In this way, Irina gained control over her work and life. Her trustworthiness and quality of work empowered her to improve her working conditions, changing the relationship with the employers. The employers clearly defined her duties, gave her a higher wage and asked her to stay with their son overnight from time to time when they had to work late in the evening. The following quote by Irina illustrated this change.

I knew that it is only today and tomorrow and then I leave. They [the employers] were away. I was alone with K. [child]. But there were no other duties, as in the past, only K. and preparing food for him. Only some ironing... if I had some [extra] time. It was a completely changed relationship. In the end we became friends because they got very used to me and I got used to them.

Another strategy used by migrants was to actively familiarise their employers. This was visible in the story of Marta. At the time of our interview, she was working in a Warsaw suburb as a cleaner and care worker for a person with a mental disability. This person’s mother was, according to Marta, ‘simply like a mother’. As she recalled:

And even when I leave for some time and I am at a friend’s place, I am not there [at the workplace], but if something [happens], I call Mrs. M., right away, immediately, like a mom. She will manage
everything, she will tell me what is right, and what is not, how to behave, what to say even...I am telling you, I just felt immediately at home, like in a family.

Marta took a proactive role and, instead of being familiarised by the employer, she familiarised her employer. Marta did not live with the cared-for person, which gave her more privacy, freedom and control over her work. Marta’s relationship with her employers was based on trust; she cared well for the disabled person and the employers did not have to explicitly instruct her about her work. As she stressed, she did not have a fixed schedule and was not obliged to assist the cared-for person all the time; she simply had to be available when her employers called. Their work relations were flexible.

Still, there was an asymmetry of power visible in how Marta described asking her employer for advice and the employer telling her how to behave and ‘what to say’ in given situations. The employer was the knowledgeable woman, while the migrant woman was the one in need of assistance. This asymmetry was also partly related to the age difference between the women. Marta used the unequal power relations between the employer and herself to gain information and protection. It can be assumed that by accepting this familiarisation and providing Marta with social capital, the employer had more trust that her disabled son would be well cared for.

In general, the migrant women treated domestic work as the activity of every woman, thus recreating dominant gender relations. When asked about the good and bad sides of domestic work, Marta said:

There are no bad sides [to this work] because what I do...what every woman in the household does. When I am home, there are dishes in the sink, I will normally wash them or clean, but there is no one standing next to me saying: ‘You have to do this.’ So I say, all this…I cook dinner with pleasure, because I like to cook...

Marta not only familiarised her employers, but also saw herself as a helper and as a friend to everyone: ‘I was mostly happy that I can come here and that, in that sense, I can ... to help someone mainly, and because, I feel good here.’

Marta used the so-called ‘help’ discourse, present also among other interviewed migrant women, empowering herself by claiming to be helping others. The word ‘help’ hid the work aspect of the migrant’s activity, while at the same time allowing her to cement her position vis-à-vis the employers or cared-for persons. The interviewed women spoke of the latter as ‘needing’ their help. They showed themselves as ‘the last hope’ for the elderly whom they took care of and whose own children did not give them assistance. They also portrayed themselves as better nurturers
of children than Polish mothers. For many of the interviewed migrants, this emotional engagement and helping attitude took place in the context of guilt due to their absence from their own care responsibilities in Ukraine. But this was not the case with Marta, who did not have children. Marta’s life was now based in Poland. She liked the anonymity of living in a city, as compared to the curiosity of neighbours in her small hometown. She liked the freedom and autonomy that being in Poland gave her. She built up her network by familiarising her employers. Marta described the situation as follows:

...someone calls and says, for example, ‘Maybe you could come to my...’, for example, ‘My friend’s mom lives alone, so maybe you can come and help and clean the windows.’ And apart from that, some people even want company, for the whole day. When she sits alone in a three-bedroom apartment for a whole day, this grandma, well then...She simply wants someone to visit. So even with those whom I have contact with here, so very close, they know me well and even when we meet once in half a year, we have half a day or a whole day to discuss what is going on at home, how is my mom, what my mom is doing. So I am friends with a lot of people.

By referring to employers as ‘friends’, Marta made the work relation ‘invisible’. She saw the relationship with the employers less as a financial investment and more as a social one. The employers responded to her friendliness by showing interest in her personal and family life. Building up relationships with Polish employers – a form of migration social capital – was Marta’s strategy not only to respond to the potential risks of migration, but also to gain from those relations. This was visible in how she attended to her health problems by getting help from employers who were doctors and how one of her employers paid for her to finish a beautician course in Poland, so that she would be able to leave the domestic work sector.

6.3.3 Depersonalised work relations

In some cases the migrant women were unable to create a personal tie to the employer. Depersonalisation of the work relationship was presented by the migrant women as the creation of distance by the employer: both spatial (in regard to household and personal space) and symbolic (in terms of limiting rights). According to the interviewed women, such depersonalised work relations placed them at risk of being exploited at work and insulted their dignity. Depersonalisation of a work relationship may be an attempt to make it more ‘professional’. But it may also result in intensification of work, making it more ‘time efficient’ and cheaper (Aronson &
Neysmith 1996). Often, pressure from the employer to be more efficient was related to the method of payment. When the migrant was paid on an hourly basis, it was in the employer’s interest to set a time limit within which the cleaning was to be done.

In cases of depersonalised work relations, the services the domestic worker provided and the work’s efficiency and quality were all that mattered to the employers. This was the only justification for his or her presence in the household. However, it meant less predictability and control over the work relationship on the side of the migrant. Depersonalised work relations were visible in the case of care workers who built the emotional tie with the cared-for person and not with the actual employer, even though it was they who nevertheless decided on the workload, the payment or, as in the case below, the continuation of employment. With emotional separation between the migrant and the employer, it seemed easier for the employer to reduce the migrant to a simply replaceable service. Chrystyna shared the story of a friend who wanted to leave earlier for Ukraine during her last stay in Poland because of health problems. She told her employer – the daughter of the elderly couple she had been taking care of – about her plans to leave.

This daughter behaved like that: in the house, instead of saying, ‘Thank you very much, that you have helped my parents for so many years, respected them, were good to them, friendly, thank you. Well, too bad, you also have your problems,’ she said the following: ‘What do you imagine?! Since you came here, I always have had problems with you. I can have several [caregivers] such as you for one złoty!’

According to Chrystyna, in this extreme instance the employer – without warning – ended up firing someone who had worked for her for four years. The employer did not acknowledge the woman’s personal qualities, her trustworthiness, emotional involvement and the care she provided her parents. These characteristics are usually the ‘gambling card’ migrants use to stabilise and/or improve their informal working conditions.

Working for several employers as a cleaner, Larysa, complained about instances when an employer decided to check the quality of her work.

...It was very unpleasant for me...I couldn’t...this was a humiliation for me. I always did – that means, when there were four doors – the upper landing, of those four doors and simply I forgot to clean one of them. You know, it is not that I didn’t want to [clean it], but you know how it is, I am human, I am not a machine [...]...I thought: ‘Well, I will clean it immediately,’ and something else happened and I forgot. So the husband of this woman came and checked the whole house. This was very strange for me that it was him and not her who
went [to check], and later on it was just terribly sad. And she was coming all the time, was checking whether I just sit and do nothing. But I do not have such habits, even when I am alone at home I do not have the habit of sitting. I just simply work at a regular pace. I just got used to it, although it was difficult at the beginning [...].

Her employer’s intrusive work checks made Larysa feel that she was mistrusted as a person and suspected of working inadequately and thus dishonestly. The fact that the household’s husband, a man (who, in her opinion, did not know much about cleaning), checked on the quality of her work felt humiliating. This meant that Larysa accepted the idea of domestic work as ‘women’s work’.

Some of the migrant women adopted a ‘professional’ attitude in response to depersonalised work relations. Larysa, who resented the employer’s impersonal treatment, adopted such a strategy of emotional detachment, which reflected what she had experienced.

I am not afraid of this. I am already [...] you know what I mean, I was in different jobs. I even was in such a job where a woman was standing in the door, leaned against them and I worked, and she was standing and watching. So I said, ‘I am sorry, but maybe [...] you will not look at my hands...’ Because now I no longer pay attention, I just work and that’s it. But then, at the beginning, my hands were trembling when someone was looking at me like that, I could not work. Now I don’t pay any attention. One time I said: ‘I am sorry, but maybe you will not watch me like that, you will come and check later. I am not afraid, you can come and check.’ But she didn’t understand this, so let her stand if her feet don’t hurt...

During the interview, Larysa is ridiculing the behaviour of the Polish woman. The treatment she received was followed by an act of resistance: although the employer expected her to return, she refused to do so. At the same time, she worked for employers with whom she entered into a ‘professional’ relationship based on her reputation as a trustworthy worker.

There are many such [people] for whom I have worked, for two, three years, sometimes longer. They are pleased that I work and they all want me [...] ‘You know everything, I don’t have to tell you anything, just come.’ [...] I have somewhere I have already been five years, five years, in July it will be five years.

The migrant women tried to find a balance between a personalised knowledge of their employers while, at the same time, not becoming too
familiar with them. Depending on the degree of trust, the migrants modified the strategy, in some instances creating more distance and in others becoming more familiar with the employer. To ‘professionalise’ their work relationship, the migrant women had to have a longer migration experience together with what it entailed: living independently of the employer and having developed a reputation for reliability and efficiency among employers.

When dissatisfied with the working conditions, some of the migrants decided to leave employers. Leaving work involved changing from live-in to live-out arrangements. Marijka, who worked as a care worker, initially as a live-in, moved out and stressed during the interview how that gave her new options.

When the work is not good and it doesn’t suit me, I don’t have to be there. Because I can find something else, I can be for some time without work, when there is somewhere to live. This is most important, to have somewhere to live.

The relationship with the employer, as already mentioned, was not solely or primarily built on monetary exchange, but also on the migrant counting on the employer as a source of social capital. The development of a work routine through socially rooted informal strategies is an important response to the risks related to instability of work status during irregular migration. This was possible only in long-lasting relationships. When changing jobs, the migrant had to start the process of building her reputation from the beginning. Leaving the job also meant not getting recommended for further employment and losing access to the employer’s social network. Switching employers meant lack or change of a work routine and was regarded as a risk by some migrants. For that reason, those migrant women who had more than one employer could more easily exit unfavourable working conditions.

Selecting jobs, however, is important. This is what Olga said about her employers (she had already worked for seven years as a cleaner in Warsaw): ‘I choose the better ones, who really treat me well and help.’ Switching jobs allowed migrants to improve their working conditions.

The behaviour of the employers, who felt, as one of the migrant women claimed, ‘offended’ when left by a domestic worker, showed how they assumed that the person with the higher social position should decide whether the relationship would or would not be created and when it should end. The pattern of power relations was challenged the moment the migrant displayed agency. Face-to-face criticism may have had very negative consequences for the domestic worker. Using alibis and lies, claiming that one has to leave for Ukraine, giving signs of dissatisfaction such as ‘getting ill’ were ways to avoid leaving work directly. As
Hondagneu-Sotello (2003a: 65) wrote:

A domestic employee who tells her employer that she is leaving because she has a better job prospect or because she was dissatisfied with her job may be accused of betrayal and disloyalty. She may be accused of theft, justly or unjustly. She may fear that the former employer will call the immigration authorities in retaliation. Or she may fear that by quitting verbally, she will ignite the flame of unpleasant verbal encounter...

6.3.4 Declining social status

Domestic work is a job of little social prestige, thus providing the migrant with a low occupational status. The interviewed migrant women, although only temporary migrants, were unable fully to disassociate their social status from their work in Poland. Through care work and domestic chores provided for their families at home, the women, sustained their status as mothers and wives. Now, through remunerated domestic work, they affirmed someone else’s status – that of the employer. At the same time, however, there was financial opportunity, leading to an increased social status in Ukraine. In addition, some of the migrant women whom I interviewed had a university education and the majority had secondary education. Most had many years of work experience and were skilled employees. With migration, domestic work became their main source of income. The risks related to domestic work at first glance seemed obvious: loss of skills, no possibility of upward mobility in the Polish labour market and an overall decline in social status. Chrystyna had been working as a bookkeeper in Ukraine and now works as a care worker and cleaner in Warsaw. As she describes it: ‘A so-called sprzątaczka [cleaning lady in Polish] – that’s what they call us here – degrading it is, I would say [laughs]’. The higher the educational level and the more years of work experience, the more the women reflected upon their decline in social status.

The fact that domestic work is a job of low social prestige led to the migrant women experiencing something that Goffman referred to as non-person treatment. This means that the person’s presence is not acknowledged as socially significant and therefore requires no effort by the person to impress those in his or her presence. The non-person treatment signifies ‘social invisibility’ ascribed to certain people. An example of such treatment was the behaviour towards slaves and servants in the past; today children, very old and ill people experience this sort of treatment (Goffman 1967: 208). So, too, do domestic workers, as Chrystyna noted when discussing the way her employer treated her: like ‘a machine’.

As was already mentioned, migrant women who came to Poland for
the first time were in a difficult financial situation and had a limited social
network. This increased the probability of their accepting jobs with ex-

ploitative conditions. During our interview, Chrystyna returned several
times to memories of the Polish woman who was her ‘manager’ in her
first migrant job (a live-in care worker looking after the employer’s eight
children).²³

You couldn’t just sit down simply and eat. Because if only you sat
down, she came straightaway. She didn’t ask: ‘Why are you sitting
here?’ She gave you work right away and you had to do this work
immediately. That means [...] there was no time to eat.

Chrystyna claimed she had lost fifteen kilograms during her three-month-
long stay there. In her view, she was not treated as a person with particu-
lar needs, but as a service, a function. The employer considered the mi-
grant’s wants as an excuse for not working. Chrystyna’s ‘manager’ did not
allow her to react to the insubordination of the children, who were under
Chrystyna’s supervision, but she was held responsible for the outcome of
their disobedience.

[W]hen I woke up every morning at five, I had to get up at five, go
to every child, wake him or her up, and the child didn’t wake up
because they ignored me [...]. They woke up when it was already
daylight and I felt the results: ‘Why is the child not awake?’ [said in
Polish, impersonating the Polish woman]. And what about me... I
guess I am to be blamed, because I woke them up, what do they [the
children] care, right?

Chrystyna responded to this depersonalised, functional treatment by
criticising her Polish ‘manager’ for having raised her children badly.
Chrystyna reached for the power of the ‘powerless’ – she claimed moral
superiority. During the interview, she acted out her hidden transcript,
letting out the emotions she had to control in front of her employer.

For the women, it was difficult to accept the role of a servant who plays
no social role in their family, as some other migrants had experienced,
apart from providing services. Chrystyna shared a story about a friend who
used to work near Warsaw.

[...] Well, this Holy Evening [Christmas] she was in the kitchen alone,
no one invited her to sit at the table. Can you imagine?! [...] And this
person who works there, who washes their underwear, who washes,
gives them food, who serves food, takes care of the dog, cleans every
corner, because this Polish woman never lifts a finger around the
house – she can’t do anything, certainly. Maybe I talk harshly, but
do I make myself clear? [...] And she called me and she was crying and said: ‘Chrystyna, I am lucky that there were doors to the kitchen, that I could close them, because my heart was breaking.’ They were eating, feasting all the Holy Evening. I am telling you, [Pope] John Paul hanging on every wall! No one would allow that [not inviting someone to Christmas dinner] to happen [in Ukraine]. Have a piece of bread, come, the poor ones, I would share this piece of bread with you. But this wealthy family, who can afford to employ a care worker but cannot give her food, cannot seat her at the table.

Chrystyna used this story to vent her frustrations. In her interview, she confronted the Polish employers by negatively evaluating their family responsibilities, religiosity and morals, clearly contrasting them with those of Ukrainians. The Polish woman was judged as failing in her role as wife and mother. Ridiculing the employer is a form of resistance to domination (Scott 1990). During the interview, Chrystyna acted out the reciprocal aggression denied by the presence of the employer.

The migrant women did not remain passive in the face of risking loss of social status. In the patron-client relationship, the client increased her own status by being close to persons with a higher social standing (Tarkowski 1994: 55). Through the familiarisation of the relationship to Poles – be it the cared-for person, the employer or the landlord, who had a relatively higher social status than the migrants – the interviewed women attempted to change the meaning of their own status in Poland. Some of the interviewed migrants stressed this during the interviews, particularly in the way they presented their employers, as well as other Poles. Irina, an engineer working in Warsaw in child-care, commented on the qualities and status of people from whom she managed to rent accommodation.

Mrs. B [the employer and landlady]... her husband was a professor, connoisseur of fine arts, who died..., he is very well known in Poland and [...] she was very religious [...]. And she was also very educated and somehow very eccentric. I remember [...] she would come from church and she would play classical [music], Bach or Vivaldi at full blast and read a book in French, a love story, or in German, because she knew it perfectly [...]”

Although Irina’s husband was doing renovations for this woman, he and the woman were presented by Irina during the interview as sort of equals. Similarly, Irina underlined the qualities of her other landlady: ‘this was really interesting, she was wise, very wise, she knew about bookkeeping, mathematics, history...such a down-to-earth woman’.

Zenya, who also came from a background of higher education, underscored the special emotional attachment she had for her care charge.
A very interesting woman, she will remain in my memories for my whole life. I really loved her, respected her a lot, liked her, this was all very good.
[I asked: And why was she so interesting?]

Because she also raised two sons. She was a nurse [...] And during the war, her husband was killed, he was a doctor and she saved [...] she saved 33 Jews [...] and I have a photocopy with a short note about her life story, which she described in some journals and in some publications and so on. A very interesting woman. And I was with her almost one and a half years, one year and some three months, yes, something like that. Sadly, she died. Ninety-six years she lived, this grandma, and in her 97th [year], she passed away. I, naturally, went to her funeral. Now I work for someone else.

Zenity could relate to this woman who, like herself, had two sons. Her narrative underscores the woman’s braveness and the emotional relationship they cultivated – using such words as ‘love’ and respect – and saying it was ‘natural’ that she, like the women’s relatives and closest friends, attended her funeral. The migrant women displayed agency by presenting work of little social prestige in a different light, improving its status thanks to their personal ties with those they cared for, who had relatively high social status.

6.4 Conclusions

Migrant domestic work in contemporary Poland is a relatively new phenomenon. There are several reasons for the development of this niche in the labour market. Care institutions in Poland are weak, both in terms of facilities available and quality of services provided. There also continues to be little social acceptance for placing one’s parents in an elderly care institution (and few elderly are happy to accept such arrangements) or one’s child in a nursery. The less developed the institutional solutions and the less social acceptance for such care practices, the higher the employer’s dependency on private care solutions and the higher the chances for finding work in this niche for migrant women.

When searching for work for the first time, the migrant women had to rely on their social networks at home. However, with growing experience, they got to know more migrants and had better access to information. One can even claim that the relationship between the migrant domestic worker and the employer was characterised by the presence of certain unwritten rules. The employer ‘knew’ what to do to find a domestic worker. The migrant domestic worker, in turn, ‘knew’ how to search for
work, how much she could earn and how to leave one job for another one. She evaluated her work situation and chose the preferred option. Migrant domestic workers from Ukraine made use of their understanding of the rules of interaction and took advantage of their access to resources within the migrant institutions in order to obtain and keep work in Poland.

The migrant combined ties to other migrants and a patron-client relationship with the employer in order to create a sense of stability in undeclared work. The quality of the migrants’ working conditions – payment, in particular – improved when they possessed migration social capital gained through ties to their employers. Recommendations given by employers as well as experience from several jobs allowed the migrant domestic workers to achieve satisfactory working conditions and to create a work routine. The form of payment was a way to balance the risks of not being paid for one’s workload. The information gathered from other migrants via weak ties did not require investment on the side of the migrant and was treated instrumentally.

As domestic workers, the Ukrainian women were liminal figures. According to them, they were treated like someone falling between worker and family member. Being treated ‘like a family member’ was presented by them as an achievement, an indication of having cemented their position in the household. This was especially so in the case of care work, a relationship between at least two parties that requires the exchange of intimate knowledge. The migrant domestic workers found it difficult to accept impersonal treatment from the employers. They were conscious of the locale they were working in – that is, someone’s home – and associated it with familiarity. For that reason, they expected the rules of interaction to remain less formal. The women stressed how they felt more ‘at ease’ being treated with familiarity. The employer was also interested in developing friendly relations with the migrant to guarantee their loyalty and quality service. However, their liminality both increased and decreased the risks of migrant domestic work. On the one hand, the migrant increased his or her chances of receiving not only financial gratification, but also a source of information about jobs and a form of protection from the employer. On the other hand, the employer was interested in a specific service provided by the migrant. However, excessive dependence on the employer, related to social capital during migration, made the migrant vulnerable to exploitation by the employer.

The familiarisation of work relationships ceased to be the migrants’ preference at the point where the employer started abusing his or her power to gain unpaid services from the migrants. Familiarisation may lead to exploitation the moment dependency of the migrant vis-à-vis the employer passes the former’s threshold of acceptability. It sometimes reached the point where the migrant could no longer be able to negotiate or exit work. In this manner, the employers posed a risk to the migrants:
the time of work increased, but did not bring them closer to the migration goal – that is, earning money. With their earnings, migrants hoped to be able to sustain or improve their own material situation and that of their families.

The ability to respond to risk was related to the migrant’s choices and dependence on the employer. The dependence of the migrant on the employer was highly conditioned by the living arrangements. Live-in migrants were dependent on the employer for accommodation and work. Their access to information about new jobs and other forms of social support was also limited, due to scarce time off from work. The weaker the migrants’ position within the household, the less possibility for negotiation and the higher the risks of being forced to accept new workloads without additional payment.

Live-out migrants, while having fewer opportunities to develop a personal relationship with their employer, were not as dependent on him or her for work and accommodation and thus could leave undesirable work. With increasing migration experience, the migrants had more self-confidence and opportunities for negotiating their working conditions. For these migrants, power relations changed, as did possibilities for responding to the risks of demands for unpaid work on the part of the employer.

The migrants developed social capital on the basis of ties to their employer, but simultaneously attempted to keep emotionally distant by living independent of the employer or choosing cleaning instead of care work. These strategies allowed them to gain more control over their work. By negotiating their role and conditions of their work, they made themselves indispensable and drew benefits from the employer. The seemingly contradictory strategies of familiarising and depersonalising the relationship with the employers allowed many of the Ukrainian domestic workers to maintain an optimal proximity-distance balance with the Polish employers. In so doing, they balanced their risks, thus turning migrant domestic work into an opportunity to achieve their migration goal.