

THE PROMISE OF (UN)HAPPINESS? GENDER, LABOUR, AND MIGRATION

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<https://doi.org/10.61095/815-0047-2026-1-7-14>

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Abstract: This editorial preface introduces the thematic issue of *Topos*, inspired by the conference “The Promise of (Un)Happiness? Gender, Labour, and Migration,” held at the European Humanities University in September 2024. The volume explores the multifaceted intersections of gender, labor, and migration, with a particular focus on the experiences of women affected by war, political upheaval, and displacement, especially in Eastern Europe. The collection examines both the challenges and transformative opportunities that arise from exile and forced migration. Contributions span diverse methodologies and genres, including ethnographic studies, autoethnographies, and collaborative interviews, highlighting issues such as psychological support for refugees, professional adaptation, gender imbalances in high-tech industries, and the emotional and social dimensions of displacement. By bringing together voices from academia and activism, the issue provides a comprehensive, multidimensional perspective on the quest for happiness and fulfillment amid instability, offering scholarly insights and solidarity to those navigating migration’s complexities.



Preamble

The title of this thematic issue of *Topos* refers to the international conference entitled “The Promise of (Un)Happiness? Gender, Labour, and Migration”, which took place at the European Humanities University in September 2024. This has been the second scientific conference, organized by the EHU Center for Gender Studies in the framework of a long-term infrastructural education and research project *Women in Tech*, implemented with the financial support of the European Union. If, earlier, we explored the intersections of gender and im/material Labour (the outcomes of that conference were also published in a thematic volume of *Topos* in 2023), this time the focus was on gendered aspects of labour and migration. Over two days, scholars from diverse disciplines engaged with a wide array of topics: the challenges faced by women migrants amid wars, humanitarian crises, and political upheavals; the impact of migration on professional identity, career trajectories, and working conditions; the often invisible material and emotional aspects of labour; issues surrounding status, citizenship, and the formation of new identities; the gendered dimension of labour migration, including questions of motherhood and care and many others.

It is worth noting that apart from the articles prepared by the conference participants, the volume also features some texts of the participants of another related project, namely research Laboratory “Exclusion. Her-Perspective”, which was launched by Center for Gender Studies in the autumn of 2024. The Lab researchers examined various forms of gender discrimination in high-tech industries, focusing on Belarusian women working in the IT sector, both in Belarus and abroad. Given that, since 2020 and the onset of Russia’s full-scale war in Ukraine, at least half a million people have left Belarus, and many businesses, including those in the IT sector, have relocated to neighbouring countries, research on gender discrimination has become inextricably linked to issues of political (forced) and labour migration and challenges associated with it. Furthermore, this issue also presents the outcomes of research conducted in the same thematic area by graduates of the EHU Master’s program in Gender Studies.

We would also like to express deep gratitude to Andrea Petó, a feminist scholar and gender historian, from Central European University, for accepting our invitation to contribute to this volume and for sharing with us her reflections on the challenges that feminist scholars encounter in academia vis-a-vis the current political context in Europe.

Conceptual Framework

The conference and the volume's title draw take impetus from Sara Ahmed's inspiring reflections on happiness as an existential "problem", including for migrants. Ahmed's concept of the 'melancholic migrant' – someone who, when confronted with new and often challenging circumstances involving loss, dispossession, and incongruence, views happiness as central to their adaptation – invites us to reconsider the role of happiness and its relationship to good citizenship. For Ahmed, to "see happily" means, in essence, to exist in conditions free from violence, asymmetry, or coercion (Ahmed 2010: 132).

This theoretical lens prompts us to explore aspects of women's migration and labour that are frequently neglected, particularly how work can serve as a source of self-fulfilment and confidence, or conversely, become a site of alienation and deprivation. Although some facets of migration – such as transition, adaptation, and change – may appear gender-neutral in their impact on professional identity and career opportunities, it is often women who experience heightened vulnerability and whose specific needs and lived experiences warrant closer scholarly attention (Danaj 2022; Strelnyk and Hoops 2024). Adopting a dialectical approach to (un)happiness in the context of women's migration and exile, this volume considers how the negative consequences of migration – regardless of their causes – may be accompanied by melancholy, depression, and a profound sense of insecurity. At the same time, as the presented articles show, these very conditions can open pathways to new opportunities, alternative futures, and personal transformation.

Even though the conference's call for papers was not limited to Eastern Europe, it was not surprising that narratives of the migrant female experience from Ukraine and Belarus dominated the programme. On the one hand, the aftermath of political protest movements in Belarus in 2020–21 and the full-scale invasion of Russia into Ukraine caused mass waves of migration from these countries. The topic, therefore, provoked growing interest among conference attendees, primarily female scholars from Belarus and Ukraine. On the other hand, for decades, the European Humanities University, whose institutional history is a vivid example of the functioning of an academic community in exile, has served as a threshold between post-Soviet and Western academic discourses, providing a platform for internationalising post-Soviet scholars. Consequently, the conference's papers were primarily presented by female scholars from Ukraine and Belarus who had been forced to leave their countries of origin and are currently based in Lithuania, Poland, Georgia, Germany, and Sweden.

Several papers were presented by scholars who came from Ukraine directly and shared their personal experiences and research on the phenomenon of internal migration caused by the military invasion and its consequences. Their work, which explored internal migration and return, made a valuable contribution to the field.

As Magdalena Kmak and Heta Björklund note, “the production of knowledge is certainly affected by scholars’ own individual experiences, incidents, stories and emotions that give meaning to their scientific expression” (Kmak, Björklund 2022: 1). The intersection of gender and migration, as well as the exploration of various sites of vulnerability caused by this positionality, was not merely a research focus but a lived experience that contributed to a particularly intimate atmosphere at the conference. However, as noted above with reference to Ahmed, what was fascinating is that, despite the extreme experience of migration as a radical traumatic break in identity and belonging, the new possibilities and perspectives it provides as a liminal state were the focus of the papers. These new possibilities and perspectives also became central in our informal conversations.

Previous scholarship has addressed how migration and displacement can foster unique experiences, particularly for intellectuals. Edward Said observes that exile allows intellectuals to break from conventional career paths focused on established achievements (Said 1994: 62). As a result, the marginalisation that accompanies migration can prompt straightforward career advancement – driven both by necessity and new opportunities – which may transform gender norms under unusual circumstances. For example, when exploring how displacement affects female academics, there is often a tension between heightened traditional family responsibilities and emerging professional opportunities. This dynamic can produce feelings of guilt among women academics while also deepening their awareness of their social responsibilities as intellectuals (Kiselyova and Ivashchenko 2025: 117). Navigating this negotiation and tension forms the central framework of the issue.

The issue’s overview

The issue is divided into several parts, corresponding to the conference sections’ topics. The authors are female scholars of various ages, cultural backgrounds, migration experiences, and professional expertise. They represent diverse migration paths and locations, encompassing both the places they left (or not) and their current residences. Additionally, they come from different academic cultures, particularly

Western and post-ex-Soviet (Ukrainian and Belarusian), and various disciplines, including sociology, anthropology, economics, gender and cultural studies. The articles primarily rely on ethnographic fieldwork, in-depth qualitative interviews, and quantitative data. Furthermore, several contributions come from non-academics or individuals who operate at the intersection of artistic practices and engaged research. Consequently, the issue features a variety of voices, methodologies, and genres—such as quantitative analyses, anthropological notes, autoethnography, a forum, and essays — that together provide a multidimensional approach to the topic.

The first section “Feminist Agenda in Migration Research” (a title that reflects the work of the conference’s keynote speaker, Volha/Olga Sasunkevich) focuses on the challenges and needs of migrants and refugees from Belarus in Lithuania since 2020. Yana Sanko’s article, “Seeking and Avoiding: Ethnographic Study of Psychological Help for Belarusian Refugees”, examines how displaced Belarusians encounter, interpret, and sometimes resist psychological assistance. The study emphasizes that psychological support is not a neutral resource but is intertwined with issues of agency, social inequality, and historical legacies. In “Crossing Borders: Social and Economic Deprivations of Belarusian Women Migrants in Lithuania”, Natallia Shcherbina explores the long-term and potentially irreversible migration patterns of Belarusians, particularly noting the significant increase in female immigrants during this period. The research identifies key vulnerabilities and adaptation strategies of Belarusian women migrants in Lithuania, aiming to illuminate the factors contributing to their social and economic deprivation.

The next part, “Displacement and Migration as a Challenge for Professional Career: New States of Labour”, explores the roles of women’s NGOs and internal displacement in Ukraine, focusing on challenges faced by displaced women and the impact on their careers and employment. The contribution from Nadiia Pavlyk and Olena Ostapchuk, “Women’s NGOs in Addressing the Challenges of Internally Displaced Persons in Ukraine”, examines how Ukrainian women’s NGOs have supported internally displaced persons, particularly women and children, during the war. The study highlights changes in displaced women’s needs, the challenges NGOs face, and the importance of gender-sensitive, adaptable support. The article “The Impact of Migration on Women’s Professional Identity, Career and Working Conditions: The Case of Internally Displaced Persons in Ukraine” by Lidiya Lisovska and Kateryna Protsak also examines how internal displacement from the war affects women’s employment and integration. The study finds that many displaced women bring entrepreneurial experience and

resilience but face challenges such as skill mismatches and limited job opportunities. Viktoriya Kulyk's study, "Addressing Gender Imbalance in IT Companies in Ukraine", explores gender imbalance in the IT sector, highlighting barriers to women's advancement and the importance of inclusive management and digital technology. The section ends with the article "Dealing With Relocation: Problematic Integration of East European Mothers With Preschoolers in Poland" by Anastasiya Selivanava, who examines the experiences of skilled Eastern European migrant mothers in Poland, highlighting the need for institutional recognition and support to facilitate fuller participation and enhance social cohesion.

The third section, entitled "Intellectual Labour: Displaced Female Scholars' Experience", features three closely interrelated texts. The contribution from Andrea Pető entitled "Getting the Best of 'Unwanted Recognition'" analyzes the systematic attacks on Gender Studies in illiberal states, using personal experiences at Central European University to illustrate how academic freedom is undermined through political, institutional, and social pressures. Tania Arcimovich's article "On the Edge of Failure. Stories of Female Migrant Scholars from Belarus" examines the experiences of displaced female scholars from Belarus, highlighting the barriers they face in maintaining their academic identities after migration. The study calls for more inclusive, gender-sensitive support policies tailored to the unique context of Belarusian scholarly migration. Almira Ousmanova in her text entitled "Dis/placement, dis/location, dis/engagement? Feminist reflections on the production of knowledge in exile" discusses the issue of the production of knowledge in exile in both theoretical and concrete planes, drawing on the study of the nomadic history of the Center for Gender Studies at the European Humanities University, embracing both Belarusian (1997–2004) and Lithuanian period (since 2005 till present).

The section "Affective Discourse of Displacement. Emotions, Care and Infrastructure" focuses on alternative networks of care and feminist strategies for supporting migrants, emphasizing agency, solidarity, and collaborative, non-hierarchical support across communities. The article "When Attitudes Become Infrastructure: Artistic Practices at the Limits of Migration Systems and Institutional Failure" by Antonina Stebur analyzes how artists respond to the failures of migration infrastructure by building alternative systems of collective care. Identifying tactics of invasive, fugitive, and counter-infrastructure, the scholar argues that these practices blur boundaries between art and social work, positioning infrastructural art as a force for solidarity and transformation in times of institutional dysfunction. The following contribution, entitled "Creating Spaces of Solidarity: Gender

Perspectives on Migration and Community Engagement” is a collective interview between activists and art makers – Maria (Maro) Beburia, Marina Naprushkina, Amilia Stanevich and Antonina Stebur who discuss inclusive approaches to migration. They highlight the importance of recognizing migrants’ full identities, fostering agency, and building solidarity across communities, while addressing institutional challenges and advocating for collaborative, non-hierarchical support.

The final section, “I am a refugee: Researching on Oneself”, refers to Hannah Arendt’s renowned essay “We Refugees”, written in 1943. It includes articles that rely directly on self-experience and autoethnography. However, as previously mentioned, the boundary between scholarly and personal writing in the context of this volume’s themes – migration and gender – is quite elusive. Hanna Seliarniova’s article, “Emotional Displacement and the Fragility of Belonging: The Meaning of Homing in Its Transition”, investigates how Belarusian migrants and exiles, displaced since 2020, redefine the concepts of home and belonging amid instability. Through a thematic analysis of thirteen interviews, the research reveals that home is not a static place but rather a mobile, emotional practice sustained through care, memory, and daily routines. Margarita Korzoun’s essay, “No Hope – Single Mother Migrants as a New Precariat: An Autoethnographic Case from Batumi, Georgia”, explores the challenges faced by migrant single mothers in Georgia. It illustrates how the intersection of childcare responsibilities and migration results in professional exclusion, social isolation, and a loss of identity, while also highlighting the role of networking in overcoming these challenges.

We invite readers to engage with the insights and analyses presented in this volume, which together shed light on the intricate intersections of gender, labour, and migration, and the ongoing quest for happiness and fulfilment amidst displacement and change. As the editors of this issue, we hope that these texts will reach their audience – some will consider them useful and essential sources of knowledge for their own research, while others will see them as a gesture of solidarity and emotional support during these difficult times. Both responses are welcome.

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