



Short-term circular migration and gendered negotiation of the right to the city: The case of migrant live-in care workers in Basel, Switzerland[☆]

Huey Shy Chau, Katharina Pelzelmayer, Karin Schwiter*

Department of Geography, University of Zurich, Switzerland

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on live-in elder care workers in German-speaking Switzerland, with a focus on the city of Basel. Working with the Lefebvrian concept of *le droit à la ville*, it critically investigates the extent to which circularly migrating women can negotiate their *right to the city* when working as private 24-hour carers in Basel. It first discusses how the Swiss migration and labor regimes in this gendered field of work affect their rights, access, belonging, and participation in the city. The article then analyzes two examples of how live-in care workers challenge existing regulations individually and collectively, and instigate changes at the level of the city. Exploring the idea of participation beyond formal recognition such as residency and citizenship, the paper critically reflects on the *right-to-the-city* debate's key concept of *inhabitation*. Focusing on women who – as circular migrants – only reside in Switzerland for a few weeks at a time and who – as live-in workers – are often isolated in private households, the paper argues that work arrangements and mobility are key to understanding inhabitants' *right to the city*.

1. Introduction

In the last few years, an increasing number of private agencies have been offering 24-hour care to the Swiss elderly in their private homes. They employ or place women from EU countries in Swiss households for two to twelve weeks at a time. For some workers, this is only a one-time temporary deployment. In the majority of cases, however, the women regularly commute between their 'home' and 'work' countries. (Schilliger, 2014; Schwiter, Berndt and Truong, 2015). The literature discusses this specific mobility pattern in which workers go back and forth on a regular basis as 'circular migration' (Mansoor and Quillin, 2007; Triandafyllidou and Marchetti, 2013; Vertovec, 2007).

While the care workers are in Switzerland, they live in the seniors' private households. Even though they are de facto residents in Switzerland for this period of time, they are often described in a narrative that firmly locates them in their 'home' countries and *not* in the places where they work and live as 24-hour care workers (Pelzelmayer, 2016). This discursive placement is reflected in their residence status, working conditions, legal protection – and participation in everyday local community life.

As existing research has shown, both traditional guest worker programs and more recent temporary migration schemes often restrict the rights of migrant workers (Castles, 2006; Plewa and Miller, 2005;

Ruhs and Martin, 2008; Wickramasekara, 2008). They might for instance limit the duration of stay, prohibit family reunion, infringe the freedom to change employer and impede access to unemployment and other social security benefits (Bakan and Stasiulis, 2012). Furthermore, the often temporary nature of labor migration is an obstacle to traditional ways of organizing workers (Piper, 2010).

For domestic workers from other countries, migration law interlinks with labor law, which in many countries does not provide full protection if the private household is the workplace (ILO, 2013). Consequently, migrant domestic workers – and live-in workers in particular – often face what Fudge (2011, 235) has termed a "conundrum of jurisdiction" that exposes them to exploitation. In the case of circular migration, with workers alternating between their 'work' and 'home' countries, this means that "they end up not being a full-citizen [neither] here nor there" (Marchetti, 2015, 75).

The present article analyzes live-in care workers' position in German-speaking Switzerland, with a specific focus on Basel. Acknowledging the importance of work-related issues in urban politics, the paper refers to Henri Lefebvre's concept of the *right to the city* (Lefebvre, 1968). It does so with a view to exploring the potential to address questions related to the four aspects of rights, access, belonging, and participation in a situation of heightened mobility. Since issues of gender and country/place of origin are highly relevant in 24-hour

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* Corresponding author at: Department of Geography, University of Zurich, Winterthurerstrasse 190, CH-8057 Zürich, Switzerland.

E-mail address: karin.schwiter@geo.uzh.ch (K. Schwiter).

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care, the paper works with gendered readings of the *right-to-the-city* debate. Accordingly this paper addresses the following questions: Given their circular migration status, their temporary work arrangements, and the fusion of workplace and residence, what are the difficulties that live-in care workers face to claim their ‘right to the city’? How do care workers negotiate this right in Basel? How do they participate in everyday life in the city?

In the following sections, we first discuss how we read Lefebvre’s *right to the city* through a gender lens. After a brief presentation of the material and methods, the results section explores the situation of circularly migrating 24-hour caregivers in German-speaking Switzerland. We investigate the ways in which the specific nexus of migration and labor regimes affects their rights, access, belonging, and participation in the city. We focus on Basel to discuss two cases in which care workers challenge the existing regimes at an individual as well as at a collective level. In our conclusions, we reflect on what our foregrounding of work arrangements and circularly migrating inhabitants might add to the *right-to-the-city* debate.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Lefebvre’s *le droit à la ville*: collectivist politics, *inhabitation*, and the gender lens

In *Le droit à la ville*, Henri Lefebvre (1968) rejected the formalities of participation on the level of the nation-state. Urban space was to become the locus for decision-making. Lefebvre’s idea of a *right to the city* addresses issues of legal rights, access to resources, belonging, and participation (Kofman and Lebas, 1996; Purcell, 2003). It demands that all inhabitants of a city have a right to the social, economic and cultural resources in the city and it calls not just for a reform, but for a radical restructuring of social, political and economic relations in the city and beyond (Butler, 2012). All inhabitants of a city should be able to participate in decision making and have the right to appropriate the city as their own. It thus underlines the need for a fundamental shift in the power relations that underlie the production of urban space, so that control is transferred from the state and capital to urban inhabitants (Purcell, 2002).

Today, there is not only considerable interest in the (global) city (Domosh and Seager, 2001, 67; Joy and Vogel, 2015; Sassen, 2001) and (access to) rights, but also in the concept of *the right to the city*, particularly because “political and economic restructuring in cities is negatively affecting the enfranchisement of urban residents” (Purcell, 2002, 99). Research drawing on the debate has focused for instance on (public) housing (Fenton, Lupton, Arrundale, and Tunstall, 2013), on social media and activism (Tayebi, 2013), and on (minority) group participation and rights (Jabareen, 2014). As such, activist groups have also adopted the concept (Mullis, 2014). For example, the *World Social Forum* (2004, 2), an open grassroots platform that brings together a large number of civil society groups, developed a World Charter for the Right to the City, which reads,

“1. All persons have the Right to the City free of discrimination based on gender, age, health status, income, nationality, ethnicity, migratory condition, or political, religious or sexual orientation (...).”

Often the concept is employed to support individuals in claiming their rights. From a gender perspective, however, scholars have questioned this interpretation of Lefebvre’s ideas and the liberal framework in which such universal rights-based claims are often articulated (Brown, 2000). Feminist and critical scholars working with the *right-to-the-city* go beyond a rights-based language and emphasize Lefebvre’s vision of collective forms of participation and *inhabitation*.

First, Harvey (2012, 3) for example recognizes the potential of the *right to the city* as not just an issue of individualized rights and access. He foregrounds its possibilities of collectivistic participation:

“The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is,

moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization. The freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves.” (Harvey, 2008, 23).

The *right to the city* as participation and appropriation therefore also encompasses the right to reshape and transform the city collectively, and the right to form alliances in order to change existing norms, rules, and regulations.

Second, gendered readings of Lefebvre foreground his concept of *inhabitation* as the basis for (local, urban) participation. Fenster (2005, 218–219) for example explains that “Lefebvre doesn’t define belonging to a political community in the terminology of formal citizenship status, but bases the *right to the city* on *inhabitation*”, and Purcell (2002, 99) talks about an “urban politics of the inhabitant”. So while conventional enfranchisement addresses only national citizens, the *right to the city* speaks of inhabitants, urban dwellers, or what Lefebvre (1991) calls *citadins* – a term that combines the notion of citizen with inhabitant and denizen. In addition, Lefebvre uses the French word *habiter*, which refers not only to dwelling but also to a way of living that involves appropriating the city as one’s own (see Kofman and Lebas, 1996, pp. 17).

Inhabitation thus speaks to ‘lived space’ and people’s ‘actual’ experience of a given space (Lefebvre, 1991). Central here are people’s everyday rhythms of life (Lefebvre, 1992). A Lefebvrian analysis of these rhythms opens up the possibility that - instead of nationality, ethnicity, or birth – one’s own experiences of everyday life in the city is the basis for participation (Purcell, 2002). A focus on people’s experiences of every day life also gives room and potential to new forms of contestation, in which people begin to manage urban space by themselves and for themselves (Butler, 2012, 104).

Fenster (2005) discusses these everyday experiences as creating multi-layered forms of *belonging*. *Inhabitation* as the basis of belonging and participation in everyday life is a tempting proposition. However, what does *inhabitation* mean beyond formal recognition such as residency and citizenship, particularly in a context of *mobility* (Nagel and Staeheli, 2004)? How do circular migrants participate as inhabitants while being present only intermittently? To what extent can they be *citadins* in more than one city at once? Lefebvre argues that the bourgeois aristocracy that moves from grand hotel to grand hotel can no longer be considered inhabitants (Lefebvre, 1996, 159). But what about workers who might be equally mobile but for entirely different reasons? The case of migrant live-in care workers in Basel offers a unique opportunity to explore these intricate questions. In the following, the article outlines how a critical reading of the *right-to-the-city* framework can support a gendered analysis of a contemporary multi-local phenomenon such as 24-hour care.

2.2. 24-Hour care in Switzerland and the right to the city

The article builds on two points addressed in the *right-to-the-city* debate. First, 24-h care seldom takes place in what is understood as ‘public’ space (Schilliger, 2013). Care workers are therefore often poorly visible in the ‘public’ sphere. Second, the *right to the city* does not necessarily relate to the ‘private’ sphere of the household (Fenster, 2005; Staeheli and Dowler, 2002). While gendered perspectives have applied the concept to (certain groups of) women’s negotiation of public space (Hackenbroch, 2013) and to housing (Fenton et al., 2013), the ‘private’ sphere has received considerably less attention (cf. Fenster, 2005). In exploring live-in care as reproductive work that takes place in the private home but impacts on the workers’ participation in everyday life in the city, we simultaneously draw on and move beyond the private and public spheres as conceptual tools and construct a framework that disrupts the public/private dichotomy.

Looking at the case of care workers who reside in Basel regularly but only for short periods of time, we critically investigate both the formal mechanisms and state-directed rights-based frameworks, as well as the

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