



Slovak caretakers in Austria

The work of a caretaker is particularly sensitive to people's close relations. Women from Slovakia leave their families – parents, children and partners and go to Austria to take care of old people entrusted to them by their closest – children or grandchildren. Some close relations get disrupted, while some other relations get created in this kind of intimate work.

Short description of the project

The main goal of this project is to emphasize work of a large number of Slovak caretakers working abroad in public discourse and sensitization of each actor that comes into their close relationships. Zooming in on two worlds in this delicate relationship.

Our aim is to describe this phenomenon, introduce it to broader public and open and foster a public debate on this topic relating to social and health care for rather large group of the older, economic reasons and results of migration for work abroad and last but not least relating to the close family relationships in Slovakia, just as in Austria.

We want to build the analysis of this phenomenon on in-depth interviews with caretakers and also on interviews with experts in the field of sociology, psychology and economics. As an output of the project we plan on creating a journalistic text in Slovak and German that will show the situation of caretakers from various perspectives to citizens of Slovakia as well as to the Austrians. The text will be accompanied by subtitled video-interviews with caretakers and by photographs from their daily work and family life. Based on the created text we intend to establish cooperation with reputable national media in Slovakia and Austria that would in case of Slovakia help open a public debate and in case of Austria complement their existing debate about this current and often overlooked topic.

Background

Each month thousands of women from Slovakia travel to work abroad. They work as caretakers of older people in Austria. Over the last ten years their number increased tenfold. In 2005 there were about 2,600 Slovak women working in Austria, by the end of 2014 it was almost 30,000. The steep growth in the last decade is the result of interaction of several factors. In December of 2007, Slovakia became part of the Schengen, in the years 2006–2008 Austrian Act on long-term care entered into force. Further reasons are the economic crisis in 2009 and associated increase in unemployment in 2010 and also opening of Austrian labor market to Slovak citizens in May 2011. The biggest growth of caretakers working abroad was recorded exactly during 2009 and in 2012.

This kind of economic migration has many extensive social, psychologic and economic consequences for concerned citizens of both countries. These consequences are mapped by existing sociological studies as well as by pilot interviews which our work will follow. As the base we take our interview with Martina Sekulová who made it the topic of her dissertation thesis and further field research. Out of these arose some questions that we would like to find answers to in this project and push them into the public debate. The questions concern mostly these areas which are nowadays broadly discussed throughout Europe: population aging, gender equality, economic differences between countries of the EU and functional family relationships in its greatest breadth. We can look at all these areas through the prism of employment prospects, personal and “cross-boarder” relationships of caretakers and cared-ones and their background. To some of the questions we ask ourselves, one can already see hints of answers based on the pilot interviews.

How do the women themselves take the work of a caretaker in Austria, how are they viewed upon in their “new” families? How do their new “employers” abroad look at their life situation and their work?

“Slovak women have the best reputation. They are viewed as the most keen on cleanliness, the most hardworking and the most reliable compared to women from other countries that do this sort of work, for example from Ukraine, Romania and Bulgaria and so they are the most desired. Currently 70% of all caretakers in Austria are women from Slovakia.” – *Martina Sekulová, sociologist*

“Many patients and family members take you as staff, work force that they pay, as a servant, not as a person. Someone, who’s more sensitive would have a hard time taking it that someone walks all over them, that they even dare. I wouldn’t dare and especially not to a person, who helps me take care of a parent, a person who is there 24 hours a day and who just takes it. You have to have a stomach for that, often it goes all the way and you don’t even have time to eat, to take a shower and then this person suffers.” – *Mária Šichmanová, caretaker*

How does this type of migration affect the families of caretakers and their households? Who replaces the presence of these women in their families?

“Most often it is other members of the family. Some tasks are taken on by grandparents, cooking for example, some tasks are taken on by the older kids. Models of help depend on the breadth of the family, whether it is a multigenerational family with grandparents, or they live only as a nuclear family. If they live by themselves, neighbours do help for example.” – *Martina Sekulová, sociologist*

“It is one of the hardest jobs to take care of someone foreign far away from home and knowing at the same time, that at home you have someone you need to take care of. With my son it was hard, because each child misses his or her mom, even though there is the good grandma or the husband or the partner. I started going abroad when he was six, first grader so he was learning first things, that’s when he needed me. I tried to make up for my absence with gifts and toys, but it will not replace the emotional side. Money will not get you back those hugs.” – *Mária Šichmanová, caretaker*

“Our society is still in relation to gender roles rather traditional, so women are considered guardians of the “hearth,” that it should be mostly them that take responsibility for the household and be primarily responsible for the care of the children. Many of them had to confront with this perception. Not even looking at the fact, that some of them often took it as a failure of their own that they leave the children. Maybe also because of this sentiment and from experience that a man can not take over all “traditionally women” jobs – washing up, cooking, some care for the children – stay care takers primarily responsible for households in Slovakia.” – *Martina Sekulová, sociologist*

What are the differences between woman in the role of caretaker abroad? What do all these women have in common?

“More mature women that have not felt such pressure – family and responsibilities – coped with it a little bit better. That it was a new dimension of life. They felt strengthened by the experience, that they learned the language and ‘made it’ abroad. Some tell me proudly that they call them in their village ‘an Austrian.’ Satisfaction was also visible on how they looked. When I ask them in what way are they spending the acquired means they mention finally having time to themselves, treat themselves with wellness stay with they girlfriends, holidays with their husbands. It was refreshing for their relationship, they treasure each other more and enjoy spending time together and do not live a stereotypical life that they used to live. They feel that life is fuller. Some younger women took it very seriously, not only the separation from their children but also from their partner. There are internet forums where women talk to each other about working abroad. They get to read different stories of how someone’s relationship fell to pieces, how hard it is for the children, how not every household can get through it. So there are many women that are afraid of their partnership relationships.” – *Martina Sekulová, sociologist*

How do their partners take the work of their wives or girlfriends?

“With men I only know of their reactions from the women so the view might be a bit skewed. They reflect in all the different ways. Some say that they have great support in them, that their husband tries to take their place while they are away and that it affected their relationship even in a positive sense. Other feel disappointment from men that they do not help at all. They are happy when they could cook for themselves or they wring their hand that when they come after two weeks the house is in a terrible shape. That partner has not accommodated to the situation in any way, not even tried to help.” - *Martina Sekulová, sociologist*

The answers to other questions we ask ourselves and are waiting to be answered:

What are the economic reasons and consequences of this migration?

How does this type of migration of women affect the position and the relationships between household members?

How do the relationships in the families of those that are taken care of change once the caretaker arrives?

What are the work conditions of the caretakers?

Project objectives

The main project objective is to carry out the importance of numerous Slovak caretakers working abroad in public discourse and to reinforce the sensitivity of particular actors who come into close relationship with the caretakers. The aim is to bring closer the two worlds – Austrian and Slovak community – the general public.

With help of women who have direct experience with this kind of work and economic migration and experts of different backgrounds our aim is to find answers to following questions:

- What measures need to be taken (practical, institutional, legislative) to ease this type of migration for caretakers' women?
- In case there is this kind of demand, what methods enable summarization and facilitate communication and cooperation between cared-ones (and their relatives) and caretakers?
- Is it possible to develop basic terms and standards of this work (rights and duties of caretakers and clients) according to the caretakers' experiences and experts' perspectives?
- What mechanisms could soften the problems of perceptions transition in gender stereotypization occurring in the families of women?
- What mechanisms could soften the negative effect of economic migration of mothers - caretakers on their children?
- How should be the care for aging people provided in Slovakia?

The following activities presented and freely accessible for media in Slovak and German will help to foster the above mentioned questions in broad public debate:

- Publishing of caretakers' narrative stories in form of articles (long form – the whole phenomena) and videos (approximately 20 video recordings)
- Publishing of interviews on this topic with sociological, psychological, economic experts (at least 1-2 complete interviews)
- Reportage and photo reportage of caretakers route to work (at least 2-3 reportages)
- Mediation and distribution of articles and reportages (source is this project) to reputable Slovak and Austrian media (at least 3 outcomes in Austrian media – e.g. Der Standard, Die Press, weekly Format and Profil and 3 outcomes in Slovak media – e.g. Denník N, daily SME, weekly .týždeň)
- The outcomes and conclusions will be presented in influential institutions that may have impact on legislative transformation towards unloading bureaucracy on the side of caretakers and clients (for example to institutions – Ministry of social and family affairs, Public defender of rights and to organizations such as Open Society Foundation, feminist organization Aspekt, Caritas, Das Netzwerk österreichischer Frauen- und Mädchenberatungsstellen)

Socio-political importance of the project

As a matter of fact, this topic embraces about thirty thousand women (smaller portion of men). The estimation is, that the migration of caretakers implicitly touches about the same number of Austrian and Slovak families. From 150 000 to 200 000 Austrian and Slovak people are directly effected according to the approximate calculation.

Primarily, the objective of our project is to take into consideration everyday human interrelations of this number of people in both of the countries. The dimension of human interrelations is naturally hard to detect. However the economic impact, consequences on health care of aging people or school performance of caretakers' children may be measured and thus compared.

Project agenda

First phase - 12. 11. 2015 - 12. 12. 2015

- To arrange the dates and times for interviews with caretakers and their families
- To arrange the dates and times for interviews with the cared-ones
- To carry out the interviews with sociological, psychological and economic experts.
- To make preparation plans for interviews with the representatives of recruitment agencies
- To build a partnership with media that would be involved in our project from spring 2016

Second phase - 16. 1. 2016 až 17. 2. 2016

- Video recording and interviewing of women from different regions of Slovakia and Austria.
- Interviewing the family relatives of caretakers.
- Interviewing families of cared-ones.
- Following the route of caretakers from eastern and central Slovakia to Austria compiled into reportage.
- Making of photo documentation of prior four activities
- To address respected personalities in Slovakia and Austria questioning the perception of this topic and how it influences them, which would make other activities and outcomes more popular to broad public.

Third phase - 17. 2. - 17. 3. 2016

- Processing of interviews and video recordings
- Making of long form article about the caretakers and cared-ones
- Processing of reportages and photo documentation from the working and home environment of caretakers

Fourth phase - March-April 2016

- Publishing of caretakers narratives in form of long article with photographs and videos
- Publishing of complete interviews with experts
- Publishing of reportages and photo reportages from home and working environments of women
- Provision of outcomes of the whole project as a source material for media in Slovakia and Austria

Fifth phase - May 2016

- To make the texts, reportages (including photos and videos) available for reputable media in Slovakia and Austria and their publishing
- The outcomes and conclusions will be presented at influential institutions that may have impact on legislative transformation towards unloading bureaucracy on the side of caretakers and clients
- Evaluation of project objectives
- Final financial accounting
- Writing of final report

Sixth phase - May 2016 – infinity

The objective of these activities is the sustainability of this project:

- Providing the outcomes of this project to governmental and non-governmental institutions, agencies and last but not least to caretakers and their families and to clients and their families
- Providing of consultations and contacts
- Networking of all the actors of this project – among themselves and towards public, with governmental and non-governmental organizations

Evaluation of objectives

The project will be successful if the different participants and actors of this topic will be more sensitive and better informed than they have been when the project started. Thereby the likelihood will be increased, that the two sides of these working-personal relationships would treat each other more friendly and responsively. That dimension is, of course, difficult to measure. Indicator of improvements in this area may be the quality of social debate. The more positive and supportive media reports and debates, the better climate for the job on both sides.

Measurable results of success should be:

- An amount of readers or visitors and level of discussions under the articles, reports, interviews and videos on the project website (intervention of at least 50,000 RU directly on the project website).
- A number of articles published in media, which will origin from this project (min. 3 Slovakia, min. 2 in Austria).
- Mediation and acceptance of the project outcomes by opinion-making media in Austria and Slovakia (min. 3 media in Austria, min. 5 Slovakia).
- The use of project outcomes as a supplementary source in legislative changes in the field of social care and employment (for fulfilling this objective we will consider a situation where the project will be mentioned and discussed at those occasions).

The results will be controlled by the number of displays of the home page jablko.sk, the quantity of quotations or downloads of texts, videos and photos and will be documented in the final stages of the project.

The formal site of the evaluation: copies of invoices, travel documents, photo documentation, video documentation, final report.

Through what channels to reach the target groups:

- Press release - during project implementation we will send five press releases to Slovak and Austrian agencies about the progress of the project. Communication with media - during project implementation we will communicate with the editors of the opinion-making media in Slovakia and Austria, specifying the conditions of cooperation.
- Facebook, forums of caretakers and agencies - in addition to the Facebook page of the project, we will share project outcomes also on the forums of caretakers and agencies that cooperate with them.
- Newsletter - during the project we will be sending fortnightly a newsletter with published news from the project.
- Regional media - our aim is to reach out and develop a cooperation with regional media in the place where caretakers live and in places where they work.

Sustainability of the project

We assume that opening a discussion on this topic will highlight the multiple consequences of this phenomena and will help to create a better basis for possible legislative changes in both countries that would facilitate the life situation of caretakers. The fact, that this topic will be in the coming era one of a high importance is evident firstly from the current population structure and its changes in the last decades and secondly as an increasing trend in labor migration.

Recorded and published results of this project have the following long-lasting objectives:

- To create documents for creating standards in this working-personal relationship area.
- To provide resources for planning future changes in legislation.
- To point out the model of effective cross-border cooperation between two neighboring countries, which can be an example of good practice for any parallel situation in other European countries.
- To sensitize the public perception of this topic and to raise the related questions by disclosure of personal stories.

Location of the project

Austria / Slovakia

The project will run throughout the whole area of Slovakia and Austria, or more precisely in areas where caretakers most often come from and in areas where they come to work. We will focus on several regions of Slovakia which will allow us to compare the effects in individual cases of women. From piloting interviews, we know about cases where women travel from Michalovce to Salzburg, which is almost 900 km, but also about a case where this distance is only 20 km.

Who will carry out the project

The project will be created by people from the civic association Jablko.sk who are behind a number of projects with social themes, such as family, minorities, youth employment, human rights, homeless people:

- We are dedicated to current issues, such as how to accept refugees, when we contacted experts and popular personalities with a question "[How to accept those who are coming?](#)".
- Actual topic was also addressed a year and a half ago during the crisis in Ukraine, when we invited public figures in the Czech Republic and Slovakia to answer the question of what are the [possibilities for development in Ukraine](#). Their statements have been [translated into Ukrainian language](#) and published. With the aim of sensitizing the society, we also built a [symbolic cemetery for victims of Maidan](#) on the embankment in Bratislava, supported the photographer [Michal Burza](#) who had been at Maidan at that time, and we first published his photos. He later for his photos - one of them was also displayed at the title page of Der Spiegel - received the most prestigious Slovak journalist prize.
- So far, the greatest impact on society have had the topic of Hedviga Malinová when the makers of Jablko.sk expressed support for Hedviga and her family, after when she decided to move from Slovakia to Hungary. This support has been expressed - [not only signed by, but expressed with specific wishes, written or recorded on camera](#) - by more than 200 people, for example Slovak Ombudsman Jana Dubovcová, Charter 77 signatory Dana Němcová, figures of Nov. '89 Peter Zajac and Fedor Gál, Parliament vice-chairwoman Erika Jurinová, deputies across the political spectre, actors, writers, people from churches and from non-profit organizations. More about this case in english can be found [here](#).
- On some topics we work in a long run, for example, [Why to stay in Slovakia](#) - this topic is about people in their thirties who decided to stay and work in Slovakia and do something for the society.

Many of these smaller projects have had a great response in opinion-making media in Slovakia, we have established cooperation with NGOs involved in foster parenthood, palliative care, homeless people or minorities.

People who will participate

Anna Kratochvílová - *director and coordinator of Jablko.sk*

- working on topics about families and human rights
- coordinating the project, production, media communication and communication with the public

Jakub Kratochvíl - *managing editor, journalist, filmmaker, photographer*

- working on issues about refugees, thirties and minorities
- coordinating interviews and videointerviews, filming, editing and post-production

Pavol Sopko - *programmer and designer Jablko.sk*

- invented and created the page and design of jablko.sk, he also worked on webpages of other media and non-profit organizations
- design and creation of web, programming and english translation

Mária Miklušičáková - *journalist, translator, jablko.sk*

- works on interviews, editor
- interviewees, video script,

Tímea Becková - *journalist Denník N, translator from Hungarian*

- writes about refugees, editor
- writing reports, interviews, writing the main article

Others will participate on the project:

Nina Kadlečovičová - *translator into German, historian, teacher*

- translation of all inputs and outputs of the project to German

Stanislava Harkotová - *journalist Aktuálne.sk*

- interviews with experts in sociology, psychology and economics, writing the main article

Martina Sekulová - *sociologist, SAV Bratislava*

- consultation topics from a sociological point of view

Tana Sedláková - *psychologist, MU Brno, Institute of Population Studies*

- edits of outputs, consultation from a psychological point of view

Natalia Halvičková - *photographer, psychologist*

- photo essays