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Early urbanization in the Gabrovo textile industry region in Bulgaria. Women's labour mobility¹

Wczesna urbanizacja w regionie przemysłowym Gabrowa w Bułgarii. Mobilność zawodowa kobiet

Abstract

The article traces the process of transformation and the stages through which women's labour mobility in the Gabrovo region passed. If in the pre-modern era seasonal work outside the home was linked to the agrarian cycle, when girls from the mountain villages went down to the fields in the harvest seasons (a journey called "going to Romanya"), then in the years of early modernization they were employed in the Gabrovo weaving factories as workers, and some of them became servants with the rich Gabrovo families. The entrenched development of the textile industry in Gabrovo in the first half of the 20th century led to a radical change in the life attitudes and labour migration strategies of girls from the mountain villages of the Gabrovo region. It was also a major catalyst for cultural changes in the villages in the decades between the two world wars.

Key words: female labour mobility, Gabrovo, textile industry, servitude, factory workers

Abstrakt

Artykuł śledzi proces transformacji i etapy, przez które przeszła mobilność zawodowa kobiet w regionie Gabrowa. Jeśli w epoce przednowoczesnej praca sezonowa poza domem była związana z cyklem agrarnym, kiedy dziewczęta z górskich wiosek schodziły na pola w okresie żniw (podróż zwana „pójściem

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do Romanii”), to w latach wczesnej modernizacji były zatrudniane w fabrykach tkackich Gabrowa jako robotnice, a niektóre z nich stały się służącymi w bogatych rodzinach Gabrowa. Ugruntowany rozwój przemysłu tekstylnego w Gabrowie w pierwszej połowie XX wieku doprowadził do radykalnej zmiany postaw życiowych i strategii migracji zarobkowej dziewcząt z górskich wiosek tego regionu. Był to również główny katalizator zmian kulturowych w wioskach w okresie międzywojennym.

Słowa kluczowe: mobilność zawodowa kobiet, Gabrowo, przemysł tekstylny, poddaństwo, robotnice fabryczne

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Seasonal labour mobility over a long period of time is a social phenomenon that has marked social life in Bulgaria. The leading reasons for seeking work outside the home area were primarily economic rather than political, as evidenced by its progressive increase both before and after the liberation of Bulgaria. Moreover, the Gabrovo region, like other mountainous regions in the country, is a good example of this social phenomenon as it is characterized in the pre-modern era by intensive female, mainly maiden, agrarian labour mobility in the harvest seasons. The Bulgarian tradition, however, is no exception; in the pre-modern era and in the decades of early modernization in the second half of the 19th century, seasonal migrations in the agrarian sphere were mainly expressed in the movement of labour from the mountains (areas characteristic of the Balkans, according to Fernand Braudel, “for their archaism and scarcity”) to the rich plains and river valleys, especially in the harvest seasons (“the harvest”), a process characteristic of the entire Balkan-Mediterranean area (Braudel 1998: 30, 40-43, 51-53).

The rapid development of textile industry in Gabrovo in the decades of early modernization in Bulgaria led to the introduction of new modern and contemporary machinery into the agrarian economy. The new labour model rapidly changed the nature of young women’s employment. New forms of work emerged, and this completely changed the perceptions and attitudes of the society. An increasing number of young women from the Balkan regions were hired as textile factory workers, and some of them even as servants, especially in Gabrovo, but also in Sofia, Plovdiv, Stara Zagora also and many other cities around the country.

The form of female labour mobility developed over a long period of time, consisted of young women, divided into groups and led by *dragomanin*,² going down to Thrace Valley, where the wheat ripens for about a month before this happens in the mountain regions. The *dragomanin* had an important role; they helped the girls find work and organize their journey. Most often the girls from Gabrovo went down to harvest in

² “Elderly, respectable and experienced persons” (Tsonchev 1996/1929: 39).

Southern Bulgaria – the regions of Stara Zagora, Yambol, Chirpan, Burgas, Kazanlak, and ones from some of the villages went to Northern Bulgaria: Lovech, Veliko Tarnovo.

Petar Tsonchev, an expert on the economic, social and cultural past of Gabrovo, noted that “is not known exactly when” the seasonal labour mobility had started, “but every case it was before the 19th century” (Tsonchev 1996/1929: 36). The leading reasons for seeking work outside the home region were primarily economic rather than political, as evidenced by its progressive increase both before and after the liberation of Bulgaria. Moreover, intensive female agrarian labour mobility in the harvest seasons as evident the Gabrovo region was no different from other mountainous regions in the country in the pre-modern era.

Going to a harvest – *na Rumanya*,³ as it was known in the region – was distinguished not only by its duration as a social phenomenon, but also by its mass occurrence; Peter Tsonchev published reports from the middle of the 19th century that “annually there were more than 1000-2000 reapers, mostly girls” (Tsonchev 1996/1929: 42). This is what he wrote:

It has been a practice in Gabrovo since the old days that every girl, as soon as she was marriageable, regardless of her parents' material condition, had to go to *na Rumanya* at least once, if not every summer, until she was married. When the month of June came, the maidens “seemed to turn red”, their parents often said. They welcomed this time with joy, although they know from stories and experience that hard work waited for them (Tsonchev 1996/1929: 39).

In the fields, the young women were guided by a *chakumdzijka*, an experienced maiden, who also took care of the distribution of the food brought by the field owners. Harvesting was intensive every day, for the duration of twelve to twenty days. Usually, the harvest in the field was over by St. Peter's Day. Then the owners made a festive lunch for everybody, and the girls joined in the festivities in the village. Payment for the work was made to the *dragomanin*, who distributed the money received among the reapers according to the wages earned. The maidens used the money they earned towards the preparations for their wedding, and by the 1920s they were buying the necessary materials themselves at the market in Gabrovo.⁴

³ “Today the geographical meaning of this word (*Rumanya*) is almost lost and it means only harvest work” (Tsonchev 1996/1929: 42). Kuyo Kuev derives the genesis of the name “Rumanya” from the era of Emperor Constantine the Great (4th century) and the transfer of the capital to Constantinople (year 330), when the Balkan possessions of the Eastern Roman Empire (in particular Macedonia and Thrace) were called Rumanya; cf. Kuev 1946: 22-31. In folk ideas and folklore, it is the name for Thrace.

⁴ The extent of young women's labour mobility during the harvest season is evidenced by the fact that there was not a village in the Gabrovo region that did not have at least one *dragomanin*, and some had more. In the village of Agatovo, for example, there were two *dragomanin* leading the young women “to the field”; the narrative by I.V., born 1922 in Agatovo (personal archive).

Two or three days after their return, dressed in festive attire, the Rumanya women went down to the market in Gabrovo to buy with the money they have earned the most necessary things – cotton yarn, wool, shoes, some ornaments such as earrings, a ring, a coin, etc. In the days of the Rumanya women's return, there was a great animation among the merchants and craftsmen, especially when they came home with more money earned, as the *allash-verish* (bargains) became greater (Tsontchev 1996/1929: 42).

The aim of the research on young women's labour mobility is to trace the process of change in the social life of the region, and above all the economic, social and cultural dimensions of this change. Gabrovo is located in the central part of Bulgaria; it is a region saturated with different cultures, bringing together people from different backgrounds, traditions, and religions. This is an extremely important prerequisite for the developed processes and is the reason why it was chosen as the focus of the case study.

The development of research in this direction illuminates the social changes that occurred, contributes to clarifying the transformations in the family model, and generally highlights the paths for the early modernization of the Bulgarian village. The studies bring to the fore the change in everyday life under the influence of urban patterns of behaviour. All of this also allows the historical patterns of female labour mobility in Bulgaria to be outlined.

In Gabrovo region, labour mobility in the field of domestic service preceded the mass employment of young women in weaving factories. Field research so far shows that the needs of the declining bourgeoisie in the capital and some other major cities in the country, such as Plovdiv and Ruse, created a demand for servant girls from many regions of the country. This process did not bypass Gabrovo and the villages in the region, and we have records of maids in wealthy Gabrovo families from the late 19th century. The liberation of Bulgaria also changed the nature of textile production in Gabrovo and the region, quickly becoming a defining economic sector of the town.

The diversity of the Gabrovo region was discernible in all forms of community life. Several published documents from the series "Statement of the State of the Sevlievo District" contain interesting data on the development of the region in the period 1890 to 1898. At that time, Gabrovo was part of the larger Sevlievo district. According to the 1893 national census, the district had over 95,000 inhabitants, of whom 34,000 were in the Gabrovo region. At the end of the nineteenth century, there were ninety-seven 5-grade schools in the county and 92 primary schools; 44 of all school buildings were built after the liberation. The statistics give us very important information about the number of students and their origins. The ratios of the girls and boys in the schools coming from the town and those from the surrounding villages are widely different. In the year under review, there were 640 boys and 462 girls in Gabrovo, of whom 515 boys and 456 girls attended school. The statistics for the children born in the villages differ considerably. In the same period, there were 2,346 boys and 1,357 girls of school age.

Of these, 2,099 boys and only 519 girls attended school. The number of village girls who went to school is much less than the total enrolment, and the number of graduates is far less than those enrolled in the first grade. The largest number of children left school in the first grade and these were mostly boys from the villages. The main reasons for these social processes included the remoteness of the villages, the poor condition of the roads, and the insufficient number of schools there. There was a Sunday school with 40-50 students, but no evening school. According to the records for 1898, in that year considerable outlay was made for the maintenance of the roads in the county, for the renovation of the schools, for aid to poor pupils, for doctors and paramedics, for the extermination of noxious insects, and even for the binding of books in the library. Also, the enactment of the law for wearing locally made clothing and shoes led to an upsurge in light industry in the region, primarily in textiles.

A special place in the published documents is given to the livelihood of the population. In the reviewed period, the population subsisted on agriculture (viticulture, silk-growing, fruit-growing, tobacco, beekeeping, etc.), cattle breeding, trade and, above all, industry: "In industry, the county stands almost first in the principality. In recent years much progress has been made both in the quality and the quantity produced – check, cotton, and woollen cloth".⁵ Many of the factories in the town and region worked on imported raw materials, mostly from Germany, Austria-Hungary, Belgium or Russia. Each factory produced tens of thousands of meters of fabric and tens of tonnes of goods per year. Much of the production was exported to foreign markets: Turkey, Romania, Serbia, Asia Minor. In addition to weaving factories, knitting factories, a brewery, a gunpowder factory, a flour mill, others were established and operated in the region. There were also ten tanneries, which processed twenty thousand skins a year.

The same sources with statistical data on the economic and demographic situation of the surrounding area at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century contain information that after the liberation, crafts began to decline. This had a particularly strong impact on the typical crafts of the region: carpentry, pottery, trouser-making, ironwork, knife-making, candle-making and soap-making. But this was far from being the only problem for the local population. It is noted in the documents that due to lack of sewerage, during rainy weather, water in the taps was murky and unfit for use. Special mention is also made of the diseases prevalent in the period under review: dysentery (250 people), parotitis (118), influenza (157), diphtheria (68), scarlet fever (20), typhus (11), syphilis (322), and otitis (271). Every summer the number of dysentery patients increased, and the syphilis patients were mainly from the mountain villages. All this information gives us a better overview of the local population's everyday life.

In this difficult environment, people were constantly looking for ways to secure better living conditions and better-paid work. Gradually, along with industrial progress,

⁵ "Statement on the State of the Sevlievo District – 1890-1898".

new opportunities appeared throughout the country, and they were mostly for young unmarried women. Women's labour was increasing. In that times, young women had the right to choose, on the one hand, whether to take to contract labour and on the other, what kind of labour that would be. The most popular were two options: they could become factory workers or they could find domestic work in the home of a bourgeois family where they would look after the house and the children.

The region's rapid urbanization brought with it several social and domestic changes. Villages in the surrounding area were being depopulated and agricultural labour was largely being replaced by industrial work. The newly opened textile factories soon became an attraction for young women from the highland villages and from all over the country. As Peter Tsontchev observes, "[i]n the factories, mostly textile establishments, only girls (note: during the 1899–1908 reporting period the working day was 14 hours) were engaged, at the age of 10–20, when boys were at school". And he adds: "The servants in rich houses were in no better position" (Tsontchev 1996/1929: 42). Indicative of the extent of economic and social change in Gabrovo is the fact that, according to the information received from Krasimira Cholakova, the long-time director of the Gabrovo Museum, at the time of nationalization, there were 463 factories in the town alone, of which at least 200 were textile factories.

The life of factory workers, both men and women, in Gabrovo has been relatively well studied, but primarily with regard to the struggles for labour rights and the specifics of Gabrovo entrepreneurship in the first half of the 20th century. Documents from this period, as well as life stories, are preserved in local archives. For the completeness and objectivity of the study, it should be noted that the quoted life narratives were collected in the early 1960s. Given the changes that occurred in the political and social situation of the country in the middle of the century, certain deliberateness is admitted in their collection and preservation. This thesis is supported by the lack of conflicting information in the various narratives. Their large number, however, cannot be underestimated, which is why they find a place in the general picture of the development of the city's factory industry.

The stories of respondents testify that girls from the villages surrounding Gabrovo were employed in the factories immediately after completing their primary education, and often earlier. Gabrovo women were distinguished by their clothing:

The women from Gabrovo, even when they were wearing their traditional clothes, wore them without aprons. The women living in the mountain village huts all had aprons. Gabrovo women didn't wear aprons; you could see who was a servant by the apron. In the "Prince Cyril" factory all the girls were from the mountain villages and all of them were wearing aprons (K. Ch., Gabrovo).⁶

⁶ Archive IEFSEM-BAS № 1183-III.

One of the girls' main motives for wanting to work in the textile factories, besides the pay, albeit minimal, which they received, was the practice of the factory owners giving them Singer sewing machines after a certain period of time, usually two or three years. According to our research, after the 1920s a sewing machine, along with a dresser, became an emblematic part of the trousseau of a Gabrovo hut girl. In the recollections of the people who organized the textile workers' strike in 1937, one of the reasons for its outbreak was the refusal of the employers to honour the girls' contract and to give them the Singers when it expired.

Archival material highlights the aspects of harsh working conditions, lack of safety measures for workers, and the employment of underage girls and boys. Without the necessary training and in the absence of protective provisions, accidents were frequent. These conditions remained unchanged until the 1930s, when the first safety measures began to appear. Physical punishment by guards was frequent, and harsh language was commonplace. Workers were fined in the event of a machinery breakdown. Also noteworthy is the evidence of poor living conditions in the dormitories adjacent to the factories, which lacked heating and running water and whose cleanliness was questionable to say the least. Numerous cases were reported of fifteen girls living in dark, damp and cold rooms no larger than 16 square metres. Only those who had brought blankets with them when they started work were well wrapped against the cold. Often girls were forced to sleep on the ground, and providing work clothes was out of the question. The only lighting available was by gas lamps and those were only used at mealtimes. Invasions by pests, such as bedbugs, were also a daily occurrence. Very often, forced by the difficult financial situation, girls started working in the factories as early as fifteen years of age. Working hours often exceeded ten hours a day, and breaks did not exceed a total of thirty minutes per shift.

In the 1920s Peter Tsontchev made an interesting survey of factory workers in Gabrovo enterprises. Its conclusions do not fully support the facts stated above, and further cast doubts on their credibility. As he noted, among the 624 men and women he had questioned almost all, with few exceptions, were from Gabrovo and the surrounding area. Moreover, he recommended how working conditions could be improved in order to preserve the girls' health. He observed that girl workers themselves aspired to enter the factories and preferred factory work. Servants stayed in households for a while, but left them to enter the factories, where life seemed easier and the profits greater. These major changes in economic and social life, which occurred in a short period of time, resulted in many changes in the lifestyle and outlook of people, including young women, who were looking for better opportunities for their personal fulfilment. The dynamic social and economic environment was leaving its mark.

The current case study is based on the story of a young woman from a little village who went to work as a servant at a young age and this completely changed her life. "Mother, Penka Kadiyeva, was born in 1922 in the village of Yastrebino, Targovishte

region. Her parents were farmers” (Respondent Y. S. K., woman, born 1948 in Yastrebin). She started working at a very young age: she was only thirteen. There was a *dragomanin* in the village who supported the girls and helped them go to Sofia and find jobs as servants. The Yastrebin people were settlers from the Kyustendil region and had relatives in that area. In this way they found out that apple pickers were being sought and took the girl to the village of Studena to work.

Then she went to Sofia, to the servants’ market, which was around the Lion Bridge at that time. The landlords who hired her lived close to the Lion Bridge. She described them as good people, elderly by then. They liked the young servant very much and took care of her as if of a granddaughter. She lived in a separate room in the house. In the morning, when she woke up, they would start making breakfast and preparing coffee together with the old lady. She even went shopping with the master of the house; he used to carry the basket, and Penka used to choose the products. They did not pay her, but they took care of her; they even took her to the opera or to the theatre, and bought for her whatever she needed. She was about fourteen years old at that time. The old gentleman was a jeweller and his wife worked at the Alexandrovska Hospital.

The owner of the house, the old lady, whose name was Milenka, saw that Penka was learning new skills very quickly and took care to teach her to knit and sew in order to give her a craft. These skills were highly valued by young women at that time.

And when they realized that she was gifted at sewing and knitting, when she left they bought her a Singer sewing machine. It was a hand-held one, one of those old machines. Did they buy it for her as a thank you for working for them, as payback? Then they loaded the machine on the bus and my grandfather carried it on his back from the bus stop to the house (Y. K., Gabrovo).

All the servants in Sofia, on their days off, used to go to a square where the young people met and danced. Young soldiers used to go there as well, to find girls there. Yet Penka preferred to attend cultural events with her master and mistress rather than go there. Occasionally she went out together with her girlfriends. As per her own words, she lived with this family very pleasantly, but after a time they became very poor and could no longer care for her. Penka decided to go to work for the director of the opera, who lived with his mother. She worked there for a while and then she moved to Plovdiv. There, she worked for a dentist. She delivered dentures and took care of household work. She was about twenty at that time. For the next few months, she moved from Sofia to Kardzhali to work at the “Knyaginya Nadezhda” factory (brickworks). At the age of twenty-two (which was in 1946), she returned to Gabrovo, where she found a job as a worker in the Boynovski textile factory. She was a weaver, a spinner, a gear-maker; she was able to work with all the machines in the factory. At the age of twenty-five, she got married.

The Boynovski textile factory was a small plant. As per Penka’s words, Boynovski was a very good man and he and his son toiled together with his workers. The workers

were young women of all ages, who came from all over the region to work in the factories in the city. Penka had a friend from Yastrebinovo with whom they were in a brick factory in Kardzhali together and they came to Gabrovo together. Many of her cousins from Yastrebinovo came after Penka to Gabrovo; she brought them there. There was no work in such a village as Yastrebinovo; this was the reason why Penka decided to leave home and search for a better future. Through the years, she realized she wanted to work, to live her life in a city, but not to be a servant forever. Penka told her daughter that the couple who had hired her in Sofia had set her on a path of very good destiny. She was interested in sewing, weaving, knitting, and they gave her an opportunity to learn these skills. After the old lady, Milenka, saw how hardworking she was and taught her to knit, Penka became an accomplished knitter; she made very beautiful things. The old couple influenced her behaviour, too, giving her a different point of view. She had dignity; for this reason she did not enjoy going to the servants' get-togethers and being teased by the boys. She saw another world and looked for a better life. The couple she had worked for influenced her very much. After she stopped working for them, she wanted to be independent, have a nice job and live well.

* * *

Women's servitude was a relatively late phenomenon in Bulgaria. This type of employment gained great popularity among young girls in the first decades of 20th century and became an important stage in their lives. In many cases, the experience they gained during their service determined the choice of a marriage partner, affected their working habits and, in general, delineated the future course of their lives. There were often close relationships formed between the masters and hired servants, including responsibility and care on both sides. The way of life, constant contact, and the close spiritual relationship between a master/mistress and a servant girl brought about changes in the private life of both parties. The servants adopted numerous elements of the hosts' culture. In many ways, servant girls can be defined as "social mediators" between the village and the city. The phenomenon of domestic servitude can be distinguished as a specific element of the modernization of the Bulgarian society at the beginning of the 20th century, of which Gabrovo is a perfect example.

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