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## Remarriage among older immigrants and their host country peers – a countrywide study

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### Abstract

*With immigrants across Europe ageing in increasing numbers, this article uses Danish administrative data to map the unexplored remarriage patterns among three groups of older immigrants and compare them to their Danish host country peers. Results show that remarriage late in life is uncommon. When it occurs, men remarry more often than women, with the gender difference many times larger among immigrants. For choice of spouse, most marriages are endogamous, with immigrants predominantly finding spouses transnationally. The data also reveal a distinct age pattern in all groups, with wives substantially younger when marriages are transnational, i.e. when wives arrive as marriage migrants. In addition to extending the literature on remarriage in old age to include immigrant groups, this study also documents both the centrality of older immigrants finding spouses transnationally and the existence of substantial age differences in transnational remarriages, regardless of whether husbands are immigrants or not.*

**Keywords:** Care work; gender; marriage migration; older immigrants; remarriage

### Introduction

Across Europe, while immigrants are ageing in increasing numbers, research on this group has been relatively scant: immigrant studies have often overlooked older individuals, and ageing research has rarely focused on immigrants (Treas, 2015). In the past five years, however, this literature has grown, often focusing on issues such as care arrangements, family relations and contact with the country of origin (e.g. Baykara-Krumme & Platt, 2018; Ciobanu & Hunter, 2017; Songur, 2019). Nonetheless, when it comes to marriage, the literature on both late-in-life remarriage in general populations (Brown et al., 2019; Raley & Sweeney, 2020) and studies of remarriages in immigrant populations (across all ages) are sparse (Aguirre et al., 2017; Andersson et al., 2015). Hence no studies have yet focused on the late-in-life remarriage patterns among immigrants, that is how often older immigrants find a new partner and remarry, who such spouses are, or how remarriage patterns among older immigrants compare to those in the majority populations in their adopted countries.

This study analyses Danish administrative data to ascertain the unexplored remarriage patterns among three groups of older immigrants in comparison to their Danish host country peers. Because Danish administrative data include detailed information on all individuals legally residing in Denmark, I am able to map in great detail the remarriage patterns of selected groups of older immigrant and compare these patterns to those of their host country peers. This study focuses on remarriages among 55-to-80-year-old individuals who have immigrated

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to Denmark from Turkey, Pakistan or one of four Arabic-speaking countries in the Middle East (Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Jordan).

As the majority of such remarriages are transnational, that is to partners who migrate to Denmark in connection with marriage, I first review both the literature on late-in-life remarriage and selected parts of the marriage migration literature. Second, I present the data underlying that analysis and, third, discuss the pattern emerging from the results. Fourth, I discuss the findings in relation to those of previous studies.

## **Research on remarriage late in life**

Due to both economic and social changes and to developments in the availability of contraception and abortion, marriage has progressively become an arena for self-realisation and emotional fulfilment, more than a simple exchange of material goods for practical purposes (Giddens, 1992). While most pronounced in the Global North, this development is increasingly observable in the Global South (Padilla, Hirsch et al. 2007). Nevertheless, marriage retains considerable material importance globally, and is, especially for women, almost a necessity in many parts of the world (Cindoglu et al., 2008).

That relationships in general and marriages in particular have both a material and an emotional content is also visible in the literature on re-partnering in old age (Brown et al., 2019). This literature finds that men consistently re-partner in late life more often than women do. Four factors contribute to explaining this gender difference. Firstly, and very importantly, the life expectancy of women exceeds that of men by several years, resulting in a skewed sex ratio in the higher age brackets (Danmarks Statistik, 2019; de Jong Gierveld, 2004). Coupled with the fact that women often marry spouses older than themselves, the limited availability of potential spouses in itself makes re-partnering more difficult for older women. Secondly, traditional gender roles within many relationships play an important role. Women may be less inclined to re-partner, as doing so could mean relinquishing the autonomy they may experience as singles. In contrast, men may commonly be motivated to find a wife who will take over household chores and care for them as they age (Brown et al., 2019). Such gendered expectations may also underlie the greater proclivity for older women to enter into a 'living-apart-together relationship', rather than a marriage than older men, because the living apart arrangement entails lower levels of conjugal responsibility for women (de Jong Gierveld, 2004; Karlsson & Borell, 2005).

Thirdly, a combination of ageism and sexism generally devalues older women as attractive partners (Carpenter et al., 2006; Milton & Qureshi, 2020b). Fourthly, as regards widowhood, women may be more prone to 'sanctify' their deceased spouses than men. Such sanctification may make the women somewhat reluctant to enter a new relationship. As Carr (2004, p. 1051) writes, 'Women mourn, men replace'. Moreover, that women on average, have more social contacts, including close contact with their adult children, can make them less eager than men to start a new marriage (Brown et al., 2019; Schimmele & Wu, 2016; Wu et al., 2014).

Qualitative studies of older immigrants show similar gender differences: older immigrant women are more likely than older immigrant men to remain alone after losing their spouses (Bennett et al., 2018; Mand, 2005; Ng et al., 2016; Liversage & Jakobsen, 2016). Part of the explanation is that formerly married immigrant women may be challenged when it comes to finding partners: On the one hand, cultural norms may make marrying outside the ethnic



minority group difficult. On the other hand, immigrant men (divorced or not) may not desire formerly married partners, and while such women may be attractive to overseas partners, such transnational marriages may carry a risk of abandonment, once husbands achieve independent visas (Qureshi, 2020; Milton & Qureshi, 2020a).

Only through quantitative studies can one ascertain whether such qualitative observations – that older immigrant men remarry more often than older immigrant women – are indeed part of a broader pattern. The present study, based on nationwide data covering older immigrants in selected groups, is the first of its kind to map their gendered proclivity for remarriage.

### **Marriage migration and gendered age differences**

When marrying, many immigrants find spouses transnationally. These transnational marriages take place in a global marriage market that has gained increasing importance in the last three decades (Beck-Gernsheim, 2011; Bloch, 2011; Constable, 2009). Affected by global inequalities, transnational marriages may entail several types of exchanges between partners. Studies show, for example that little-educated men settled in affluent countries (usually in the Global North) may marry well-educated wives from abroad (usually the Global South), indicating a marriage market exchange between educational levels and access to more affluent societies (Charsley, 2005; Kalpagam, 2008; Qureshi, 2016). Another type of exchange may occur when men from the Global North transnationally marry substantially younger women from the Global South (Constable, 2009; Elwert, 2016; Glowsky, 2007; Guetto & Azzolini, 2015). Hence, when women from the Global South choose to marry men who are less educated, substantially older, or both, an underlying dynamic is the alternative that these marriages provide to these women's limited life options in their countries of origin (Rytter, 2012; Thai, 2008; Yeoh et al., 2014).

Quantitative studies document the existence of such patterns. Thus when men residing in the United States marry women of immigrant descent, the age differences are greater for the wives who move to the US as marriage migrants than for the wives who were already living in the US before the marriage (Balistreri et al., 2017; Levchenko & Solheim, 2013). Similarly, marriage migrant wives arriving in Sweden from low-income countries tend to be younger than marriage migrant wives coming to Sweden from more affluent ones (Niedomysl et al., 2010).

Immigrant men may indeed opt for transnational marriages to younger, well-educated (or both) wives due to the 'status paradox' of migration (Nieswand, 2011): Immigrants may find themselves in low-class positions in their new country of residence – positions reducing their options in the local marriage market (Becker, 1981). In contrast, the class position of these same men in their country of origin is often higher because they now live in an affluent country. Consequently, such men can be attractive partners for marriageable women living in less affluent parts of the world.

When women enter into transnational marriages with such men, the relationship may not only provide them with a way of supporting themselves but also enable them to remit money to family members in their country of origin (Piper & Lee, 2016). However, in some of these husband older-wife younger transnational marriages, younger migrant wives may end up shouldering a substantial care burden as the care needs of their husbands increase over time. Indeed, some of these marriages appear to be contracted as a way of meeting the pressing

care needs of an older male immigrant when neither care from his adult children nor care provisions in the host country prove viable solutions (Liversage and Ismail, under review). Such marriages may thus become yet another permutation of the many ways in which low-skilled migrant women end up doing the ‘three C’s’ – cooking, cleaning and caring – in the Global North (Andersson 2000; Lutz & Palenga-Möllnbeck, 2010; Williams, 2012).

In combination, the literature on marriage migration and on remarriage at older ages leads one to expect that remarriage among older immigrants will more commonly occur for men than for women, and that wives will be younger than their husbands when men find spouses abroad, compared to when wives do not migrate in relation to the marriage. The remainder of this article will show whether this expectation is realistic, how patterns differ between older immigrants from selected countries, and how these patterns compare those among their host country peers.

## **Data and method**

This study uses longitudinal administrative register data from Statistics Denmark, data that relies on the unique personal identifier of each legal resident in Denmark (including both immigrants and native-born Danes). For each individual, the registers contain information on such details as year of migration and marriage, and whether previously married single individuals had become divorced or whether their spouses had died. The data also includes the country of origin of all spouses and their year of immigration, thereby allowing researchers to assess whether immigrant spouses came to Denmark as marriage migrants or were already living in the country when the union was formed. In comparison to survey data, register data do not entail the potential non-response bias that is often high among immigrants (Deding et al., 2008). Containing data on entire populations, register data also allow detailed analyses of, for example age and country of origin.

This analysis – which focuses on 55-to-80-year-old individuals – reveals the patterns of remarriage in the following four groups: i) individuals born in Turkey, ii) individuals born in Pakistan, iii) individuals born in one of four Arabic-speaking countries in the Middle East and iv) individuals from the Danish majority population. The first two groups – immigrants from Turkey and Pakistan – predominantly came to Denmark as labour migrants around 1970, explaining why they are presently entering old age in large numbers. The third group comprises 55-to-80-year-old individuals from Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. Such individuals predominantly came to Denmark as refugees or arrived through family reunification to refugees. Historically, they arrived later than the labour migrants (from the 1980s and onwards) and are thus younger on average. Hence, I need to combine data on individuals from four countries to obtain a group size comparable to that of the two groups of older labour migrants.

The analysis utilises data from 2003-2018 and contains information on all individuals who stayed in Denmark for at least five years during that period. Remarried individuals are defined as older individuals who changed their civil status from ‘divorcee’ or ‘widow(er)’ to ‘married’ in the period under investigation. Thus individuals who marry for the first time at a mature age are not part of the analysis. Spouses are classified as marriage migrants if they had lived less than two years in Denmark at the time of the marriage.



The study distinguishes among remarriage in old age to the following three types of spouses: i) spouses from the Danish majority, ii) spouses who are either immigrants or of immigrant descent and living in Denmark at the time of the marriage, and iii) spouses who move from other countries to Denmark as marriage migrants. This study also establishes the relations between partner choice and age differences in the various groups under investigation.

## Results

A first step is establishing the sizes of the groups under investigation. The first column of Table 1, below, thus shows all individuals in the 55-to-80-year age group, regardless of their civil status. The table also shows the numbers and shares of remarried individuals.

<b>Table 1</b>	<b>All individuals in dataset</b>	<b>No. of remarried individuals</b>	<b>Shares who have remarried</b>
Turkish immigrants	10,760	143	1.3%
Pakistani immigrants	4599	54	1.2%
Arab refugees	9976	174	1.7%
Majority Danes	2,270,437	59,651	2.6%

As depicted in Table 1, remarrying late in life is an uncommon phenomenon. Although approximately 25.000 individuals constitute the three immigrant groups, only 371 widowed or divorced older immigrants (between 1.3 and 1.7% in the three groups) remarried during the 15-year period between 2003 and 2018. While remarrying is also uncommon in the Danish majority, it nevertheless – at 2.6% – occurs about twice as frequently as among the immigrants.

As for gendered patterns, Figure 1 shows the shares of men and women remarrying in the different groups.

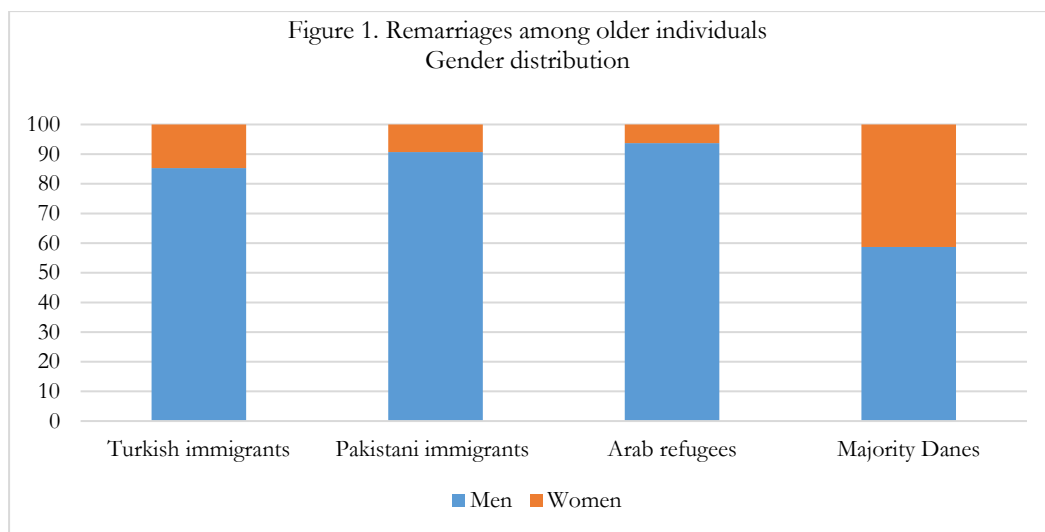


Figure 1 shows that while men remarry more often in all four groups, the gender difference is much less marked in the Danish majority. In contrast, remarriages are six, 10 and 15 times more common for men than for women in the Turkish, Pakistani and Arab groups, respectively. Thus, in late life, the remarriage pattern in the immigrant groups is much more strongly gendered than in the majority. This gendered pattern can partially be explained by

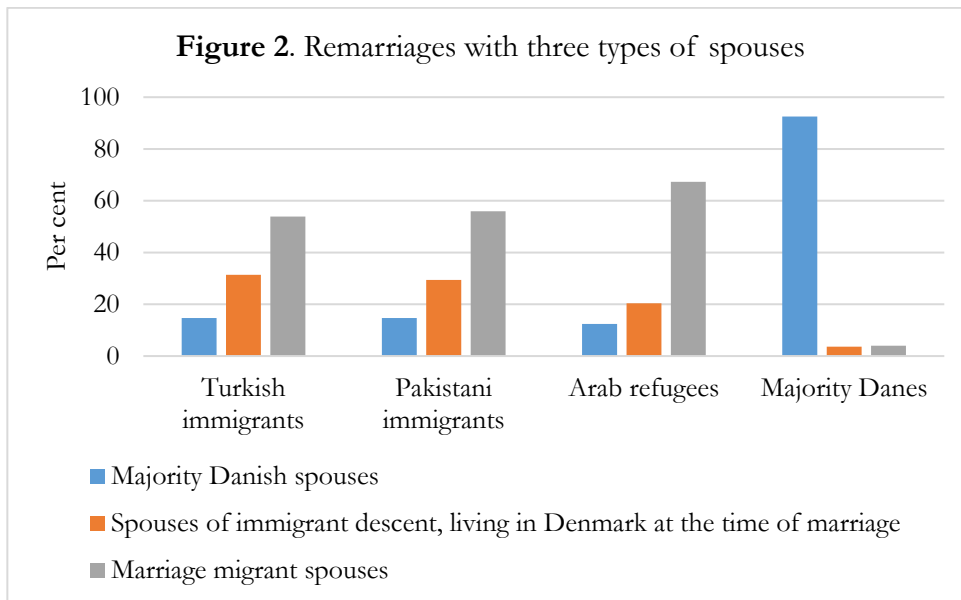
the immigrant groups containing more men than woman due to patterns of migration. In the majority group, the gender pattern is the opposite, due to women's greater longevity.

The next analytical step is ascertaining who the spouses of the remarrying individuals are. For a first observation, Table 2 shows that data is missing on a substantial share of these spouses.

	No. of remarried individuals	No. of spouses in the Danish registers	No. of spouses with missing data	Share of spouses with missing data
Turkish immigrants	143	106	37	25.9%
Pakistani immigrants	54	39	15	27.8%
Arab refugee	174	121	53	30.5%
Majority Danes	59,651	58,116	1535	2.6%

At least some of the missing data in the immigrant groups results from spouses who did not move to Denmark after the marriage. A likely explanation is the restrictive Danish rules regulating marriage migration (Bech & Mouritsen, 2013; Bech et al., 2017). Presently, these rules include that to have a spouse enter Denmark through marriage migration, the Danish-resident spouse must live in an independent residence of a specified size, be economically self-supporting, and must post collateral in the form of a financial guarantee of app. 7.700 euros (see [www.Nyidanmark.dk](http://www.Nyidanmark.dk)). Thus some Danish residents (either native Danes or of immigrant descent) may marry transnationally, only to learn that their spouses cannot obtain a marriage migrant visa for Denmark (Liversage & Rytter, 2015).

However, when data is available, the registers show what types of spouses the older individuals marry. I distinguish between the following three types of spouses: i) native Danes from the majority, ii) immigrants or descendants of immigrants who lived in Denmark before the marriage, and iii) spouses who arrived in Denmark as marriage migrants. Figure 2 shows the distribution among these types of spouses:



Unsurprisingly, Figure 2 shows that older majority Danes predominantly marry spouses who – like themselves – are majority Danes. In contrast, the pattern is very different in the immigrant groups: Partners predominantly marry spouses who live abroad and move to Denmark as marriage migrants. Such spouses make up 53% in the Turkish group, 56% in the Pakistani group, and 67% in the Arab refugee groups (compared to 4% in the Danish majority group). Furthermore, as spouses with missing data are most likely also individuals living outside of Denmark (i.e. who have not yet arrived in Denmark as marriage migrants), the share of older immigrants marrying individuals living abroad is probably even larger than Figure 2 indicates.

Figure 2 also shows that the second most common spousal choice for older immigrants (20-32% of the immigrant re-marriages) are to individuals of immigrant descent who were already living in Denmark at the time of the marriage. The least common choice is the 12-15% who marry a majority Dane. In the vast majority of marriages without a majority Danish partner, the two spouses share the same country background (not shown). In line with commonly observed patterns, all four groups thus demonstrate a clear preference for endogamous marriages (Lichter & Qian, 2019).

Informed by studies documenting marital exchange between (relative) youth and the possibility of migrating to more affluent parts of the world (Balistreri et al., 2017; Glowsky, 2007; Levchenko & Solheim, 2013), the last step in the analysis maps the age differences in different kinds of couples. I focus only on remarried men, as the numbers of remarried older immigrant women (N=37, in the three immigrant groups combined) are too small for inclusion in the analysis.

Figure 3 shows the husband-older age difference when 55-to-80-year old men from the four groups remarry i) women from the Danish majority population, ii) immigrants or individuals of immigrant descent, already living in Denmark, and iii) women living outside Denmark, who subsequently arrive as marriage migrants.

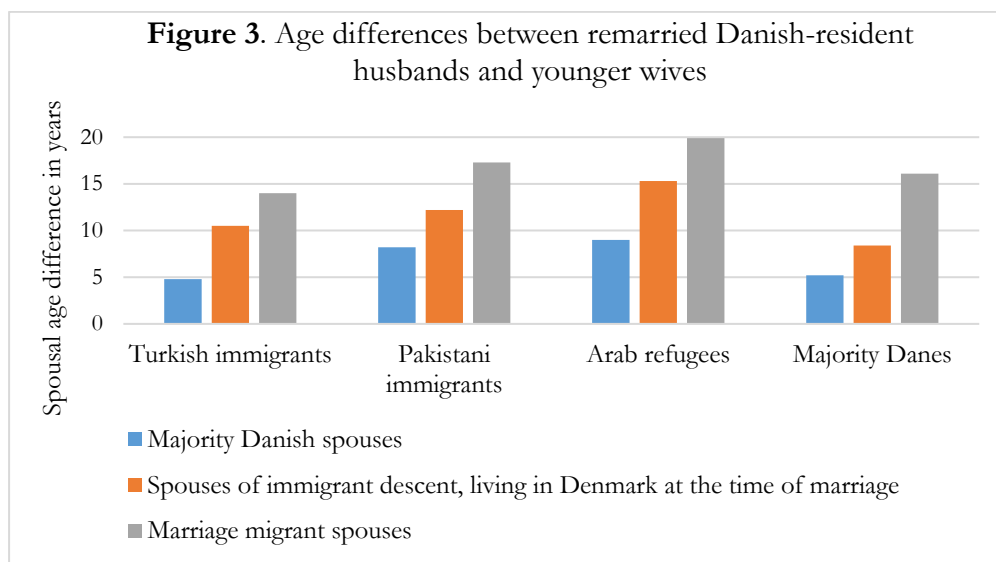




Figure 3 shows a clear pattern across all four groups of men: the age difference is smallest (5–9 years) when marriages are to majority Danes and somewhat larger (8–15 years) when spouses are of immigrant descent and already living in Denmark. The age difference is largest when wives immigrate to Denmark from abroad. In this last group, the age gaps between the spouses range from 14 years for Turkish husbands, 16 years for native Danish husbands, 17 years for Pakistani husbands, and a full 20 years for Arab refugee husbands. As these figures are the group averages, the age gap in some such transnational marriages is substantially larger.

## Discussion and conclusion

With studies on both remarriage among older individuals and remarriages among immigrants scarce (Aguirre et al., 2017; Brown et al., 2019; Raley & Sweeney, 2020), this study examines the previously unexplored subject of remarriage among older immigrants on the scale of an entire country. It thus heeds Kaveri Qureshi's recent call to build remarriage into the analysis of transnational marriage patterns (Qureshi, 2020).

In line with findings from the general late-in-life remarriage literature, a first observation is that remarriage among older immigrants is rare: the rate of around 1.5% in the immigrant groups under investigation is lower than that in the 2.6% of the Danish majority. This finding contrasts Andersson et al. (2015), who investigated remarriage rates – at all ages – among immigrants in Sweden and compared them to those of majority Swedes. They find that many groups of immigrants (including those from Turkey, the Arab Middle East and South Asia) remarry more often than the majority. These contrasting findings between immigrant remarriage patterns at younger and older ages indicate the existence of an interplay between age, gender, and ethnic background, an interplay warranting further investigation.

As in general remarriage patterns (Gierveld, 2002; Schimmele & Wu, 2016; Wu et al., 2014), this analysis shows that older immigrant men remarry more often than older immigrant women. However, this study reveals that while the ratio between men and women who remarry is less than 2:1 in the Danish majority group, it is much higher in the immigrant groups, up to a full 15:1 in the Arab refugee group. The processes underlying remarriage in older age groups thus appear much more strongly gendered among immigrants than among the Danish majority population. Likely explanations as to why older men remarry more often than older women include women's propensity to mourn their deceased spouse rather than replace him (Carr, 2004), women's desire to avoid the burden of housework (Gierveld, 2002), adult children's discouraging their mothers from remarrying (Vespa, 2012), and the 'double standard of aging', which devalues older women (Carpenter et al., 2006). Cultural taboos in certain countries of origin against women's remarriage after the loss of a spouse (Bennett et al., 2018; Mand, 2005; Ng et al., 2016) may also combine with immigrant women's often vulnerable socio-economic positions. Such vulnerability may make women depend on support from natal families who might dislike the idea of repartnering (Qureshi, 2020; Milton & Qureshi, 2020a).

One similarity across both immigrant and majority groups is that the majority of all remarriages – in line with marriages in general – are endogamous (Lichter & Qian, 2019). Thus majority Danes mostly remarry majority Danes, and immigrants mostly remarry spouses from the same country of origin. This behaviour results in a pattern of large shares of older immigrants remarrying others of immigrant descent, while only small shares of older Danes do so. However, given vast differences in group size, the number of older majority Danes





who (when remarrying) choose spouses who arrive as immigrants (N=2051) far exceeds the number of individuals doing so in the three immigrant groups combined (N=140).

In all four groups under investigation, non-majority Danish spouses more commonly are marriage migrants, that is did not live in Denmark before the marriage. This observation is likely linked to the heightened status a partner living in an affluent country holds in the global marriage market (Beck-Gernsheim, 2011; Constable, 2009; Qureshi, 2020).

A last point of interest is the age difference between spouses, a difference presenting a remarkably clear pattern: The average age difference between spouses is lowest when all older men remarry a majority Danish woman, and is largest – up to an average of 20 years in the Arab refugee group – when wives of older men arrive as marriage migrants. The analysis also shows that the age gap when older majority Danish husbands marry marriage migrants (16 years) exceeds the 14-year age gap found in the Turkish group, indicating that the age pattern is shaped by gender rather than by differences between majority and minority groups.

These findings are similar to those in Balistreri et al. (2017) and Levchenko & Solheim (2013): age gaps are smaller when partners of immigrant descent lived in the host country prior to the marriage, indicating an exchange between youth and residency status. This pattern is likely to arise from the fact that, for survival, women in many parts of the world may have few alternatives to marriage (Cindoglu et al., 2008). When some women – due, for example to advancing age or divorce – find themselves virtually ‘unmarriageable’ in their local contexts (Rytter 2012; Thai, 2008; Yeoh et al., 2014), they may opt for a marriage to a much older husband in a more affluent part of the world.

As this analysis shows, such marriages may sometimes entail a substantial age gap, with considerable care duties when older husbands have health challenges – duties that wives can only assume when they are younger and stronger. While not all husband older-wife younger marriages need involve such care arrangements, the gendered age gap in transnational marriage that this study documents nevertheless indicates that at least some marriage migrant wives exchange a livelihood in Denmark for caring for older husbands. Further research needs to explore whether this type of marital exchange indeed takes place.

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