

Article history: Received 23 June 2016; Accepted 22 August 2016

Marriage and transnational family life among Somali migrants in Finland

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Abstract

In this article, we investigate how marriage practices of Somali migrants in Finland are influenced by their transnational kinship. We examine how transnational family ties play a role in migrants' spouse selection, marriage arrangements, and management of spousal resources. We also identify the factors that enable migrants to successfully navigate marital challenges caused by their transnational kin-based ties. These factors are: companionate marriage relationship based on emotional closeness and flexible spousal roles, compatibility in spousal resources, and the cooperation of couples in navigating transnational family obligations. We show how gender and generation are at play (in complex ways) in the interplay between transnational kinship and marriage. We draw on interview data from 16 married male and female interviewees, taken from a larger sample of 37 interlocutors of different marital statuses. Our analysis is also based on data from focus group discussions.

Keywords: transnational kinship; marriage; Somali migrants; generation; Finland.

Introduction

The relationship between transnational kinship and marriage has been a focus of growing research on contemporary migrant communities in Europe and beyond (Ballard, 2004; Constable, 2005; Charsley, 2012). Charsley (2012), in particular, emphasizes the importance of unpacking what is 'transnational' about the marriages of migrants whose family ties and relations are managed across multiple national borders. She proposes a multidimensional approach that does not simply focus on migration marriages (i.e. marriages that result from or lead to migration), but rather explores the diverse ways in which marriages of migrants are impacted by their transnational family ties and lives. Similarly, we adopt an approach that highlights the multiple ways in which marriage practices and relationships of Somali migrants in Finland are shaped by their transnational family ties and relations, and which go beyond cross-border marriages. This interplay is manifested in how

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Acknowledgement: Special thanks to all interlocutors who took part in this study and graciously shared with us their time and experiences. We also thank the editors of the special issue and the two anonymous reviewers for their insightful and helpful comments.



migrants choose spouses (even those residing in the same country); how they arrange their marriages; and how they navigate marital relations and resources.

Studies on contemporary migrant families have shown how their transnational kin-based ties and relations are not *given* but are dynamically reproduced and navigated (Bryceson and Vuorela, 2002; Goulbourne et al., 2010). Gender and generation intersect dynamically with other categories of hierarchies – such as citizenship, nationality, and material resources – to differentiate transnational family relations and experiences (Pessar and Mahler, 2001). Marriage, in particular, becomes a site of practices and relations where processes of transnational kinship are manifested (Charsley, 2007; Liversage, 2012). Thus migrants may become empowered or marginalized in their marriages as a result of these asymmetries, which are shaped, in some ways, by how the migrants are embedded within their transnational kin-based networks.

Our article also sheds light on the gendered and generational aspects of the connections between the Somali migrant marriages and their transnational kinship ties. We investigate how women and men of first and 1.5 generation¹ benefit from their transnational family bonds in relation to their marriages, and at the same time how they navigate marital challenges arising from transnational ties and practices. We specifically examine the factors that enable some marriages to be strengthened rather than strained by transnational kinship.

We start with a description of the Somali community in Finland and their migration history. Next, we present the research background of our study. Then, we examine our interlocutors' transnational family ties and relations. We also explore how their marriage practices are influenced by their transnational kinship and practices. This is followed by an analysis of the interviewees' strategies of navigating marital tensions arising from their transnational ties, and the factors that strengthen some marriages in the face of these challenges. We explore how gender and generation are at play in these processes in complex ways. We conclude with final reflections.

Somali Migration to Finland

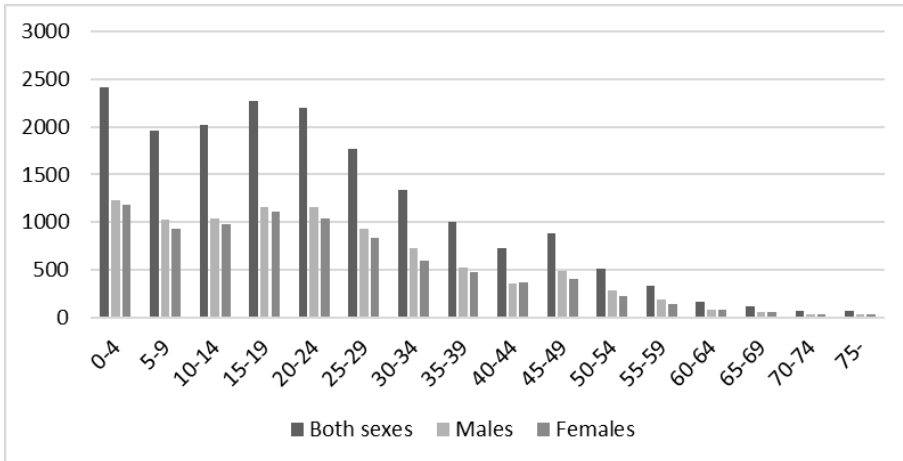
In the 1980s few Somalis settled in Finland as students and spouses of Finnish nationals, but Somali asylum seekers started to arrive in the early 1990s. This first wave consisted of Somalis who ended up in the USSR (and then Finland) after fleeing Somalia as the civil war was escalating. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Somali students who were studying there also moved to Finland. Thus, in the early 1990s, while Finland was in the midst of a deep recession, large numbers of Somalis began arriving, soon becoming the largest refugee, black African, and

¹ We use the term 'first generation migrants' to refer to those who moved to Finland during their adulthood, whereas the term '1.5 generation' refers to minors who moved after age 6, and 'second generation' to those born to migrant parents in Finland. Following the definition of Portes and Rumbaut (2001), we also include in the category of second generation minor migrants who moved before age six.

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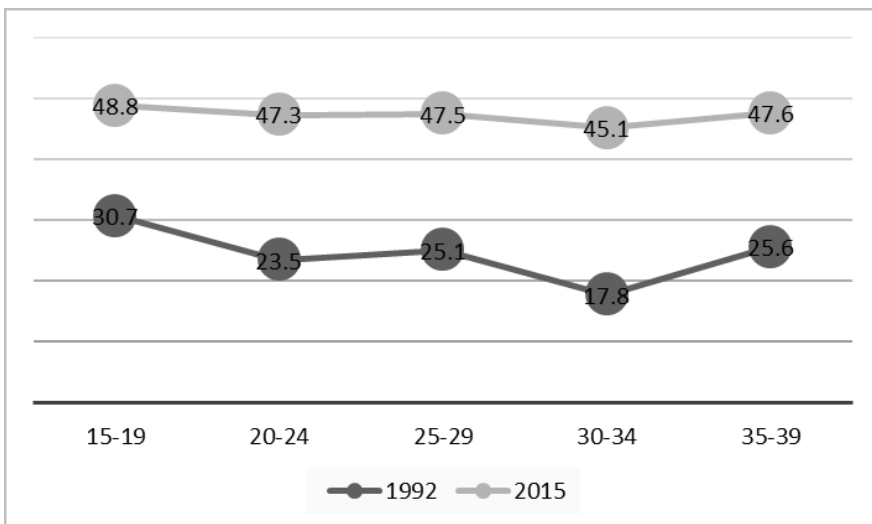
Muslim group in the country. At the time, Somali migrants attracted a lot of negative public attention, and soon became the minority group most discriminated upon in the country (OSF, 2013).

Figure 1: Somali Population in Finland in 2015, by Gender & Generation.



Source: Statistics Finland, 2015.

Figure 2: Percentage of Female Population among Finnish-Somalis, Age 15-39, 1992 & 2015.



Source: Statistics Finland, 2015.

The Somali speaking population in Finland, with a total number of almost 18,000, is the third largest migrant group after Russians and Estonians. In 2015, more than

60 per cent of Finnish-Somalis were less than 25 years old, making this migrant group young (Statistics Finland, 2015). While the overall numbers of women and men are currently fairly even (Figure 1), the number of women was small in the early years of migration (Figure 2). Furthermore, Somalis commonly marry a spouse of the same national background (City of Helsinki, 2014). Thus, many single men in the early years of migration married Somali spouses from Somalia or Somalis living in other countries, as our analysis will show.

Research Background

This research is part of a four-year study 'Transnational Somali Families in Finland: Discourses and Lived Realities of Marriage' which investigates the marriage and divorce norms and practices of Somali migrants in Finland.² The overall data were collected through three-year qualitative research, conducted by the authors and consisting of interviews, focus group discussions, participant observation³, and an ethnographic case study⁴. In this article, we focus on the data from 16 married interviewees, drawn from a larger sample of 37 women and men. By focusing on the married interlocutors, we seek to show how they drew on their transnational family ties to realize marriage goals, and how they navigated challenges arising from their transnational obligations and relations. We also highlight the factors that enabled the marriages of these particular interviewees to be strengthened rather than strained by their transnational family ties and practices.⁵ Our analysis is also based on data from 5 focus group discussions with a total of 39 women and men.

The majority of men (six out of eight) were first generation migrants, in contrast to the majority of women (six out of eight) who were mostly 1.5 generation⁶. Most of the first and the 1.5 generation interlocutors were in their forties and late twenties, respectively. The 16 interviewees were relatively well educated with a minimum of post-secondary vocational degree and maximum of an MA degree. Seven women had professional careers. At the time of the interview, five of these women were working and two were full-time care providers for young children, but planning to return to the workforce shortly. The eighth woman was pursuing an MA degree while working part-time with youth organisations. Four of the men were employed

² The study is part of a larger Academy of Finland-funded team project titled 'Transnational Muslim Marriages in Finland: Wellbeing, Law, and Gender, 2013-2017,' led by Marja Tiilikainen, University of Helsinki. The overall project goals are to investigate how Muslims in Finland organize and experience marriage in transnational space, and how the Finnish legal system and state institutions meet their needs and enhance their wellbeing.

³ The second author conducted participant observation of five marriage ceremonies.

⁴ The first author conducted a case study of a mosque programme for the wellbeing of families. Data were collected through participant observation, interviews, and documentation of life stories.

⁵ Elsewhere the first author has written about the role of transnational family ties and practices in the breakup of marriages, focusing on the 10 divorced interlocutors in the larger sample, see Al-Sharmani (forthcoming).

⁶ Five of these women moved to Finland when they were 9 years old, while the sixth moved when she was 4 years old, making her a second generation.

in professional fields, while two were unemployed. Also, one man had a part-time job, while another was between jobs.

Transnational Kinship and Marriage Practices

Transnational Family Ties and Practices

The literature on modern Somali diaspora shows that transnational kin-based ties and practices are a central dimension of the family life of diasporic Somalis and their relatives (Horst, 2006; Al-Sharmani, 2010; Hautaniemi, 2011; Tiilikainen, 2011). Similarly, almost every interviewee in our total sample had active ties with relatives based in different countries, and took part in transnational family practices.

Interlocutors had extensive contacts with their transnational relatives through telephone, Skype, and social media. For example, a twenty-six-year-old woman regularly talked on the phone with her sister in Norway and another sister in Somaliland. Another male interviewee in his forties spoke to his parents in Somalia on a weekly basis.

Visits were another transnational practice that connected interlocutors with their relatives. There were these holiday visits spent with relatives in Europe, North America, or in Somalia or Somaliland. The interviewees also received relatives from other countries. And there were the occasional visits undertaken by our interlocutors for important family events such as weddings, births, illnesses, or deaths. One woman took leave of absence from her work and travelled to the country of origin to take care of her sick mother for three months. The trip was arranged in coordination with her sisters, who also paid for the costs. Also, there were the trips to Middle Eastern countries to seek religious education as well as visits to the country of origin for temporary professional opportunities.

Remittances were another significant component of transnational kinship relationships. Some interviewees remitted to their parents, siblings, or close relatives regularly. This was more common among the first generation interviewees. Perhaps this was because parents and siblings of the second generation interviewees resided in Finland, and thus the financial relationship of the second generation with relatives in the country of origin was limited (see also Tiilikainen, this issue). There were also types of financial support that our interlocutors gave to their transnational relatives on important or urgent occasions such as weddings, serious ailment, funerals, and financial or legal troubles. Similarly, interviewees, on occasion, also received financial help from other relatives in Europe and North America, for instance, to help with their wedding expenses.

Remittances, whether regular or occasional, were either sent directly by the individual informant to an immediate family member or was part of money collected by a group of relatives for the assistance of a family member in need. For example, a forty-four year old man recounted that many years earlier; his nephew



who was a high school student in Somalia was recruited by a warring militia group. After the family persuaded the young relative to leave the militia group and return to his normal life, it became necessary to get him out of the country to protect him from possible retaliation from the group. The interviewee contributed to the costs of the nephew's travel, along with other relatives.

Marriage Practices

Women and men from both generations shared a number of marriage practices. Most married a spouse of Somali descent (six women and seven men), which is compatible to a wider marriage pattern found among the Somalis (City of Helsinki, 2014). This preference for a spouse of the same national background is also similar to the marriage pattern among other Muslim migrants in Europe (Beck-Gernsheim, 2007). Only three interviewees were married to a native-born Finnish Muslim. Two of these were 1.5 generation (female) migrants, while the third one was a first generation male migrant. Nine interviewees were married for the first time, while seven had been married previously; more men than women had been previously married (5 and 2 respectively).

Interviewees also tended to have similar motivations for marriage. Almost all were seeking a companionate relationship, i.e. to marry someone to whom they were emotionally attached. Thirteen interviewees were romantically attached to their partners prior to their marriage. This was true for both first and 1.5 generation migrants. But our interlocutors also had other marriage goals. One goal was to fulfil their sexual needs through religiously sanctioned and lawful marriage. Another was to start a family. Marriage was also about achieving a sense of independence from the extended family.

Marriages that took place in the country of origin prior to migration were few (two men and one woman). But there seems to be a notable gendered and generational difference in relation to spouse selection with regards to their initial country of residence: seven of the women married spouses based in Finland, while only two of the men met their spouses in Finland. All these women were 1.5 generation migrants; meanwhile one of the two men was from the same generation. Furthermore, four men married spouses who were based elsewhere, compared to only one woman. Three of these men were first generation migrants, while the woman was a 1.5 generation migrant. Thus, migration marriage was more prevalent among the men and the older generation. This finding is partly explicable in light of the fact that in the early nineties, as Figure 2 illustrates, the number of Somali women in Finland was relatively low.

Nonetheless, a closer look at the migration marriages of the interviewees shows a more layered picture. In the case of the four men, one married a spouse from the country of origin. The second married a Somali migrant from Italy, while a third married a Somali migrant from Denmark. Interestingly, the fourth man, a first generation migrant, was himself the spouse who migrated from the USA to Finland

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to join his new wife who grew up in the country. As for the sole case of migration marriage among the women, the thirty-four year old interviewee were married to a young Somali man who was based in an East African country.

What is 'Transnational' about Marriage Practices?

The above mentioned spouse selection practices suggest that 'transnational' marriages among interviewees were not confined to the nexus of Finland and country of origin. Older male migrants sought Somali spouses from different countries. This is related to our interlocutors' widespread transnational kin-based ties. Furthermore, transnational family ties also played a role in marriage relationships that were established in Finland as well as those which were established in the country of origin and prior to migration. In this section, we delve into the interplay between these marriage practices and interviewees' transnational kinship ties. We show that the interviewees' close transnational family networks played central roles in assisting them with finding a spouse, making the decision about spouse selection, or with marriage arrangements and costs.

For example, transnational relatives assisted several interviewees with finding a spouse: an uncle in Italy helped a male migrant meet his wife who was based there. Another man who was initially based in the USA was helped by his cousin in Finland to meet his current wife who was living in the country. A sister in East Africa helped a female interviewee meet her husband who lived in the same country. And a father in Somalia helped arrange the marriage of a male migrant to his former neighbour in Somalia.

But the roles that relatives played in migrants' marriage practices went beyond assistance with finding a spouse. For instance, a twenty-six year old woman sought the advice of her older sister in Norway to help her make the decision about marrying her current husband, a young man whom she met through mutual friends in Finland. She had been talking to him on the phone for months. Although the interviewee had become emotionally attached to this young man, she was not sure about his religiosity, a point that was important to her. But her sister helped her put these doubts to rest after they had lengthy discussions about piety and the desirable qualities in a husband. She became convinced that it was better to marry someone who enacted values of modesty and piety (like the husband to be) even if he did not adorn visible symbols of religiosity such as growing a beard.

Another example is a forty-four year old man who drew on the support of his three sisters from other European countries to marry his Finnish university classmate. His sisters came to meet his fiancée and to help him with the final decision-making since the siblings were close and shared the same values. His sisters also helped with the costs of furnishing the couple's apartment.

Transnational family members also helped our interlocutors with other aspects of the marriage process. For example, the fathers of two of the interviewees



undertook the role of the guardian during the religious marriage ceremony, which took place in the country of origin. And the father of a third interviewee came to Finland from another European country to undertake the role of the guardian.

Thus, similar to Charsley (2012), our findings highlight the need to expand our understanding of the transnational elements in migrants' marriage practices beyond a narrow focus on the physical migration of a spouse. Furthermore, the roles that transnational kin played in the interviewees' marriage processes cannot be understood in terms of traditional hierarchical family relations where parents or older generations were imposing their authority on their adult children. Rather, these transnational family relations were varied, involving relatives of different generations.

Navigating Marriage in Transnational Family-based Social Field

Our data show that migrants' transnational kin-based ties can also result in marital tensions. In fact, this is a factor that contributed to some of the divorces researched in the larger study (Al-Sharmani, forthcoming). But in most married cases, our interlocutors were able to navigate successfully these tensions. Below, we outline three challenges and examine how the interviewees and their spouses maintained a positive and dynamic balance between their marriages and their transnational family relations and ties.

The first challenge revolved around remittances. Interviewees had to negotiate with their spouses if one or both partners were going to remit to their families, which family member(s) would receive remittance, how much, and for how long. This was a sensitive issue since remittances tied interviewees to their relatives both materially and symbolically. Couples who successfully managed to avoid marital conflicts tended to strategize collectively and creatively to better prioritise and juggle their obligations. For example, a forty-year old woman and her husband agreed on prioritising sending remittances to his siblings for several years as they were in greater financial need than other family members. But other factors also influenced her decision: her husband was a supportive and cooperative spouse, and this made a tangible positive difference in her life. He helped with childcare and housework, which enabled the interviewee to get higher education and secure a professional job. Years later, both spouses had rewarding jobs with adequate incomes and the husbands' siblings were no longer in financial need.

In general, we observed that financial obligations of both male and female interviewees towards their transnational relatives did not cause marital tensions when a number of factors intertwined, namely, the couple had a marital relationship where there was significant sharing between the spouses in spousal and parental duties; when spouses were able to agree on life goals and the prioritization of their transnational family obligations; and when both spouses were employed and, hence, the financial situation of the family was stable.

The second challenge was how to navigate traditional gender norms when visiting relatives in the country of origin. Most married interviewees did not adhere to traditional spousal roles as wives tended to work and contribute to the maintenance of the conjugal home, and husbands assisted with housework and childcare.⁷ These new gender norms were found to be problematic, however, by older relatives in the country of origin during couples' visits. During these visits, husbands, on the one hand, had to show deference to traditional gender norms in front of their parents. And on the other hand, they felt a responsibility to help their spouses with housework, just like they used to in Finland. Juggling the two discreetly was not always easy. For example, a twenty-six-year-old female interviewee went for a month long visit in Somaliland with her husband and child. They stayed at her in-laws' household. While the interviewee had to help the women in the household with housework, her husband could only help her when his mother was not there. She was annoyed, but still appreciated that her husband was making an effort to help whenever it was socially possible. When they returned to Finland, the couple resumed sharing housework.

Polygamy was the third challenge arising from migrants' transnational lives. During visits to Somalia or Somaliland, husbands sometimes contracted second marriages. Our overall field data show that this was more likely among first generation men. On the whole, both men and women agreed that polygamy threatened the marriage. Some young women at the time of marriage negotiated with their husbands for a monogamous marriage (Al-Sharmani, 2015). In our married sample, only one first generation migrant was in a polygamous marriage. The rarity of polygamy in the researched marriage cases seems to be a factor that strengthened these relationships. The polygamous interviewee married his second wife on a visit to Somalia. At first, the second marriage created a rift between the couple, but they managed to solve the conflict. Perhaps what helped sustain the marriage was that the two had a relationship of cooperation: they collectively managed their family affairs and resources, and this did not change with the second marriage. Also, the husband gave the first wife financial compensation (a traditional Somali custom), which she used for her trading business. Thus, she was neither economically nor socially marginalised by the second marriage. If one juxtaposes this case with researched divorce cases, one finds that in some of the divorce cases the women were made vulnerable by the husband's polygamy (Al-Sharmani, forthcoming). However, further research is needed to investigate particular factors that motivate some transnational husbands to either maintain a monogamous marriage or opt for polygamy.

⁷ Our interlocutors justified their flexible spousal roles in diverse ways. Some based it on new understandings of Islamic norms which they had acquired (see Al-Sharmani, 2015). Others said that such flexibility was needed because of the difficult socioeconomic conditions of Somalis in Finland.



Conclusion

We have examined how Somali migrants in Finland drew on their strong transnational family ties and relations to achieve the goal of marriage. We also highlighted the challenges to their marriages that resulted from these transnational ties and how couples navigated these problems. We identified factors that enabled a positive interplay between transnational kinship and marriage. They were: a companionate marriage relationship based on emotional closeness and flexible spousal roles, compatibility in spousal resources, and cooperation of couples in navigating obligations towards their transnational kin.

The relevance of our findings is threefold. First, the role that the interviewees' transnational family ties played in their marriage practices affirms the need for, as the scholar Katherine Charsley (2012) argued, nuanced and multidimensional understandings of 'transnational marriages.' In this research, what was 'transnational' about interviewees' marriages was not confined to the issue of one spouse migrating as a result of the marriage. Rather, it had to do with the layered role that these transnational kin-based ties and relations played in spouse selection, marriage arrangements, and management of marital resources.

Second, similar to other literature on diverse migrant groups (Levitt 2002, Smith 2002, Foner 2002), our results question the assumption that the 1.5 or second generation migrants have tenuous or weak transnational kin-based ties. While the first generation migrants were more likely (than those of younger generation) to shoulder the obligation of remitting to relatives, the latter still had strong and active ties with their transnational families. These ties were reproduced and maintained through diverse forms of relationships and practices that went beyond sending remittances. Furthermore, in addition to parents and siblings, our interlocutors' transnational kin-based networks consisted of diverse relatives such as aunts, uncles, and cousins.

Third, our findings problematize clear-cut divisions between first and 1.5 (or second) generation migrants with regards to changes in marriage norms and practices. Our research, in fact, has shown that flexible egalitarian spousal roles were not necessarily confined to married couples of younger generation as this was also found among some first generation migrants and their spouses. In relation to this point, wives' economic role and contribution to the conjugal family (in addition to husbands' role) helped couples navigate their transnational family obligations. This factor combined with others (e.g. companionate marriage relationship, shared life goals, and flexible management of marital resources) created conducive conditions for stable and relatively happy marriages. Interestingly, in the researched divorce cases, it was also women's economic autonomy, interwoven with other factors, that contributed to marital conflicts (Al-Sharmani, forthcoming).

To conclude, our research shows that the benefits and challenges of transnational kinship for the marriages of migrants are shaped by multiple intersecting factors.

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These benefits and challenges play out in complex and mixed ways in the lives of migrants of different generation and gender.

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