

Subjectivities of highly skilled lead, tied, and equal migrant mothers

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Abstract

Professionally mobile individuals tend to migrate for career purposes at the prime age of reproduction. This article focuses on highly skilled migrant mothers from different cultural backgrounds living and working in Geneva. The article argues that they inhabit and internalize their identities as—lead, tied, and/or equal—migrants and this impacts ways in which they come to develop their professional and maternal subjectivities. Highly skilled migrant mothers who identified with their tied migrant status developed a neoliberal professional and maternal subjectivity, whereas those who had internalized the lead or equal migrant ideal subjectivities developed liberal feminist professional and maternal selves. The typology of postfeminist/neoliberal versus liberal feminist migrant mothers' subjectivities helps us to better understand the feminist potentials for migration of highly skilled mothers.

KEYWORDS

accompanying spouses, career advancement, highly skilled migrant mothers, mothers and work, subjectivity, trailing spouses

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Career driven, professionally mobile individuals tend to migrate for career purposes in their twenties, thirties, and forties, which corresponds to the prime age of reproduction (Roos, 2013). Career-based international relocations in individuals' lives coincide with the timeframe for forming partnerships that are likely to lead to creating families. There is thus an urgent need to understand how internationally mobile couples deal with their professional and caring roles. Since women are still seen as primarily responsible for rearing children and often assume caring roles, examining how highly skilled migrant women reconcile their roles as professionals, mothers, and migrants is essential to addressing gender inequality. This narrative study enhanced by feminist approaches on migration finds that highly skilled migrant mothers who identified with their tied migrant status developed a postfeminist neoliberal professional and maternal subjectivity, whereas those who had internalized the lead or equal migrant ideal subjectivities developed feminist professional and maternal selves. Whilst the first cohort were blind to gender inequalities, the second cohort actively worked toward reducing it.

Since Kofman's (2000) influential call for higher visibility of skilled female migrants in migration studies, there has been a growing body of work focusing on skilled migrant women. One strand of this literature seeks to understand the multiple structural inequalities migrant women face integrating into labor markets in their host countries causing their "downward occupational mobility" (Jamal Al-deen & Windle, 2017) and/or a full scale "opting-out" and reorientation of energies toward children, home, and family (Ho, 2006; Man, 2004; Orgad, 2019; Riaño & Baghdadi, 2007; Suto, 2009; Yeoh & Willis, 2005). Four intersecting features have been identified as major obstacles to migrant women's employment and career opportunities in the host country, especially when it comes to finding employment in line with their qualifications. First, and most significant, is the mode of migration. Lead migrants demonstrate more positive employment outcomes than tied or equal migrants (Krieger, 2020; Mincer, 1978; Preston & Grimes, 2019; Spadavecchia & Yu, 2021; Zinatsa & Saurombe, 2022). Krieger defines the three categories of migrants in the following way: "*tied migrants* as those whose partner played the decisive role in the migration decision, *lead migrants* as those who themselves played the decisive role in the migration decision, and *equal migrants* as those who report that they were as involved in the decision making process as their partner." (2020:939) Individuals who are transferred by their employers to positions abroad also fall under the category of lead migrants, whilst tied migrants are sometimes referred to as trailing or accompanying spouses (Slobodin, 2017; Taylor & Napier, 1996).

Feminist scholarship has challenged straightforward categorization of men as lead and women as tied migrants and demonstrated that highly skilled migrant women adopt diverse migratory patterns (Acedera & Yeoh, 2019; Madianou & Miller, 2011; Parrenas, 2005; Phoenix, 2011; Pratt, 2012; Tyldum, 2015). It has also provided convincing evidence that highly skilled migrant women who relocate as tied migrants are significantly higher in number and disproportionately more vulnerable in the labor market (Aure, 2013; Santero & Naldini, 2020; Spadavecchia & Yu, 2021; Zinatsa & Saurombe, 2022). However, what is less researched is exactly what conversations, negotiations, settlements, and agreements take place prior to relocation and result in people falling under the categories of lead, tied, or equal migrants.

The second obstruction to highly skilled women's successful employment is labor conditions, such as the particularities of the labor market in the host country, nonrecognition of their skills, and the fact that highly skilled migrant women often find themselves in culture-related professions that heavily rely on social networks for recruitment (Fosslund, 2013; Zinatsa & Saurombe, 2022). The third stumbling block to highly educated migrant women's career success is race and ethnicity. Highly skilled migrant women from white and English-speaking backgrounds show greater employment levels than women who are from racialized and not English-speaking or non-European backgrounds (Lee et al., 2020; Zinatsa & Saurombe, 2022).

However, highly skilled migrant women's maternal and caring roles are believed to be the main obstruction to labor market integration. Research on motherhood and work has established that mothers struggle to reconcile childbearing and care work with career advancement (Blackwell & Glover, 2008; Cahusac & Kanji, 2014; Orgad, 2019; O'Brien, 2019; Stone, 2007; Wong, 2021), a struggle that is considerably exacerbated by international

mobility (Ackers, 2010; Bolzani et al., 2021; Gilmartin, 2016; Hearn & Niemisto, 2012; Kofman, 2000; Kwon, 2023; McKinnish, 2008; Riaño & Baghdadi, 2007; Suto, 2009). Highly skilled migrant mothers are often not eligible for social support systems such as maternity leave and/or institutionalized childcare in the host countries (Santero & Naldini, 2020; Spadavecchia & Yu, 2021), which forces them out of work for extended periods of time and potentially permanently. Furthermore, all highly skilled migrant mothers, irrespective of migrant status, face disproportionate difficulties in accessing childcare due to the lack of family networks and inadequate childcare provision in the host countries (Crowley-Henry, 2007; Gilmartin & Migge, 2016; Kwon, 2023). Finally, “gender-role ideologies that portray women as the primary care provider and men as the primary breadwinner” (Slobodin, 2017: 261) impact negatively on trailing migrant mothers' agency and decision-making. This prevents them from researching immigration laws and employment opportunities in destination countries. It also obstructs negotiations with male partners, inciting fear of social punishment for failure to fulfill the roles of the mother and wife, as well as enhancing employers' discrimination against them (Lee et al., 2020; Santero & Naldini, 2020; Slobodin, 2017). Cultural maternal roles in some cultures also contribute to obstructing highly skilled migrant mothers' pathways to career advancement (Spadavecchia & Yu, 2021). The more these features intersect, the worse the outcome will be. As Camilla Spadavecchia and Jie Yu eloquently put it “when the migrant is a woman, non-European, mother, who migrated to join the partner, and whose migration status is ‘spouse’, this person experiences the lowest level of subjective well-being and the most significant barriers in finding a job” (2021:17).

Structural impediments to mothers' employment and careers associated with gender, care, and motherhood regimes or sexual contracts (Pateman, 1988) have long been the focus of feminist scholarship on motherhood and work. Orgad (2019) explores the reasons behind the choices of highly educated mothers in the 21st century UK to leave paid employment to focus on the family. Although her study does not examine exclusively migrant mothers, she notes that in her sample, “Just over a quarter (10) were migrants who had moved to London in pursuit of professional and creative opportunities, often following their husband's work relocation.” (18) Therefore, a quarter of her sample were either tied or equal migrants. Orgad insists that the patriarchal institutions of workplace and family intersect to push these women out of their careers and/or paid jobs into full time caring roles. To add to the list of patriarchal institutions enumerated by Orgad, it is noteworthy that motherhood has also been theorized as a patriarchal institution. The cultural scripts that define the rules of good mothering constitute what Adrienne Rich famously defined as “the institution of motherhood” (Rich, 1986) which in the last few decades in Western societies has been styled as intensive mothering (Heffernan & Stone, 2021). Orgad observes that the most important feature of the institution of motherhood her respondents were forced to negotiate was the “new sexual contract,” which rests on combining motherhood and successful career” (Orgad, 2019: 28).

While a lot of research in migration studies focuses on understanding highly educated women's and mothers' vulnerabilities in the labor market, yet another body of literature on motherhood and migration seeks to highlight migrant mothers' contributions to host societies and/or give voice to migrant mothers' agency. For example, Gedalof (2009) focuses on migrant mothers' home making and caring practices. She demonstrates that those practices are steeped in migrant mothers' culture of origin and are in productive dialogue with the culture of the host country. As such, the mothering practices migrant mothers engage with prove to be highly creative, transformative, and geared toward their and their children's economic and cultural belonging in the host country. Erel (2009) frames migrant mothers' care and cultural work in nurturing future citizens as another impactful contribution they make to host societies. According to Erel and Reynolds, unpaid care work at home that includes migrant mothers' involvement with their children's education, instruction of language(s), cooking, cleaning, and emotional labor negotiating family's cultural belonging constitute citizenship practices (2019). Tyldum (2015) challenges the dominant narrative in migration studies that conceptualizes migrant mothers as either heroines who sacrifice their own well-being for the sake of a better future for their children, or as victims who are pitied for the sacrifices they made at the point of migration. Tyldum argues that the actual motives behind skilled Ukrainian mothers' migration to Italy, where they fill low status jobs, relate to their determination to eschew lack of opportunities and gender-based violence at home (Tyldum, 2015).

These studies are all extremely valuable contributions to knowledge about highly skilled migrant mothers' experiences. However, the subjective responses of individual migrant mothers to post migration realities and structural inequalities have not yet been adequately addressed. This article fills that gap by focusing on highly skilled migrant mothers from different cultural backgrounds living and working in Geneva, Switzerland. It explores highly skilled migrant mothers' subjective experiences of their intersecting identities as migrants, professionals, and mothers.

The study draws on two further key theoretical frameworks. Firstly, Archer's presentation of "the inner conversation", which happens inside a person's head, but is mediated or structured by external "constraints or enablements" (2003:5) is used to access and articulate migrant mothers' subjective perceptions of their identities as migrants, as professionals, and as mothers. According to Archer, the internal conversation determines what people believe in, desire, and how they intend to go about achieving it, assuming that personal beliefs, desires, and actions can only take place within objective social circumstances and structures that are then either reproduced or transformed by the agents (Archer, 2003). To this end, people establish a set of inner conversation practices around multiple facets of their identity and the different domains of their lives, such as family, parental roles, migrant status, occupation, and the society in which they live. The inner conversations highly skilled migrant mothers had prior and post-migration shed light on their subjectivities as lead, tied, and equal migrants, professionals, and mothers.

Secondly, I take O'Brien's concept of women's "gendered subjectivity" (2019: 83) in relation to work and show its relevance to mothers as workers and migrants. O'Brien examines how women experience gender inequality at work and argues that women workers develop subjective internal relationships with the external gendered expectations imposed on them. She defines gendered subjectivities in relation to work as ways in which "women internalize gender identity and how they come to see and define themselves as women and workers" (Ibid.). I analyze the ways in which the respondents internalize their migrant identities and come to see themselves as professionals/workers and as mothers in relation to their migrant selves. In her typology of the ideal-type gender subjectivities at work that women internalize, O'Brien identifies four types of subjectivities: first, the self as gender "neutral", which involves women self-identifying not as women but as neutral workers who believe to be working in an unbiased, meritocratic context; second, the postfeminist/neoliberal self that sees structural gender inequalities as "something that was already overcome" (O'Brien, 2019: 85); third, the self as insider/outsider defined by a sense of an outsider as a woman but a sense of an insider as an industry expert. Finally, O'Brien posits the feminist self. However, she points out that it "was not in evidence amongst the respondents" (O'Brien, 2019: 85). This article further develops O'Brien's taxonomy of women's subjectivities by proposing a definition of a liberal feminist ideal subjectivity in relation to work. In what follows, I assume that feminist liberal subjectivity implies the 'have it all' attitude that seeks to solve women's work and mothering conflict through demanding effective support structures like childcare. The postfeminist/neoliberal is distinct from the liberal feminist subjectivity in that it converts those liberal feminist demands for equality to the notion of women's individual 'choice' within existing structures of family, motherhood, and work absolving those institutions of their role as perpetrators of discrimination¹.

2 | MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study belongs in the field of narrative research and conceives of the "narrative as an expression of individual experience" (Andrews et al., 2013: 9), which is embedded in social realities and shaped by dominant discourses. A carefully crafted interview schedule combining *events* and *experience-centered* approach was developed to interview highly skilled migrant mothers in Geneva.² It asked them to give an overview of their migration history and to reflect on: at what points of their migratory journeys they prioritized their maternal or their professional roles and how they felt about their situation in terms of maternal and professional arrangements at the time of the interview. The interviews were conducted in either English or French, one of the two *lingua franca* of the international

community in Geneva. Interviews were anonymized, transcribed, and analyzed using four thematic strands: (1) modality of relocation to Geneva; (2) negotiations and settlements agreed on with partners prior to relocation; (3) inner conversations prior to relocation; and (4) subjective responses to post-relocation realities.

Twenty-six interviews with highly educated migrant mothers in Geneva were carried out between 2013 and 2015. All the participants save one had completed tertiary education, many had master's degrees, and some had PhDs or were seeking them at the time of the interview. Legally, both lead and tied migrant mothers had rights to work in Geneva. Participants were recruited using snow-ball sampling of mothers contacted through both a private and a state school in a central neighborhood of Geneva, both densely populated by career migrants. Table 1 details interviewees profiles.

My own positionality is also important. I relocated to Geneva in 2006 with my husband who accepted an advantageous three-year position at an international organization. Our son was born there and for reasons that have been identified in the literature review above and that I further explore in this article, the 3 years that we had planned to spend in Geneva turned into 10. During those 10 years, I was effectively a housewife, financially dependent on my husband, although all the while desperately trying to launch my own academic career. I finally achieved that goal in 2016, which resulted in us all leaving Geneva the following year.

This study has the following limitations. First, it only includes highly skilled migrant mothers in different sex relationships. Power distribution and negotiations in single sex couples might be very different. Second, ways in which different nationalities influence how highly educated migrant mothers negotiated their motherhood and career, including cultural maternal roles in their respective countries was not adequately considered. Finally, the different experiences between highly skilled migrant mothers who moved to Geneva prior to having children and those who arrived with children were not taken into account.

3 | RESULTS

Objectively, highly skilled migrant mothers in this cohort moved to Geneva as tied or lead migrants, whilst subjectively they all considered themselves equal migrants. Conversations leading to the relocation to Geneva that they had with their partners, were not very explicit and focused on careers (theirs or their partners) or relationships (identified as family, love, and children), whilst childcare arrangements and household duties were not discussed. Those conversations resulted in the following settlements: highly skilled migrant mothers entered lead/tied migrant arrangements that subordinated the career of the tied migrant to that of the lead migrant or equal agreements that prioritized both careers. Consistently with the feminist theory terminology of the "sexual contract", in what follows, I call those arrangements and agreements "lead/tied migrant contract" and "equal migrant contract", respectively. The inner conversations prior to relocation revealed that all the highly skilled migrant mothers interviewed had career plans and believed that they would manage to balance out their careers/employment and their relationships. However, while most lead migrant mothers were employed full time at the time of the interview, only a handful of accompanying migrant mothers were formally employed. In terms of ways in which respondents came to see themselves as professionals and as mothers in relation to their migrant status, highly skilled migrant mothers who identified with their tied migrant identities developed postfeminist/neoliberal professional and maternal subjectivities, whereas those who identified with their lead and/or equal migrant identity manifested liberal feminist professional and maternal selves.

3.1 | Modes of relocation

All highly educated migrant mothers reported to have moved to Geneva for professional reasons (including study) or joined their partners. They themselves or their partners at the time were offered "their dream job," a very

TABLE 1 Interviewees profiles.

Name	Origin	Children	Children's age	Partner/ Nationality of partner	Migrant status	Occupation
Maria	Brazil	2	8 and 4	Swiss-German	Lead	Stay at home mother. Designer
Mary	USA	1	7	Legally separated	Tied	Actress, voicer over artist, presenter, artist, journalist, and director
Antonia	Italy	1	3	Italian	Lead	Architect. Humanitarian worker
Bianca	Italy	2	9 and 11	Austrian-French-Swedish	Tied	Stay at home mother and small business owner Former fashion sales manager
Orlagh	Ireland	1	3	British	Tied	Stay at home mother. Part-time PhD student. Former researcher for an NGO in human rights
Rabiaa	France/ Algeria	1	3	French-Spanish	Tied	Project coordinator
Carolina	France	3	7, 5, and 3	French	Lead	Humanitarian worker at an international organization
Zaina	Lebanon	1	1	German	Lead	Employee at an international organization
Agnė	Lithuania	1	6	British	Tied	Stay at home mother. Researcher, journalist
Emilie	China	1	6	Divorced	Lead	Interpreter at an international organization
Francesca	Italy	2	5 and 8	British-Congolese	Lead	Lawyer at an international organization
Natalia	Russia	2	3 and 6	Canadian	Tied	Stay at home mother
Li	China	2	5 and 7	Italian	Tied	Stay at home mother. Chinese teacher, translator
Bella	Italy	2	7 and 9	Italian	Lead	Expert in audio-visual coproduction
Giorgia	Italy	2	6 and 9	German	Tied	Lawyer at an international organization
Angelica	Italy	2	6 and 9	French-Cameroonian	Lead	Humanitarian worker at an international organization
Alessandra	Italy	3	7 and 5 (twins)	Italian	Tied	Stay at home mother. Free-lance photographer
Abla	French	2	9 and 2	French	Lead	Economist at an international organization
Juliette	France	4	11, 8, 6, and 3	Italian	Lead	Public health specialist at an international organization
Bohdana	Ukraine	1	3	Ukrainian	Lead	Academic
Abeba	Zimbabwe	1	11	Single	Lead	Lawyer at an international organization
Adele	Italy	1	7	Divorced	Lead	Economist at an international organization
Armi	Finland	3	7, 5, and 1	Belgian	Lead	Accountant at an international organization
Sita	Germany	3	8, 6, and 4	German	Lead	Humanitarian worker at an international organization

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Name	Origin	Children	Children's age	Partner/ Nationality of partner	Migrant status	Occupation
Gretchen	Germany	3	10, 8, and 6	Divorced	Tied	Medical doctor
Christina	Italian	2	11 and 9	Italian	Lead	Human rights specialist at an international organization

tempting job offer, or simply a job that corresponded to their education and career goals. Therefore, according to the tied migrant theory (Mincer, 1978), they relocated to Geneva as either lead or tied migrants. Five participants moved to Geneva for professional reasons and met their partners while staying there. I consider them to be lead migrants too. However, on the level of decision-making, all participants fall under the category of equal migrants. This is to say that they all reported to have been “as involved in the decision-making process as their partner” (Krieger, 2020: 940) regarding the relocation. Thus, objectively, they were either lead or tied migrants, whilst subjectively they considered themselves to be equal migrants.

3.2 | Conversations and settlements prior to relocation: Lead/tied versus equal migrant contracts

Most highly skilled tied or lead migrant mothers did not have an explicit conversation with their partners about how they would go about advancing their careers or distributing childcare responsibilities before relocation. However, the settlements they agreed on prior to relocation suggest that they implicitly entered a lead/tied migrant contract with their partner stipulating that the lead migrant who initiated the move should benefit from it in terms of career advancement. This is how Francesca, an Italian lead migrant mother put it:

You know, it's like, I wanted to build up my career and that's what I did and [...] I really prioritized, if you wish, my eh... my career, my professional life. Well, he was very...supportive; he's always been very supportive of my professional career since I started working for the UN, I mean, he's always put his own career...at the back, you know, as secondary.

According to this testimony, Francesca's husband was a tied migrant. When asked about childcare arrangements in her family, she explained: “My husband wasn't working at the time when we had children, so he naturally became the main carer.” This suggests that her husband's caring role was naturalized, since his career was already subordinate to hers. Alessandra, an Italian tied migrant mother, and an independent artist describes the same settlement in reverse:

My professional life always came after his. My career has never been prominent or enough for me to be able to tell him: “I need to be in this place to work and I can't come with you.” I was building my career. I was working for a photographer at the time when we got married and wanted to leave that job anyway to start working on my own project without a salary. Things were too vague for me to make calls. And he was the one who had a salary, not me.

Her account suggests that she had equally ambitious career goals as her husband but did not feel she could prioritize them because her career did not guarantee a stable income. The fact that she could afford to work

on her own project without a salary suggests that she had some other source of income outside of her husband's salary but the money her husband made was valued more than the income she could and would generate. When questioned about the childcare arrangements in her family she explained: "I made a choice to live in a couple, to have kids and I knew that meant that a lot of my time will be spent with those people. [...] I need to be available physically and psychologically." This testifies to the fact that she undertakes most if not all the childcare duties in line with the idea of the patriarchal motherhood institution, which requires that mothers spend most of their time with their children and are always attuned to their children's and husbands' needs (Rich, 1986: 22). To sum up, the tacit lead/tied migrant contract stipulates that the career of the lead migrant would be prioritized, that they would provide for the family while the tied migrant would shoulder the lion's share of the physical, emotional, and mental load of childcare, and household responsibilities, as well as finding a job and/or developing their own career. Consequently, tied/lead migrant contract subordinates the career of the tied migrant to that of the lead migrant and significantly hinders their pathway to career advancement, labor market integration, and economic independence. Furthermore, tied-migrant mothers' career advancement is further obstructed by all the vulnerabilities of trailing migrant women in the job market detailed in the introduction to this article.

A minority of participants had explicitly agreed with their male partners to prioritize both careers thus ostensibly entering an equal migrant contract. For some, the agreement entailed that both partners would look for jobs and follow the person who found a job first. For example, Armi, a Finnish lead migrant, reported:

I arrived in Geneva [...] from Kenya, Nairobi, where I had worked for five years for... United Nations office. I met my... husband to be there, but he was not from Kenya, and he was from Belgium, he also worked for the UN and... after five years there we wanted to come back to Europe and we were both ah...looking for jobs and decided the one who gets a job in Europe first, that's where we go. And it was me.

Other falsely equal migrant agreements were guided by the idea of patriarchal motherhood institution interlinked with patriarchal family that lives together where father is the main breadwinner, as illustrated by a tied migrant mother who was successfully employed full time after the move, although not in her "dream job" and not under a permanent contract:

We were living in different cities as a couple. [...] Although we were married, we had two different apartments, two lives and working lives, but when you are expecting your first child, then you have to decide whether you want to keep the same structure or not. We thought it was better to reunite the family in one city. [...] My husband pushed for me to resign, because he was sure I would find the exact same position here. I am still looking for that job.

Such agreements, even if subjectively experienced as equal, are still rooted in a tied/lead migrant logic that subordinates the career of the accompanying migrant to that of the lead migrant.

Conversely, one participant, Carolina, a lead migrant and a mother of three presented a more viable version of an equal migrant contract she had negotiated with her partner:

So we had agreed to follow one another and this is what we have really done. I had a position in New York, he followed me. Then I followed him to Addis Ababa in Ethiopia and this is where I was twice pregnant. Then we came back to Geneva. He followed me to Geneva. [...] In all cases, the person who followed always also found a job.

As this quotation demonstrates, Carolina had agreed with her partner to prioritize both their careers over time as opposed to momentarily. This is how Carolina reflected on her couple's internal conversation throughout her professional and maternal migrant trajectory:

We had many discussions on whether it was really worth it, that maybe it was not the best strategy, that maybe if one of us had a very good career, he or she should get on with it and the other one not, but I don't think it would be fair. I find it is important to both have the same thing. Yes, maybe slow down, maybe not go as far as one could have, but for us it has been important that both should be involved in the children's upbringing.

This account demonstrates the couple's strategy to maximize the family well-being whilst working on the principle that both need to advance their careers, earn a living, shoulder household duties, and care for the children. Consequently, the equality contract prioritizing both migrants' careers over time stipulates that both migrants would accept to occupy a vulnerable position for a definite or indefinite amount of time. Both partners would accept not knowing whether the tied migrant would find a job, whether their partner would keep their promise to follow them back, earning less or not at all for a while. Respondents of this study reported that periods of transition and uncertainty varied in duration and were strenuous for all. From this perspective, the equal migrant contract can only be conceived as equal in terms of equally assuming periods of vulnerability. However, the vulnerabilities of women who go through pregnancies, pregnancy losses, births, potential still births, breastfeeding, career interruptions due to maternity leave, and may not always have access to paid maternity leave are much higher than the vulnerabilities to which men/fathers are subject.

Finally, equal migrant contracts are embedded in extreme privilege. Most respondents who entered those contracts were of European origin, enjoyed unrestricted movement in the world, high financial stability, and job security (their employers would keep similar positions open for them for several years). The very small group of highly skilled migrant mothers whose equal migrant contracts worked out in Geneva were the ones whose partners were from white European backgrounds, whose professional profiles were finance related and/or who only moved in together in Geneva when both had secured jobs in their chosen career fields.

4 | INTERNAL CONVERSATIONS PRIOR TO RELOCATION: BALANCING OUT CAREERS AND RELATIONSHIPS

Based on their inner conversations prior to relocation, all the highly skilled migrant mothers interviewed irrespective of the mode of migration believed that they would manage to balance out their careers with their relationships. Tied highly skilled migrant mothers like lead migrants expected to continue with their professional lives after the relocation, as illustrated by the following quotations: "I thought I would find the same job," or "I thought I would find a job" in Geneva. Those who were somewhat dissatisfied with their careers/jobs prior to the move assumed that "new avenues would open up" for them. Even Natalia from Russia, who had explicitly signed a tied migrant contract with her husband prior to the move, articulated a different agenda through internal conversation:

My husband thought it was a lot better if one person goes out to work and brings in money and the other one stays at home and runs the household and looks after the children. I told him I agreed, but inside I thought that I'd find some way around it, I'd find some other place for myself.

It seems that she had always planned to honor her professional self and acted on it as she was trying to set up a specialized school for Russian children at the time of the interview.

Where the pronounced differences between highly skilled migrant mothers occurred, were the ways in which they imagined their family relationships. Lead migrants expected to be supported by their partners and childcare services. Some tied migrant mothers expected to equally share the household and mothering duties with their partners, whilst others assumed that it was their responsibility to undertake childcare and household duties (whether they provided them themselves or partly outsourced them). Post migration reality demonstrated that lead migrants were either supported in those tasks by their partners and/or arranged their childcare/domestic help provisions themselves as they saw fit. Conversely, tied migrant mothers navigated a bumpier terrain: they could not always pick and choose their childcare/household arrangements. Ways in which they talked about their career paths and maternal responsibilities suggested that there was a link between their migrant status, their professional and maternal selves.

5 | EMERGING SUBJECTIVITIES POST-RELOCATION: HOW THE MIGRANT STATUS IS INTERNALIZED?

According to O'Brien (2019), subjectivities are internalized aspects of socially imposed identities. People inhabit gendered identities differently. Highly skilled migrant mothers' inner conversations revealed that they inhabited lead, tied, or equal migrant identity categories in different ways that in turn shaped their subjectivities as professionals and as mothers. Following O'Brien's typology of internalized "ideal-type subjectivities," two ideal-type subjectivities emerged in the sample, namely postfeminist/neoliberal and liberal feminist. Highly skilled migrant mothers who identified with their tied migrant status developed a postfeminist/neoliberal professional and maternal subjectivity, whereas those who had internalized the lead or tied/equal migrant ideal subjectivities developed feminist professional and maternal selves.

6 | POST-FEMINIST/NEOLIBERAL SUBJECTIVITIES

Highly skilled mothers who internalized tied-migrant ideal-type subjectivity conceptualized their professional and mothering selves in a post-feminist/neoliberal way. According to O'Brien, women who internalized the post-feminist/neoliberal self-assumed "that feminist battles had been won, that gender equality now existed, and that they should as individuals verify this state of affair through their own individual success. If they failed to succeed, that failure was their individual responsibility, divorced from any broader gendered, social or economic structure". (90) Thus, the postfeminist/neoliberal self is self-responsibilizing, self-policing, self-blaming, self-doubting, and self-disguising around gender inequalities (*Ibid.*, 85). Highly skilled tied-migrant mothers I interviewed justified their unequal mothering settings through the idea of a falsely egalitarian neoliberal middle-class family which "becomes a kind of unit or team, a partnership of equals, even if this means a stay-home Mum and full-time working father. In contemporary parlance such a settlement reflects a team decision, one which could be easily reversed" (McRobbie, 2013, 130). McRobbie points out that such uneven settlements are hardly reversible and argues that professionalization of the caring role—efficient housekeeping, seeing a family as a small business and children as human capital as well as the emphasis on private childcare provided by paid help or stay-home parents—are all part of postfeminist neoliberal ideology. This is how it shapes Natalia's understanding of her maternal and professional roles:

I'm running a household, taking care of the kids, living for the kids. He really wants me to maintain the house and the family and I am so not designed for this kind of work. [...] but the most important job in life for women is to raise their children. To give birth and have kids is very important for women, but they have to do something extra. I am always trying to find a happy balance between my family and

creative or professional life, but I'd never sacrifice the luxury of bringing up my children myself. To raise young children and turn them into successful people is the most important task for me at this moment in time.

Natalia, who is a trained designer, adopts managerial vocabulary to describe her mothering practice. She runs a household as a business and sees the time spent with the children as a luxury and an investment into their future. She admits that she is not cut out for such work but insists that it is up to her to find a "happy balance" between the domestic, the caring role, and her professional ambition that is subordinate to that of her husband's and to her role as a mother and a wife. Finding the balance between a successful career and an intensive motherhood ideal is at the heart of neoliberal and popular feminism, which rather than challenging silences "discontent regarding a dizzying array of inequalities facing women, minorities, and precarious populations." (Banet-Weiser et al., 2019: 18) The silencing of the discontent is loud in Natalia's account and is traceable in Bianca's, who is an outstandingly successful former entrepreneur, testimony.

Bianca's story illustrates another iteration of postfeminist/neoliberal maternal and professional subjectivity under the unequal tied migrant contract consisting of living the maternal and the professional selves at different moments in highly skilled migrant mothers' lives. Bianca said:

My husband was offered a very good career opportunity here in Geneva and he suggested moving. I accepted, even though for me it meant leaving my job, my career, my everything. I agreed because I had worked all my life, I had already had a brilliant career and I felt it was time to give my life a change. Since I knew we could only count on ourselves, as we had no family around, the choice to look after my family felt good. [...] Work is not everything, you know, it helps you feel more complete and gives a certain social status, but the real joy of life comes from everyday little achievements that can be hard to see with the eyes of a businesswoman but are easy to find with the eyes of a woman.

The quotation suggests that despite agreeing to a tied-migrant status, Bianca experiences a tinge of nostalgia for the personal fulfillment her former professional life brought her. The undeniable sense of pride she takes in her career makes the pleasure of looking after her children now inextricable from her former success as a businesswoman. Similarly, Li, a tied migrant mother from China, explained:

I have changed since moving to Geneva. I've become family, not career oriented. My husband works a lot and if I did the same, we wouldn't have any quality of life. Now, that the children are older, I am enjoying my free time – practicing the piano, learning French. I know that I am doing good for my family – my children are looked after, my husband has favourable conditions for his career, and I am not wasting my time either, I keep my options open for the future.

This testimony discloses the internalized neoliberal quality of self-policing in terms of adapting to what Orgad calls "toxic work cultures" (45). Li takes the responsibility of alleviating the pressure of her husband's long working hours onto herself and makes it her business to improve the quality of all of their lives by shouldering the childcare and household responsibilities as well as putting her career on hold until the indefinite future. The key phrase—"I have changed"—speaks to the pressure on tied migrant mothers to adapt the aspects of their selves that are in conflict with the external inequalities. Li was a successful teacher back in China and was forced to adapt her occupation due to the pressures arising from the lack of childcare, her husband's toxic work culture, a neoliberal idea of the family, and the job market in Geneva that did not accommodate her former career. As it happens, tied/lead migrant settlement is not always articulated prior to the move, but even if it is, highly skilled migrant mothers might find it hard to anticipate the impact of such an agreement on their lives after the relocation. Arguably, the fact that these

mothers had played an equal role in making the decision to move to Geneva and accepted a tied-migrant contract made it even harder for them to articulate their frustration and the sense of injustice.

7 | LIBERAL FEMINIST SUBJECTIVITY

Many highly skilled lead or equal migrant mothers had internalized the equal migrant ideal subjectivity and as such developed liberal feminist professional and maternal selves. They identified as feminists and subscribed to the principles of liberal feminism (Bittman, 2001). The liberal feminist is self-sufficient, she values financial and other forms of independence, the rights to paid employment as opposed to unpaid work at home, competes with men for the privileges of a career as well as the inclusion of men in childcare and housework (Rottenberg, 2017: 331). Thus, the liberal feminist subjectivity aspires to a fulfilling career and/or a sufficiently paid job whilst mothering to her satisfaction and together with her partner of choice (Eichner, 2021). Finally, the liberal feminist self is proactive in creating the kind of life for herself where a fulfilling career is compatible with satisfying mothering and endeavors to eliminate the external obstructions to her aspired life. The feminist self is responsible and political; it recognizes structural inequalities that affect them, reflects and acts upon them seeking structural change in transforming their workplaces and families. The feminist self feels it is her right to work, mother, and relocate on her own terms. After all, this was the promise she was given by the previous generation of second-wave feminists: she was supposed to be able “to have it all”. This model of liberal feminist self was evident in the data. In the words of an Italian lead migrant mother, Angelica:

If you had asked me before [my daughter] was born about what I thought of gender equality, women's rights in working and family settings, I would have said: "We're fine." And then you start opening your eyes on the entrenched behaviours and mentalities that are very difficult to change, including that of my husband. It's about the way you divide labour, responsibilities with the children. You just realise that there is a lot of work to be done. There is a huge confidence gap because of the way we are socialised. Also, it's all about organizational structure, nothing helps and supports, when you try and go forward with your career while you have children.

Angelica had an equal agreement with her husband to try and both find jobs in Geneva but at the time of the interview this had not happened and was unlikely to happen. Thus, she lived in Geneva with her two daughters and a live-in nanny, whilst her husband still lived abroad. He would come to stay with them regularly and for several weeklong visits, which was not ideal, but she felt that her needs as a mother and professional were met: “Coming to Geneva was not only because I wanted to put my daughter in a safe environment, but also the nature of my work is different. I gained a lot in terms of serenity and time with my children.” Once she realised that as a mother, she could no longer do the dangerous work she used to do, she demanded a transfer and was granted it. Consequently, her liberal feminist subjectivity rests upon the equal migrant contract she had with her husband but is largely possible to her privilege, not the least, her privilege to relocate to Geneva as a lead migrant.

All migrant mothers in this study reflected on their mothering experience in relation to work and stayed tuned to their needs and desires as mothers. The dominant theme in this respect was the complementarity and profound interconnectedness of their professional and maternal subjectivities. Lead migrants in high status jobs voiced and acted out their liberal feminist professional and maternal selves most prominently. However, some accompanying migrant mothers also demonstrated liberal feminist maternal and professional selves. As Mary, an independent artist from the US who had followed a love interest to Geneva puts it:

To give up my career, which to me is a piece of me, it would be like cutting my heart out, to be a mother. No, I had to be a mother and include what I do because what I do is my passion and it is a very strong, inherent part of who I am [...] it's my soul, and if you... I couldn't give up my soul to bring another soul into the world but I could share my soul with that little one. My son has been part of my working life since he was in the womb until now.

Mary struggled professionally and as a mother in Geneva due to the language barrier, difficult access to childcare, and financial as well as emotional abuse she suffered at the hands of her husband but that did not stop her in her efforts to continue her career as well as mothering.

Respondents whose equal migrant contracts had not only been premeditated, explicitly discussed, and supported by the relative financial equality within the couple were able to act in line with their liberal feminist selves most productively. Carolina, the Italian lead migrant who had an equal settlement with her husband to follow one another in turn, negotiated her own terms of career advancement, mothering, and relocation both at work and at home. When it was her turn to follow her husband, she first tried to see whether she could work remotely or negotiate a schedule of dividing her time between Bangkok, where her husband was going, and Geneva, where she aspired to keep the job that she enjoyed and cherished. Since her husband had relocated first and she stayed behind with the children for almost a year, it was important for her to make sure that the care was as equally divided between them as possible. Thus, it was decided that the children would go to live with him for some time while she negotiated favorable terms for her own relocation. In the end, she successfully negotiated a career break and joined them in Bangkok. Considering that the entire family reunited in Geneva 2 years later, one has to acknowledge that had she not continued her negotiations at home and at work, the positive outcome would never have materialized.

Alas, such success stories were few. Mostly, migrant mothers' efforts to accommodate their maternal and professional selves resulted in dramatically less positive outcomes including job loss, career abandonment or disintegration of the family. However, the disintegration of the family in the context of international career and mothering arrangements can be seen as migrant mothers' feminist bid to transform the patriarchal family. For example, Abla who is French, followed her partner twice – to Asia where they had a child together, then to Italy, where he had a good job offer but she could not find a job in her area of expertise. After a short stint working in Africa where she went alone and took their daughter with her, she found a job in Geneva which was close to Rome where her partner was working and was going to facilitate reuniting the family. Alas, when he failed to make an effort to join her and their daughter in Geneva, she initiated separation. This was a liberal feminist move to leave an unequal family setting where only one person was willing to accommodate the other(s) and make sacrifices. She subsequently met another partner and had another child with him. It is thus obvious that some highly educated migrant mothers managed to resist gender inequalities as well as constraining patriarchal structures at home and at work for better personal outcomes. Importantly, those who did manage to pull it off were all of European origin, educated in Europe, and all worked in the field of humanitarian work.

8 | CONCLUSION

The categories of lead and tied migrant are deeply rooted in power relations in which lead migrants hold a lot of power and tied migrants are vulnerable. This is also true in this data featuring highly skilled migrant mothers. Lead/tied migrant power dynamic introduces a sharp hierarchy subordinating the careers of tied migrants to those of lead migrants and by doing so imposes certain aspects of their work cultures and mothering practices on tied migrants. Lead migrant mothers in the sample demonstrated a lot of freedom to work, mother, and relocate on their terms whilst tied migrant mothers found themselves having to adapt and change aspects of themselves, most notably in relation to their professional and maternal selves. They were also less free to relocate on their terms.

This suggests that migration may help lead migrant mothers to assume a “de-facto” household head position, which elevates them from the “second earner” position presumed in many households.

The category of an equal migrant proposed by Krieger (2020) is uncertain yet useful. First, it helps to articulate the hierarchy of lead versus tied migrants. In this sample, all highly educated migrant mothers reported to have participated in making the decision to move but it had not protected the equal migrant mothers who relocated as trailing or accompanying spouses from the vulnerabilities of tied migrants. Second, the category of an equal migrant introduces the importance of negotiations within the migrant couple. The lack of a conversation about how migrants are going to coordinate the development of their careers, parental, and family relationships is another factor hindering highly skilled migrant mothers' careers. Thus, the identity of an equal migrant, if significantly developed and adopted, could result in egalitarian professional and maternal subjectivities that would contribute to alleviating gender inequalities in migrant settings.

Finally, the current study demonstrates how highly educated migrant mothers battle unequal expectations imposed on them as wives, how they yield to the many demands of the institution of motherhood and suffer from the effects of toxic work cultures (their own and their partners'). The typology of postfeminist/neoliberal versus liberal feminist migrant mothers' subjectivities helps us to better understand the feminist potentials for migration of highly skilled mothers. Upon migration, women's work life is unflinchingly tied to household dynamics (which may be easier to ignore in other circumstances) and thus has a distinct impact on women's work life. Thus, the liberal feminist subjectivity at least helps acknowledge the uneven playing field they stand on and give them agency to make the demands, set up negotiations, and secure some partial victories.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ These terminologies are each debated in other arenas (Banet-Weiser et al., 2019; McRobbie, 2020; Rottenberg, 2018) but I feel that the distinction is critical to my analysis as I have defined it.
- ² I would like acknowledge the photographer, Marina Cavazza, who I collaborated with in Geneva on the book “Portrait d'une mère (qui travaille) / Portrait of a (Working) Mother” and who contributed to developing the questionnaire.

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