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The Reconfiguration of European Boundaries and Borders: Cross-border Marriages from the Perspective of Spouses in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Cross-border marriages between citizens with a migration background and spouses from non-EU countries have been politicised and restricted across Europe. This article simultaneously applies the analytical lenses of bordering and boundary work to this issue and de-centres the perspective by investigating the consequences of these restrictions not on Europe, but on a country of origin – Sri Lanka. We show that a particular symbolic boundary against cross-border marriages in European countries legitimises the externalisation of borders to the country of origin. This has important consequences for the female spouses before they even begin their journey to Europe: it challenges their life aspirations, enhances their economic dependency and precarity and directly impacts the marriage system in Sri Lanka. We argue that this situation creates a form of neo-colonial governmentality that perpetuates historically established forms of Western politics of belonging.

Keywords: *Cross-border marriages; border studies; boundary work; politics of belonging.*

Introduction

Archan, the director of a language institute in Colombo, Sri Lanka, describes the situation of his students, mostly women from northern Sri Lanka who come to the capital to take a language test. If they pass it, they will be permitted to join their husbands in Europe:

These women come to Colombo only for the [language] test, which they need for the visa for family reunification with their spouses living in Europe. The failure rate is very high: roughly 60 per cent need to repeat the test several times. Quite often they try to bribe me [...]. These women are under enormous pressure to pass this language test. Sometimes they threaten to commit suicide. [...] The language class costs around €120, the final exam as well. You understand that this can get very expensive? And it often happens that if a woman fails the test and everything [i.e. the visa] gets delayed, the man simply looks for another woman. This is obviously very traumatic and difficult for the women here.

This situation is a consequence of a new configuration of European borders and boundaries that is particularly visible in the regulation of cross-border marriages involving a partner in Europe and another partner from a non-EU country.

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A wide body of literature on marriage migration shows the entanglement of particular symbolic boundaries and the tightening of European borders. The first are constructed upon culturalised and orientalist ideas of gender (in)equality. The latter have led to a restriction of marriage migration for non-EU citizens (Block, 2014; Bonjour & De Hart, 2013; Carver, 2016; Charsley & Bolognani, 2019). By de-centring our perspective, we contribute to this literature in three ways. First, while most studies in this field are conducted in the European countries themselves and depict the consequences of this reconfiguration of European borders and boundaries for marriage migrants in Europe, we analyse the effects in a country of origin – Sri Lanka. We show that the particular symbolic boundaries created in Europe have led to reconfigured externalised and re-territorialised borders in Sri Lanka, and that these boundaries thus contribute to differentiated restrictions on Sri Lankans' ability to migrate to Europe (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2012).

Second, a wide of body of literature scrutinises the new European border regime and its exclusionary character, mainly by discussing the human costs people face on the borders of Europe or within Europe once they arrive here (De Genova, 2017; Eule, Borelli, Lindberg, & Wyss, 2018; Yuval-Davis, Wemyss, & Cassidy, 2019). We add to this literature by showing that the externalisation and reterritorialisation of borders and boundaries has important consequences for people who are still in their country of origin, even before they begin their journey to Europe.

Finally, by examining how a “good marriage” is defined in northern Sri Lanka, we show the aspirations of the Tamil women who engage in cross-border marriages. This example demonstrates the simultaneously ethnocentric and hegemonic nature of the European definition of a “legitimate” marriage, which is based on the idea of romantic love without any other interest, a definition that makes possible a form of neo-colonial governmentality that perpetuates historically established forms of Western politics of belonging.

In the following, we first introduce the research project on which this article is based. We then clarify how we conceptualise borders and boundaries in the context of marriage migration. Finally, we depict the effects of these new border and boundary practices upon Tamil spouses waiting for their visas to join their husbands in Europe. Simultaneously applying the analytical lenses of bordering and boundary work makes it possible to understand how European nation-states and the EU reproduce themselves in a globalised and unequal world by producing exclusion in people's countries of origin, before they even become migrants.

Methodology

This article is part of a larger multi-sited research project that studies cross-border marriages from the perspective of both sponsors in Switzerland and their partners in Turkey, Kosova and Sri Lanka who are in the process of applying for the visa that will allow them to join them in Europe. Turkey, Kosova and Sri Lanka were selected because these were the countries most of the spouses of our interview partners in Switzerland came from.

This article is based on data the first author collected in fieldwork conducted in Colombo and Jaffna in 2016. She conducted problem-centred and semi-directive interviews (Witzel & Reiter, 2010) with two men and 17 women who were all married to people living in a European country. The interview partners were all involved in language courses in order to obtain a visa that would allow them to join their partners in Europe. The language schools were chosen as entry points in our search for spouses married to people in Europe. The first co-author also conducted expert interviews (Meuser & Nagel, 2009) with the director of a language school, a representative from an



embassy and the president of a women's NGO. The interviews were conducted in either English or Tamil with the support of an interpreter. The researcher contacted the teachers of different language schools in Colombo and Jaffna and asked them to put her in contact with students. The interviews with the students were mostly conducted during or after class and either at the school or in a café. The expert interviews were conducted at the offices of the respective representatives. The interview data was analysed according a theoretical coding procedure (Charmaz, 2001).

Bordering and boundary work: Conceptual clarifications

Theories of boundary work and contributions to border studies both examine the processes, practices and experiences of inclusion and exclusion, but through different analytical lenses. For the sake of clarity, and to thus more clearly demonstrate the ways in which they are mutually constituted, we disentangle the two concepts.

At the most general level, boundary studies aims to understand the ways otherness, membership and belonging are and have been socially produced and organised by different actors, and with what consequences (Pachucki, Pendergrass, & Lamont, 2007). The concept of boundary finds its origins in Fredrik Barth's (1969) seminal work, in which he introduced a procedural, interactional, dynamic and relational perspective to the study of ethnic group making. Later, Michèle Lamont developed a sociology of boundaries, applying Barth's ideas to other forms of group making (Lamont & Molnar, 2002). She and her colleagues understood boundaries as having both social and symbolic dimensions. In this article, when referring to boundaries we mean symbolic boundaries, which we understand as "conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorise objects, people and practices [... that] separate people into groups and generate feelings of similarity and group membership" (Lamont & Molnar, 2002: 168). In daily interaction, actors – individuals, state agents, journalists and so on – are involved in struggles over social distinctions and categorisations that can shift symbolic boundaries.

Following the work of many scholars (Kolossoff, 2005; Paasi, 2011; Wastl-Walter, 2012; Wilson & Hastings, 2012) we understand bordering processes as linked to a territory and the spatial scale of the (nation) state. Borders are not merely physical lines on a map, however. They do not represent a fixed point in space or time, but instead "symbolise a social practice or spatial differentiation" (Van Houtum & Van Naerssen, 2002, p. 126). In line with Van Houtum (2005, p. 673), we argue that borders are differentiators of socially constructed mindscapes and meanings, and that bordering processes are always entangled with ordering and othering (see also Fassin, 2011; Van Houtum & Van Naerssen, 2002). In other words, bordering is simultaneously a political project of governance and a political project of belonging (see also Yuval-Davis et al., 2019).

The construction of both European and national borders deploys symbolic boundaries to distinguish between those who do and do not belong, who to let in and with which rights (Favell, 2014; Nieswand, 2018; Wimmer, 2002). Put differently, symbolic boundaries regulate membership in terms of the distinction between "us" and "them", while borders regulate membership in legal, infrastructural and spatial terms. Both are involved in the (re)production of systems of dominance and inequality (Amelina, 2017).

Boundary making and bordering in the regulation of cross-border marriages

Throughout Western Europe, there has been a tendency to strongly politicise cross-border marriages, particularly when they involve citizens with a migrant background and a spouse from a

non-EU country. Marrying a national of an EU or European Economic Area country comes with no conditions, and in this case the state perceives marriage as a contract between two individuals, although it regulates the spouses' rights and obligations vis-à-vis each other. However, in the case of a marriage between a migrant or a citizen or resident of a European country and an extra-EU spouse, marriage becomes a legal status defined and highly controlled by an intrusive state (Carver, 2016, p. 2759). Such marriages are often seen as illegitimate, problematic and in need of governmental intervention. Most Western European countries have reacted by restricting family reunification (Wray, Agoston, & Hutton, 2014), most importantly by imposing economic thresholds on sponsors and age requirements on the incoming spouses (Bonjour & Kraler, 2014; Strasser, Kraler, Bonjour, & Bilger, 2009). These restrictions mobilise symbolic boundaries and both internalise and externalise borders. Simultaneously, given Europe's highly selective migration policies, family migration has become one of the few remaining channels through which non-EU nationals can enter Europe (Moret, Andrikopoulos, & Dahinden, 2019).

Symbolic boundaries related to marriage migration

States have a hegemonic role in determining acceptable forms of marriage and family and defining how citizens should behave towards each other in the intimate context of their home (Moret et al., 2019). Family politics and marriage are a crucial element of what Nira Yuval-Davis (2006) has called the "politics of belonging". Nation-states rely on specific, gendered visions of kinship relations in order to reproduce themselves and the boundaries of the imagined nation. As Carver (2016, p. 2772) has demonstrated in her historical analysis of marriages between British citizens and aliens, although the discourse has changed over time, the substance of the argument – the need to "protect the nation's values from being over-run by cultural others" – has remained the same.

Most importantly for the argument in this article, cross-border marriages challenge European states' normative vision of the "good family". In recent decades, cross-border marriages have increasingly been perceived as "sham", "forced", "arranged" or "bogus" – illegitimate forms of union that threaten the love- and consent-based relationships supposedly characteristic of modern, Western societies (Andrikopoulos, 2019; Bonjour & De Hart, 2013).

We can identify a symbolic boundary here that results in a particular construction of otherness. First, this symbolic boundary is based upon "femonationalism" (Farris, 2017) or "gendernationalism" (Dahinden, Fischer, Menet, & Kristol, 2018): nationalist forms of politics of belonging (Hadj Abdou, 2017) become entangled with orientalised representations of the other (Dietze, 2010), and women's rights and gender equality have become the yardsticks through which to assess who is or is not eligible to belong to European (national) societies (Delphy, 2006; Korteweg & Yudakul, 2009; Phillips, 2010). Gender equality is presented as an accomplished fact in European marriages and a genuine European value.

Second, cross-border marriages are often presented as evidence of the failed integration of both the migrants or citizens with a migrant background, on the one hand, and their incoming spouses, on the other (Charsley, Bolognani, & Spencer, 2017). The framing of migrant marriages as indicative of failed integration reinforces the idea that these marriages and forms of doing family are culturally incompatible with and a threat to the host society. Being in need of integration necessarily implies that one is not a full member of the nation and hence legitimises government intervention (Block, 2014; Schinkel, 2018).



Finally, this symbolic boundary related to cross-border marriages is based on the construction of migrant women as victims, whether of their sexist culture, Islam or gender inequality. As Bonjour and De Hart (2013, p. 72) argue, representing women as vulnerable and in need of help not only legitimises state governance of intimate relationships, but also allows European politicians to demonstrate their commitment to gender equality. This complex symbolic boundary is mobilised only against non-EU migrants from specific countries. It is not mobilised against white-settler countries such as the US and Australia or other European citizens.

New forms of bordering practices regarding cross-border marriages

Importantly, this symbolic boundary is mirrored in new bordering practices in Western Europe regarding family-related migration. This symbolic boundary based on gender equality, integration and victimisation legitimises a double form of the de-territorialisation of borders (De Genova, 2017; Walters, 2006). On the one hand, most European countries have introduced measures to restrict migration through marriage. Many of these measures take place within their borders, thus constituting an internalisation of bordering (Lavanchy, 2013; Pellander, 2015; Yuval-Davis, Wemyss, & Cassidy, 2018). On the other hand, and especially important for the following, some of these measures, including pre-entry language tests, involve the externalisation of borders. Several European countries, including Germany, the United Kingdom and France, have made a language test in the country of origin a pre-condition for a family-reunification visa. The organisations responsible for these tests, such as the British Council and the Goethe Institute, become spaces where the externalised border is territorialised in the country of origin.

The official European discourses that legitimise these new bordering practices mobilise a symbolic boundary based on female victimisation and gender inequality (Block, 2019). Policymakers present these language courses as facilitating the integration and autonomy of these women, who supposedly suffer from gender inequality in their country of origin (see also Gutekunst, 2015). These language courses grant policymakers some measure of control over these intimate relationships, even before the spouses arrive in Europe.

Effects of bordering and boundary work in the Sri Lankan context

These externalised bordering practices, based on specific racialised, gendered and morally charged symbolic boundaries, have a significant impact on the future migrants. We cannot here examine the complexities of family and kinship systems and marriages in Sri Lanka. Rather, our ambition is much more modest: we first present the definition of a “good marriage” that emerged from the interviews and demonstrate how that definition contrasts with its European counterpart. Second, we demonstrate how pre-entry language tests, contrary to their postulated emancipatory intent, increase female spouses’ precarity.

What is a “good marriage”? Global inequalities and the European view on marriage

Most interview partners agreed that marriage in northern Sri Lanka is often a collective decision negotiated between families in a post-war society characterised by economic deprivation. The women we interviewed described a variety of marriage types. Some were so-called love marriages, but most were arranged, by either specialised brokers or family members living in Europe.

Asha's narrative challenges the European view that only a purely love-based marriage is a good marriage (for a discussion of how European marriages are not free from "interests", see Andrikopoulos, 2019).

When asked if she was looking forward to going abroad, Asha responded as follows:

I am pleased. I will have a husband and we will have a family, that's the part I'm looking forward to [...]. But it's the first time I'll be leaving home, I'm leaving everyone, this creates insecurity for me [...]. We think that if we marry someone abroad we'll be better off, economically speaking, because we have big financial problems. Also, the men here ask for a big dowry. The young men abroad, on the other hand, they don't ask for a big dowry. Sometimes they don't ask at all [...]. My parents like that I'm going abroad. Because it's difficult here. The economy is not very good here. And I can help my parents.

This quote highlights the many components of the definition of a "good marriage". For many interviewees, the most important aspiration was simply to get married and have a family. Another consideration was the ability to support their family economically. The issue of a dowry was also raised often. A dowry is common in local Tamil marriages, but less so when the marriage is a cross-border one. This can be a reason for parents to try to find a husband abroad for their daughters, especially if they have more than one daughter. Many women also referred to friends who have married and migrated to Europe. Cross-border marriages have become part of the "cultural repertoire" (Swidler, 1986), demonstrating that processes of transnationalisation are deeply anchored in northern Sri Lanka.

In other words, marriage to a man abroad is seen positively: having a family and supporting one's family are intertwined drivers of the attempt to find a husband abroad. These aspirations clash with European countries' view of a legitimate marriage, which is constructed as informed only by romantic love. They also render visible the ethnocentric underpinnings of the European view and they uncover the ways in which these aspirations are embedded in long-lasting global inequalities.

The expert from the women's NGO referred to a negative aspect of such cross-border marriages that she said had only become salient in the last few years. Many families have lost control over whom they marry their daughters to. With locally arranged marriages, parents have first-hand information about a potential husband. This knowledge is often lacking when the potential husband lives thousands of kilometres away and the match is arranged with the support of a specialised broker, who, as many interviewees told us, generally checks only if the marriage partners' caste backgrounds and horoscopes are compatible. As the women's NGO expert stated:

Women are often cheated for various reasons. Because when the proposal comes from a foreign country, the parents don't know whether there's a problem with the man. I know one case here, a daughter, she's very poor, a proposal came, and she wanted to go to the UK. Then she borrowed money, took a loan, everything, and she went. When she got there, it was a small room [...] and this man had a lot of problems, and he was a drug addict. Nobody inquired about this person, and neither did the broker. He started beating her. It was terrible.

Put differently, the global inequalities that partly inform the desire for these cross-border marriages create risks for the female marriage partner.



Consequences of the externalisation of the border through pre-entry language tests

In this complex situation, the pre-entry language test directly contributes to the female marriage partner's financial dependency and precarity.

Most of the women we interviewed had grown up during the civil war, and thus during a time when the school system did not work properly. They are often poorly educated and struggle with their German or English course. As a result, they are often unable to pass the test, or only succeed after several attempts. This situation has various highly gendered consequences. First, apart from keeping them separate from their husbands for as long as several years – a human-rights concern (Strik, De Hart, & Nissen, 2013) – passing these tests requires significant economic resources. The women we talked to often live in small villages and need to relocate to Jaffna, where they mostly live with family members, to take the course. They need to pay for the language course and their trip to Colombo to take the test, as well as for the trip(s) to the embassy. It is often the husband abroad or a family member abroad who finances these expenses. Second, we were told that some husbands cancel the marriage if it takes their wife too long to obtain her visa. Some women also told us that some men only propose conditional marriages: they marry their potential wife only when she has already passed the test. Third, the teachers and directors of the schools we interviewed indicated that many women experience serious psychological problems as a result of the course, including nervous breakdowns and suicide attempts. Finally, it is becoming increasingly common for the women to be rejected by their family if the man cancels the marriage. New NGOs have been established to provide these abandoned women with care.

In other words, this externalised bordering practice, which is legitimised by a symbolic boundary based on ideas about gender equality, the need for integration and victimisation, challenges these women's aspirations and places them in a situation of (economic) dependency – on the goodwill of the husband abroad, on the economic resources of others and on their families. It also has a direct impact on the marriage system in Sri Lanka and on marriage conditions, to the disadvantage of women. These tests function as a means to filter the border in the country of origin. Doing this directly in the country of origin allows European countries to outsource governmentality as well as the costs of immigration.

Conclusion

This article has argued that jointly articulating the fields of bordering and boundary studies makes possible a nuanced understanding of current processes of differentiated exclusion. A symbolic boundary based on gendernationalism, integration and the victimisation of women legitimises a new governmentality of borders and a particular project of the politics of belonging.

The effects of this reconfigured border and boundary regime in the realm of marriage migration are considerable. First, this regime leads to a hierarchisation of marriage migrants and the exclusion of certain candidates. Similarly to what Gutekunst (2015) and (Jashari, Dahinden, & Moret, 2019) observed in Morocco and Turkey, respectively, this new border and boundary regime filters into Sri Lanka and affects would-be migrants according to their educational background and financial resources. Second, the externalisation of bordering practices directly impacts the spouses even before they migrate: it challenges their life aspirations, increases their economic dependency and precarity and has a direct impact on the marriage system. This case study has also demonstrated that the European vision of marriage is simultaneously ethnocentric, and, because of global inequalities and Western dominance, hegemonic.

Our analysis demonstrates how bordering and boundaries together make, rather than simply represent, a world, through political projects of governance and belonging. Policies restricting family reunification constitute a form of neo-colonial governance of borders and boundaries that reinforces global hierarchies that are historically anchored and ideologically constructed (Lutz, 1991; Nader, 1989). Pre-entry language tests allow European countries to externalise their borders, and thus to govern the cultural other before they have even left their country of origin.

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