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## EDITORIAL

# Transnational migrant families: navigating marriage, generation and gender in multiple spheres

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### Abstract

This special issue seeks to enrich readers' understandings of the transnational family practices and relations of selected migrant groups of a predominantly Muslim background in a number of Western contexts. It presents theoretically and empirically grounded studies that investigate how these family practices and ties are transnationally shaped, navigated and experienced by different family members. It focuses on two aspects of family life: marriage and the second generation's aspirations and transnational experiences. Under the first theme, this special issue examines how marriage, migration and kinship interplay in transnationally shaped social fields where multiple legal and normative systems intersect in the lives of migrants. With regards to the second theme, the issue investigates how the children of migrants navigate and experience transnational family norms, ties and practices. Throughout the issue, individual articles shed light on the gendered dimensions of the different family practices and experiences.

**Keywords:** transnational families; Muslim migrants; marriage; gender; generation.

### Introduction

This special issue investigates the multiple domains, practices and norms through which the family ties and aspirations of selected Muslim migrant families are transnationally constituted, negotiated and experienced by different family members. It presents theoretically and empirically grounded studies that focus on two areas of Muslim migrant family life: marriage and the second generation's

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aspirations and transnational experiences. With respect to the first of these themes, the issue examines how marriage, migration and kinship interplay in transnationally shaped social fields where multiple legal and normative systems intersect in the lives of migrants. With regards to the second theme, the issue investigates how young family members navigate and experience transnational family norms, ties and practices. Throughout the issue, individual articles shed light on the gendered dimensions of the different transnational family practices and experiences.

The articles focus on different aspects of family life: marriage conclusion practices; legal regimes regulating marriage unions and family ties; spousal relations and transnational kinship; marriage migration and care of elderly parents; and the transnational social fields inhabited by the youth, where they navigate their autonomy, strengthen or weaken ties with transnational family relatives, and draw on transnationally shaped cultural capital and faith-based social capital to navigate their aspirations vis-à-vis other family members and the larger society.

The articles in this issue for the most part discuss research on migrant families with African, Middle Eastern and South Asian backgrounds who predominantly reside in Europe, while one article also covers migrant families in North America. The issue focuses on migrant families of a predominantly Muslim background. This, however, does not mean that these migrants and their families are all part of a homogenous religious community. Rather, what it means is that in the case of most researched migrants, their family ties and practices are shaped by and located in transnational social fields where multiple legal and normative systems (including Islamic family law) govern or impact migrants' family relations and the claims that individual family members make as a result of these relations. Furthermore, Islam, whether as one type of legal and normative system or a source of core values, has significance (of varying degrees and scope) in the family practices and relations of the studied groups. This special issue shows, for instance, how in some cases claims to Islamic religious knowledge become a source of social capital used by second-generation Muslim women to exercise agency both within their families and in the larger society.

The eight articles give readers insights into the diverse realities of transnational Muslim migrant family life and their gendered and generational dimensions. Some of the articles, by focusing on migrants from similar ethnic backgrounds, deepen our understanding of particular ethnic groups and their migrant family lives in different contexts (Somali migrants in Finland and Canada). Other articles shed light on state laws governing migrant family life in particular national contexts, showing, for instance, how state law and religious law interact in the conclusion of marriages (Belgium); how the regulation of marriage migration demonstrates the rapidly changing state–citizen relations and conditions of civic belonging (the Nordic countries); or how the intersection of state welfare laws, marriage



migration laws and transnational kinship obligations shape the work of caring for the elderly in migrant families (Denmark).

### **Transnational Muslim Families: Linking Theory and Practice**

The existing literature on contemporary migration shows that transnational experience has become a common feature of migratory lives (Basch et al., 1994; Brach, 1996; Cohen, 1997; Guarnizo and Smith, 1998; Faist, 2000; Smith, 2000; Vertovec, 2009; Baldassar and Merla, 2013). Some of this extensive literature focuses particularly on transnational migrant families and family life (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila, 1997; Gamburd, 2000; Levitt and Waters, 2002; Bryceson and Vuorela, 2002; Salih, 2003; Parreñas, 2005; Al-Sharmani, 2006, 2010; Reynolds and Zontini, 2006; Ryan et al., 2009; Goulbourne et al., 2010; Kleist, 2007; Hautaniemi, 2011; Tiilikainen, 2011). This scholarship has tackled, broadly speaking, how migrant family lives are organised and navigated across multiple national borders through ties and practices connecting networks of transnational kin. The research has also explored the workings, contradictions and challenges, and implications of the processes of establishing, navigating and regulating transnational families on the part of states, migrant families and individual migrants.

Some of the notable studies in this field have developed conceptual tools to explain the transnational experiences of migrant families. For instance, Goulbourne et al. (2010) have emphasised the need for researchers to identify the different spheres in which transnational family life takes shape (e.g. economic, political, socio-cultural) as well as the ways in which these spheres overlap and intersect through the practices and experiences of transnational families. In this issue, we examine how transnational family practices and relations inhabit different spheres. These spheres include: the domain of state legal regimes where Muslim marriages and family relationships are contested and policed (Mustasaari); the domain of transnational Islamic normative orders and their intersection with state codes, both of which attempt to regulate migrants' marriage conclusion practices (Lecoyer); the interconnected domains of transnational kinship and state institutions, where the care for elderly parents are arranged (Liversage); the domain of family relationships and practices, where spousal relations and rights are navigated vis-à-vis the obligations of both spouses towards transnational kin (Al-Sharmani and Ismail); the means by which the second generation partakes in transnational ways of being and belonging through particular family practices and the meanings they attach to them (Tiilikainen); the ways in which adolescents negotiate their autonomy vis-à-vis their parents (Turjanmaa et al.); the ways in which young women use transnationally-shaped religious knowledge and understandings to negotiate their educational and career goals vis-à-vis the patriarchal family and community-based norms and to resist the racism of larger society (Sanghera and Thapar-Björkert); and the means by which the children of migrants draw on family-based social capital in dynamic and gendered ways to pursue aspirations of success and a happy life through onward migration (Kelly).

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The approach of this special issue is also informed by the conceptual frameworks developed by Bryceson and Vuorela (2002) and Goulbourne et al. (2010) to identify and explain the common elements of transnational family life; the ways in which family members' experiences of such life are differentiated (in terms of their benefits and challenges) by generation, gender and class; and the processes through which members claim or contest identities as part of these transnational experiences. For instance, Bryceson and Vuorela (2002) coined the term 'frontiering' to 'denote the ways and means transnational family members use to create familial space and network ties in terrain where affinal connections are relatively sparse' (Bryceson and Vuorela, 2002: 11). 'Frontiering', according to the authors, encompasses the ways in which transnational families strategize and creatively undertake different practices to 'forge new cultural, economic and social frontiers to benefit their own families in the first instance, but ultimately contributing to a richer societal culture, economy, and polity of their host countries' (Bryceson and Vuorela, 2002: 13). In other words, 'frontiering' refers to the layers of agency that members of a transnational family embody through specific practices to navigate their way through different normative systems and to realize a viable and enriching life in their new countries of settlement, where they lack the traditional support networks that existed in the home country. This issue, similarly, presents research that, for example, examines how Muslim migrant families (particularly women) and religious actors navigate both secular and religious laws in the process of concluding marriages (Lecoyer). Another article also explores how migrant adolescents in Finland make sense of the different norms shaping parent-children relationships as they negotiate their autonomy vis-à-vis their parents in the transnational social fields that they inhabit as a part of their migratory lives (Turjanmaa et al.).

Bryceson and Vuorela also developed the term 'relativizing' to 'refer to the variety of ways individuals establish, maintain or curtail relational ties with specific family members' (Bryceson and Vuorela, 2002: 14). This term is a conceptual tool for highlighting the relative and dynamic nature of transnational family ties and relations; that is to say, these ties are not a given among a group of people simply because they are related to one another, but instead they are actively produced and may change (e.g. become stronger, weaker, etc.) through particular practices and relations. Goulbourne et al. (2010) have also emphasised the centrality of the concept of 'network' to denote the fact that the bond of familyhood is not a given, but is instead consciously produced by a group of relatives located in different national contexts who actively engage in creating interdependent relations and ties between themselves (Goulbourne et al., 2010: 9). Likewise, Tiilikainen's article in this issue highlights the processual and dynamic nature of transnational family ties through a study of second-generation youth's experiences of family practices and networks that tie them to the country of origin and relatives elsewhere and the meanings that the youth attach to these family bonds.



Additionally, Goulbourne et al. (2010) have proposed that the concept of social capital and its different forms (e.g. 'bonding', 'bridging' and 'linking') explain the roles that family resources (material and non-material) take on as part of the practices undertaken by these transnational kinship networks in order to achieve individual or collective goals and realise a particular way of life (Goulbourne et al., 2010: 16). This issue also sheds light on how the second generation in Muslim migrant families draw on different forms of social capital to exercise multi-faceted and transnationally-shaped agency. For example, in Sanghera and Thapar-Björkert's article, young British women of Pakistani background use faith-based social capital to resist community and family-based patriarchal norms as well as racial and religious discrimination in the larger society. Kelly's article focuses on how second-generation Iranian men and women who grew up in Sweden draw differently on family-based social capital in dynamic ways to pursue professional aspirations and a successful happy life through onward migration to the UK.

Some of the studies on transnational families shed light especially on the specific practices through which family ties and relations are reproduced and navigated. These practices include the sharing and management of economic and social remittances, decision-making and strategies of pursuing different family goals, and the management of care work. Such research also highlights family members' unequal access to resources, their asymmetrical relations and the divergences found between their aspirations and experiences, which result in tensions and complex family ties and relations (Salih, 2003; Al-Sharmani, 2010; Tiilikainen, 2011; Baldassar and Merla, 2014). This perspective is present in most of the articles of this issue. Liversage's article, in particular, investigates the work of caring for the elderly in Muslim migrant families in Denmark and sheds light on how transnational Muslim migrant families (of Turkish background) navigate this care work at the intersections of marriage migration, transnational kinship, Danish welfare policies and the changing lived realities of these families as more migrant women enter the labour market.

Processes and strategies for concluding, navigating and dissolving migrant marriages have also been a point of focus in research on transnational migration and families. This area particularly illustrates the complexities of the legal and lived realities of transnational families. In this regard, some of the existing scholarship investigates migrant nuptial relationships that are constituted or shaped in transnational social fields and given various names, such as 'transnational marriages', 'migrant marriages', 'cross border marriages', and so forth. One driving question in research on such unions has been the role of states and their legal regimes in regulating and impacting the intimate relationships of transnational migrants. In addition, the implications and consequences of the national and legal regimes for migrants as well as for citizenship and national identity discourses in the countries of settlement have been the focus of a number of studies (Razack, 2004; Beck-Gernsheim, 2007; Schmidt, 2011a; Charsley, 2013; Eggebø, 2013; Leinonen and Pellander, 2014). In this issue, Mustasaari's article tackles some of

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these central questions as she investigates the role of law both as a site for policing Muslim migrant marriage unions and for resisting exclusionary and essentialised constructions of family relationships and national belonging.

Other research questions have focused on the strategies used by migrants in marriage practices and the motivations guiding these practices, such as romantic attachments, obligations and claims on transnational kin-based networks, and the pursuit of multiple forms of capital to minimise the risks and maximise the benefits of marriage relationships. In particular, the question of the gendered agency of both women and men in such marriages has received close attention (Charsley, 2005, 2007; Shaw, 2011; Schmidt, 2011b; Charsley and Liversage, 2013). Again, Lecoyer's article on marriage conclusion practices in Belgium highlights the agency of Muslim women as they make choices about concluding civil and/or religious marriages and the meanings they assign to these choices.

In short, this issue presents empirical studies that illustrate and analyse the different processes of transnational migrant family life, and hence, it provides field-based insights into the conceptual and theoretical frameworks that have been outlined earlier. Notably, we present new research that focuses on migrant families of Muslim background in several Western countries. We show the diverse and dynamic roles and meanings that religion assumes in the lives of these migrants, whether as a normative system regulating intimate relationships and intersecting with state codes, or as a form of social capital that enables the younger generation (particularly women) to exercise agency. This issue specifically highlights and reflects on both the generational and the gendered dimensions of transnational family ties and practices. Furthermore, the issue demonstrates how affective family ties are not given but reproduced, weakened or severed through particular transnational practices and how the second generation has differentiated and uneven access to transnational resources, which accordingly impacts their experiences of transnational family bonds and relations.

### **Contents of the Issue**

The articles in the issue investigate transnational families from the angle of two major themes. With respect to the first theme of marriage, we group together four articles that, broadly speaking, tackle the interplay between marriage, migration and transnational kinship as well as the ways in which gender features in these connections and intersections. We examine how state-based legal regimes, on the one hand, and transnational and local religious normative orders, on the other, construct and shape marriages and family ties. We also examine how migrants understand and navigate these different legal and normative systems.

In 'Marriage Conclusion in Belgian Muslim families: Navigating Transnational Social Spaces of Normativity', Kim Lecoyer investigates how Belgium Muslim women navigate multiple normative orders when concluding marriages. Lecoyer examines the ways in which the women's practices of concluding civil and religious marriages



are informed and influenced by the interplay between transnationally (and locally) shaped Islamic normative orders on the one hand and Belgian state codes on the other, as well as these women's lived realities.

In 'Ruling on Belonging: Transnational Marriages in Nordic Immigration Laws', Sanna Mustasaari examines how transnational marriage migration is regulated in Nordic migration laws, principally through the definition of family, income requirements and integration requirements. She studies the right to respect for family life and the freedom from discrimination within the context of immigration as a site of resistance.

Under the theme of marriage, we also examine migrants' strategies and challenges as they navigate marriage, family obligations and tensions in their transnationally-shaped daily lives. In 'Marriage and Transnational Family Life: The Case of Somali Migrants in Finland', Mulki Al-Sharmani and Abdirashid Ismail investigate how the transnational family ties of Somali migrants in Finland play a role in their selection of a spouse, marriage arrangements and management of spousal resources. The authors identify the factors that enable migrants to successfully navigate marital challenges arising from their transnational kin-based ties, showing how gender and generation are at play in complex ways.

In 'Twice as Many Helpers: Unpacking the Connection between Marriage Migration and Older Labour Immigrants' Access to Family Support', Anika Liversage studies the interplay between marriage migration and filial support to Turkish elderly migrants in Denmark. Liversage argues that the substantial family support that these older migrants receive depends on their children and children-in-law (who arrived through marriage migration). In the Danish context, however, where women generally work, the failing health of older migrants may lead to considerable family strain.

Under the second theme of the second generation's aspirations and transnational experiences, we group four articles that examine the transnational social fields inhabited by young people and their gendered aspirations. In "'Whenever Mom Hands Over the Phone, Then We Talk": Transnational Ties to the Country of Descent among Canadian Somali Youth', Marja Tiilikainen, using the concepts of transnational *ways of being* and *belonging*, investigates the transnational family relations and practices of second-generation Canadian Somalis and the meanings, emotions and identifications that they attach to these practices and ties.

In '1.5-Generation Immigrant Adolescents' Autonomy Negotiations in Transnational Family Contexts', Elina Turjanmaa, Anne Alitolppa-Niitamo and Inga Jasinskaja-Lahti investigate how 1.5-generation migrant adolescents in Finland negotiate their autonomy with their parents in transnational family contexts. Comparing three adolescent migrant groups, the authors show that adolescents' autonomy is negotiated within local family circumstances, while the transnational

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context becomes particularly crucial in the negotiation categories of peer relations and cultural continuity.

In 'Transnationalism, Social Capital and Gender – Young Pakistani Muslim Women in Bradford, UK', Gurchathen S. Sanghera and Suruchi Thapar-Björkert investigate how second-generation young Pakistani Muslim women in Bradford build faith-based social capital to negotiate transnational gendered expectations, norms and values. In particular, women use social capital to gain access to education and improve their life opportunities as well as to overcome anti-Muslim sentiment and hostility in their society.

Lastly, in 'Searching for 'Success': Generation, Gender and Onward Migration in the Iranian Diaspora', Melissa Kelly uses the concepts 'transnational social fields' and 'habitus' to explore the multifaceted role that Iranian migrant families in Sweden play in shaping the aspirations of young people who migrate onward to the UK. The author sheds light on the ways in which the youths' motivations and goals for this onward mobility are gendered and how they are not only shaped by but also diverge from their parents' perspectives on life success.

### Conclusion

This compilation of articles brings forth interesting case studies on transnational migrant families, family ties and practices, and hence, it enriches our understandings of the 'transnational' in the domains of marriage and lives of young people, in particular. The articles shed light on migrant Muslim families and individuals and how they negotiate and navigate their way through multiple norms and expectations, shaped by both transnational and local structures, and several normative and legal systems as well as the lived realities of the people involved. Importantly, the heterogeneity of Muslim migrant populations is highlighted with regard to the meaning of religion in their lives, as shaped also by gender and generation. Hence, the articles provide fresh views on public debates about Muslim populations in the West, where they have increasingly been 'religionised'. In addition, this special issue points out not only the role of the transnational dimension, but also the importance of local context, which shapes the resources, opportunities and specific challenges that transnational families face.

Along with special issue articles, the readers will also find regular articles, viewpoints and bookreviews in this issue of *Migration Letters*.

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