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**Contrasts in Ageing and Agency in Family Migratory Contexts:  
A Comparison of Albanian and Latvian Older Migrants**

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## INTRODUCTION

This chapter comparatively examines the experiences of older migrants from two Eastern European post-socialist countries which have been deeply impacted by emigration: Albania and Latvia. We explore migrants' ageing and agency relationally within the transnational family spaces spanning out from their origin countries – from Albanian mainly to Italy and Greece, from Latvia mainly to the UK. Different geopolitical trajectories frame the emigrations from these two source countries. Located at the southern, Mediterranean limit of the Eastern bloc, Albania witnessed extreme poverty and isolation under the dictatorial regime of Enver Hoxha. When communism finally fell in 1991, a mass exodus ensued. Much of this migration was initially irregular and comprised young men, but regularizations in the destination countries led to the sedimentation of the migrants, based on nuclear families with children and, subsequently, the follow-on migration of the migrants' older-age parents. Latvia's main migration flow is more recent: some emigrated in the 1990s following independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, but a more intense outflow occurred after EU accession in 2004. Most emigration has been to the UK and Ireland, and economically driven: young men and women seeking better-paid but often low-status jobs. In contrast to the Albanian case where, reflecting strong norms of Balkan patriarchy, it was almost impossible for young single women to migrate on their own, in the Latvian case there has been much independent female migration, including older women who are often separated, widowed or divorced.

Our objectives in this chapter are as follows. First, we draw attention to the *neglected role of older people in studies of transnational family life*. Walsh and Näre (2015), in the introduction to their recent book on ageing, migration and 'home', write that the current literatures on globalization and transnational migration are age-blind, thereby marginalizing the experiences and narratives of older people. This immediately raises the question of how to define an older person. We have no easy answer. Rather than nominate a chronological threshold, we prefer to focus on ageing as a socially and culturally constructed process and therefore also as locationally and situationally emplaced according to the spatial relocations of older migrants and their various family members.

This leads us into the second framing objective of our comparative study, which is to privilege the *relationalities of age*: that is to say, age and ageing as produced and reproduced in the interrelationships between people of different generations, classes, genders etc. (Hopkins and Pain, 2007: 288). In our study generation and gender are key. These dimensions intersect with ageing and migration in complex and changing ways, constantly shifting the balance of power and the responsibility of care as ageing takes place and as different family members shift between locations within the transnational family space – Latvia or Albania on the one hand, and England, Italy or Greece on the other hand.

Third, this study is positioned within an appreciation that contemporary migration and family life take place against a backdrop of *increased and diversified mobilities*. The ‘mobilities turn’ (Sheller and Urry 2006) has helped migration scholars to appreciate the diversity of time-space rhythms of human spatial movement, ranging from long-term and lifetime migration through temporary, seasonal and circular regimes to short-term visits for holidays and family care. Some mobilities are regular and predictable, others are spontaneous and take place in response to sudden needs and emergencies. Many facets and practices of transnational and cross-generational family life are deeply embedded in such movements.

Fourth, we locate our comparative study within a particular geographical cross-section of the global migration scenario: that of *East-West mobilities within Europe*. The past 25 years has seen the unfolding of a remarkable range of cross-border movements within Europe’s staged enlargement and integration. The form and quantity of these border-crossings have been fundamentally shaped by geopolitical factors of migration facilitation versus control: ‘free movement’ for those inside the EU (Latvians), ‘fortress Europe’ towards those outside (Albanians).

In this chapter, we pose, and attempt to answer, the following questions. How do the respective home-country family contexts influence age- and generation-related mobility patterns? To what extent are the markedly patriarchal patterns of Albanian family hierarchies carried over to the transnationalized family sphere; and how do the experiences of migration impact changing gender and generational relations within

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Albanian migrant families? Ditto Latvia: how do the more ‘open’ northern European norms of family life, combined with both the Soviet heritage and the post-Soviet neoliberal experience, contribute to Latvian migration patterns, with special reference to older migrants? To what extent are these contrasting social and family contexts responsible for variations in agency of older migrant women in furthering their own economic and well-being agendas and those of their families?

Our chapter proceeds as follows. Next we give some background on the two countries, followed by a section which problematizes old-age and ageing. We then outline our research methodology. The bulk of the chapter is made up of our analysis of the Albanian and Latvian cases, focusing in the first instance on multiple migratory options set within a context of patriarchy, and in the second on the notion of migration as empowerment. We conclude with a comparative discussion.

## **ALBANIA AND LATVIA**

Albania and Latvia are two countries which are rarely compared with each other: indeed this chapter might well be the first to make this particular bilateral comparison. And yet there is a rationale for doing so. They are two small countries at opposite extremes of the vast post-socialist European space, one facing the Baltic Sea, the other the Mediterranean. More importantly, here are two countries which have experienced, proportionate to the size of their populations, very intense emigration since 1990. The scale of the Albanian exodus is hardly matched by any other country; a ‘stock’ of 1.4 million Albanians lived abroad in 2010, two-thirds of them in Greece and Italy (World Bank, 2011: 54). As a result of this emigration (both direct loss and the removal of future reproductive potential by mass young-adult emigration), the Albanian population fell from 3.2 million in 1989 to 2.8 million in 2011. Latvia has also haemorrhaged emigrants since its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, and especially since joining the EU in 2004. Here the population has declined – from 2.3 million in 2001 to 2 million in 2011 – due to a combination of heavy emigration (a net loss of 213,000 during the decade) and low birth-rate. The total emigrant stock was 273,000 in 2010 (World Bank, 2011: 158).

Within these macro-level migration episodes, we direct most of our analysis to older migrating women since, at this age-cohort, they are the most active and numerous. Older people engage with migration in various ways, both as immobile participants who are nevertheless powerfully affected by the migration of family members, especially their children, and as active participants in the migration process themselves. In this chapter we focus mainly on the latter perspective, and draw a contrast between situations where the migration of the older generation is fundamentally conditioned by the prior migration behaviour of their children (the case in Albania), and where older people's migration is carried out more independently (the case with Latvia).

## **PROBLEMATIZING 'OLD-AGE' AND AGEING**

The literatures, extensive as they are, on transnationalism and migration tend to marginalize the experiences and perspectives of older people. Where the focus shifts to transnational care, most attention is paid to migrants' 'left-behind' children, not the left-behind elderly, with the notable exception of research led by Baldassar (see Baldassar et al., 2007). And yet, the globalization of migration and the concomitant transnationalization of family lives are transforming the experiences, practices and cultures of ageing and old-age, as well as leading to shifting notions of home and of 'homing' – the process of creating or re-fashioning a 'home' in different spatial contexts (Walsh and Näre, 2015).

Most of the literature on migration and ageing focuses on what has come to be called *international retirement migration* (King et al., 1998), on which an abundance of research now exists, much of it about Spain (see Casado-Díaz et al., 2004 for a review). Less often researched is the involvement of older people, directly or indirectly, in migrations driven by *poverty and the desire for economic improvement*. Three ageing-migration interfaces can be mentioned here: the impact of the departure of labour migrants on their parents; the follow-on migration of the older generation to where their children are; and the later-life migration of older people as independent economic migrants.

We acknowledge the problematic nature of any fixed definitions of ‘old-age’. Age is assumed to refer primarily to a biological reality, a point or stage on the irreversible trajectory from birth to death. However, it is now widely recognised that the meaning and significance of age, and of the process of ageing, are differentially defined and experienced historically, geographically and culturally (Bytheway, 1995; McHugh, 2003). Where transnational migration leads people to encounter different cultures of ageing, it becomes important not to be blinded by the two competing models of ageing which dominate ‘Western’ thinking about older age. These are, firstly, the ‘vulnerability model’, which essentializes dependency and helplessness and leads into a discussion about physical and social care needs; and secondly the opposing model of ‘active’ ageing with its stress on independence, individualism and physical exercise. Policies directed towards the exigencies of older people, especially in a migrant setting, must strike a delicate balance between socially-defined needs and obligations, and carefully informed cultural awareness.

Hopkins and Pain (2007) urge us to *think relationally* about ageing – to look at inter-generational relations, at the markedly gendered nature of ageing and later-life stages, and at a graduated life-course approach rather than the fixed-category life-stage model (youth, middle age, old age etc.). Also important is the relationality of space and place, especially salient in transnational family settings where the conditions and perceptions of ageing vary from one country to another. Hence the *social and political structures* of our case-studies become absolutely relevant: one a migration from a post-socialist and post-Soviet country to the relatively open, meritocratic and deregulated work environment of the UK; and the other a migration from a Balkan state with a patriarchal family and social structure to two adjacent Mediterranean countries where family structures and patriarchy are less rigid.

## **METHODS AND PROJECTS**

The research presented in this chapter derives from three projects. Although these were independent projects, they followed a similar research design and epistemology, namely an open-ended and loosely structured interview format in which participants

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talked about their lives, family situations, emigration, responsibilities towards (and expectations of) other family members, and hopes for the future. The projects were:

1. Research on the transnational care situation of the older-age parents of Albanian migrants: 38 interviews with older residents in villages in southern Albania. All interviewees had children, and often grandchildren, living abroad, mostly in Greece. Fieldwork was in 2004-06 and 2008-09. For further details on this research see King and Vullnetari (2006), Vullnetari and King (2011).
2. Research on older Albanian migrants living in Italy, where they had moved to join their previously-migrated adult children: 24 interviews were carried out in the central Italian region of Marche in 2013. For further details see Cela and Fokkema (2014), King et al. (2014).
3. Research on older Latvian women living and working in three locations: Boston (eastern England), London, and the Channel Island of Guernsey: 37 interviews with older women undertaken in 2010-14. For partial results see King and Lulle (2015).

This chapter represents a first attempt at analysis of ageing, migration, family dynamics, agency and well-being in a *comparative* European post-socialist context. Interviewees are given pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.

## **ALBANIAN OLDER PEOPLE: MIGRATORY OPTIONS AND CONSTRAINTS**

The unprecedented scale of emigration from Albania in the 1990s, continuing at lesser intensity since, has put intense pressures on family structures. The older generations have been particularly impacted, with many middle-aged and older parents losing *all* their children to emigration. This cross-generational rupture constituted a rather brutal upsetting of long-standing family traditions in Albania, whereby extended multi-generational families either co-habited or at least lived in close proximity in the same town or rural locale. Underpinning this extended-family co-presence was a traditionally highly patriarchal society which survived, with some egalitarian modifications (notably in female literacy and employment), through the

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communist era and into the post-socialist years. This family clan model was most entrenched in the mountainous north of Albania where aspects of the medieval customary law of *kanun*, based on strict principles of family honour, endured (Backer, 1983). There has been a partial reassertion of patriarchal values and behaviours in the post-communist era, as a reaction against the ‘forced equality’ of communism (a myth anyway) and as part of a neoliberal free-for-all form of market economy (Schwandner-Sievers, 2001).

### **The left-behind older generation**

Even when not moving themselves, the older-generation parents of migrants were thoroughly enmeshed in transnational family relations and livelihoods, their everyday experiences configured by the progress, or otherwise, of their children abroad. Most of those interviewed in Albania articulated, either directly or by implication, a trade-off between the material improvement in their lives brought by remittances and a deeply-felt sense of loneliness and abandonment. Kasem (male, 55 years of age, interviewed in a village in southern Albania in 2009) was receiving substantial remittance cash from his migrant son in Greece. Proudly, he conducted a tour of his newly enlarged and refurbished house:

We built this bathroom with new tiles and everything... Then we refitted the kitchen... Now we are constructing the second floor, the work continues... A lot of money has been invested here... He never brings less than 6,000 euros a year.

As a ‘younger-old’ father, living with his wife, and with other relatives in the village, Kasem did not suffer the extreme loneliness felt by others, generally older. Moreover, his son in Greece was still single and so had nobody else to send remittances to. Holding a ‘regular’ status in Greece, he was able to visit the village from time to time, and Kasem hoped that one day he would return, get married and settle there.

The ‘older-old’ people left behind by migration generally felt more lonely and vulnerable, especially if they were widowed. Dashamire (female, 75, widow, southern

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Albania, 2005) expressed acute loneliness, to which she also ascribed psychological and physical symptoms:

[Migration] is good, but they [her children] are far away from their mother... They are doing fine for themselves, but it is not good for us older folk... I would like the economic situation to improve so that they could come and work here, close to their families... When I work... [in her vegetable plot] I get a bit tired... Do you know when I feel tired? When I'm feeling unhappy... because there are things that don't go well now and then. And then I feel it here at the top of my head, as if I am going crazy. May God protect me.

This loneliness and sense of abandonment was also highlighted by De Soto et al. (2002) in their World Bank report on *Poverty in Albania*, which documented in detail the critical role of migration and remittances in enabling families to combat poverty and survive economically during a decade (the 1990s) of rapid and profound political, social and economic transition. The report stressed the negative social impact of migration's fracturing of families, affecting all generations. Often, migrants cannot be by their parents' sides during their most difficult moments of illness, personal crisis, or death; constraints on travel were particularly acute during the 1990s because of migrants' irregular status and limited financial means. De Soto et al. (2002: 46) likened the abandonment of the older generation to a process of 'orphaning'.

Most older people in Albania (over 60 for women, over 65 for men) are entitled to a tiny state pension from their earlier work in rural cooperatives or state enterprises, worth around \$20-40 a month. In rural areas, if health permits, livelihoods can be supplemented by subsistence farming. Remittances are the key element of many household budgets, but the circumstances are highly variable from family to family and over time (Vullnetari and King, 2011). Remittances to parents – nearly always from sons to fathers, reflecting the patrilineality of Albanian society – are high when migrants are in remunerative employment and are not yet married, as in the case of Kasem's son in the earlier quote. Once migrants get married, they have

their own families to support and remittances to the older generation dwindle, except for emergencies like essential medical treatment.

The following biographical case illustrates several of the above points. Selvie (female, 63) lives on her own in a village in southern Albania; her husband had died the year prior to the interview. In this village, like many in highland Albania, only about a third of the pre-1990 population remained as stable residents – chiefly older villagers. One third had emigrated abroad, and another third were seasonal migrants who worked in Greece for part of the year. Selvie has three sons and five daughters; all are married with children and live away from the village, although at the time of the interview in 2004 she was looking after two of her granddaughters. One son is in Athens, the other two sons are in Milan; of her daughters, three are in Italy and two in Tirana (which is five hours away). She survives on her husband's pension and works some land: 'I have a bit of land, a cow... I have planted the land and I work there... When I don't have enough money, my sons send some to me'. Note that the remittances come only from her sons, not from her daughters who are 'owned' by their husbands' families (Vullnetari and King, 2011). She has never visited any of her children abroad, although she is applying for a visa to go and see her children in Italy. Selvie's prior immobility is explained by multiple causes: her poverty and inexperience of foreign travel, frustration over visa regulations, and her care duties towards her co-resident grandchildren. She receives occasional visits from all her children, less frequently from those abroad.

Although she is widowed and all her children are living away, Selvie is relatively fortunate compared to many 'left-behind' older people in Albania. She receives distant and occasional hands-on care from her many children, and she has her own, albeit challenging, care responsibilities for the grandchildren. Others are in a much more desperate state, reduced to penury, scavenging and begging (Vullnetari and King, 2008: 139-40). This arises when inter-generational breakdown occurs and care duties are forsaken, or when migrant children fall on hard times and cannot send remittances. There is minimal state support in Albania for such destitute older people, who must rely on their own meagre resources and the work of voluntary and charity groups running shelters and soup kitchens in the main towns.

### **Follow-the-children migration**

For some older Albanians there is another choice – follow their children abroad. For much of the 1990s this was not an option because of the migrants' undocumented status. Selvie lamented that one of her sons in Italy had not been able to attend his father's funeral because he did not yet have his 'papers'. Since the large-scale regularizations in Italy and Greece in the late 1990s and early 2000s, visits in both directions had become more feasible, although far from straightforward due to visa restrictions (finally lifted in 2011) and the difficulty and cost of renewing migrants' permits to stay.

Follow-on moves result from several decision-making factors. The decisions are rarely taken independently by the older generation, but may be heavily influenced, even dictated, by the migrant generation. Economics, family togetherness, health and inter-generational care are the main factors framing the decision.

The most common rationale combines economic and care considerations. This is when the 'left-behind' older generation moves to the home of one of their sons in order to take over the care of the grandchildren, thereby releasing both parents, the son and his wife, for full-time paid employment. Several points can be noted with this arrangement. First, this process is highly gendered. The older-generation parents follow their sons, not their daughters, since the patrilineality of Albanian family organization is preserved with migration – as with remittances, noted earlier in the case of Kasem. The youngest son is the 'preferred' one, since according to Albanian custom it is his duty (and more practically, that of his wife) to take care of parents in their old age.

The second thing to note is that the older generation are functioning as *care-givers* and not *care-receivers*; this contradicts the common construction of older people as passive, vulnerable and in need of care. There is an Albanian saying that older people love their grandchildren even more than they do their children. This is not to say that there are no difficulties involved in these arrangements. Care of grandchildren, and carrying out other home-making tasks such as cooking, cleaning and washing, fall mainly, if not exclusively, on the shoulders of the women. The men can thus feel a little 'lost' in this new living arrangement, although they may acquire

some part-time employment or busy themselves with house/flat maintenance. Another issue concerns the language of the migrant household. Most grandparents speak only Albanian, and they often see part of their role as a cultural one – to preserve the Albanian language with their grandchildren. But as soon as the children start school or kindergarten, the host-country language predominates, and Albanian is seen as a stigmatized language to be avoided (Zinn, 2005). This means that the grandparents' self-assigned role of linguistic tutelage gets subverted: the grandchildren may understand Albanian, but reply in Greek or Italian. And later on when the grandchildren become older, they no longer need looking after by their grandparents when their parents are at work.

But the key problems with the follow-the-children migration are balancing family togetherness with social isolation beyond the household sphere and a feeling of displacement from their 'true home' in the Albanian village. There are complex inter-generational dynamics going on here, since the older generation does not want to burden their children with their problems of loneliness, and so they efface themselves, as in the following quote from Rosa (73), interviewed in Ancona:

Our children work really hard and when they get back home in the evening they are exhausted and they need to hear nice words and not our complaints. We don't want to be a burden for them. If I would talk to my daughter-in-law about my loneliness [she feels she could never tackle her son about this], she would start worrying about us and feel guilty about their insufficient support. So I prefer not to trouble her. They are already doing so much for us, paying our daily expenses, taking us to the doctors, arranging hospital appointments.

Hence, just as those who stay in Albania have to accept and manage the balance between material well-being through remittances, and the pain of separation from their children and grandchildren, so for those who went to join their children, another set of trade-offs has to be confronted. On the one hand they can enjoy family togetherness, mutual care and better health services; on the other side are feelings of being 'not-at-home', socially isolated, and over-dependent on their younger family members. This dependency throws up other tensions – such as those which often

occur between a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law living and working together in the same crowded flat. When their health remains good, and provided they have the financial means and the legal status to travel in and out of the EU, the older generation can enjoy a transnational pattern of living, moving back and forth as their, and their children's needs and wishes dictate. But when health fails or 'older-old' age beckons, the son may insist on moving them abroad, where health facilities are generally better than in Albania.

The following case illustrates the psycho-social dilemmas and tensions over care and responsibility. The speaker is Milika (female, 83, Italy):

My sons decided I could no longer live on my own. So they bring me to Italy. I don't like it here, but at my age my opinion doesn't count anymore... My sons treat me like a new-born baby; they are obsessed that something bad might happen to me. At my age, sooner or later something will be the cause of my death. They don't trust the doctors in Albania. They decided for me. I told them I want to be buried in my village [in Albania].

Milika was brought to Italy in 2012 after a mild stroke the year before. She is widowed and has three sons, one daughter and ten grandchildren in Italy, and two daughters living in Albania close to her village. In Italy she co-resides with her youngest son and his family; her daughter-in-law takes care of her, although Milika insists she is self-sufficient. Milika does not understand why she had to come to Italy: in Albania her daughters visited her every day and she was surrounded by friends and neighbours who kept an eye on her. She was happy there, despite the fact that most of her family resides in Italy, because she could look forward to their visits at least twice a year. Now in Italy she is alone much of the time; her daughter-in-law works two days a week. She misses Albania, particularly her daughters. She has not seen them for two years because they cannot afford to come to Italy. She fears she will never see them again.

The latest event to influence transnational family living and caring arrangements is the economic crisis, whose effects have been most severe in Greece,

especially for male migrants working in the stricken construction sector. Most of our interviews with Albanian participants were undertaken before the worst effects of the crisis became apparent. Michail (2013) provides some useful insights into the impact of the Greek crisis on migration trends, to which we add our own knowledge of the evolving situation. There has been substantial return migration, but there is a strong preference for migrants, and especially their school-age children, to stay in Greece if at all possible. Sometimes the result is a new pattern of transnational living whereby the migrant father returns to Albania to seek work or engage in subsistence farming, with the migrant mother and the children staying put in Greece. Different outcomes may result for the older generation: return to Albania, or stay in Greece to care for the grandchildren.

### **LATVIAN OLDER WOMEN: MIGRATORY ROUTES TO EMPOWERMENT**

For the second case-study we focus on older Latvian women. We use the Latvian case to rethink ageing and migration through a twin optic of *gender* and *empowerment*, and examine how the opening up of new 'spaces of possibility' (Morokvasic, 2004) for migration as a result of Latvia's accession to the EU in 2004 enabled older women to achieve both better material lives and a greater sense of their own self-worth and dignity. Unlike the Albanian case, where the migration possibilities of the older generation are very much related to the whereabouts and situation of their children and grandchildren, Latvian older women are more independent actors in the emigration process. It is true that there often are relational aspects involved in their migratory decisions, notably their wish to contribute to the material well-being of various family members; nevertheless the decision to move to the UK is usually taken on an individual basis. This therefore makes our focus on Latvian women who often are migrating for the first time at a mature age as economic migrants – in their 40s, 50s and 60s – a rather unique study (but see also Lutz and Palenga-Mollenbeck, 2011; Solari, 2010). At the same time, our research material resonates with an ongoing critique of the image of the older woman, including widows, as socially devalued, de-sexualized or 'gender-neutral' (Hahn, 2002). As both historical and current research has shown, older age sees many women wanting to assert their independence and

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achieve some means of physical and existential detachment from their past lives dominated by the constrictions of marriage, care duties, and sometimes spousal abuse (Hahn, 2002; Wray, 2004). One such means of escape is emigration.

### **Post-socialist Latvia: a bitter and poor old-life?**

Like the whole of the East European region, Latvia's population is steadily ageing due to a combination of a low birth-rate and ongoing emigration. But Latvia is not a good place to be an older person, particularly an older woman. Pensions are low (though not as low as in Albania), averaging around \$280 per month, insufficient to live on – in fact, three-quarters of pensioners live below the official poverty threshold.

Moreover, in the pensions reform implemented in the wake of the 2009-11 financial crisis, women can no longer inherit their husband's pension – another example of the neoliberal squeeze on Soviet-era welfare guarantees.

Latvians who are currently in their late 40s or older will have been brought up, educated, and started their working lives during the Soviet era. These same people then witnessed the collapse of the Soviet system and the abrupt change of the nation's economic and political trajectory. In addition to the wider forces of globalization and an opening 'back' to Europe, the dismantling of Soviet industries and bureaucracies abruptly changed the career paths and options of much of the Latvian population. Many people lost their 'safe' jobs which were abolished under the new market-driven economy with its emphasis on business development, sales and profits, and a more youthful personnel.

But what Latvian older women whom we interviewed found particularly devastating was the sharply gendered social construction of older age: women over the age of around 45 not only found they had few opportunities for getting decent jobs in the new Latvia, but they were socially condemned as of little value. Their ascribed social role was to care for grandchildren, in return for which they would be materially supported by their younger-generation family members via an unwritten generational contract. Quite apart from being condemned to an economic state of penury and dependency, many Latvian older women wanted to assert a more positive

self-identity and challenge society's view of them as economically and socially 'worthless'. Their strategizing of migration and other forms of exit-mobility were a means to achieve multi-dimensional well-being: earning an income, building up a British pension, getting satisfaction from work, rediscovering a sense of purpose in life including in some cases a sexual reawakening through the establishment of new relationships. In this we follow Wright (2012: 10) in a broad understanding of well-being as combining objective and measurable dimensions such as income, health and social networks, and subject feelings of perceived well-being, including self-esteem and the balance between sacrifice and satisfaction.

### **Work abroad: a fundamental need for ageing Latvian women**

Latvian labour migration boomed after EU enlargement in 2004, most of the migrants being young to early-middle-aged adults at that stage. However, an earlier, mainly female migration stream had already developed in the 1990s to the Channel Island of Guernsey, where Latvians, who became the largest migrant community there, were recruited to work on temporary contracts in the horticulture sector, later expanding to the hospitality and care sectors (Lulle, 2014). On mainland Britain, Latvian women and men – apart from some high-skilled graduates, mainly from wealthy families, who worked in professional jobs in London – were typical labour migrants filling the jobs in those subsectors of the local labour markets which the existing supply of workers were unable to fill at the prevailing wage and working conditions, such as agricultural work in Eastern England and cleaning and care work in large cities.

As time passed, and especially after the Latvian financial crisis, older women started to migrate as well, spurred on by the success of their younger compatriots in finding jobs and earning good money by Latvian standards. Sometimes, a visit to friends or younger relatives such as a sister, cousin, or even a daughter, was treated as a scoping visit for finding work. Lauma (51, Guernsey, 2011) described her experience as follows:

I already had friends here and I came with the idea to find work within one week. I had dry soups with me and money to survive for about ten days. If I didn't find anything, I would have to go home. But I found a job on the very last day!

The older-age emigration project can be seen as an economically sensible strategy for Latvian women, given their dire economic and social status at home. The strategy is two-pronged: to earn a reasonable income, including the possibility of increased earnings through overtime; and to accumulate some pension rights, which they could no longer accrue in Latvia. The emigration project is generally viewed as temporary, until retirement (but this does not preclude working beyond normal retirement age), since pensions are transportable within the EU.

The types of work available to older women with little or no English are limited to tough manual labour. Yet there is pride in the ability to survive the rigours of this work, to even get fitter and stronger as a result, and above all to earn money to support relatives at home and start a pension. Many of these elements are encapsulated in the following narrative of Gita, aged 56, who arrived in Boston in 2008, initially doing seasonal agricultural work, later working in a turkey processing factory. In the early part of her account, Gita described her downward slide into unemployment and personal crisis in Latvia. She was working as an administrator in a hotel when the economic downturn hit and she had to take first a drastic wage cut and then was made redundant. Her lack of English meant she was unable to get another job in the tourist sector. Violent arguments developed with her husband, who was also unemployed.

I really needed to get out of that oppressive situation. Our relationship was fast approaching a crash, something terrible. He was unemployed, I was unemployed, we were arguing all the time... So I went to a recruiting agency and got a job picking raspberries in England. I knew that it was going to be really hard work, but already on the bus from Riga to England I suddenly felt a sense of freedom – like a bird set free from its cage.

Then she described the sequence of jobs done on her seasonal work trips to England:

Work in the raspberry fields was terribly hard. The supervisors were rushing us all the time – work harder, faster, you must reach the quota. At the end of every day I was telling myself – you must endure, endure, rely on your stamina, you have nowhere to go, nothing to do back home.

After two more seasons picking soft fruit and flowers, Gita moved to a chicken and turkey farm, a more secure job with a pension plan.

On my fourth year abroad I went to work on a poultry farm. The recruiter said it will be very hard for you. But I was ready... The first month I was scared because those fowls and turkeys look at you and you have to catch them. I am short and some of those turkeys were up to my waist. My job on the production line was to tear the liver out of the birds as they slid along the line. Terrible! But I soon got used to it. And the wage was much better... *And we were included in the pension plan!* That's very important. Most probably I'll stay at this place because of the pension prospects.

The final element in Gita's enhanced sense of personal well-being is being able to support her mother and her own good physical shape in England:

I am happy that, with the money I earn in England, I can help my mother who is 80 now: I can buy her medicines and get her some specialized treatment... I feel as if I am 36 not 56... Yes maybe I feel tired after work but I still have more energy for life... I am out in the fresh air as much as possible, I have a bike, I go swimming... I feel good.

Gita's case could be multiplied many times from the Latvian data. She illustrates how ageing Latvian migrants perceive new work and travel opportunities in post-2004 Europe, judged against the severe constraints they experience in Latvia. The work may appear to be extremely tough, even exploitative, but the comparison is

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always with Latvia, where their lives are blighted by financial insecurity and little hope of employment due to their age. Moreover, for Gita and many others, living what Judith Butler has (2004) has termed a 'liveable life' involves more than working to earn a half-decent income and gaining some pension credits. It is also about using mobility to craft an improved psycho-social well-being. Gita begins to hint at this in the final phrases of her quote above. Other interviewees were more explicit about this dimension of their embodied migration and the sense of personal empowerment it gave them.

### **Reclaiming femininity and erotic agency**

Like other East and Central European countries, post-socialist Latvia has seen the neo-patriarchal reinscribing of the ideal woman as wife and mother and the relegation of older women to the very margins of society. Pensions have been slashed and the social and cultural construction of ageing no longer views them as attractive mature women respected for their life and work experience, but as elderly grandmothers waiting to die. Although Latvia has signed up to EU norms on gender equality and age discrimination, legislation and official policy are not matched by practice and values. The demoralization of older women in Latvia was summed up by one of the research participants who saw her life faced by two alternatives: 'emigrate abroad or get a rope to hang myself'. We cannot underestimate the severity of the economic crisis in Latvia, which hit the poorest people hardest. Emigration was indeed a survival strategy for those who were unemployed and indebted (Sommers, 2014).

Of course, the economic need to emigrate often comes at a huge emotional cost – the separation from family and friends and the geographical break-up of nuclear and multi-generation families, as noted in the Albanian case. But, unlike the Albanian case, in Latvia divorce and separation are more widespread, and many emigrating older women are escaping difficult marital situations, or are widowed. For them, emigration is also about starting a new phase in their lives, having the chance to see places, and often also to rediscover their youth and femininity – as well as the economic imperatives discussed in the previous section.

Our key theoretical references here are Giddens' (1992) use of the term *plasticity* when applied to ageing and sexuality, which can be moulded into different forms and expressions in different contexts, and Sheller's equally powerful notion of *erotic agency*, which refers to something much broader than the purely sexual, namely 'all forms of self-determination of one's bodily reaction to time, space and movement' (2012: 279). Moving to new places in England and Guernsey enables Latvian older women to view and experience their particular age in different ways – as more open and liberating, including the possibility of romantic and intimate relationships that their new self-confidence enabled. This enhanced self-esteem derived not just from the physical relocation itself but from their active agency in securing work, income and a future. Women interviewed repeatedly said how they felt younger, healthier, more attractive and sexually re-awakened after leaving Latvia, where they felt – and were made to feel – of little worth.

Some extracts from the interview with Inga (45, Guernsey, 2011) are revealing of how Latvian women aged 40+ are viewed and treated in Latvia. Recently divorced, Inga was struggling to support her children by doing poorly paid bit-work jobs in Latvia. On a dating site she came across some offensive postings from Latvian men about Latvian women, saying that they are 'ready to sleep with foreign men just to get their money' and that no Latvian man 'would be ready to take a 40-year-old woman with her children and her cellulite'. Inga continued: 'You know, I felt so resentful... is it something to be ashamed of that I am over 40 and I have children? How far can these Latvian men go in valuing themselves so highly?' After migrating to the UK, virtually all the participants made comments along the lines 'I feel much younger here'. Laima (56, London, 2013) said 'Nobody cares about my age here. The main criterion is that I can do the job I am paid to do'.

To illustrate the activation of erotic agency we turn to the case of Elga, a divorcee who arrived in Guernsey in 2004 and was aged 62 at the time of interview in 2011. We choose Elga precisely because, as a shy, gentle person, she is far from the stereotype of the more predatory or sexually extrovert older Eastern European woman (cf. Cvajner, 2011). Elga came to Guernsey on the recommendation of a friend in order to escape a failing marriage and support her four children through their secondary and higher education; her husband was not helping in any way and they

subsequently divorced. Coming from a rural area in Latvia, she knew no English, which limited her job options to cleaning in hotels. Here she describes her initial problems with the language:

I didn't know a word of English. My eldest son took me to the airport and all the way there he was teaching me the most important phrases: 'Where is bus to Gatwick?'

[...]

I could only hope for a cleaning job... It was hard, but I managed... I started understanding some words, but I was still mixing up, pillow and blanket, shit and sheet... I could not hear the difference. One elderly guest was there when I asked 'Where you put green shit?' Ah, so ashamed to remember this! [laughs].

One free evening she went to a bar with some Latvian work friends and met a local man. Although initial communication with him was difficult because of Elga's shyness and limited English, they quickly got to know each other and then got married.

I am timid; it was difficult to start relationships... but he is a wonderful man, he has such a warm heart. He is not rich; all his life he has worked hard to afford a small house. I was thinking, how could it look, me getting married at my age [literal translation 'at the end of my age']?... All my life I have been the one making all the decisions. Now he is the one. He wants me to continue working until I receive a proper pension; all is prepared and well thought-out. We plan to live three months of the year in Latvia; we are looking for a flat there... When we both have our pensions maybe we will move there... He likes Latvia... Sometimes I am thinking that some stars were showing me a path to Guernsey.

Elga's story is quite typical of those women in the study who, through migration, unlocked their previously oppressed erotic agency by having relationships

with local men. She discovers that her agency develops along several parallel yet mutually supporting tracks: she finds steady employment in order to help her children and (later) two grandchildren, she eventually learns English quite well although she initially thought she never would, and she rediscovers that she is an attractive, desired woman able to establish her own personal and intimate life.

## COMPARATIVE DISCUSSION

This chapter has drawn out the contrast between two groups of older, especially female, migrants from different East European countries: Albania's 'migrating grannies' – who care for their already-migrated children and grandchildren in migratory contexts in Italy and Greece – and Latvia's independent older women who see emigration as an empowering escape-route to a better economic life and a salvaged sense of self-worth.

In their pioneering paper on 'gendered geographies of power', Mahler and Pessar (2001: 441) ask whether, as a result of migration, gender relations are reaffirmed or reconfigured across transnational spaces. Our simple answer is that, in the Albanian case, they are reconfirmed whilst, in the Latvian one, they are reconfigured. But of course, our field evidence is more nuanced than that. To some extent, both migrating national groups engage in mobility to demonstrate their agency. For the Albanians, it is to realise their aspiration to be 'proper', 'hands-on' grandparents and to achieve a sense of fulfilment as care-givers rather than be left behind as passive care-receivers. For the Latvians, emigration enables them to free themselves from the post-Soviet social construction of older women as value-less and undesirable yet still, in most cases, attached emotionally to their families, especially their children and grandchildren, to whom they send material support in the form of remittances and gifts.

Both groups have traversed state as well as cultural boundaries where different gendered norms and perceptions, and different models of ageing, care and family structures are in operation. On the whole, the generational interaction with mobility is reversed between the two cases. Albanian older generations are 'left-behind' by

their migrating children and seek to join them when this is feasible; the opposite is the case in Latvia, where it is the older generation which migrates in order to support younger family members at home. In Elga's words, 'I don't want that my children go abroad, it's better that I work more and harder so they can stay in Latvia and help each other' (cf. Solari, 2010, on Ukrainian older women migrants). Elga activates her freedom as a migrant wage-earner who can provide real material help to her family when needed. She prefers visiting them every few months to check that they are happy and get what they need – 'new bicycles for the grandchildren, replacement windows, repairs to the flat' and so on.

Another contrast between our two case-studies lies in the interaction between local-scale mobility in the host society and language ability. Albanian older persons felt constrained by not knowing the host-country language and saw this as one reason for their being boxed in and immobile when living with their children abroad. They had difficulties understanding the public transport system, and had few people they could make friends with. They were reluctant to ask their children for money for bus fares, and many felt that their children were over-protective of them. Latvian women behaved very differently. They expressed pride in learning (some) English and saw this as a way to enrich their social lives and get out and about in their free time. This contrast is due, above all, to different migration patterns: Latvian women are labour migrants, Albanians move as family members.

Let us now conclude. Through both our conceptual framework of looking at ageing and agency within family migratory contexts, and our empirical evidence illustrated in numerous narrative extracts, we have presented ageing and mobility as entwined biographical trajectories which are often highly gendered and reflective of relationalities between generations. The participants' lives evolve over two intersecting time-lines: their own biographical progression through the life-cycle based on shifting experiences and perceptions of ageing, work, place and family relations; and the respective political and social histories of the various countries involved in the migrants' transnational space. For Albania, this means mass, irregular, male-led migration in the 1990s followed first by the consolidation of nuclear families abroad and, second, by the possibility for the older generation to reunite with their children and grandchildren abroad. For Latvia, the sequence runs from independence

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from the Soviet Union (1991) through EU accession (2004) to economic crisis (2009-11) and beyond. These geopolitical events have been the background context for the intersection between migration/mobility on the one hand, and ageing, shifting family configurations, care and agency on the other. The spatial mobility of older people brings out the inherent plasticity of ageing in different spatial contexts, where it is constructed and experienced differently. And yet older migrants' mobility behaviour often exhibits strong elements of economically rational choice: freeing the younger generation to work full-time by taking over childcare (Albanians in Italy and Greece) or engaging directly in wage labour to support family members back home (Latvians in Britain).

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