

# Gendered Margins

## Immigrant Women in Portugal<sup>1</sup>

Christiane Hellermann

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Portugal experienced in the last decade the same shift from emigration to immigration country like the other Mediterranean EU-member states. This article looks at the partly gendered character of immigration in Portugal. Nowadays, many women migrate to Portugal alone, without their children, husbands or other family members; some of these women are the main breadwinners for their families in their home countries. On the basis of the experiences of ‘single’ immigrant women, I explore their daily life situation, paying special attention to the aspects of work and interpersonal relationships. After some years of immigration, a basic difference can be identified between women, who are main breadwinners, and those without this duty, regarding the evaluation of their migration and further perspectives they see.

Christiane Hellermann, M.A., Largo Leonor Faria Gomes, nº 11, 2-A, P-2770-108 Paço de Arcos. E-mail: chrhell@yahoo.de

*“Ilegal é simplesmente má, é difícil”* (Being illegal is just bad, it’s difficult), repeats Tânia. It is a sunny Sunday afternoon in Lisbon, September 2003. We have met after the Roman-Orthodox mass and sit now in a cafeteria in the centre, talking about Tânia’s experiences in Portugal:

*“Todos que saem da Roménia têm problemas. E aqui, encima mais problemas. É difícil, para todos é difícil, muito difícil”* (Everyone who is leaving Romania has problems. And here, even more problems. It’s difficult, for everybody it’s difficult, very difficult).

Tânia is one of many women who came *alone* to Portugal in the last years. Some of them are the breadwinners for their children and other family members in their home countries; economic factors are the predominant reasons in their decision to migrate. How do these women live in Portugal? What do they work? What is their position within the Portuguese society? What problems do they encounter? How do they feel?

This article draws on my fieldwork on female immigration to Portugal. I am in particular interested in ‘autonomous’ or ‘independent’ migration projects. Thus, my research focuses

on women who migrate alone, on their own. Those women are not ‘following’ their husbands or other family members, and their immigration cannot be considered as part of so-called family reunifications (cf. Bedoya 2000, Izquierdo 2000, Morokvasic 1993). In this article, I want to explore some aspects that shape the daily life of immigrants in Portugal, paying special attention to gendered sides within migration processes. My descriptions and analyses are based on the experiences of immigrant women as they are expressed in their narratives, reflected in different social situations and encounters, and completed by my observations and interpretations. In the first part, I give a brief outline of Portugal’s recent transformation into receiving society and its current immigration dynamics. By showing different ways how the immigrants enter Portugal, first indications of gendered experiences of migration become visible. In the second part, I examine the position and situation of immigrants within the Portuguese society, and show their predominant marginality due to the connection between their legal status and restricted work possibilities, and visaversa. In the following, I will look closer

at two aspects of the daily life experiences of immigrant women –work and interpersonal relationships– and analyse them in their social context. The significance of these aspects for the women themselves will be worked out.

## I. Immigration in Portugal

Images of stranded and often dead people from the Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa at the beaches of Southern Spain and the Canary Islands became well known throughout Europe in the last years. The attention of the media, paid in particular to Spain, helps to alert – and focuses at the same time – the public perception on the so-called ‘illegal immigration to Europe’, sometimes completed by reportages on victims of human trafficking from Central and Eastern Europe. Portugal plays, within the Mediterranean area, only a minor role in the discourse on immigration to the European Union, largely overlooked similar to Finland in Northern Europe. As a new destination country of immigration, Portugal is not in the focus of public attention and consciousness yet and academic studies are still rare. Nevertheless, the country experienced in the last decade a similar shift from emigration to immigration country like

the other Mediterranean EU-member states Spain, Italy and Greece. Some authors call this phenomenon ‘new migration’ (cf. Anthias & Lazaridis 2000, Castles 1993). While the EU-Mediterranean transformed into a receiving area, only Portugal continued being at the same time sending country (Baganha 1997, Rocha-Trindade & Oliveira 1999). As a consequence, Portugal and Ireland are currently the only EU-member states with relevant numbers of leaving population. However, it is necessary to be aware of Portugal’s unique and important role within the European Union: its long Atlantic coastline is the geographic borderland of the EU that serves since centuries until now as port and connection to *ultramár*, overseas, to Africa and the Americas. Additionally, due to its long and diverse colonial history, there are still strong bonds between Portugal and its former colonies in political, economical, and cultural terms.

As a new receiving area, Portugal is characterized by the strong heterogeneity of the immigration flux (Rosa *et al.* 2000): on the one hand, the so-called *traditional immigration* from the former Portuguese colonies in Africa (Angola, Cape Verde Islands, Guiné-Bissau, Mozambique, São Tomé e Príncipe), often referred to as PALOP, *Países Africanos de Língua Oficial Portuguesa*, African countries with Portuguese as official language<sup>2</sup>, and Brazil; on the other hand the so-called *imigração de Leste*, the immigration from the ‘East’, which began only in the mid-90s but increased fast and continuously. The new immigrants are coming from Central and Eastern Europe (e.g. Poland, Romania), including the countries from the former Soviet Union (esp. from the Ukraine, Russia, Moldova). Also the immigration from Asia (e.g. China, Pakistan, Bangladesh) is considered in Portugal as part of this new ‘immigration from the East’.

Portugal has today a total population of almost 10,4 million inhabitants<sup>3</sup>. In the year 2002 lived 413.304 legalized immigrants in Portugal<sup>4</sup>, which corresponds to a percentage of 3.99 percent of the entire population. The immigration volume changed significantly in the last decade (cf. Peixoto 2002, Pires 2002): 1991 only 113.978 foreign persons lived in Portugal, at that time 1.6 percent of the total population<sup>5</sup>. In the beginning of the 1990s, more



Russian and Ukrainian magazines, downtown Lisbon.  
Photo: Matti Porre.

immigrants came to Portugal due to the increased need for manual labour force (*mão-de-obra*), in particular for construction and lower service work. As a consequence, the immigration rate started to rise until today. If we consider also the undocumented immigrants, which, corresponding to official governmental estimations, might be about 50.000<sup>6</sup>, we get a total of about 460.000 immigrants – that means that the number quadrupled within one single decade.

44.4 percent of the immigrant residents in Portugal are women – a fact that is not perceived in the Portuguese society: Immigrant women remain largely invisible in public as well as academic discourses on immigration to Portugal, even if some recent works can be found (e.g. Albuquerque 2000, Catarina/Oso 2000). However, some official statistics on immigration issues, for instance on the *Autorização de Permanência*, tend to be gender-blind (cf. SEF 2001, 2002). Here, a parallel can be drawn to the predominant continuing disregard of women and/or gender aspects in international migration studies, which Nora Räthzel calls “silence” (1992: 29), while Floya Anthias and Gabriella Lazaridis speak of this phenomenon in the Mediterranean context as “invisibility” (2000: 1). A still vivid tendency in spite of the fact that numbers and statistics worldwide illustrate the *feminization of migration* (Geddes 2000, Papastergiadis 2000).

*The Entrance to Portugal: Partially Gendered*  
Most immigrants from the Portuguese African Ex-colonies (PALOP) and Brazil enter the country (at least the first time) with a tourist or study visa, which are *relatively* easy to obtain due to binational agreements. They overstay the visa in the hope of being able to legalize their situation permanently *somehow*, sooner or later. A work visa offers for some immigrants a temporary solution: Barbara for example came from Brazil to Portugal as tourist and arranged a work contract as *empregada doméstica*, domestic worker; after that, she left Portugal for one week to obtain the visa and returned. This practice is common amongst many Brazilian and PALOP nationals. Nevertheless, I indicated already above that thousands of immigrants continue to be undocumented, many of them overstayers, and further regularization

possibilities are needed.

The entrance to Portugal is in general more difficult for immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe, Asia and other African, not Portuguese speaking, countries. It is not unusual to pay a couple of hundreds or thousand dollars to ‘agents’ who arrange a Schengen or tourist visa, or smuggle them into the EU and through various countries to Portugal, in the case of Central and Eastern European migrants. Some of my research participants referred to the risks during their travel: even having valid tourist visa, they might be controlled several times and offered ‘protection’ – meaning that they are threatened and charged – by different mafia-gangs operating within the EU. The existence and practice of human trafficking became better known in the last years as well as the fact that many women from Central and Eastern European countries become victims of forced prostitution. Consequently, many of the women I met were aware of these risks before their departure, in particular from the countries of the former Soviet Union (Russia, Ukraine, Moldova). To reduce the risk that their passport might be taken away and they might disappear in these ‘controls’ by mafia-gangs, some accepted rough conditions of transport on their way to Portugal: for instance, one woman spent three days bent in the luggage boot of the bus; another had to cross the river Oder between Poland and Germany without knowing to swim, and experienced then a similar journey to Portugal hidden in a bus.

Sub-Saharan African women arriving by plane face a different problem: they might be sent back if being *suspected* to plan working as prostitutes in Portugal – even if their papers are in order, even if they have valid visa etc. Officials from the SEF (Serviço de Estrangeiros e Fronteiras, the Portuguese Aliens and Frontiers Service) are controlling at the airports and send ‘suspicious’ women straight back. There is no information about the criteria for this practiced selection and what is understood as consistent indications or evidence for intended sex work. No numbers or estimations are available how many women are sent back this way<sup>7</sup> but stories of African women being sent back without having left the airport of Lisbon run through the discourses of immigrants in Portugal, repeatedly

referred to by my research participants.

Therefore, I argue that the gendered experience of migration starts already at the arrival in Portugal; it continues and shapes the immigrants' daily life as will be shown more detailedly below, based on the concrete experiences of my research participants.

## II. At the Margins

Portugal as a new immigration country was – and partly still is – not prepared to receive immigrants. They remain at the margins. Even if the immigration from the Ex-colonies is relatively old, very few policies or programs for social support and integration were introduced. This led to a very visible social and spatial exclusion of the African immigrant population (cf. Malheiros 2000, 2002), including nowadays the 2<sup>nd</sup> or even 3<sup>rd</sup> generation: slum-areas and clandestine housings can be found easily in Lisbon and Porto, the main Portuguese towns. And even today, after a decade of increased immigration flows, exists only a small number of services and support programs for immigrants. Predominantly, they are connected to churches (e.g. Roman Catholic, Ukrainian or Roman Orthodox, Muslim) and some NGOs, which, as well as some town administrations, offer also Portuguese language courses – but only few immigrants attend them. The basic problem is that the information on these few existing programs does simply not reach most

of the immigrants: a huge lack of communication is noticeable when talking with different immigrant groups. Also relatively complicated, inflexible and partly 'obscure' bureaucratic structures in Portugal make it difficult for newcomers to obtain the information needed, as various immigrants told me (and, by doing so, they confirmed my own impressions and experiences). Besides, many immigrant women tend to keep distance to any kind of institution or networks, as I will explain more detailed below. In the last years more and more NGOs got successfully active in the area of immigrants' rights and protection, despite their mostly very restricted financial possibilities: *SOS Racismo*<sup>8</sup> started for instance in summer 2002 a large media campaign against the widespread exploitation and slave-like working conditions of many immigrants all over Portugal. As a consequence, various cases of mistreatment and abuse were denounced and more people than ever got aware and interested in the daily life of immigrants, including the media. Nevertheless, in his recent report on Portugal from December 2003, Alvaro Gil-Robles, Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe, refers explicitly to the "exploitation of foreign labour by unscrupulous employers" as a continuing problem within the Portuguese society (Gil-Robles 2003: paragraph 30). And indeed, many immigrants remain unprotected at the margins of the Portuguese society. They are trying to get a work contract not only in order to legalize



Rossio. Photo: Matti Porre.

their life, but also to be able to pay the social contributions (*segurança social*), which gives the right to – at least minimal – security in the case of illness or unemployment. But many immigrants have to continue working without contract, which sets them in a very vulnerable position. Unfortunately, it is in general not unusual in Portugal that employers do not pay salaries throughout months – and the workers are left without any legal possibility to get their money or to sue the employers. At the same time, the work conditions are in many cases (esp. construction work, cleaning service) precarious and immigrant workers completely unprotected: many endanger their health or even risk their life every day.

*“Os Imigrantes ‘Ilegais’”: The ‘Illegal’ Immigrants*  
The word ‘illegal’ is widely used in Portuguese daily talk in relation to immigrants, by immigrants themselves as well as by the Portuguese population. Governmental institutions like ACIME, *Alto Comissariado para a Imigração e as Minorias Étnicas*, the High Commissioner for Immigration and Ethnic Minorities, employ this notion instead of ‘undocumented’ or alike<sup>9</sup>, in the same way the mass media (e.g. Público January 21, 2004). Immigrants are constantly confronted with their ‘legal status’, not only by the police and other officials but also by the Portuguese population. Here, the use of the word ‘illegal’ refers not only to the legal status of the immigrants but also to their position in the labour market: the underground economy has a very strong impact in Portugal (cf. Baganha 2000, Sousa Ferreira *et al.* 2000). A significant part of the Portuguese autochthon labour force is working also without contract, not paying taxes or social security. The underground economy is estimated with 20–24 percent of the official GNP.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, the situation of the immigrants is precarious, in particular in their first years in Portugal; for many it is simply impossible to get any ‘real’, legal job with contract and contribution to social security. Almost all immigrants I met have or had problems with their papers; almost all experience at least temporary ‘being illegal’. Papers are an eternal struggle and problem: papers are needed e.g. for staying, for residence,

for getting work and a work contract, for the recognition of their education and profession (*equivalência*), for further studies, for holidays at home, for coming back to Portugal afterwards. In the second half of 2003, almost 30.000 undocumented Brazilian nationals living and working in Portugal registered for an extraordinary regularization process due to a new bilateral agreement between Portugal and Brazil<sup>11</sup>. The fact that twice as many undocumented persons as estimated ‘appeared’, reflects the urgent need for further possibilities of regularization. Being undocumented is a clear transitory situation and is perceived and explained as such by the immigrants. All my research participants are trying to get their papers in order to be able to live a more stable life in Portugal, with at least minimal security. And without the eternal fear of being discovered, denounced, threatened, arrested or expelled.

#### *Work as an Example of Gendered Margins*

The labour sectors within the formal and informal labour market accessible to immigrants in Portugal are predominantly gendered: *Men* are working mainly in the construction industry. Strong pull-factors were since the beginning of the 1990s the Expo ’98 and the preparations for the Euro 2004 (European Football Championship): in their context various buildings, stadiums, highways etc. were built. Additionally, the highway and railway network is continuously expanded and improved, partly in connection to these special events, partly with the aid of EU structural funds like the European Regional Development Fund, ERDF.

*Women* work mostly in the service industries: immigrant women clean offices and shopping malls, work in restaurants and hotels (service, kitchen, cleaning), as *empregadas domésticas*, domestic workers, very often as *internas*, live-in maids. In this area work in particular women from Eastern Europe, Brazil and Africa. Many immigrant women also work in the sex industry, sometimes in a situation of forced prostitution, mainly women from Brazil and not Portuguese speaking African countries like Senegal and Chad, or as victims of trafficking from Brazil<sup>12</sup> and Eastern Europe (cf. Neves 2003).

There are some exceptions from the basically

gendered character of the labour market. Immigrant women and men work together in the following three sectors: 1) in the agricultural production, which is mostly to be found in the rural areas of Southern Portugal, Algarve, Alentejo, as well as in the Setúbal region in the South of Lisbon; 2) as kitchen workers, immigrants wash the dishes, clean, cut, and cook in restaurants and hotels all over the country; and 3) they work in small (family-) enterprises and shops, which are mostly run by immigrant families from Asia (China, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh), often using extended family networks (Malheiros 1996). These shops can be found in all bigger and smaller towns in Portugal.

In relation to their work, women and men are facing some similar problems: very frequent are an unstable job-situation, which means, as mentioned above, difficulties to get a work contract, problems with the employer, not receiving money, as well as insecure work conditions: no protection, dangerous, unhealthy work, working overtime, not enough free days, no social security etc.

Additionally to these difficulties, women experience regularly sexism and sexual harassment at their work place. Almost all my research participants mentioned sexual harassment; the women, who spoke about that explicitly, work for example as domestic workers, cleaning workers or employees. The material of my fieldwork indicates that sexual harassment is a common and widespread experience by immigrant women at their work place. Sometimes, also physical threatening and violence were told. Similarly common is – also at the work place – the defamation of immigrant women as ‘easy to have’, as ‘open and willing’ for sexual intercourse with whom-ever. Some male employers pressured the women to have sex with them and/or told other work colleagues that the woman is a prostitute.

Extremely vulnerable for exploitation, abuse and sexual harassment are women working as domestic workers (cf. Anderson 2000, Lutz 2002): They work alone and have, due to their long working days and weeks, only limited contact with others. This is especially valid for live-in maids.

These problems, repeatedly encountered and narrated by immigrant women, show that the living and working situation for immigrants in

Portugal is basically gendered.

In the following part, I will look closer at the daily life situation of immigrant women and their experiences in relation to work and social networks respectively communities.

### III. Experiences

#### Work

Tânia, the woman we heard at the beginning, is 31 years old and divorced. Her 7-year-old son is living with her parents since she left Romania one and a half year ago: she could not earn enough money to pay their living. In Portugal, Tânia works as *empregada doméstica interna*, or simply *interna* (live-in maid), taking care of an 82 years old Portuguese lady. She was employed for cleaning and cooking on the basis of two free days per week but her actual work situation consists of seven labour days, only having the possibility to leave on Sunday morning for attending the mass and meeting some compatriots afterwards – in the afternoon, she has to be back at work. Being a trained physiotherapist with ten years of work experience, Tânia found herself also in the duty of nursing her ailing employer who is neither willing to reward this additional professional service work, nor to give the work contract as promised, which would allow Tânia to regularize her stay in Portugal. Consequently, every time I meet Tânia, “*os problemas como os documentos*” (the problems with the papers), as she calls it, dominate big part of our conversations. Tânia’s case is not a rare one; many women migrated alone in the last years to Portugal. Some of them, like Tânia, are the breadwinners for their children and other family members at home and economic factors are the predominant reasons in their decision to migrate.

Many women, who migrate alone, are high qualified professionally: in my research, the women from Eastern Europe in general and many Brazilian and African (not Portuguese speaking countries) women have at least secondary school degrees and professional education with long work experience. The majority of women from Eastern Europe and many Brazilians hold university degrees, up to professorship.



During their migratory trajectory, they suffer in general a significant downward mobility, which has negative effect on their professional identity and self-esteem. Many of them feel that they had to throw away what they ‘were’ before and feel their skills and qualifications neglected or even wasted. My research participants are for instance lawyers, teachers, and economists. They have high qualifications, a wide knowledge and many skills: today, as immigrants, they work as domestic and cleaning workers – not unusually treated by their employers like “a stupid kid without own will and brain”, as Barbara says. She is from Brazil, 48 years old and mother of three children, two of them adults. Before her migration to Portugal, she run her own consulting company, and studied additionally journalism. After the company’s bankruptcy she paid her private savings as recompense for lost salaries to her employees; left without money she decided to go to Portugal, hoping that the economic situation there would be better than in Brazil, and also for starting a new life, as she explains me. Barbara works as domestic worker but does not live with the family. She took the job only because the employers were the only one willing to sign a work contract, which she needs to get a labour visa. She experienced her first workdays in this rich Portuguese family as extremely humiliating, and recalls as especially negative various situations when ‘a senhora’, the lady of the house, explained her for instance what a microwave is and how it works, and how to iron. In order to be able to continue, Barbara began telling to herself that she must forget all her past, and should just think ‘today’ and ‘tomorrow’, but not ‘yesterday’ – otherwise she would not be able to stand this work one single day. All my research participants face similar problems with their daily situation of degradation and humiliation. Mostly, they try to ignore and forget about it, their attitude: ‘It is better not to think about’. Their self-esteem is suffering.

Most of the women might be considered as so-called ‘economic’ or labour migrants; money, or, better said: the *possibility* to have work, to earn enough money to support their families, their children, their parents at home, was the main reason to come to Portugal. Being the main breadwinner is a strong responsibility



Post office in the centre of Lisbon, Restauradores. Photo: Matti Porre.

and a burden, which, in moments of doubts concerning their migration, some immigrant women perceive also as a heavy social pressure from home. At the same time, they feel guilty of being abroad, of not being with their children and family. This mixture of feelings leads frequently to a negative assessment of their own migration and its significance for them and their families. One woman from Ukraine, Larissa, sums it up in a very clear way: “I hate Portugal, I don’t want to be here. But I need the money to send to my mother, my sister and her kids. And in my country, it is still not going well. I hope I can return soon” (original in English). Saying that, Larissa knows very well how unlikely this will be in the next future.

These women migrate because of the difficult economic situation in their home countries: Migration serves in many cases as a family-strategy. The migrant women have to earn enough money to support the family at home (by sending remittances), additionally to their

own living costs in Portugal.

Letters, telephone calls, in urgent situations text messages sent or received with mobile phones, and in some cases e-mails and chats are important media for the maintenance of regular contact with their families and friends in their home countries. Portuguese telephone companies, Internet cafés as well as banks discovered in the last years the immigrants from all over the world as an interesting group of potential clients, and consequently began to direct special advertisements to Brazilian, Asian, African and East European immigrants. In fact, the amount of remittances sent by immigrants is relatively high, more than 333 million € were transferred from Portugal in the year 2001 (this sum excludes international transferences made by EU nationals, cf. D'Almeida 2003:27).

*“O meu único objetivo é ganhar dinheiro. Dinheiro para as minhas filhas, para que possam ir a faculdade, para que terem um futuro. Tudo para elas. Por isto estou cá. Nunca pensei [na emigração], nunca imaginei-a. Mudou toda a minha vida, toda.”* (My aim is to earn money. Money for my daughters, so that they can go to university and have a future. All is for them. That's why I am here. I never thought [about emigration], I never imagined it. It changed my life completely.)

Irina is from Northern Romania, 44 years old and mother of three daughters. Her husband is ill, and together they decided that Irina should go abroad for some years. In Portugal, she found work as live-in-maid in a family with two children, 14,5 hours per day, six days per week. Irina misses not only her family but also her work as pottery designer – and her creativity: *“A minha profissão era a minha vida”* (My profession was my life). She is crying a lot every time I meet her. Irina never imagined she would have to emigrate one day to assure the future of her children – until the economic pressure in her country got very strong and started to affect her and her family's life in the end of the nineties. Initially, Irina planned to work in Portugal only two years, but already after the first year she knew that she would have to stay at least four years or even longer to earn the money she and her family would need ‘to have a future’.

Irina and many other immigrant women try to live in Portugal with the least money as possible, avoiding spending any cent in order to be able to send more money home. The material of my fieldwork indicates clearly how far these women consequently tend to restrict their own needs to an absolute minimum, deny themselves the smallest pleasures like meeting somebody for a coffee (which costs in Portugal 50 cent) and, thus, reduce their social contacts even further (see next section). As a result, many immigrant women feel very alone and useless. Irina's case shows that in particular immigrant women, who have to support their families at home, feel deeply frustrated about their work and life situation. Additionally, most of them understand – respectively admit to themselves – only after some years that their migration tends to be a long-term situation: They need to stay much longer than they thought initially – and for many of them, a return home might become more and more unrealistic and improbable. Therefore, migration and its consequences mean a threat to the personality, the self-esteem and the professional and social identity of many migrant women, in particular when they are the main financial supporters of their families. They have difficulties to find a satisfactory balance between their different roles, duties and own needs. Frustration and resignation are common reactions and problems as they do not see any concrete personal perspective, respectively cannot plan any future, neither in Portugal nor at home.

The situation turns out to be somehow ‘easier’ for women who are not the main breadwinners for their families at home, as they are not so much *in between* two countries and two lives. Tamara for example decided to give up her secure work place as merchandiser in a big import company and to leave Siberia *“por aventura”*, for adventure, as she explains. She is living since more than three years in Portugal. During the first time, Tamara worked as live-in-maid but left after some weeks due to problems of sexual harassment by her employer; since then, she had different service jobs in restaurants and hotels until she found an administrative position in a Russian magazine in Portugal, which allows her to travel once in a



while and get contact with many people all over the country. She is very content about her work and feels challenged. During the last years, it was Tamara's advantage, and gave her somehow personal 'freedom', that nobody was depending on her income; therefore, she could leave more easily the work places whenever she encountered problems or which she did not like. Tamara, now 32 years old, is very active and enjoys living in Portugal: she does a lot of sport and attends Portuguese and English language courses, in particular the latter ones for her future, as she says. Since more than one year she has a Portuguese fiancé and they plan to marry soon: his parents are delighted by her. In the next future, she wants to travel with him to Siberia, show him her country and present him to her family. Tamara tells me that she likes changes in life and that she is curious about the future.

Tamara's case is a good example for a personally successful outcome of the migration process and its dynamic. In my encounters with immigrant women I could see a tendency that, after a couple of years of being in Portugal, some women manage to open and develop new perspectives for themselves and their future. Even if most of them have not the possibility to change their job and general life situation at the very moment, they begin to invest in the future and improve their social life significantly: many of these women attend further professional training or start to study (again), learn other languages or open own small businesses. Others begin to teach language courses in NGOs or at universities, work as volunteers in NGOs or religious groups, do sports and join other group activities. All in all, they start to be actively involved and have their 'own' life in Portugal.

To sum it up it can be said that, after some years of immigration (mostly 2–3 years), the difference is striking between women, who have to support their families at home, and those who do not have this duty. The first ones tend to continue like before, feeling frustration and resignation, whereas the latter ones manage to open new possibilities to change their life and future, gaining new perspectives on themselves and the significance of their migration.

### *Social Networks and Communities...*

...as they are experienced by immigrant women, have two sides: they offer support and help in situations of despair and solitude – but they are also a weight, up to a pressuring and controlling instrument. Interestingly, most immigrant women, who migrate alone to Portugal, keep themselves out of communities and more formal or institutionalised networks. In particular single women from the former Soviet Union, from Russia and the Ukraine, are very sceptical about any contact with their compatriots since they encounter an intensive level of control within these communities. The control over women who are alone in Portugal is mostly, but not exclusively, exercised by men, and follows the idea that a woman needs a male protector, as some women pointed out explicitly in our conversations. This idea leads frequently to the emergence of patterns of protectionism respectively paternalism. Most immigrant women alone in Portugal do not identify with these ideas and behavioural structures. Thus, they reject them – and any other control over their lives – actively through keeping distance to these communities of compatriots.

Moreover, these women are quickly seen and labelled as prostitutes. Single women suffer easily from the suspicion, disrespect and even defamation of their male compatriots. The combination of these two tendencies of control and suspicion and a general atmosphere of mistrust leads regularly to protectionism that might be also connected to mafia structures and/or pimping. Therefore, many women from Eastern Europe keep by purpose distance to social communities and networks.

Some immigrant women I met, made also bad experiences with more informal, female networks and 'friendships': also in these contexts, the level of suspicion and mistrust is quite high. Various women from Brazil and Eastern Europe told that other immigrant women, work colleagues etc. with whom they had more personal contact or even friendship, disappointed them because they gossiped about them, telling intimacies or even lies. In some cases started, once again, the defamation that the woman is a prostitute. After that, all my research participants began to keep consequently distance to

other immigrant women. One Ukrainian woman sees one of the reasons in the attitude of envy and concurrence between Eastern European immigrants, as their life situation is dominated by humiliation and certain “greed for material things”, as she says. She feels alienated from her own compatriots, not understanding “*my own people*”.

Similar experiences of being treated differently and feeling therefore rejected made Astrud from Brazil in her contact with other immigrant women: Being active member in a weekly women’s group of a religious community, she has many contacts with other immigrant women from Brazil and Portuguese speaking African countries. As Astrud is the only single woman who is not living with her family, husband and children in Portugal, she experiences certain mistrust and suspicion from the other women of this group. On a more concrete level, Astrud tells that she feels lonely amongst them as her life and problems are quite different from theirs. Unfortunately, the others are not very interested in her problems, she feels rejected – and disrespected. She keeps on participating in this group because of her religious belief, seeing it as a challenge to her own tolerance. Nevertheless, Astrud continues being very lonely and missing somebody to talk to.

Most Ukrainian and Russian Orthodox women, who migrate on their own, do not keep strong contact to the Orthodox churches; they perceive the atmosphere in the communities as relatively closed, relationships seem to be more formal and socially divided. Also in this context many women feel observed suspiciously by some of their compatriots and fellow believers because they are *as women* alone in Portugal. Additionally, some women mentioned again the tendency for being protected respectively controlled. Therefore, Russian and Ukrainian women tend to avoid religious as well as secular communities and networks. At the same time, they also continue missing friends and feeling alone.

Notwithstanding, some immigrant women talk also positively about the contacts that they get through participating in existing social networks and communities. The religious groups offer after all for some women a welcomed possibility for meeting regularly and obtaining

help if needed. Especially Romanian women working as domestic workers and live-in maids refer positively to the social bonds around the Romanian-Orthodox church, which is not only a social meeting-point on Sundays but offers also support e.g. in legal questions. Many Moldavian migrants belong also to this community.

In this context it is important to emphasize once more the particular situation of live-in maids as exemplified above in Tânia’s case: these women work full day, mostly 6 or even 6,5 days per week, and have only very limited possibilities to meet other people, to get support, to build networks. Due to these circumstances, they are very alone and therefore in an extremely vulnerable position. Since their free day is normally on Sundays, the church becomes a very important social element in their life in Portugal. The mass on Sundays and, especially, the informal meetings afterwards on the street, offer the only regular possibility to see other immigrants and to establish some forms of social relationships. In further research, it will be crucial to question how far migration experiences reinforce religious activities and faith.

However, during my fieldwork I could make an interesting observation in relation to domestic workers, respectively live-in maids, and social networks: the mobile phone, which virtually all immigrants in Portugal possess, turns out to be *the* key-instrument for social contact and support amongst domestic workers. It offers the possibility – or even: freedom – to talk with whom they want, whenever. Without having to use the employer’s phone or having to ask for permission. Thus, they can talk without the control of the employer. I argue that the mobile phone becomes for many domestic workers not only an object of great social importance, enabling an at least minimal construction and maintenance of social contacts and friendships, but it is also a special object of privacy and personal freedom. It allows the woman to withdraw herself from her current situation, reinsuring her own identity – which is *not* the one of the uncultured immigrant and often humiliated domestic worker as which most of them feel treated by their employers.

## Conclusion

Women, who migrate on their own, experience intensive solitude. It is very difficult for them to get social contact. They are frequently confronted with suspicion – because they are alone – and defamation – often of being prostitutes – by the Portuguese society as well as by their compatriots, by men and women. Most of the immigrant women had very stable and intensive social relationships at home, now they miss close personal contacts and friendships. Many women feel that their social capacity – and, thus, their social identity – is degrading if not totally wasted away. The same happens on the professional level: Immigrant women experience a significant downward-mobility, which, additionally to the harsh life and work conditions, makes it very difficult, to maintain or construct a positive self-esteem and self-identity.

Nevertheless, after some years of migration, some immigrant women – especially if they have not the burden to support their family or children in their home countries – are able to gain new perspectives on their professional and social life. Through getting to know different ways of thinking and living, meeting new persons, they feel challenged in a positive way and begin to experiment. Very often, migration is turning in an enriching experience that develops their personality and identity further. More difficult is the situation for women who are the breadwinners for their families at home: they keep the distance from social communities as well as from the possibilities they might find in the Portuguese society. To some extent they tend to self-restrict their life in Portugal.

My fieldwork shows that many immigrant women are in similar positions with similar problems, but they keep distance to other immigrants – and continue suffering from loneliness. Support would be needed that focus this group of women in order to encourage further mutual help and networking.

## Notes

1. This article is based on the paper “Gendered Margins: Survival Strategies of ‘Illegal’ Migrant Women in Portugal”, presented at the 5th European Feminist Research Conference *Gender and Power in the New Europe*, August 20–24, 2003 Lund University, Sweden. I would like to thank the

Ethnicity and Social Policy Research Unit (ESPR), and in particular Prof. Charles Husband, University of Bradford, UK, who hosted me as a Marie Curie Fellow November 2003 – April 2004; this paper was revised during my stay at the ESPR.

2. It is important to differentiate PALOP from the diplomatic and political institution CPLP, *Comunidade dos Países de Língua Portuguesa*, Community of Portuguese speaking countries, which was founded in 1996 to enhance multi-lateral cooperation. Members of CPLP are the five PALOP countries, Brazil, Portugal, and, since its independence in 2002, East Timor (for more information, see [www.cplp.org](http://www.cplp.org)).
3. Census 2001: 10.356.117 inhabitants. Source: Instituto Nacional de Estatísticas, INE 2002. Final data.
4. This number includes the foreign residents and the holders of *Autorização de Permanência*, ‘permit to stay’, which was introduced during 2001 and 2002 and is tied to a work contract. Source of data: Serviço de Estrangeiros e Fronteiras, SEF, Nov. 2002 (last numbers available). Foreign residents: 238.746 (provisorial data from 2002, processed May 14, 2003). *Autorização de Permanência*: 126.901 (2001), 47.657 (2002).
5. Data on foreign residents: SEF. Census 1991, INE: total population 9.866.000 inhabitants.
6. Estimation by Nuno Morais Sarmiento, Minister for the Presidency. *Correio de Manhã*, January 21, 2004 cf. [www.correiomanha.pt/noticia.asp?id=83258&idCanal=9](http://www.correiomanha.pt/noticia.asp?id=83258&idCanal=9). Also on the official governmental site: [www.mp.gov.pt/mp/pt/GabImprensa/NoticiasLusa/20040121\\_Imigracao.htm](http://www.mp.gov.pt/mp/pt/GabImprensa/NoticiasLusa/20040121_Imigracao.htm).
7. For airports as instrument of immigration control see Miles 1999.
8. [www.sosracismo.pt](http://www.sosracismo.pt)
9. See: [www.acime.gov.pt](http://www.acime.gov.pt)
10. Estimation for the mid 1990s, based on currency demand approach (Frey/Schneider 2000).
11. Cf. [www.acime.gov.pt](http://www.acime.gov.pt), [www.portugal.gov.pt/Portal/PT/Governos/Governos\\_Constitutionais/GC15Ministerios/PCM/MP/Comunicacao/Notas\\_de\\_Imprensa/20030825\\_MP\\_Com\\_SEAMP\\_Migrantes\\_Brasil.htm](http://www.portugal.gov.pt/Portal/PT/Governos/Governos_Constitutionais/GC15Ministerios/PCM/MP/Comunicacao/Notas_de_Imprensa/20030825_MP_Com_SEAMP_Migrantes_Brasil.htm)
12. Portugal is one of the principal gates for the trafficking in women from Brazil and other Southern American countries to Europe, in particular to the UK. Cf. the country reports on Portugal by *The Protection Project*: [http://www.protectionproject.org/human\\_rights/countryreport/portugal.htm](http://www.protectionproject.org/human_rights/countryreport/portugal.htm), and by the *Netherlands Institute of Human Rights* (SIM): <http://sim.law.uu.nl/SIM/CaseLaw/uncom.nsf/0/97f14bbc1f705b1a41256bae004a4de5?OpenDocument>

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