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Post-Migration Experiences of Female Immigrant Spouses from the Former Soviet Union

Abstract

This paper attempted to shed light on post-migration experiences of women from the former Soviet Union who married American nationals. On the basis of the qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews with these women and their husbands, the present study explored two research questions: (1) why these women and men chose to marry a foreigner; and (2) how well immigrant spouses have adjusted to the life in the U.S. Failures of romantic relationships with local partners were cited by both men and women as the primary reason to turn to transnational marriage market to seek out brides and grooms, respectively. American men were looking for traditional wives and expected their spouses to assume the roles of housekeepers. In contrast, the majority of immigrant women pursued more egalitarian gender relationships in the family. A conflict of expected gender roles and the household division of labour has strained many relationships.

Keywords: marriage migration; transnational mixed marriages; in-depth interviews; qualitative analyses

Introduction

Perestroika and the demise of the USSR open up the Soviet society to globalization. Exposure to alternative values and cultures went hand-in-hand with the process of economic liberalization which has created numerous unintended consequences for women in the former Soviet Union, such as rising unemployment, labour migration and feminization of poverty. All these changes provoked enormous interest to the transnational marriage market on the part of those post-Soviet women who, either independently or with the help of marriage agencies, could engage in a correspondence relationship with potential partners from abroad (Johnson 2007; Levchenko & Solheim 2013; Visson 1998). Many of them found husbands in the U.S. Despite the fact that after the implosion of the Soviet Union and the fall of the “Iron Curtain”, women from the former socialist republics have become more ‘visible’ on the transnational marriage market (Heyse 2010; Patico 2009, 2010), research devoted to transnational marriage migrants from the former Soviet Union is scarce.

The research objective of the present study was to fill the gap in the literature on female marriage migrants from the former U.S.S.R. in the U.S.A. The sample was assembled using snowball technique, a procedure that is often used with hard to reach, ethnically diverse and/or vulnerable populations (Boeije, 2009; Mathews 2005). As a result of snowball recruitment, the final sample size included twenty immigrant women from the former Soviet Union and six of their American husbands. Through the qualitative analyses of interviews with these women and their husbands/partners, the present study attempted to identify emergent themes in their narratives, to offer a more in-depth understanding of their spousal choice and marital life in the U.S., and, finally, to

provide a nuanced depiction of the challenges that immigrant women encounter in their quest for upward social mobility and the strategies they devise to overcome them.

Literature Review

Toward a Critique of Rational Choice Approaches

One of the paradigms that has long held a central position in the study of spouse selection is social exchange theory. This theory has historically been linked to rational choice theory and both theories are seen by many as the single paradigm (Sprague 2005). Both social exchange and rational choice theory assume that spouses make cost–benefit analyses as rational, goal-oriented individuals before exchanging scarce resources or statuses (Homans, 1958; Blau, 1964; Blau & Schwartz, 1984; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Generally speaking, women offer the characteristics sought after by males in exchange for the characteristics they desire from men. It is usually assumed that women depend on men for money, while men depend on women for sex (for a critical stance on this assertion see Brennan 2004; Giddens 2013; Mai & King 2009).

Although quite a few examples of exchange have been considered in the case of transnational marriages, arguably the most debated case is the idea of status exchange introduced by Davis (1941) and Merton (1941). Status exchange theory, also frequently referred to as the Davis-Merton hypothesis, was first applied to interracial marriages in the U.S. It predicts that members of ethnic groups whose prestige in society is low would have better chances of marrying outside their group if they offered a high socioeconomic status in return. The focus is not on the exchange of resources, as in the classical exchange theory (e.g., Homans, 1958; Blau, 1964), but on exchange of statuses or roles.

When applied to transnational marriages, status exchange theory predicts women using their 'sexual capital' to achieve higher socioeconomic status through marriage and migration to a wealthy country. In other words, greater economic resources and a carefree life (or a promise of such) in an affluent country are exchanged for traditionally valued characteristics, such as beauty and virginity (or at least absence of children from previous unions). Being a merger (or cross-fertilization) of functionalism and exchange theory, the Davis-Merton hypothesis has attracted numerous criticisms because it is liable to the drawbacks of both paradigms, such as universalist claims (functionalism), methodological individualism (exchange theory), cultural insensitivity (both), etc. (Kalmijn 1998; Sprague 2005).

Studies rooted in rational choice and social exchange theories (referred hereafter as rational choice approaches) almost exclusively employ quantitative techniques, while emphasizing the economic drivers for the move and the decision to marry (see Sprague 2005 for more detail). Crucially, exogamous transnational families are not always amenable to quantitative data analysis since there is little data to work with and there have been no credible attempts to launch a representative survey of such families. Even greater problem is quantifying the effects of such resources as affection, security and care. Of all the factors important for marital choice, these are the most difficult to measure. Indeed, the difficulty in dealing with affective motivations for social action, in contrast with self-interested, material concerns, has been well noted in work on exchange relations (Hochschild, 2005; Wharton 2009).

Despite the aforementioned methodological concerns that reflect weakness and limited applicability of rational choice approaches, these theoretical perspectives continue

to exert an influence on public discourses related to family (Wang & Chang, 2002). Particularly, the aforementioned theoretical perspectives have left behind the economic assumptions that underlie notions of agency and choice, the notions that have been at the forefront of discussions devoted to transnational marriage market (Sprague 2005). Agency, the ability to define one's choices and act upon them, is often seen as an unalienable property of a modern individual (Kabeer, 2005). In the academic debate, the question often evolves around whether or not transnational marriage migrants, who are in their majority are women from developing countries, make their decision to marry based on a conscious choice (for more discussion see Constable 2009; Jacobsen & Skilbrei 2010).

Seen as self-interested individuals intent on maximizing their utility, transnational marriage migrants are sometimes portrayed as ruthless opportunists who marry a foreigner with the sole purpose of material gain and/or getting permanent residence (Lyons & Ford 2008; Wang 2007). At the other extreme, potential brides are often represented as victims of sexual exploitation and human trafficking (e.g., Kim 2011; Choi et al. 2012). Although opinions vary, portrayals of 'mail-order brides' in media tend to take a narrow view of transnational marriages, either placing a high value on personal agency and delighting in using economic terms or denying agency to 'mail-order brides' and seeing them exclusively as the authentic victims of sexual exploitation (Constable 2003). It is not difficult to predict that both bride-demonization and bride-victimization point of views trigger an emotional response from audiences inculcated with the ideals of romantic love. These extreme but quite widespread views tacitly share the pejorative attitude toward transnational marriages, while playing on a Western conflation of sex

with the highest form of intimacy and ignoring the degree of difference that sexual subjectivities display in differing cultural settings (Constable 2009).

Macro-Level Explanations of Transnational Marriage Market Explosion

It has also been acknowledged by many (e.g., Jones & Shen 2008; Constable, 2003; Charsley & Shaw 2006) that transnational marriage market differs from the traditional marriage market in the way the decision to marry coincides with the decision to migrate, and it is extremely difficult to disintegrate the two. Hence, it is worthwhile to look at marriage as a migration strategy. Migration studies, at least at the macro-level, have been historically dominated by push-pull theory in the very similar way as marriage theories were influenced by exchange theory. Push-pull theory predicts that unfavourable conditions in one place (poverty, discrimination, etc.) ‘push’ people out, and favourable conditions in an external location ‘pull’ them out (for a detailed discussion see, for example, Castles et al. 2014).

In light of what has been mentioned above, it is worth examining the ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors which transnational brides and grooms take into consideration when looking abroad for their spouses. Prior studies of transnational brides from Russia identified lack of marriageable men as the primary motivation to find a partner abroad (Johnson 2007; Visson 2001). The shortage of marriageable men can be explained by combining two perspectives: one derived from gender role strain theory and another one derived from social demography. According to gender role strain theory (e.g., Levant & Richmond 2008), post-Soviet men are strained by gender role conflict which is exacerbated by contradictory messages that they receive from the state-sponsored media and their close circle about their own roles within society (Levant & Richmond 2008;

Levant et al. 2003). Because a demographic situation directly affects the economic development of a country, its competitiveness and stability, the state makes everything possible to promote healthy behaviours among its male population who is at much risk of dying early due to stress, alcohol, tobacco and illicit drug use (Levant et al. 2003; Yakushko 2005). Hence, the state-sponsored media promote family values and healthy lifestyles, while encouraging men to abandon risky masculine behaviours. However, at the peer group level stereotypically masculine behaviours are expected and those who deviate from the established norm are ostracized. This situation assures that the patriarchal norms guiding male behaviour are still very much in place. While there is a great number of men who adhere to traditionalist views about the role of women in family, there is a declining pool of local women who are sanguine about the prospect of marrying such men (Luehrmann 2004).

Owing to the stress associated with the gender role strain and with the transition to a market economy, there is a large discrepancy between male and female life expectancy which is another contributing factor to the shortage of marriageable men (Cubbins & Vannoy 2005; Luehrmann 2004). A quite noticeable gender gap in mortality rates does exist in Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and many other post-Soviet states (Billingsley 2011). As a result of this demographic asymmetry, there are just simply fewer men than women in the reproductive age group. Moreover, in comparison to Western European and even Central European countries, all post-Soviet countries are characterized by a young pattern of family formation and low female remarriage rates (Ryabov 2010). In fact, the remarriage rates are significantly higher for men than for women (Perelli-Harris & Gerber 2011). Consequently, it becomes difficult for a single

woman, especially for a divorcée, to find an unmarried local partner of approximately same age (Ryabov 2010).

On the ‘pull’ side of the equation, there is a shortage of reproductive labour, the labour that frequently takes place within the institution of marriage and is traditionally assigned to women. Although women in industrialized countries continue to do more housework than men, they have been able to challenge the sexual division of labour (Suzuki 2004). As Western women move up in the public work force, they spend less time on housework and childcare, while their male counterparts are slow in taking up those tasks (Ehrenreich & Hochschild 2002). In the West, women’s resistance to the patriarchal order leaves a gap in the domain of reproductive labour, a gap often filled by women from other countries. This gap, also known as ‘care deficit,’ is often cited as an explanation of the surge in transnational marriage migration as well as women’s labour migration from developing countries (Ehrenreich & Hochschild 2002; Tang & Wang 2011). While highlighting the fact that the parallel migration flows of foreign brides and foreign maids originate and terminate in the same locales, some researchers (e.g., Lan, 2008) envisage class-specific strategies as solutions to the shortage of reproductive labour. Whereas upper-class and middle-class households in the industrialized countries are able to fill their ‘care deficit’ by hiring immigrant housekeepers, working-class households seek cannot afford foreign maids and are bound to rely on foreign wives to provide unpaid domestic labour (Wang 2007). As it will be seen from the qualitative analyses that follow, the overwhelming majority of American men who the participants married rose from working-class roots and held to traditionalist views of women’s roles and appropriate behaviour.

Intersectionality and Its Methodological Complexity

A rapidly growing phenomenon of its own, transnational mixed marriage, by definition, occupies the intersection of gender and nation (ethnicity). Hence, I realized at the project's outset that my research endeavours might better benefit from an intersectional approach. While defying one-dimensional frameworks that give a priority to one aspect of identity, intersectionality captures the unique, non-additive experiences of persons with membership in multiple social categories (Yuval-Davis 2006). One-dimensional frameworks, such as those that prioritize gender, ethnicity, class, immigrant status, are not adequate in capturing the complexity of marriage migrants' lived experiences and realities of their being. By the virtue of being women and immigrants, participants of the present study are doubly disadvantaged. Moreover, by inhabiting a deviant marriage category (transnational marriages are outside the norm – see Nagel 2003), they are marginalized and ostracized. As such, they are subject to stigmatizing and disciplinary practices in the host society. At the same time, the absolute majority of 'Russian' women embody a privileged racial identity (white). To what extent and how these aspects of their social identity are 'situationally' important can be revealed by a systematic analysis of women's post-migration experiences.

Method

Sample. Research reported here is based on in-depth interviews collected in person in 2010-2012. In conducting this research I have drawn upon my academic training as a sociologist, my cultural background as a native Russian speaker, and my personal ties to women whom I through random encounter at social events. The original group of four informants grew rapidly due the snowball technique utilized to increase the

sampling size. Participants were encouraged to promote the study to potentially eligible women in their community through positive word-of-mouth which became self-reinforcing as recruitment progressed. Anecdotally, face-to-face contact and establishing rapport and building trust with individuals were major factors affecting study participation from the target population. As the recruitment was made possible via social networking, it is highly possible that all participants shared similar lived experiences, and characteristics. In other words, due to the limitation of the snowball method of sample acquisition, the resulting sample may be biased toward a network of interconnected individuals. Thus, the participants may not be representative of all transnational marriage migrants from South Texas where the study was conducted, thereby restricting the generalizability of the findings. Nevertheless, as evidenced by the sample description below, the snowball technique yielded a diverse set of Russophone transnational marriage migrants from different countries of the former Soviet Union. Having participants from different age and ethnic groups provided a myriad of valuable insights to the research topic and added considerable richness to the data.

Twenty two marriage migrants from the former Soviet Union were invited to be interviewed; one declined the invitation. One interviewee insisted that her interview would not be recorded. Invitations to participate have been extended to women's current spouses (14 men in total) of whom six agreed to be interviewed. Thus, the final sample size consisted of 20 women and 6 men. In terms of ethnic composition, the sample differs from those that were used by prior studies of Russo-American couples (e.g., Visson 2001; Johnson 2007). For example, Visson (2001) relates almost exclusively to marriages between ethnic Russians (among whom the urbanites and Muscovites, in particular),

dominate) and white Americans of Anglo-Saxon heritage. The main difference is that the mixed couples examined in the present study are situated at the '(semi-)periphery' as compared to the 'core' of Russian-American unions investigated by Visson (2001) and Johnson (2007). As Table 1 shows, approximately one half of women – participants of the current study – were not ethnically Russian. Although Eastern Slavic ethnicities (Russian, Ukrainian or Belorussian) were most common in the sample, there were four representatives from each of the following ethnic groups – Ashkenazi Jewish, Georgian, German and Kazakh (the only Central Asian in the otherwise all-Caucasian sample). The participants came from five Post-Soviet states – Russia (9 respondents), Ukraine (7), Kazakhstan (2), Belarus (1) and Georgia (1 respondent). Except one Ashkenazi Jew, all women who came from Russia were ethnically Russian. Likewise, five out of six women who emigrated from Ukraine were ethnically Ukrainian.

A note would be appropriate here. All women who were not ethnically Russian reported being perceived as 'Russian' by their (ex-)husbands and their husbands' families. As an insider to the community, I had also noticed that 'Russian' is how these women were referred to in common parlance which is indifferent to peculiarities of the Post-Soviet realities. Although for many participants Russian language was not their native language, all women were fluent in Russian and could communicate with each other in Russian without a problem. Moreover, immigrant women often identified themselves as members of 'Russophone community', an 'imagined', rather than real community of people sharing an original homeland – the Soviet Union (for an explanation of the concept of 'imagined community' see Anderson 2006).

Further, inspection of the ethnic origin of (ex-)husbands of immigrant women reveals that these men were not all white and their ancestries were quite diverse (see Table 1). In fact, roughly one third of them were the third-country nationals who were granted permanent residency only recently. With respect to ethnicity, the most commonly represented were Hispanics (mainly men of Mexican ancestry). Although ancestries traceable to Europe (e.g., Anglo-Saxon, Ashkenazi Jewish, Dutch and Italian) and Latin America were the most common among the men, four women reported having African-American, African (Ghanaian), Korean and Filipino (ex-)spouses. Consequently, some Russian-American unions investigated in this study were not only interethnic, but interracial. In addition to the four unions mentioned above, a marriage of a Kazakh woman to an Ashkenazi Jewish man can also be considered an interracial union.

At the time of their interview, the duration of stay in the United States varied widely among women from 1 to 11 years, with an average of 5.9 years. In terms of age, the youngest respondent was less than 26 and the oldest was 53 years of age. This was the first marriage for eight of the female informants and for twelve of their husbands. Five women had children from previous marriages. The majority of informants used marriage agencies in their search for a 'mail-order husband'. Although many women corresponded with their suitors before deciding to emigrate and marry, not all marriages in the sample were 'correspondence marriages'. Some women met their future husbands while studying in the U.S. or in a third country. Conversely, two of the women met their partners in their home countries where these men worked or studied. The majority of the transnational couples got married in the bride's country of residency. Three of the women had come on

fiancée visas. Six women were no longer living with their husbands at the beginning of the study period.

Qualitative Analyses. The interviews were semi-structured. They ranged in length from 30 minutes to over 1 hour. An array of questions dealt with a choice of transnational partner, decision to marry, time frames in which the choice was made, expectations of marital life, problems encountered by women in adjusting to the life in the U.S., marital life in the U.S., and types of social support encountered to help with the adjustment process. Although some English facility was required, fluency was not necessary for study participation. The interviews with men were conducted in English and with women in Russian. The latter were later transcribed into English.¹

Coding and analysis of data were guided by the grounded theory method (Charmaz 2006). A preliminary coding framework of relevant themes garnered from the literature review was developed prior to conducting the interviews. This way all preconceived notions and assumptions could be documented in the first draft of the framework. After the interviews took place, the coding framework was revised to incorporate themes generated through an adaptation of the constant comparison methods used in grounded theory. The coding process lasted until theoretical saturation was achieved, that is, until data from successive interviews were not showing any new themes, but rather corroborating those already known.

Results

Transnational Partner Choice

The starting point for my analysis is the question of *why* my interviewees, both women and men, chose to marry a foreign partner. While being subject to ostracism as

immigrants and ‘mail-order brides’, ‘Russian’ women were overwhelmingly apologetic in their defence of their partner choice. The most common response to this question of partner choice was a lack of marriageable men in their immediate circle of acquaintances or in the local marriage market, or both. Contrary to the popular belief that prioritize the socio-economic reasons which drive women from the former U.S.S.R. to procure relationships and marriage with foreign men (Johnson 2007; Luehrmann 2004; Patico 2009), I found little to no evidence that the desire to attain a higher standard of living was the underlying motivation of most interviewees to emigrate. The majority of women experienced difficulty in finding local marriage partners because, as they acknowledged themselves, they were not in a position to be ‘choosy’ as local women. They ended up orienting their conjugal prospect toward a foreign partner in the hope to establish a secured life with a ‘normal’ relationship, without the stress of the existential struggle. They would be eager to marry ‘any man’ who could provide a stable future, not necessarily a foreign national. There were three common reasons (or some combination of them) that these women gave to explain their marriage with a foreigner. These were: (1) failures of romantic relationships with local partners; (2) having children from prior relationships; and (3) being the only breadwinner and/or caregiver for their children and parents. The following quotes from the interviews are provided below to exemplify these reasons.

“My man [with whom she cohabited at that time] left me for another woman... Luckily, we didn’t have children...”

“After 4 years of living together, we separated and went our own ways... We have a daughter together... He told me: “I’m sorry, don’t expect much from me. I can’t give

you much [money].” He was not giving us anyway. He was making good money at that time but gambled most [of it] away... I had to take care of my elderly parents and I was the sole provider. I was working night shifts and was barely making any money. I didn’t have much time to go out and meet anyone.”

“After four years of unhappy marriage I was divorced with a sick child. I lost job because I had to take care of my daughter’s health. In addition to all that, my dad passed away the year I divorced my husband. I was trying to come out of this impasse, to find a supportive partner that would take care of me and my 5-year old daughter... to establish a new life somewhere else...”

The analysis of the interview data of American husbands of ‘Russian’ women revealed unanimity on one point: all men were looking for traditional wives, women who had not fallen under the influence of the women’s liberation movement, i.e. “untainted by feminism” (Constable 2003: 94). “I’ve dated women [after the divorce] and lived [cohabitated] with some, none of them was good in keeping the house in order. You know what I mean, like keeping the house clean and helping me with kids at home,” said one man, the father of two children from previous marriage. “I’ve travelled a lot. But this is not the kind of experience I want anymore. I want to have a settled life, to come home from work at day’s end and to smell my favourite food and to see my wife in the kitchen cooking it,” said another man who had recently been married to a ‘Russian’ wife. All men indicated failures to establish lasting relationships with local women as the primary reason for seeking brides abroad. As one interviewee noted, “I’ve never been in love, I guess, before I met my wife.” This probably reflects the shared ideal among ‘Russian’ wives and their American husbands of forming marriage alliances on the grounds of a

love relationship. The themes of romantic love and sexual attractiveness were quite pervasive in the interview data for both men and women.

The motivation to marry outside of their culture was often explained in terms of sexual image. A few women explicitly stated that they were *sexually* attracted to their partners because of their perceived sexual difference with local men who were commonly portrayed as ‘tasteless’, ‘unsophisticated’ and ‘sexually ignorant’. These women also praised America as a more ‘open’ society, favouring ‘openness’, thus accentuating diversity in ways that remain inextricably linked to gender ideologies. One woman said: “I have always attracted to Latino men, they are so valiant, so sexy. I have lived with and dated many men back in N. [the city where she lived]. Many of them were not N. [dominant ethnic group]. I have also met one guy from Peru. But my husband is better. I am married to a Latino man now and I do not regret.” This finding is tentatively consistent with the literature showing that selection of an ethnically different partner may amend, as it were, failures in erotic affairs with local partners (Lyons & Ford 2008; Mai & King 2009).

As it was the case of all interracial marriages in this study, the qualities women admired in their Black and Latino mates bring in the importance of sexuality in transnational partner choice. This issue raised here, however, is not just about sexuality, but the sexuality of the dark-skinned ‘colonized other’ (Loomba 2015). This kind of sexuality is rooted in visceral feelings about dark-skinned bodies fuelled by the myths commonly shared by all white people regardless of their ethnic origin. This is not surprising, as imaginal processes and erotic representations are known to play a crucial role in partner choice processes (Brennan 2004; Zahedi 2010). Yet, the sexual

subjectivities of women in interethnic and especially interracial marriages were masked by ambivalence which is constituted by the conjunction of two Selves: the colonizer and the colonizer herself being colonized. The ambivalence of the sexual subjectivity derives from the lack of a clear distinction between the identities of the colonizer and the colonized. The conflict between these two identities manifested itself through women's conflicting motivations to reproduce gendered stereotypes of themselves as erotic wives and to see sex as instrumental, as one of the ways to achieve power over their partners.

Furthermore, by pulling together repertoires from multiple cultures, women understood that their whiteness makes them a desirable commodity and they could capitalize on it on American marriage market. As one of the interviewees indicated: "My husband travelled a lot in Asia... He dated many women, but he always wanted to marry a white woman, he wanted his children to be white..." Some women also indicated that they fitted neatly into the racial hierarchies of the U.S. and, therefore, might not be easily recognized as 'mail-order brides' when appearing with their husbands in public. As with other white people in American society, their racial identities were 'invisible'. But this kind of 'invisibility' can be easily unveiled. As soon as women began to talk, the easily identifiable accent could make them labelled as 'audible' minorities. Hence, the reaction of the audiences, positive at the first look, quickly turned sour after hearing them speak. One interviewee indicated that she liked "...going to parties with my husband, but he told me not to speak much and smile all the time."

Inequality in Marriage

A common theme that emerges from the interview analysis is the expectations about gender roles in marriage. Almost all women expected their prospective partner to

assume the breadwinner role after the marriage. The identification of ‘traditional’ masculinity with economic activity and ‘traditional’ femininity with nurturing care was often considered the ‘natural’ gender order by the majority of women interviewed. An exemplary quote from one woman’s narrative is provided below: “I did not come here to work. I came here to be a wife and a mother...I want to see and enjoy my children growing up..., spending time with them.” The caveat is that women’s motivations were often contradictory: on the one hand, they allowed their husbands to assume the breadwinner role in the family, while, on the other, the majority of them were clearly dissatisfied with their status as housewives.

The feeling of being depreciated by some women was exacerbated by their comparatively high educational level (especially as compared to their spouses). One woman indicated: “I have graduated from the university and my husband has the high school diploma. I used to work as an accountant back at home. I know everything about money and he does not.” Almost all women I interviewed had college degrees from their home countries. Without recognition of their foreign credentials, nevertheless, it was very difficult for them to find employment.

It was easy to notice that, unlike those who came 10 or more years ago, the newly arrived women were very much under the influence of the grapevine stories of ‘stability’ abroad which were contrasted with the ‘hard life’ in their home country. Bitter disappointment awaited those who came with unrealistic expectations. Their lack of competence in and knowledge about the new culture exacerbated the perceived loss of identity. Wrought by unexpected hardship (e.g., bad marital relationship, health issues, social isolation, etc.) many women acknowledged living through the psychological crisis

which arose from the clash between lived realities and imaginations. The conflict between the idealized images before migration and just after arrival, on the one hand, and the reality of mixed couple life, on the other, is a recurrent finding in research on transnational marriages (Constable 2003).

As Table 1 shows, about one half of the marriages under study ended in divorce. Although these data are not generalizable, the international statistics (U.N., 2012) indicates that approximately half of all marriages end in divorce in the main bride-sending countries represented in the sample (e.g., Russian Federation, Ukraine, and Belarus). This is equally true about the U.S. Perhaps, it would be an exaggeration to say that transnational marriages exemplified in this study were more fragile than the marriages in the host country (i.e., the U.S.) as a whole. The qualitative analyses of the interview data revealed that the major source of marital instability was the conflict of expectations about gender roles. “I did not come here to cook, to clean up the house which was always a mess. My husband never cared for cleaning up the house. He was really surprised when I told him to clean up after himself. It just threw me off. When I asked him what was for dinner, his reply was “I do not know, what are you making?” one respondent noted. The majority of women were eager to find more equality in the domestic milieu, while their transnational husbands expected them to assume the roles of traditional wives.

Domestic roles were not so much rejected by women as deemed insufficient: they were not enough to provide financial and intellectual satisfaction. One interviewee once said bitterly: “I’m tired of being a good wife and a good mother. I want to have more. I always wanted to be a painter.” Another interviewee mentioned: “...I like to cook and

like to take care of the house. But I also want to find a decent work. I have a sick mother in Belarus and want to help her financially. But my husband does not see it this way.” It should be noted here that all women, at least, for some time in the U.S. were stay-at-home housewives and none of them was initially active in the professional domain. Nevertheless, all interviewees, with no exception, had accumulated years of working experience back home. There was a range of the previous occupations in the sample, from the vaunted position of medical doctor to the more ‘pink-collar’ one of a secretary. There were those who were quite successful in the business world back at home. One woman (self-employed at the time of the interview) used to be an owner of a matchmaking agency in Russia. The majority of women were not prepared to experience downward social mobility, particularly the fact that their professional and other societal-level qualities were devalued. Here is an exemplary quote: “I was a physician in Georgia. Now, I am nobody [here]. To go through the attestation here, excuse me! It takes so much time and money... I have two children and a house to take care of...”

The Sense of Community and the Sense of Agency

In contrast to the domestic milieu, which was for many a site of struggle, the community milieu was where women gained a sense of agency that allowed them to reject the negative stereotypes of their country of origin and encouraged them to maintain sense of identity with their natal country. The following exemplary quote was selected to show how women cherished their ties to the home countries: “I was so surprised how many people here does not know where Kazakhstan is...I’m very proud of my country and would present my country on the International Festival”. The most palpable evidence of women’s agency was their intense desire, as new members of American society, to

contribute to the community, through participation in events, clubs, circles, shows, religious organizations, volunteer work, and civic activities. Because many women felt that the social resources they possessed in their country of origin had been lost in the move to America, the ethnic community was essential to recuperate the perceived loss of identity. Ultimately, the ethnic community was the site of social capital formation. Having acquired linguistic and cultural skills over many years, women who left their home countries a long time ago were a great resource for newcomers.

According to Blau's theory of relative group size (Blau 1977; Blau & Schwartz 1984), the larger the group, the more likely its members are to have relationships between themselves. The community of Russophone women was united as long it stayed small. However, as the number of newcomers rose, boundaries based on tastes, lifestyles and cultural preferences became visible. Some women were able to form a group unto themselves, interacting less with others. For example, some women who were second-generation college graduates often looked down upon those less educated and had low-status husbands. In this instance, education defined a social circle that is closed to outsiders (Bourdieu 1986). Further, after arrival into the U.S., the prior ethnic/racial stereotypes held by women had changed to conform to those of their husbands and the mainstream society. Particularly, it was not uncommon for women to form friendships with each other according to the race/ethnicity of their husbands. As a result, they reproduced the same racial boundaries among themselves that paralleled American society.

It is also worthwhile to note the women's unspoken understanding that belonging to a nation had layered definitions and that citizenship and national identities could mean

different things in different situations. With time the community of Russophone women developed ethnic boundaries, in additions to those mentioned above. Moreover, the community exhibited a pedigree with respect to political ideologies brought from abroad and acquired in the U.S. (primarily through the contact with their spouses). It was due to these political ideologies that the first signs of conflict arose from. Tensions amounted and the onset of the 2008 Russo-Georgian War marked the final split of the community. Nationalistically-minded Ukrainians lead the revolt. Since the schism, one group of women would not go to the places where the other group socialized and vice versa and there was hardly any interaction between the two groups.

Conclusion

Using qualitative interviews, the present study focuses on mate selection and post-migration experiences of women from the former U.S.S.R. who married American men. The rationale was twofold – to let the women explain their choice of marriage partner and to look into their post-migration identities. The qualitative analyses revealed that, the conflict permeates many aspects of women’s life: (1) the conflicting images of “ideal man”— on the one hand, some women complain about the excess of patriarchy in their home countries, and, on the other hand, they reproduce the same stereotypes by picturing their “ideal man” as the breadwinner; (2) the conflict between their expectations about their gender roles and family life in the U.S. and their partners’ expectations about their prospective wives’ roles.

With respect to the marital choice of the women I interviewed, the main finding was that, although economic considerations might have played a role, these were not the main reason why these women decided to marry a foreigner. It is the qualities of local

men associated with traditional gender roles that made the respondents to look for foreign grooms. In other words, they were 'pushed from' their region of origin rather than 'pulled to' the country of destination. Additionally, romantic love was cited as the important component of women's desire to marry foreign men. Of the women and men I interviewed, many emphasized the fact that their marriage was for love. Many women tended to emphasize the sexual image that they were attracted to. For some women, this was not just a typical masculine sexual image, but an exotic sexual image of 'other' rooted in visceral feelings about black/brown bodies fuelled by sexual myths. This concerns women in inter-racial marriages. They strived to realize their sexual subjectivities by marrying a man of different race. Among them it was common to reject local men as 'rude' and 'tasteless'. Their stories underscored conventional images of gender and race.

The results also revealed that women strived for greater independence in the family and better work opportunities. An important avenue through which many women found the potential for self-realization was through engaging in community life. Women's attraction to American men was in part shaped by the common perception of American men as open minded, liberal, and egalitarian. However, American husbands were looking for more 'domesticated' wives. The majority of women were not happy being circumscribed to the domestic sphere and this conflict of gender role expectation often gave rise to family tensions. Faced with the need to increase their bargaining power in the family, women were tempted to capitalize on their whiteness and relatively high educational attainment.

Recent migration studies show that migrants may find that their economic position has improved after migrating to a richer country, but their social standing in the host country is lower than that prior to migration in the country of origin (Castles et al. 2014; Charsley & Shaw 2006; Constable 2009). This strand exemplified by Massey's "gendered geographies of power" (Massey 2013) and Constable's "global hypergamy" (Constable 2003) particularly challenges the economic and rational explanation of migration decisions. The present study is intended as a contribution to this stream of thought. Specifically, the analyses presented above show that immigrant women who, overwhelmingly, came from middle-class background used transnational marriage to escape not poverty, but patriarchal gender relations in the home countries. Their strategy, however, was no success because their American husbands who shared strong attachment to patriarchal values of the generation of their parents expected their wives to assume traditional caregiver and housemaker roles in the family. The clash between traditional patriarchal values shared by men and modern gender-equality values of the immigrant women was the main cause of family instability. This study adds to the growing evidence that transnational marriages seem to reinforce the unequal gender relations the women want to escape from.

Note

1. Audio records were destroyed after the transcription had been made and checked for accuracy. Several checks had been made to make sure that the transcriptions were accurate to the tapes and there was no material too personal to be included in the interview, which the subjects later might regret. All personal identifiers were be erased

from the transcribed data which were archived in digital format. Once transcripts are checked for accuracy, the interviews were analysed using QSR In Vivo software.

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Table 1. Sample Description.

Years Abroad	Duration of Current Marriage (+), Divorce or separation (-) in years	Country of Origin (Wife)	Ethnicity (Wife)	Country of Birth (Husband):	Ethnic Origin/Ancestry (Husband)
1	1	Russia	Russian	U.S.A.	Mexican
2	2	Ukraine	Ukrainian	Ukraine	Ukrainian
3	-1	Russia	Russian	Mexico	Mexican
3	3	Ukraine	Ukrainian	Peru	Peruvian
4	-2	Ukraine	Ukrainian	Palestine (West Bank)	Palestinian
4	4	Ukraine	Russian	U.S.A.	Italian
4	3	Georgia	Georgian	Netherlands	Dutch
5	-3	Ukraine	Ukrainian	Mexico	Mexican
5	-1	Russia	Ashkenazi Jewish	U.S.A.	Ashkenazi Jewish
5	3	Russia	Russian	Ghana	Ghanaian
6	6	Belarus	Belarusian	U.S.A.	Mexican
6	6	Ukraine	Ukrainian	U.S.A.	African-American
7	-2	Russia	Russian	Mexico	Mexican
7	7	Russia	Russian	Philippines	Filipino
8	8	Kazakhstan	Kazakh	U.S.A.	Ashkenazi Jewish
8	6	Ukraine	Ukrainian	U.S.A.	Latino (Multiple Ancestries)
9	10	Kazakhstan	German	U.S.A.	Anglo-Saxon
9	9	Russia	Russian	South Korea	Korean
10	10	Russia	Russian	U.S.A.	Irish
12	-9	Russia	Russian	U.S.A.	Unknown

