

# FROM ACCOMPANYING FAMILY MEMBER TO ACTIVE SUBJECT

## Critical Perspectives on Transnational Migration

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Today, a growing number of people spend their lives beyond the borders of nation states. They create homes, families and identities that are not easily understood if one adheres to the concept of “true belonging” as meaning solidly anchored to one territory, one culture and one language. Even in the era of globalization, however, this concept retains its force. It is, after all, still the nation state, and only the nation state, that guarantees individuals’ fundamental rights and grants them their true home, their proper place. Refugees are still viewed as exceptional, for they lack the basic protection which only the native country can give (see Bauman 1998). Thus, despite modern global mobility, the nation state’s legal regulations, border controls and migration policies are still of pre-eminent importance. During periods of rapid social change, the nation, accordingly, often becomes a socially, culturally and politically charged subject within a symbolic battle over how to define so-called normal relations and healthy family ties. The breakthrough of industrialism and urbanization and the modernization of the European welfare states meant new ways of conceptualizing and organizing marriage, parenthood and family life (see Frykman & Löfgren 1987). Today, the family is again the focus of social debates conducted in the light of growing international migration, the transformation of the welfare state, assisted fertilization of childless couples and the emergence of same-sex parents in “rainbow” families.

International research on ethnic relations and international migration has shown how many migrants’ everyday life takes place in several places simultaneously. Personal relations and family economy, life goals and identities are formed by social interrelations that reach across national borders – sometimes beyond continents. Transnational contacts and family ties link together geographically disperse worlds. In many cases, they create a virtual homeland consisting of several different places. Marita Eastmond and Lisa Åkesson (2007) have shown that global families are shaped by interplay between migrants’ lives, as lived in different local contexts, and the global communities of which they form a part. Munzoul Assal’s 2003 study of Somali and Sudanese living in Norway discusses how these engage in an intense social exchange with relatives and friends outside Norway’s borders. This exchange is, moreover, not confined to people in the migrants’ country of origin; it reaches out to several other parts of the world, as well. Assal argues that one must position these groups’ views on home, family and belonging against this wide, mobile horizon. He also calls attention to the number and variety of everyday actions and communication forms that together create a home that lies beyond the narrow logic of the nation state. Family and kin, here, is not something one simply is or has. One *creates* family in the everyday practices of sending money to relatives, celebrating holidays together, participating in ethnic

associations, joining Facebook groups and chatting with relatives who can partake of family pictures. The same findings emerge in Anna Lindley's study of Somali refugees in Great Britain (2010). She shows that refugees' money-transfers to relatives in other countries involve more than sending resources from afar. They are also a means of providing moral support, of exchanging information of how it is to live and work in different countries and on the opportunities and difficulties encountered in one's everyday life.

Family and kinship are formed in many different ways, going far beyond the community (if any) constituted by members of a biological group. Social, cultural and emotional ties are essential to communities that extend over time and space. In this edition of *Ethnologia Europaea*, ethnographers use case studies of migrants' own experience and perspectives to illuminate these processes. The authors show how close family relations are created despite geographical distance, in studies of how people handle the complex and sometimes contradictory demands that a transnational life entails. This special issue's broad spectrum of empirical studies ties together two highly topical theoretical debates. The first is concerned with transnational migration, the second with family and gender. The case studies are diverse and imaginative, ranging from assisted fertilization through sex work to nuns' and migrants' accounts of their lives. Körbel and Merkel's thoughtful and well-structured introductory text shows how the different texts are linked in a dialogue "crosswise" over a number of empirical fields, in the cross-roads, of the major research themes of transnational migration, family and gender.

The growing corpus of international literature on transnational networks paints, in broad brushstrokes, a dark picture of a strongly polarized world in which a privileged cosmopolitan elite and faceless global market forces rapidly cross all and any borders, while an ever-growing mass of refugees and paperless migrants risk their lives to circumvent national border controls, only to end up at the mercy of human smugglers in the West. This somber picture

has replaced earlier visions of globalization's international brotherhood with dystopian images of global exploitation, trafficking and increasing marginalization. Such dichotomizing images are, of course, problematic. They tend to be mutually self-enforcing, depending, as they do, on the same type of binary logic. The articles in this volume are, therefore, a welcome contribution to the discussion. They approach transnational processes from below, from the point-of-view of individual experiences. This gives new visibility to the complexity and ambivalences in different forms of transnational imagined families.

Earlier migration research often took as its point of departure the processes that brought migrants to a new country. Equally often, the unquestioned norm was to focus on a male subject – the adult male migrant, sometimes accompanied by wife and children, encountering opportunities and difficulties in the new country. The inquiry was, finally, framed in terms of how people who were torn loose from their "natural" context adapted to the receiving country. The studies in this issue provide a different, and innovative, type of analysis.

A common point of departure in the articles is Nina Glick Schiller's discussion of the concept of a "transnational social field". Glick Schiller shows how immigrants can construct ties to two or more nation states. This allows appreciation of how immigrants *concurrently* partake in the daily life of their country of origin, with all the political, social and emotional implications that entails, *and* in the everyday life of their new country, participating in the daily communities created at home, among friends and acquaintances, and at the workplace. An important point emphasized by the articles in this issue is that this type of simultaneous multi-national daily life applies not only to migrants who have changed countries, but also to those of their relatives and friends who have stayed in the country of origin – that is, have not physically crossed nation-state borders. In 2008, Lewitt and Glick Schiller distinguished between "transnational ways of belonging" and "transnational ways of being" (2008: 189). Belonging, they argue, is based on ideas of kinship ties, roots, origin and ethnicity. No matter where in the

world a person lives, it is assumed that she or he is a member of a group united by a common past and a “community of fate”. This belonging is unaffected by the person’s movement across national borders. Ways of being, on the other hand, signify the ways in which a person can exist and interact over borders, without necessarily saying anything about where that person feels at home or about his or her self-identification. Notions of belonging address the ways in which people use remembrance, nostalgia, narratives and artifacts to reach out to other places, often in other countries – whether they live as migrants or are among those staying behind in their native locality.

Helma Lutz has provided a detailed discussion of the theoretical and methodological implications of an intersectional approach to migration (Lutz, Herrera Vivar & Supik 2011). In the same vein, ethnologist Maja Povržanović Frykman (2011), in her current research project *The Transnational Life of Objects: Material Practices of Migrants* (financed by the Swedish Research Council), discusses a closely related way of viewing transnationalism. She sees it as a ribbon or flow of people, ideas and things over national state borders. Lewitt and Glick Schiller develop the point of analytical distinctions between the concepts of being and belonging as follows:

If individuals engage in social relations and practices that cross borders as a regular feature of everyday life, then they exhibit a transnational way of being. When people explicitly recognize this and highlight the transnational elements of who they are, then they are also expressing a transnational way of belonging. Clearly, these two experiences do not always go hand in hand. (2008: 189–190)

### **A Transnational Service Sector**

Every year thousands of women leave their countries of origin to work in richer countries, finding employment within the domestic sector as servants, child minders or personal assistants for elderly and sick in well-to-do families (Lindio-McGovern &

Wallimann 2009; Parreñas 2001; Yeates 2009). A large proportion of these women migrate legally, their visa, tickets, contracts and work permits provided by employment agencies. A still larger proportion, hoping to penetrate EU borders, put their trust in illegal contractors (Agustin 2007). In many cases, the home countries’ governments encourage this emigration: The money that the women send home is of great importance to the country’s monetary reserves. Most of the women involved are between 18 and 40 years of age; they have varying educational backgrounds. Many leave children behind in the care of grandparents or other relatives. The primary reason for these women’s migration is low family income – too low to cover the family’s most basic needs. Often, the woman’s subsequent earnings, sent home from abroad, serves to improve the family’s long-term economy, through (for instance) making it possible to start a small business in the home town. These prospects encourage many women to leave their homes and countries of origin, traveling, sometimes, to nations in other continents (Ehrenreich & Handschild 2003).

My own research on women from the Baltic States working in the Scandinavian sex industry shows that their employment within economic sectors regarded as socially low-value and morally dubious can be given a different meaning when viewed in terms of earnings earmarked for a particular use. Women so employed can retain their feeling of self-worth by placing their personal sacrifices within a discourse of respectability – the respectability of taking responsibility for one’s family. Fulfilling their duty as the family’s breadwinner is defined as the highest virtue. Accordingly, migrant sex-workers may position themselves as responsible and respectable rather than as victims – the position given them in main-stream Swedish discourses – or as the “dirty whores” of their home-countries’ discourse.

The fact that private services involving bodily contact and touch are sold by migrants from the southern parts of the globe and Eastern Europe to West Europeans and Americans maintains an ethnic segmentation of work. This confirms and

strengthens the social division between a national “us” and a foreign “them”, as well as a division between different sorts of women (Lindqvist 2007, 2008). It cements an essentialist understanding of well-paid productive work as the purview of well-qualified, independent, self-conscious and reflexive women from the Western world. Reproductive work joins other forms of lowly-esteemed work as the natural occupation of under-qualified, low-earning and unreflexive foreign women (Mohanty 2003). According to several studies, the increasingly global market economy has, when conjoined with the feminization of poverty, transformed reproductive work into a transnational economic sector that operates, in large part, unseen (see Ehrenreich & Handschild 2003; Parreñas 2001).

This gives us the context for understanding the young women who arrive in European countries to work, in periods, either on their way to other countries or as a temporary solution to the problem of earning a living. Intimacy, bodily contact and care are important pillars in this mobile employment market, a market which transforms those involved into senders and receivers. The services that are sold are almost all connected to the traditional duties of women – care of small children, care for the sick, cleaning houses, washing and ironing clothes, providing men with sexual satisfaction. While many Western women and men pay for care, domestic and sexual services, the transnational migrant, in her turn, often depends on someone in her country of origin for the domestic care of her own family. The sisters or aged parents who may be taking care of the children she has left behind are, in turn, supported by her long-distance earnings. In different ways, Hess’s article on sex-workers affected by Europe’s increasingly restrictive migration policies, and Hüwelmeier’s on German nuns in North America, exemplify the fruitfulness of discussions on “the international division of labor” (Sassen 1983), “the ethnic division of reproductive labor” (Parreñas 2001) as well as feminist theory’s abrogation of the binary opposition between productive and reproductive work, particularly when used within a longer historical perspective.

### **Looking at both those who Migrate and those who Stay at Home**

When focus is redirected to the interplay between the migrants’ life in Europe and the transnational family relations in both their country of origin and in the other countries of which they have become part, it also becomes possible for the scholar to go beyond the “nationalistic ideology” that otherwise easily leads to the analytical dichotomies of “at home, and abroad”, “local and global”, and the like (Amelina 2012).

Geographically separate worlds become interconnected; the narratives that tie together persons and events across national, linguistic and generational borders become the basis for experiences where the “home land” often consists of several different places (see Eastmond & Åkesson 2007). The combined use of ethnographic and discourse-analytic methods and different theoretical perspectives interrogates the relationship between local integration and transnational networks. It is only by focusing on everyday life that one can study the role that kinship plays in transnational migration, allowing people to maintain a close community over time and at great distances. Only this, further, allows an understanding of how this is achieved in everyday practice. In this volume, ethnographic and experiential approaches provide important insights into the significance of these communities for their members. It becomes clear that migration is not a one-way process, destined for the terminus of integration within the frames of a nation state. Even after family relations are detached from their local context, they will often continue to organize relationships, senses of belonging, and material welfare. Narratives concerning who one is, as well as what it is that unites the family, including each family member’s rights and duties, are maintained, adjusted and renegotiated in a process that includes both continuity and change. Family ties can thus be strengthened or weakened as they are invested with (partly) new meanings and emphasis.

Family and migration have been studied in many ways. But, regardless of focus – whether on monastic orders’ symbolic mothers and daughters, the sex

worker and her parents and children, or migrants' genealogies – there exist commonly shared practices which, in varying degrees, link together spatially scattered family members. These may be the exchange of economic and material resources with relatives who have remained in the country of origin, or the social care of children and old parents who were left behind, or the emotional support that can contribute to the family members' feeling of being valued simply for who they are. Today's adaptable and inexpensive means of communication can promote close contacts around everyday concerns and decisions. Different conditions for relatives in different places can also create tensions. An unequal division of power and resources and inevitable conflicts of interest necessitate constant renegotiation of roles and expectations across transnational space. Often, family ties that have worn thin over time can be picked up again, in a different context, later in life, or even by the next generation. An important insight provided by this broad empirical spectrum is that engagement with relatives on the other side of the globe does *not* conflict with the migrant's integration into the society of the receiving country. The relation between different places and generations is complex, and migrants take on different positions in the transnational space. These vary between and within families, and during an individual's life. They cannot be explained, in any simple way, by one-sided references to class, generation or gender. Especially Karen Körber's article shows the advantages of using narrative analyses of stories of migration to understand generation-specific constructions of family and of belonging in transnational spaces. It becomes clear that an intersectional analysis which includes the interaction of different power dimensions is more productive, even if it is significantly more difficult to carry out in practice.

The articles bring up many important questions concerning women, migration and transnational processes. Here, for once, the adult male has ended up in the margins. This raises new questions on the shifts in power made possible by women's mobility. Other questions can be asked about the children that migrant mothers often leave behind. Has

their mothers' migration and employment abroad had any direct effects on the children's living conditions? How is the money that the mother sends back spent – on education, on bettering living space, and/or consumption, and if so, of what and by whom? Körber's and Hess's articles call attention to the invisible work that is an undercurrent integral to today's welfare economy. The move away from migration studies' traditional focus on the immigrant male and his accompanying family allows us to see new patterns and strategies. Hopefully, this critical approach to transnational processes, international migration and gender will open up for more studies in which not only adults but children, those who migrate and those who are left behind, will both be seen and heard.

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