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# Forced Migration and Separated Families

Everyday Insecurities and  
Transnational Strategies

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Editors

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ISSN 2364-4087

ISSN 2364-4095 (electronic)

IMISCOE Research Series

ISBN 978-3-031-24973-0

ISBN 978-3-031-24974-7 (eBook)

<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-24974-7>

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This Springer imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG  
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

# Acknowledgements

This book is an outcome of the multidisciplinary research project ‘Family Separation, Migration Status, and Everyday Security: Experiences and Strategies of Vulnerable Migrants’, which was funded by the Academy of Finland for the period January 2018 through August 2022 at the Migration Institute of Finland and led by Marja Tiilikainen. The project staff include researchers Johanna Hiitola, Abdirashid Ismail, Johanna Leinonen and Jaana Palander, and research assistants Zeinab Karimi, Edris Bayan Shenwarai and Ahmed Zaidan.

We are grateful to our advisory board, who have provided us with invaluable support throughout the project and offered comments on the chapters of this book: Professor Eleonore Kofman at Middlesex University, Associate Professor Helena Wray at the University of Exeter, Professor Laura Hammond at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) and Senior Researcher Jill Alpes at the Human Rights Centre at Ghent University. Helena Wray’s legal expertise has been of great help in finalizing the legal chapters of the book.

The writing and editing of the book took place in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has impacted both individual contributors and the process as a whole. A face-to-face seminar for the authors and advisory board that we had planned to organize at SOAS in London was changed to a Zoom meeting that took place on 16–17 April 2020. We owe huge thanks to our contributors, who have shown great commitment and worked on their chapters in often very difficult circumstances in different parts of the world. For example, the chapters dealing with Nigeria and Mexico draw on data that were collected during the pandemic.

We are indebted to Christina Saarinen, who has taken care of the book’s English language editing. Her engaged work, insights and input, far beyond ‘ordinary’ proofreading, have significantly helped us to improve the text. Any errors that may remain are naturally our responsibility. The thoughtful comments of two anonymous reviewers were very helpful in making final revisions to the manuscript. Finally, we want to thank the IMISCOE Research Series, in particular, the editorial

committee chair, Professor Anna Triandafyllidou, and the series managing editor, Irina Isaakyan, for a smooth publication process.

Marja Tiilikainen

Johanna Hiitola

Abdirashid A. Ismail

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## About the Editors

**Marja Tiilikainen** received her PhD in the study of religions from the University of Helsinki, Finland, in 2003, and the title of associate professor (docent) in the same subject in 2011. She is a senior research fellow at the Migration Institute of Finland. Her research has focused on such issues as Muslim minorities; everyday lived religion; the cultural dimensions of health, illness and healing; everyday security; and transnational family life. In particular, she has studied Somali diasporic communities and conducted ethnographic research in Finland, Canada and Somalia. Her publications include the co-edited volumes *Wellbeing of Transnational Muslim Families: Marriage, Law and Gender* (Routledge 2019) and *Family Life in Transition: Borders, Transnational Mobility and Welfare Society in Nordic Countries* (Routledge 2020). She recently led the research project ‘Family Separation, Migration Status, and Everyday Security: Experiences and Strategies of Vulnerable Migrants’, funded by the Academy of Finland (2018–2022), and is a partner in the NordForsk-funded research project ‘Relational Wellbeing in the Lives of Refugee Young People in Finland, Norway and Scotland’ (2020–2024).

**Johanna Hiitola** has a PhD in gender studies (2015) from the University of Tampere, Finland, and is a university lecturer and director of gender studies at the University of Oulu, Finland. She has received the title of associate professor (docent) in social and public policy from the University of Eastern Finland and in social work from the University of Jyväskylä, Finland. Her research includes intersectional feminist family studies, migrant integration, interpersonal violence, forced migration studies, citizenship scholarship and, most recently, family separation of forced migrants. She has recently conducted research as part of the Academy of Finland-funded project ‘Family Separation, Migration Status, and Everyday Security’ (2018–2022) and the project ‘Mobile Futures’, funded by the Strategic Research Council within the Academy of Finland (2021–2027). She is leading the projects ‘Transnational Child Protection: Knowledge and Service Paths’, funded by the Finnish Ministry of Social Affairs and Health (2022–2024), and ‘Spitting Image: Direct-to-Consumer DNA Testing and New Networks of Kinship’, funded by the Northern Ostrobothnian Cultural Foundation (2022–2023). She is the first editor of

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**Jaana Palander** has a master’s degree in administrative sciences (2008) and is currently completing her doctoral studies in public law at the University of Tampere, Finland. Her doctoral thesis deals with human rights and family reunification and is supported by a grant from the Finnish Cultural Foundation. Currently, she teaches migration law and human rights law at the University of Eastern Finland Law School. Recently, she has been a researcher at the Migration Institute of Finland in the project ‘Family Separation, Migration Status, and Everyday Security: Experiences and Strategies of Vulnerable Migrants’, funded by the Academy of Finland. Earlier, she worked as a researcher in the project ‘Multilayered Borders of Global Security’, in the research group ‘Migration, Everyday Security and the Resilience of Finnish Society’ hosted by the Department of Social Studies at the University of Eastern Finland. Palander is a book review editor for the *Nordic Journal of Migration Research* and has published articles and blog texts related to family reunification policy and law in several Finnish publications and platforms. In addition, she has co-edited a textbook on Finnish migration law, where she has a chapter on family reunification law.

**Part I**  
**Introduction**

# Chapter 1

## From Forced Migration to the Forced Separation of Families



**Marja Tiilikainen, Johanna Hiitola, Abdirashid A. Ismail,  
and Jaana Palander**

The aim of this multidisciplinary edited volume is to examine the impact of family separation on forced migrants and their transnational families. We are interested in how people *feel* about family separation, but also in what they *do* about it. Research on transnational families (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002; Goulbourne et al., 2009; Baldassar et al., 2014; Al-Sharmani & Ismail, 2017; Tiilikainen et al., 2019; Hiitola et al., 2020a) has shown that to maintain collective welfare and unity among family members, migrants dynamically reproduce and navigate kin-based ties across borders. Previous research has extensively discussed transnational family attachments, networks, and practices such as care practices as common features of migratory lives (Evergeti & Ryan, 2011; Baldassar & Merla, 2014; Mazzucato & Dito, 2018; Assmuth et al., 2018; Bryceson, 2019; Tiilikainen, 2020). Such studies have, however, primarily looked at the transnational experiences of labour migrants. As Kraus et al. (2019) have pointed out, significantly less is known about what happens to forcibly separated family and kin and their mutual relationships in a transnational context. For example, research on asylum seekers' opportunities for parenting across distance has been scarce (see, however, Madziva, 2015; Leinonen & Pellander, 2020).

Globally, the majority of the world's forcibly displaced people remain close to their countries of origin (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2019). Nonetheless, political and academic attention has for the most part focused on migration from the Global South to the Global North, in particular to Europe and North America, where migration policies and laws have increasingly tightened. This edited volume mostly deals with this type of migration as well, but it also provides

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empirical cases of South-South migration – an angle which is often bypassed or overlooked by scholarship focusing on the Global North.

Following the large migratory movement of asylum seekers to Europe in 2015, possibilities for family reunification have diminished as many European countries have introduced more restrictive asylum and family reunification policies, including income requirements. The COVID-19 pandemic, which started in 2020, made border crossings even more difficult, with many countries closing their borders and shutting down embassies. In today's world, migrants and those 'left behind' may need to rethink their future plans, find new ways to maintain family ties, and reorganize their personal, social and economic lives. The increasing complexity of forced migration movements also challenges existing concepts, legal structures and responses to these movements both locally and internationally (Bloch & Donà, 2019).

The empirical studies presented in this book show that restrictive migration policies in the Global North, which often result in prolonged periods of family separation and waiting, are a key factor in producing everyday insecurity among forced migrants as well as among their families in the Global South. The reverse is true as well: the insecurities and vulnerabilities faced by families in the Global South impact the migration decisions and wellbeing of family members in the Global North. We suggest there is an ongoing need in the academic discussion on transnational family separation to take into account the security concerns of actors other than citizens and foreigners within a country's national borders, a need identified by Baldaccini et al. as early as 2007. Vulnerable migrants and their families in their countries of origin or transit are not devoid of agency, however, but draw from their available resources and use various strategies, both formal and informal, to endure or change the conditions of transnational family separation. Importantly, these resources and strategies are gendered, and they also differ according to factors such as age and class (Hiitola, 2019; Kofman, 2019). Migration is not only gendered, however, but is also a gendering process that impacts one's perceptions of gender and gender relations (Szczepaniková, 2006). Thus, it is crucial to understand migration-related inequalities and vulnerabilities, as well as family relationships and the resources that are produced or impacted by different gender positions, in a more nuanced way (Christou & Kofman, 2022, pp. 13–16).

We consider forced migration a phenomenon with 'neither a simple definition nor an official designation' (Zetter, 2014, p. 22). It is apparent that a host of life-threatening or life-diminishing insecurities, such as conflict and violence, political instability, states' failure to protect human rights and lack of viable livelihoods, drive people to flee their countries of origin. However, not all compelling reasons for migration are recognized as grounds for international protection. The research on forced migration often refers to particular categories of migrants: internally displaced people, victims of human trafficking, asylum seekers, refugees and stateless people. However, several scholars have pointed out that these categories are ill-defined and overlapping (e.g., Castles et al., 2014; Erdal & Oeppen, 2018) and that the reasons behind migration are often a combination of both voluntary and involuntary factors (Koser & Martin, 2011; Reed et al., 2016). For example, refugees may also have economic reasons for migration (Czaika & Kraler, 2020, p. 333). In

other cases, migrants may be able to utilize so-called voluntary categories for mobility, even if the reasons behind their move were compelling.

The analytical power of such categories is especially questionable when analysing everyday experiences of migration and shifting focus from forced migration to the forced separation of families across borders. Nonetheless, the consequences of different categories of residence are significant. For example, refugee status or asylum offers protections and possibilities often not afforded those with other types of residence permits. Those who receive other types of residence permits face more legal restrictions and additional hurdles in reaching family unity. In addition, many forced migrants never gain a formal status in the receiving society that would enable them to reunite their families. Therefore, struggles for security of residence are part of the family separation picture.

## 1.1 Main Concepts

In this volume, we use the term *forced migrant* to refer not only to those who qualify for international protection, but also to other displaced people and irregular migrants who have been forced to migrate due to conflict or threats to their lives or livelihood, who are engaged in unwanted secondary mobility because they do not have right to asylum in a particular country, or who have been deported (on deportation as a form of forced migration, see Gibney, 2013). These individuals are often in a vulnerable, underprivileged position due to their migration status. Zetter (2019) has suggested that compared to the term ‘refugee’, ‘forced migration’ or ‘forced displacement’ may capture the complexity of migration drivers, processes, impacts and lived realities in a more holistic way. Alexander Betts (2013) has proposed the term ‘survival migration’ to describe different types of migrants in precarious situations who have a human rights–based entitlement not to return to their countries of origin but do not fit the legal category of refugee. In this book, depending on the context, ‘forced migrant’ or ‘refugee’ may refer either to a legal and policy category that is normative in nature, or to a more descriptive and empirical understanding of refugees and the drivers of migration (see Czaika & Kraler, 2020). Our focus on forced migrants refines and adds to the previous literature on transnational families and shows how migrants’ legal and social positioning impacts their opportunities to conduct transnational family life. To date, transnational family life has rarely been addressed from the perspective of forced migrants (for an exception, see Madziva & Zontini, 2012).

Though the conventional understanding of transnational families does not encompass temporary family separation related to the processes of international protection, transnational families and separated families are quite similar at the everyday level, since reunification waiting times can be quite long. Transnational family relationships remain important during family separation, even if temporary. We investigate how people with a forced-migration background residing in Europe, the Middle East and Latin America experience separation from their intimate and

extended family members, and how family and kin in countries of origin or transit are impacted by the often-precarious circumstances of their family members in receiving countries. The insecurities of family members in countries of origin are also reflected in the wellbeing of migrants in receiving countries (Rousseau et al., 2004; Nickerson et al., 2010; Ismail, 2019). Family members waiting in other countries may face everyday insecurities as well.

Like Assmuth et al. (2021), we use the concept of *everyday security* instead of human security (which has been used by, e.g., Purkayastha, 2018) because we want to emphasize our focus on everyday experiences, understandings and strategies. We understand the concept of everyday security as being closely linked to the concept of wellbeing, comprising material, relational and ethical dimensions (for previous discussion on everyday security and wellbeing, see Al-Sharmani et al., 2019; Tiilikainen, 2019; Palander, 2021). Following Crawford and Hutchinson (2015), the everyday security of forced migrants, as well as that of their families in the Global South, is seen as their lived reality as resulting from the securitizing moves of states.

Everyday security theorizes how individuals interpret, experience, adapt to and resist security projects, and how they attempt to create their own security in daily life (e.g., Innes, 2014; Cochrane & Wolff, 2021). Maintaining a sense of everyday security is a multidimensional process, as has been argued by Susan White (2010) with respect to wellbeing. The authors of the various chapters of this book discuss the different ways that family members impacted by the processes of forced migration recreate material, social and emotional security and wellbeing in their daily lives as part of transnational family life. We approach securities and insecurities intersectionally (Purkayastha, 2012), considering how personal characteristics such as gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, ability, class and age influence the security threats one is exposed to. With this intersectional approach, we also build on previous research (e.g., Hiitola et al., 2020b; Hiitola, 2021) that considers how securities and insecurities are experienced or interpreted by forced migrants.

Our focus on everyday security brings to the fore the relational wellbeing (White, 2017) that vulnerable migrants and their transnational families foster and renegotiate. Transnational family relationships are further connected to emotions and affects (on affect, see, e.g., Ahmed, 2000, 2004), which stretch and travel across borders (Skrbiš, 2008; Wise & Velayutham, 2017). A vast body of scholarship exists on the emotions connected to maintaining transnational family relationships and care, particularly mothering, caregiving and care chains (e.g., Parreñas, 2005; McKay, 2006; Melander et al., 2020). However, the toll of forced migration on emotional wellbeing is seldom discussed, and we therefore wish also to contribute to the research on emotions and affects in this context.

Everyday security is also impacted by normative structures, migration policies and administrative systems. This volume contributes to existing scholarship on the effects of the legal restrictions on family reunification (e.g., Strik et al., 2013; Eggebø & Brekke, 2019). The chapters of this book demonstrate how restrictive laws and policies impact the everyday lives of families separated across borders. International human rights law, especially the right to family life and the principle



of family unity, is often evoked in the search for justice for migrants. However, legal avenues often fail to secure the family unity, wellbeing and autonomy of migrants. Different legal systems respect family life and family unity to different degrees. While several legal and comparative studies and reports have been done on family reunification law, especially in Europe (e.g., Klaassen, 2015; Miettinen et al., 2016; European Migration Network, 2017; Borevi, 2018), studies considering countries in other regions are scarce. Chapter 2 of this volume, in particular, aims to respond to this gap by shedding light on differences in legal and administrative approaches to family reunification. Most of the countries discussed in Chap. 2 are also examined in other empirical chapters.

## 1.2 Geographical Context

The geographical coverage of the empirical studies in this volume is expansive, and the countries examined can be grouped in various ways. The contexts for empirical data collection include a number of countries in the Global South (Brazil, Jordan, Lebanon, Mexico, Nigeria, Pakistan, Somalia) and in the Global North (Finland, Germany, Greece, Israel). Also in the Global North, the United States and Sweden are studied from the point of view of migration governance in Chap. 2. The forced migrants studied in this volume have roots or family members in Afghanistan, Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Mali, Nigeria, Pakistan, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and the United States. The legal empirical study presented in Chap. 3 discusses court cases involving family members from Turkey and Egypt as well.

Most chapters focus on migration from the Global South to the Global North, but there are also examples of South-South migration: *Patrícia Nabuco Martuscelli* writes about African refugees in Brazil, *Michelle Lokot* about Syrians in Jordan and *Irene Tuzi* about Syrians in Lebanon. Jordan and Lebanon, however, can also be seen as transit countries, making receiving countries in the Global North, such as Germany, relevant in that context. Although Mexico is often considered a sending and transit country for migration, it is a destination country for Mexican deportees from the United States in the chapter by *Angel Iglesias Ortiz* and *Johanna Hiitola*. These deportations can even be seen as an example of North-South migration if the deported person has stronger ties with the United States than Mexico. Grouping states into sending, transit and destination or receiving countries is thus complex and depends on the focus of the study.

The global and transnational scope of the book, including perspectives from both sending and host countries, provides a unique opportunity to rebalance, widen and add new nuances to previous scholarship on families and migration, which has largely focused on the receiving context. In addition, by moving beyond the national context, the volume provides new insights into family migration policies.

### 1.3 Chapters of the Book

The book consists of ten empirical chapters united by the overarching themes of forced migration, family separation, everyday security and migrant strategies. The chapters are organized into three parts: Part I provides introductory and contextual background for the empirical chapters of the book, Part II addresses the everyday insecurities faced by forced migrants and their transnationally separated families, and Part III considers the effects of and affective responses to long waiting times for family reunification. The book ends with an epilogue.

Part I begins with a general conceptual and thematic introduction by the editors. This is followed by a second introductory chapter by *Jaana Palander*, *Usumain Baraka*, *Michelle Lokot*, *Patrícia Nabuco Martuscelli*, *Hilda Gustafsson*, *Hadas Yaron Mesgena*, *Irene Tuzi* and *Helena Wray* that introduces the differing legal and administrative frameworks of family reunification in the countries discussed in this book. The chapter provides a background for considering specific questions of family separation.

Part II reveals the implications of restrictive legal frameworks and migration policies for family life by focusing on the everyday insecurities faced by forced migrants and their transnationally separated families. In the first chapter of Part II, *Jaana Palander* looks at challenges to obtaining legal redress for negative family reunification decisions in Finland and emphasizes the lack of consideration for the insecurities of family members abroad both in the national court and at the European Court of Human Rights. Looking deeper at the legal principles behind the courts' argumentation, the chapter suggests strategies for litigators and judges to better protect human dignity and family life. *Patrícia Nabuco Martuscelli* analyses both legal frameworks and empirical findings from interviews with refugees in Brazil. Her investigation of the obstacles to family reunification in Brazil moves beyond regulations to encompass administrative practices. This chapter also sheds light on the selection strategies of forced migrants when they need to decide which family members to sponsor for reunification in Brazil. *Hadas Yaron Mesgena* and *Usumain Baraka* discuss how prolonged family separation and the lack of reunification prospects in Israel affect the intimate family relationships of Sudanese and Eritrean refugees, as well as their emotional wellbeing and sense of security. Though these refugees encounter administrative violence and are unable to change immigration regimes, they also take action to regain their sense of security by cultivating alternative social relationships and passing on their language and traditions to the next generation. Next, *Allwell Oseahume Akhigbe* and *Efetobor Stephanie Effevottu* highlight how Nigerian irregular migrants to Europe are motivated by the need to improve the economic security of their families in Nigeria. While migrants' families in Nigeria benefit from their family members' irregular migration in the form of upward social mobility, migration also results in strained family relationships. In the final chapter of Part II, *Abdirashid A. Ismail* focuses on the experiences of everyday insecurity among families in Somalia that result from the precarious and irregular status of their family members in Europe. Ismail identifies emotional,

health-related, material and social dimensions of everyday insecurity. His analysis connects European immigration policies to the everyday insecurities of families in Somalia.

The chapters of Part III analyse the emotional and affective consequences of being separated from one's family. These consequences are tied to long waiting times and are gendered, classed, racialized and dependent on residency status. The chapter by *Angel Iglesias Ortiz* and *Johanna Hiitola* focuses on Mexican deportees who have experienced family separation as a result of being deported from the United States to Tijuana, Mexico. The authors suggest that the decision to stay in Tijuana is often related to being able to keep in direct contact with family in the United States. Their analysis reveals that gendered everyday conditions of insecurity are intertwined with deportees' family situations. In the next chapter, *Michelle Lokot* explores the experiences of Syrian refugees living in Jordan during forced displacement and the relational ties they form and sustain across borders. The findings highlight the tensions, regrets, disclosures and silences affecting separated families. Next, *Irene Tuzi* studies the impact of forced family separation among Syrian refugees in the Global South (Lebanon) and Global North (Germany). She finds that refugees in both places use similar coping strategies to navigate separation, such as establishing new social networks, consolidating relationships with left-behind family members and reinforcing religious beliefs and practices. The fourth chapter, by *Johanna Hiitola*, *Zeinab Karimi* and *Johanna Leinonen*, investigates affective insecurity in the lives of Afghan, Iraqi and Somali forced migrants who are separated from their families while living in Finland. Acknowledging that family separation is intensely emotional, the authors suggest that everyday insecurities are related to affects in three ways: through judgement, through affective disparity and through transnational flows of affect. Finally, Part III ends with a chapter by *Laine Munir* and *Anila Noor*, who introduce the positionalities of transgender asylum seekers to the discussion. Their chapter carefully analyses the case of a Pakistani asylum seeker who sought safety in Greece. The analysis finds that the young migrant's departure from Pakistan balanced his individual need for gender expression with his family's collective need for relational wellbeing, everyday security and acceptance by their Islamic community.

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## Chapter 2

# International Human Rights Frameworks in Relation to National Family Reunification Policy and Administrative Practice



**Jaana Palander, Usumain Baraka, Hilda Gustafsson, Alyssa Marie Kvalvaag, Michelle Lokot, Patrícia Nabuco Martuscelli, Hadas Yaron Mesgena, Irene Tuzi, and Helena Wray**

Many chapters in this book deal with obstacles to family unity and the challenges of family separation. These obstacles and challenges often emerge as a consequence of legal restrictions, harsh policies and administrative hurdles to family reunification. In this chapter, we explore these obstacles and their consequences in Sweden, Finland, Germany, the United States, Brazil, Israel, Lebanon and Jordan. These

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countries, most of which are discussed further in other chapters of this book,<sup>1</sup> are mostly migrant-receiving countries. Some countries, however, can be considered temporary host countries or transit countries for forced migrants – a special situation which allows us to look at obstacles to family reunification from a novel point of view. This introductory chapter therefore provides background information for the other chapters, in which the effects of regulation and family separation are explored in greater detail.

As the formal process of family reunification is available only to those migrants who have received regular residency status, this chapter mainly considers the right to family reunification of refugees and other beneficiaries of international protection. However, in many cases, forced migrants face difficulties in acquiring international protection and residence permits. We therefore mention the circumstances of asylum seekers and rejected asylum seekers as well and consider their efforts to secure a better future for their families. After all, human rights should in principle belong to all, regardless of migration status. In practice, however, human rights obligations regarding forced migrants' right to respect for family life remain rather vague. In this introductory chapter, we show that there are different types of obstacles to family reunification in national law, reflecting the lack of clear rights to family reunification in international and human rights law.

## 2.1 International Human Rights Frameworks for Family Reunification

In the context of international law, there is no general international agreement explicitly regulating the entry of foreign citizens, let alone an agreement that would secure family reunification for all migrants (Klaassen, 2015, p. 35; Peers et al., 2012, p. 248; Perruchoud, 2012, pp. 123–125). International obligations relevant to family reunification are found only in some human rights treaties and are realized mainly through the findings of treaty bodies and in the jurisprudence of some regional human rights courts. Interestingly, the most relevant and far-reaching obligations stem from instruments that do not specifically regulate migrants' rights.

The UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951) and its amending protocol, the Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees (1967), together form the only international agreement that specifically protects the rights of forced migrants. The convention and protocol prohibit refoulement, the return of refugees to a country where they face persecution. The definition of refugee in Article 1 of the convention is very specific, but some regional agreements, including the 1984 Cartagena Declaration on Refugees, issued by the Colloquium on the International Protection of Refugees in Central America, Mexico and Panama and relevant in the case of

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<sup>1</sup>Due to changes during the writing process, the book does not include a separate chapter on Sweden.

Brazil, have adopted a wider definition (conclusion III (3)). The Refugee Convention does not create binding legal obligations regarding the entry of refugees' family members, but the final act of the conference drafting the convention included important recommendations, notably the principle of family unity, extending the rights granted to a refugee to members of his family and 'ensuring that the unity of the refugee's family is maintained'.<sup>2</sup> All of the countries discussed in this chapter are bound by the Refugee Convention, with the exception of Jordan and Lebanon.

The *jus cogens* principle of non-refoulement is now regarded as customary international law and binding on all states (Goodwin-Gill & Adams, 2021, pp. 300–306). This obligation also arises indirectly from Article 7 of the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), which requires states to avoid subjecting individuals to ill-treatment and binds all the countries discussed in this chapter. Non-refoulement in this context prohibits the return of individuals 'to a country where they would face torture, cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment and other irreparable harm' (Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2018) irrespective of the cause of the harm or the conduct of the individual, making it of wider application than the Refugee Convention. The non-refoulement principle does not, by itself, create a right to family reunification. However, individuals who cannot be returned to a state under the non-refoulement principle cannot reunify with their families there, either, strengthening their family reunification claims in the countries where they are residing.

All the countries discussed in this chapter, except the United States, are parties to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). Article 3 of the convention requires a child's best interests to be a primary consideration in all decisions that concern them, implicitly including decisions relating to their own or their parents' immigration status. This obligation is far-reaching: the Committee on the Rights of the Child has deemed it a freestanding right and a principle of legal interpretation, requiring procedural guarantees.<sup>3</sup> Article 9 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child prohibits family separation, and Article 10 requires that family reunification applications involving a child be dealt with 'in a positive, humane and expeditious manner', currently the strongest explicit commitment to family reunification in international law. Article 22, paragraph 2, applies to refugee and asylum-seeking children and requires states to assist in family tracing and family reunification. The Committee on the Rights of the Child has also concluded that refusing family reunification to children under 18 because of an age limit set in national law breaches the convention.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Final Act of the United Nations Conference of Plenipotentiaries on the Status of Refugees and Stateless Persons, UN Doc A/CONF.2/108/Rev.1 (25 July 1951), sec. IV, recommendation B.

<sup>3</sup>General Comment No. 14 on the Right of the Child to Have His or Her Best Interests Taken as a Primary Consideration, UN Doc CRC/C/GC/14 (29 May 2013).

<sup>4</sup>Concluding Observations: Denmark, UN Doc CRC/C/DNK/CO/3 (23 November 2005), paras. 30–31.

While international human rights instruments do not otherwise refer directly to family reunification, there are many references to the protection of family life in general, such as in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). Notably, Article 17 of the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which all the countries discussed in this chapter are party, prohibits ‘arbitrary or unlawful interference’ with family life, while Article 23 recognizes family as ‘the natural and fundamental group unit of society’ and requires its protection. The Human Rights Committee, which monitors implementation of the covenant, has stated that the concept of family must be at least as wide as usually understood in the receiving country<sup>5</sup> and that complete denial of family reunification would be against the covenant.<sup>6</sup> In 2016, the Human Rights Committee recommended that Slovenia ‘consider steps to facilitate the process of family reunification for beneficiaries of international protection’.<sup>7</sup> Occasionally, the expulsion of long-term residents has been found to violate family life rights.<sup>8</sup>

The general rights to family life in international human rights instruments are reproduced in various regional human rights instruments, including in Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights (1950, ECHR), adopted by the Council of Europe, and in Articles 11 and 17 of the American Convention on Human Rights (1969), adopted by the Organization of American States. Regional courts adjudicate individual complaints – for these regions namely the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACtHR). Human rights courts emphasize that states have the right to control entry and set restrictions and conditions, but they also expect that such restrictions not be unlawful or arbitrary. However, it is not clear what the prohibition of arbitrariness entails. In *Alim v Russia* the ECtHR specified that states should apply the national law, provide adequate procedures and act consistently with them.<sup>9</sup>

In Europe, the ECtHR expects states to ensure a fair balance between the interests of the state and the applicant in decision-making. In assessing this balance, the court considers whether there are insurmountable obstacles to the family living elsewhere (Klaassen, 2015, pp. 95–96). The problems forced migrants would face living elsewhere work in their favour. In *Tuquabo-Tekle v Netherlands* the

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<sup>5</sup>Hopu v France, Communication No. 549/1993, UN Doc CCPR/C/60/D/549/1993/Rev.1 (29 December 1997).

<sup>6</sup>Concluding Observations of the Human Rights Committee: Zimbabwe, UN Doc CCPR/C/79/Add.89 (6 April 1998).

<sup>7</sup>Concluding Observations on the Third Periodic Report of Slovenia, UN Doc CCPR/C/SVN/CO/3 (21 April 2016).

<sup>8</sup>Husseini v Denmark, Communication No. 2243/2013, UN Doc CCPR/C/112/D/2243/2013 (26 November 2014); Madafferi v Australia, Communication No. 1011/2011, UN Doc CCPR/C/81/D/1011/2001 (26 August 2004).

<sup>9</sup>App. No. 39417/07 (27 September 2011).

ECtHR recognized the difficulty of return for an asylum seeker who had received a visa on humanitarian grounds, and admission of the woman's child was seen as 'the most adequate way' to develop the parties' family life.<sup>10</sup> There are also other factors that need to be taken into account in the overall balancing, such as effect on family ties, ties in the host country and factors of immigration control.<sup>11</sup> It has been explicitly stated that national bodies must 'give effective protection and sufficient weight to the best interests of the children'.<sup>12</sup> Restrictions such as income requirements are permitted, but they need to be reasonable and meet the balancing test.<sup>13</sup> The ECtHR principles concerning case law on the prohibition of discrimination (based on Article 14 ECHR) do not seem to allow differences in family reunification rights between refugees and persons granted subsidiary protection (Costello et al., 2017).

In Latin America and the Caribbean, parties to the Cartagena Declaration on Refugees 'acknowledge that reunification of families constitutes a fundamental principle in regard to refugees and one which should be the basis for the regime of humanitarian treatment in the country of asylum' (conclusion III (13)). Although the declaration is not legally binding, most countries in Latin America have adopted these recommendations in their national law, including Brazil (Jatobá & Martuscelli, 2018; Kvalvaag, 2021). The IACtHR has found that unlawful expulsions leading to family separation violate the family life articles of the American Convention on Human Rights<sup>14</sup> and has issued an advisory opinion that provides an expanded definition of family and recognizes a right to family reunification for children.<sup>15</sup>

In summary, the countries considered in this chapter have rather similar legal human rights obligations to respect family life and protect the family. The migration context is special, however, and a strong obligation to allow family reunification does not exist. Nonetheless, in the situation of forced migration, a stronger human rights obligation to facilitate family reunification does apply. How this is reflected (or not reflected) in practice differs between countries, as we will observe in the next section. We will also show that it is not only family reunification rights that are relevant in protecting family life, but also the more general right to protection of forced migrants.

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<sup>10</sup>App. No. 60665/00 (1 December 2005), para. 48.

<sup>11</sup>Rodrigues da Silva v Netherlands, App. No. 50435/99 (31 January 2006), para. 36.

<sup>12</sup>Jeunesse v Netherlands, App. No. 12738/10 (3 October 2014), para. 109.

<sup>13</sup>Konstatinov v Netherlands, App. No. 16351/03 (26 April 2007), para. 50.

<sup>14</sup>Expelled Dominicans and Haitians v Dominican Republic (28 August 2014).

<sup>15</sup>Rights and Guarantees of Children in the Context of Migration and/or in Need of International Protection, Advisory Opinion OC-21/14 (19 August 2014).

## 2.2 National Laws and Practices for Family Reunification

### 2.2.1 Sweden: Temporary Protection and New Requirements<sup>16</sup>

Sweden's family reunification rules are based on the Swedish Aliens Act from 2005.<sup>17</sup> Family reunification policy took a significant turn in 2016 with the passage of a 3-year temporary law<sup>18</sup> aiming to decrease asylum-based immigration (Borevi, 2018). Previously, human rights, the nature of Swedish party politics and the welfare-state ideal of equal treatment of residents had been underlying elements in Sweden's relatively liberal family reunification policy (Bech et al., 2017; Borevi, 2018). The right to family life is safeguarded in the Swedish constitution<sup>19</sup> and there were only two notable restrictions on family reunification prior to the arrival of large numbers of asylum seekers in 2015. The first restriction confined eligibility to the nuclear family, and the second imposed a self-sufficiency requirement on the sponsor, which had little effect, however, due to its many exceptions (Borevi, 2014).

With the new law in 2016, temporary residence permits became the norm for asylum seekers. Quota refugees were not affected. Family reunification restrictions were also introduced for most applicants: the age requirement for spouses was raised from 18 to 21 years old, and persons with subsidiary protection status were excluded from reunification access between 2016 and 2019 (see also Borevi, 2018). The temporary law was later extended to 2021 by the Swedish parliament, with some revisions.<sup>20</sup> According to the amended law, temporary permit holders can only reunite with previously established family members. Stricter maintenance requirements were also imposed on sponsors: proof of monthly income corresponding with the required 'reserve amount' (based on an estimate of annual living expenses set by Parliament) and housing 'of sufficient size and standard' are now mandatory before submitting the application (Swedish Migration Agency, 2020a). Child sponsors are exempt from these requirements, as are refugees and subsidiary protection beneficiaries who apply within 3 months of the sponsor's residence permit.

In 2019, a parliamentary committee was assigned to take a stand on key points of the future of Swedish migration policy after the expiration of the temporary law. This resulted in permanent changes to Sweden's migration law that are in keeping with the restrictive nature of the temporary law. With an amendment to the Aliens Act in 2021,<sup>21</sup> most of the temporary restrictions became permanent. However, the

<sup>16</sup>Written by Hilda Gustafsson.

<sup>17</sup>Utlänningslag (Svensk författningssamling [SFS] 2005:716).

<sup>18</sup>Lag om tillfälliga begränsningar av möjligheten att få uppehållstillstånd i Sverige (SFS 2016:752).

<sup>19</sup>Regeringsformen [RF] [Constitution] 1:2.

<sup>20</sup>Lag om dels fortsatt giltighet av lagen [2016,752] om tillfälliga begränsningar av möjligheten att få uppehållstillstånd i Sverige, dels ändring i samma lag (SFS 2019:481).

<sup>21</sup>Lag om ändring i utlänningslagen [2005:716] (SFS 2021:765).

law was relaxed in relation to the age requirement for spouses; the minimum age had previously been 21 but is now 18.

Applications for family reunification may be submitted on paper in person at a Swedish embassy or consulate (Swedish Migration XE Agency, 2020b), or the application may be submitted online to the Swedish Migration Agency by the family member abroad or via power of attorney. Applying from within Sweden is sometimes also possible (Swedish Migration XE “Migration” Agency, 2020c). Application fees do not apply to migrants receiving international protection (Swedish Migration Agency, 2020d). Original documents such as marriage and birth certificates must be translated by an authorized translator and attached to the application. In many cases, both spouses are interviewed, sometimes leading to problems for families who cannot reach embassies due to border regulations or safety threats.<sup>22</sup> Law firms and NGOs such as the Swedish Red Cross (n.d.) and Swedish Refugee Law Center (n.d.) offer free but limited counselling concerning family reunification, as there is no state-funded aid available to applicants.

It is probable that the approximate 50% decrease in applications between 2016 and 2017 (P. Engman, personal communication, 7 March 2018) was a combined result of fewer asylum seekers due to the EU-Turkey Statement (2016) and increased European border controls, as well as the temporary law restricting eligibility. The law also came with two perhaps unintended consequences: the removal of legal independence between spouses in refugee families, as family members’ permits went from permanent to corresponding with that of the sponsor, and the de facto outsourcing of decision-making power to landlords and employers, whose willingness to sign contracts became key to accessing both family reunification and permanent residence permits.

### ***2.2.2 Finland: Restrictions in Law and Practice***<sup>23</sup>

In Finland, family life is implicitly protected as part of private life by the constitution,<sup>24</sup> but family reunification of foreigners is stipulated at the level of ordinary law, the Aliens Act.<sup>25</sup> The Finnish Immigration Service, which operates under guidance of the Ministry of the Interior, is the independent decision-making body for family reunification and all other residence permits. Other organizations are also involved in the process, such as the Finnish embassies, which operate under the Ministry for Foreign Affairs.

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<sup>22</sup>Written Question 2018/19:529 by Christina Höj Larsen (V) to Minister of Foreign Affairs Margot Wallström (S) ‘Familjeåterförening i praktiken’ [Family Reunification in Practice] (12 April 2019) (Swed.). [https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/dokument/skriftlig-fragafamiljeaterforening-i-praktiken\\_H611529](https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/dokument/skriftlig-fragafamiljeaterforening-i-praktiken_H611529)

<sup>23</sup>Written by Jaana Palander.

<sup>24</sup>Suomen perustuslaki (731/1999), § 10.

<sup>25</sup>Ulkomaalaislaki (301/2004).

In practice, the possibility of living with one's family depends greatly on migrant category, varying even between categories of international protection, raising the issue of equal enjoyment of human rights (Hiitola, 2019). Different requirements are in place for family members of refugees and foreigners receiving subsidiary protection (Aliens Act §§ 114–115). All applicants, irrespective of the status of their sponsor, need to pay for the application.<sup>26</sup> If admitted, the applicant usually gets a residence permit of a similar kind to that of the sponsor.

Applications are lodged by the family member abroad, either at a Finnish embassy or via an online service, which requires a later visit to an embassy or consulate for identification and an interview. Since 2011, the migrant in Finland has not been able to initiate the process. As Finland does not have embassies in every country, applicants may need to travel to another country to lodge the application. However, they cannot choose any embassy, but must go to the one designated for their nationality. Applicants are also required to be legally staying in the country where the embassy is situated (Aliens Act § 60), which creates a visa requirement for many nationalities to even reach an embassy. These requirements can be remarkable obstacles in cases where it is difficult to get the documentation needed or travel is expensive or dangerous (Hiitola, 2019; Leinonen & Pellander, 2020).

One of the most restrictive practices affecting family reunification in Finland is the requirement for 'actual' family life. In addition to requiring documents or DNA tests to prove family links, the authorities assess whether the applicant and sponsor have shared an actual family life (Tapaninen, 2016). This practice does not have an explicit legal basis in the Aliens Act, but has been documented in interviews and criticized as being used arbitrarily in some cases (Pellander, 2016).

Another significant restriction is Finland's income requirement (Aliens Act § 39). The income requirement sets a monthly salary threshold that the sponsor is required to meet, which may be higher than the average Finnish salary level when there are several family members applying. Certain social security benefits that sponsors may be eligible for are counted towards the income requirement, but the effect of including these sums is in practice negligible, as the child allowance is often the only predictable benefit (Palander, 2018). This may pose an insurmountable hurdle for sponsors, who have to meet the required sum with their earnings. In 2016,<sup>27</sup> the income requirement was extended to people receiving international protection, and only some exceptions are available to refugees and unaccompanied minors. Refugees' family members abroad have a window of 3 months to apply for family reunification without the income requirement (Aliens Act § 114.4).

Research has shown that especially those receiving subsidiary protection or residence permits based on individual compassionate grounds (a migration category laid out in Aliens Act § 52) have been negatively affected by the expansion of income requirements (Pirjatanniemi et al., 2021). The objective of this legislative

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<sup>26</sup>Sisäministeriön asetus Maahanmuuttoviraston suoritteiden maksullisuudesta vuonna 2021 (1124/2020).

<sup>27</sup>Laki ulkomaalaislain muuttamisesta (505/2016).



change was to curb the number of asylum seekers, and the human rights considerations were minimal. When the change was implemented, it was predicted that only about 2% of people receiving international protection would be able to fulfil the income requirement, and that in practice only the estimated 27% of refugees who did not have to fulfil it would be able to bring their family members to Finland (Miettinen et al., 2016).

### ***2.2.3 United States: Facilitation for Some and Separation for Others<sup>28</sup>***

Opportunities for forced migrants to reunify with family in the United States vary based on migration status. Forced migrants who are granted temporary protection status do not have a legal route to sponsor family members for reunification, while possibilities for reunification with spouses and unmarried children under 21 do exist for refugees and asylees (Nicholson, 2018). Refugees are those who have been accepted through resettlement (quota refugees), while asylees are those who have been granted asylum through application upon reaching the United States. Minor children who are refugees or asylees, however, cannot petition for their parents,<sup>29</sup> leaving no legal route to parental reunification for unaccompanied minors (Nicholson, 2018). The conditions for applying for family reunification also vary for different categories of migrants. Most lawful permanent residents have to document economic self-sufficiency; refugees and asylees are exempt from this condition, as well as from the filing fee.

There are two routes for refugees and asylees to apply for family reunification: via the Priority Direct Access Program, or via the I-730 process, commonly referred to as ‘follow-to-join’. These processes of seeking family reunification are often referred to as applying for derivative status, as the family member derives refugee or asylee status from the principal applicant. The I-730 is the most common route to family reunification for refugees and asylees.

Several actors are involved in the reunification process, one of the key institutions being U.S. Citizenship and Immigrant Services (USCIS). USCIS is responsible for processing follow-to-join petitions, with beneficiary interviews then being held at embassies, consulates or USCIS field offices (Schaeffer & Reynolds, 2019). The officer conducting the interview informs the applicant if they are eligible to travel to the United States. Follow-to-join refugee beneficiaries undergo additional processing, including placement with a sponsoring voluntary resettlement agency (UN High Commissioner for Refugees, n.d.-b). While follow-to-join asylees are instructed to make their own travel arrangements, the International Organization for Migration manages arrangements for follow-to-join refugees.

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<sup>28</sup>Written by Alyssa Marie Kvalvaag.

<sup>29</sup>8 C.F.R. § 207.7(b)(6); 24 I & N Dec. 275 (BIA 2007).

The conditions and restrictions for refugees applying for family reunification are outlined by § 207.7 of Title 8 of the Code of Federal Regulations, while conditions and restrictions for asylees are outlined by § 208.21. An I-730 should be filed by the refugee or asylee within 2 years of being admitted entry as a quota refugee or granted asylum. In February 2018, USCIS and the Department of State implemented new procedures by which all refugees, including accompanying family members and follow-to-join beneficiaries, receive similar, thorough vetting (USCIS, 2020). In practice, this means there are further interagency security checks and additional vetting. Petitioning for family reunification is a lengthy and comprehensive process that may take 3–5 years (Nicholson, 2018).

There are also some practical obstacles to applying. In 2018, follow-to-join refugee interviews were limited to a smaller selection of embassies and consulates; as a result, follow-to-join refugee family members may have to travel to another country to complete their interview. If a refugee family member cannot travel to an interview location within 2 years, the case may be administratively closed (Schaeffer & Reynolds, 2019).

Another practical obstacle is for same-sex couples, who may apply for family reunification via derivative status on the condition they are legally married; this creates challenges for couples from places where marriage is not a legal option, for those who prefer a common-law relationship and for those claiming a humanitarian status based on persecution for their sexuality. Further, USCIS practices requiring couples to provide proof that their marriage is bona fide are built on a traditional, heteronormative American family archetype and may create additional barriers in the reunification process (Carron, 2015).

Family unity for foreigners and the principle of family reunification are not explicitly protected in the US Constitution. Human rights discourse in the United States is used largely to express dissatisfaction at the separation of migrant families, rather than to promote the rights of refugees and asylees.

Light has recently been shed on asylum seekers' right to family unity by the Trump administration's policy of child separations for families at the southern US border (which was later revoked<sup>30</sup>) and a memorandum announcing a 'zero-tolerance policy', which called for the prosecution of all adults apprehended crossing the border illegally (Sessions, 2018), without regard to whether they were travelling with their families. Under this policy, over 2700 children were separated from their parents (Pierce, 2019); at least 60 of the separated families had sought asylum at ports of entry (US Department of Homeland Security, 2020). This devastating policy received international attention and resulted in renewed human rights argumentation in family unity politics; public outcry helped to reverse the practice. However, 'for-cause' separations, where U.S. Customs and Border Protection may separate families for a variety of reasons, still occur (Pierce, 2019).

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<sup>30</sup>See *L. v U.S. Immigration & Customs Enforcement*, 310 F. Supp. 3d 1133, 1149 (S.D. Cal. 2018); Executive Order 13841, 83 Federal Regulations 29435 (June 20, 2018).

### 2.2.4 *Brazil: Liberal Law but Restrictive Practice for Refugees*<sup>31</sup>

Asylum (refugee status) is the main protection category for forced migrants in Brazil, including those who arrive in the country with humanitarian visas. Unlike the European Union, Brazil has not adopted subsidiary protection or any other alternative protection statuses. Article 2 of Brazil's Asylum Law<sup>32</sup> says that refugee status may be extended to ascendants, descendants, partners and other economically dependent members of a refugee's family that are in Brazilian territory. Thus, family reunification for refugees in Brazil is a two-step process: First, a family reunification visa is required to enter Brazil. (Some nationalities, such as Venezuelans, are exempt from this requirement.) Second, once the family member is in Brazil, they must apply for the extension of refugee status. The actors involved in the family reunification procedure are the National Committee for Refugees (CONARE), the Federal Police (the border authority in Brazil) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MRE), together with consular officials and diplomats abroad.

The procedure for applying for a family reunification visa was first established by CONARE in 1998.<sup>33</sup> Between 2013 and 2018, the family reunification procedure was initiated by refugees in Brazil: they filled in the form, put together the documents proving family relationship and economic dependency (when necessary) and sent them to CONARE, which then requested that the MRE order a Brazilian consulate to grant the visa.<sup>34</sup>

In 2017, Brazil's Migration Law<sup>35</sup> explicitly recognized family reunification as a principle of Brazilian migration policy and as a right of all permanent immigrants living in the country, including refugees. Also in 2017, a more conservative CONARE agreed that the MRE was responsible for analysing visas applications, not CONARE. This allowed the MRE to make changes in the family reunification procedure and conduct interviews abroad with refugee family members applying for family reunification visas. Subsequently, many visas were denied, especially at the Brazilian embassy in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Refugees did not receive further information and there was no appeal system.

In 2018, the government adopted a regulation<sup>36</sup> stipulating that the family member abroad must apply for the family reunification visa at a Brazilian consulate. In October 2018, the family reunification procedure changed. Now, the family member abroad is responsible for submitting the application and other documents to Brazilian

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<sup>31</sup> Written by Patrícia Nabuco Martuscelli.

<sup>32</sup> Lei No. 9.474, de 22 de Julho de 1997, Col. Leis Rep. Fed. Brasil, 189 (7, t.1): 4227, Julho 1997.

<sup>33</sup> Resolução Normativa do CONARE No. 4, de 01 de Dezembro de 1998.

<sup>34</sup> Resolução Normativa do CONARE No. 16, de 20 de Setembro de 2013.

<sup>35</sup> Lei No. 13.445, de 24 de Maio de 2017, Diário Oficial da União [D.O.U.] de 25.5.2017.

<sup>36</sup> Portaria Interministerial No. 12, de 13 de Junho de 2018, D.O.U. de 14.06.2018.

consular authorities, and the refugee in Brazil sends CONARE only a form stating that they wish for the family member to come to Brazil.<sup>37</sup>

Thus, until 2017, refugees had a facilitated procedure to apply for family reunification. It was also possible for civil society organizations to assist refugees in the process. After 2018, the family reunification procedure became the same for refugees and migrants, with the exception that only refugees have to affirm their wish to be reunited with the family member (to avoid bringing relatives who are agents of persecution to Brazil). Refugees' families now compete for the same appointments at Brazilian consulates as other people applying for visas. In addition, refugee families have to provide additional documents from their host countries that can be hard to get and put them at risk.

There is a tension between the Migration Law, which guarantees the right to family reunification to all migrants in Brazil, and the implementation of family reunification visas, which tend to be denied. Diplomats are not trained in human rights, asylum and humanitarian issues. They conduct external border and migration control through the visa system. The result is that families are separated and refugees' right to family reunification is not guaranteed. The Brazilian family reunification procedure presents the paradox of being easy in the law and hard in practice, with increasing discretionary power being given to diplomats, visas being denied without justification, and no possibility of appeal or a review of the procedures. In addition, CONARE is a political organ, which means that the make-up of the committee varies and may be more or less supportive of family reunification. Other challenges in Brazil's family reunification procedure include a lack of set deadlines or a definition of economic dependency. Refugees are also responsible for paying all costs, such as airline tickets, documentation and visas, and there are no loans or organizations to help with these costs.

### ***2.2.5 Israel: No Protection or Family Reunification for Forced Migrants from Africa***<sup>38</sup>

The chances for family unification for refugees and non-Jewish immigrants in Israel are almost non-existent. Part of the problem is that there is almost no chance of becoming a recognized refugee. Although Israel signed the 1951 Refugee Convention, there is no Israeli asylum law (Ben-Nun, 2016). Instead, Israel's asylum policy is based on an ordinance issued by the Ministry of Interior.<sup>39</sup> Before 2008, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) took care of

<sup>37</sup>Resolução Normativa do CONARE No. 27, de 30 de Outubro de 2018.

<sup>38</sup>Written by Usumain Baraka and Hadas Yaron Mesgena.

<sup>39</sup>*Procedure for Dealing with Political Asylum Seekers in Israel*, Population & Immigration Authority Procedure No. 5.2.0012 (updated 10 October 2019), [https://www.gov.il/BlobFolder/policy/handling\\_political\\_asylum\\_seekers\\_in\\_israel/en/5.2.0012\\_en.pdf](https://www.gov.il/BlobFolder/policy/handling_political_asylum_seekers_in_israel/en/5.2.0012_en.pdf)

asylum applications in Israel, but in 2009, the handling of the asylum process was transferred to the Refugee Status Determination Unit at the Ministry of Interior (Berman, 2018). Since African refugees and migrants, mainly from Eritrea and Sudan, started to cross the border into Israel in large numbers in 2005–2006, Israel's policy and governmental agenda have become hostile to asylum seekers and refugees (Kalir, 2014), a position that has also been supported by the parliament (Reslow, 2019). Asylum seekers have been portrayed in the media, in the parliament and in the streets as a threat to the nation and the Jewish majority (Yaron Mesgena & Ramati, 2017). This negative approach has also been reflected in family reunification, for example, by deporting one parent in the hope that the entire family would be compelled to leave the country (Reslow, 2019).

Although Israel does not deliberately set out to disintegrate refugee families, some practitioners have noted that its policy affects them in a negative manner (N. Avigal, personal communication, 13 February 2020). The refugee recognition rate in Israel is extremely low (under 1%; Berman, 2018), entirely preventing the possibility of family reunification for the vast majority of refugees, who remain unrecognized. However, even recognized refugees' requests for reunification are not all accepted. Section 12 B of Israel's asylum ordinance lists various factors to be considered, such as whether it is possible to emigrate to the spouse's country of origin, leaving wide discretion to the authorities. According to section 12 C of the ordinance, the state may grant family reunification to a spouse of a recognized refugee only if the relationship was established outside Israel, in the refugee's country of origin. Therefore, if a couple met in Israel, a refugee's spouse cannot receive a residence permit or status matching that of the refugee, nor any promise that the spouse without a refugee status will be safe from deportation. This has raised concerns among civil society actors and even an appeal<sup>40</sup> to the Jerusalem District Court by the Hotline for Refugees and Migrants (2019), an Israeli NGO in Tel Aviv.

In its petition, the Hotline for Refugees and Migrants also pointed out the consequences for families of the prolonged manner in which the state handles asylum applications, which remain unexamined for years. During this waiting period, asylum seekers may meet people, fall in love and have children. The state's rationale for not granting status to spouses who met in Israel is to prevent fraudulent applications. However, according to the petitioners, not only is the right to family unity threatened by Israel's asylum ordinance, but also the right to asylum itself, since the asylum procedure pressures individuals to choose between their family and asylum. Asylum seekers whose spouses' applications have been rejected are also denied visa renewals unless they turn in their spouses (N. Avigal, personal communication, 13 February 2020).

The state even obstructs maintaining refugees' familyhood across borders. For example, travellers who would otherwise be eligible to visit Israel have in practice

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<sup>40</sup> Pet. No. 72951–05-19, 30 May 2019. <https://hotline.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/29.5.2019-עתירת-השוואת-מעמד-סופי.pdf>

been denied entrance at the airport if they state that they have a relative who is a refugee or asylum seeker living in Israel (Lior, 2017). Immigration officials have discretion to assume such relatives may be attempting to settle in Israel. Since asylum seekers in Israel are not able to leave and later return to Israel, they have no way to meet their families, who may be living in Western countries or in refugee camps in Africa.

The state policy also negatively affects other efforts to show care and maintain relationships across borders. Since the arrival of African asylum seekers in Israel, they have been referred to, in public discourse as well as in policy and legislation, as ‘infiltrators’. According to the Prevention of Infiltration Law,<sup>41</sup> asylum seekers, as ‘infiltrators’, are prohibited from transferring property outside Israel, blocking refugees from sending remittances to their families. Although Eritreans and Sudanese in practice often find ways to support their families outside Israel, the state in fact criminalizes refugees for caring for their families and maintaining relationships with family members who are separated by war and political persecution.

### ***2.2.6 Jordan: Syrians’ Struggle for Family Reunification<sup>42</sup>***

Jordan is not a signatory to the UN Refugee Convention; however there are 1.26 million Syrians in Jordan, 658,000 of whom are registered as refugees with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, n.d.-a). In 1998, the Jordanian government entered into a memorandum of understanding with UNHCR that recognized that political asylum seekers are entitled to protection in Jordan while UNHCR assesses their cases. Davis et al. (2017, p. 18) suggests that this represents the ‘temporary absorption model’ of refugees, where refugees may temporarily remain in the country until repatriated or resettled to a third country. Like the Iraqis before them, Syrians in Jordan have been referred to as ‘guests’ (Davis et al., 2017). The Jordanian government also agreed to non-refoulement, ostensibly protecting asylum seekers from involuntary return to home countries where they may be subject to persecution. However, under Jordan’s Law on Residence and Foreigners’ Affairs,<sup>43</sup> the minister of the interior may deport individuals who enter Jordan illegally, on a case-by-case basis (Sadek, 2013).

While UNHCR’s role internationally involves finding durable solutions for refugee populations, the three general options for long-term solutions (integration into the host community, return home and resettlement in a third country) are usually not

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<sup>41</sup> Prevention of Infiltration (Offences and Jurisdiction) Law, 5714–1954, LSI 8133 (1953–1954), § 7.

<sup>42</sup> Written by Michelle Lokot.

<sup>43</sup> Law No. 24 of 1973 on Residence and Foreigners’ Affairs, Official Gazette No. 2426, 16 June 1973, art. 31.

feasible for Syrian refugees in Jordan. Integration is not possible, since the Jordanian government does not grant Syrians the permanent right to remain in the country. While some Syrians in Jordan have chosen to return to Syria, the only other option has been resettlement (through a lengthy process) or family reunification elsewhere. Families may apply for reunification after one or more family members make a journey to another country from Jordan, often to the European Union or the United Kingdom.

According to unpublished UNHCR data cited by Chandler et al. (2020), 36.5% of Syrian refugees in Jordan are separated from a member of their family. Of families interviewed by Chandler et al. (2020), 43.5% had made the decision to temporarily separate after having lived together in Jordan. The reasons for separation included seeking a source of income, returning to Syria and seeking refuge in a third country. Adult men make up the majority of those seeking asylum in Europe (REACH, 2017); similarly, Syrian men often travel first, sometimes with one or more children, while the rest of their family members remain in Jordan.

Syrians face numerous barriers during the reunification process, including restrictions on who in the family can be reunified. Definitions of 'family' differ, with European countries defining family as the nuclear family, while Syrians consider extended family members to be part of the family (Costello et al., 2017). For example, in many European countries, children or siblings aged over 18 cannot be reunified, as they are deemed adults (McNatt et al., 2018). The rules about who can sponsor relatives are particularly strict in the United Kingdom, where even children under 18 cannot sponsor their parents (UK government, 2020; Beaton et al., 2018).

Refugees are often unaware of the processes required for reunification, which change regularly (McNatt et al., 2018). Financial barriers to seeking reunification can also be significant, with some unable to pursue reunification due to cost (Chandler et al., 2020). The reunification process is often time-consuming; waiting times for decisions regarding reunification in European countries may take several years (European Council on Refugees and Exiles and Red Cross EU Office, 2014). Women in particular are often left waiting to be reunified with their husbands, facing the challenges of earning income and caring for children while waiting for their reunification applications to be processed (Damir-Geilsdorf & Sabra, 2018).

In addition, the documentation requirements for reunification can often create insurmountable barriers. CARE International in Jordan (2018) found that 33.2% of Syrians were missing important documents such as birth certificates, marriage certificates or death certificates, and 22% of refugees who returned to Syria did so to obtain documents. In other cases, documents may no longer be available because they were taken by government officials (Chandler et al., 2020).

### 2.2.7 *Lebanon: Syrians Seeking Family Reunification in Germany*<sup>44</sup>

Lebanon is not a signatory of the Refugee Convention and does not recognize the Syrians living in its territory as refugees (*lāji`iyn*) but rather as displaced persons (*nazihiyn*) (Mourad, 2017). The state operates under a memorandum of understanding signed with the UNHCR in 2003, which gives the UNHCR autonomy to assist displaced people in Lebanon. A persistent number of Syrian refugees remain unregistered, however, and are thus excluded from UN assistance and any alternative solutions to displacement. Moreover, many of those who are registered with the UNHCR are not offered the possibility of integrating into Lebanese society or resettling in other countries.

Lebanon does not have a governmental programme of family reunification for migrants in its territory, nor does it offer support for left-behind families in Lebanon attempting to join their family members abroad. The state is rather a sending country for Syrians who want to reunite with their families in other countries. In this way, family reunification has been used as an alternative avenue for protection.

Most Syrians in Lebanon ask to be reunited with their families in Germany. For these migrants, family reunification is operated by the International Organization for Migration (IOM). According to the IOM, many of those who are now in the process of family reunification in Lebanon or Syria are wives or minor children who were separated from their families in 2015, when their family members took the so-called Balkan route, travelling from Syria to Turkey and then to Hungary by land. Only a smaller number of Syrians crossed the sea to Greece during these years.

After Syrians in their home country or in Lebanon have booked an appointment with the German embassy in Beirut, the IOM office assists them and their family member sponsors in Germany with preparing for the personal appointment. Cases are processed in order of application, but priority is sometimes given to urgent cases (such as medical cases) or to cases involving minors. Syrian families applying for reunification in Germany have to fill in a questionnaire about their humanitarian situation, on the basis of which the embassy makes a decision on the applicant's eligibility for family reunification.

The protection status of the sponsoring family member in Germany affects the requirements for family reunification. In Germany, many Syrians have been granted subsidiary protection, with only a minority having received full refugee status. While refugees are granted the legal right to family reunification, beneficiaries of subsidiary protection do not have this privilege and are subject to further conditions and quotas. In August 2015, the Act on the Redefinition of the Right to Stay<sup>45</sup> granted access to family reunification also to beneficiaries of subsidiary protection, but this right was suspended in March 2016 for 2 years. In March 2018, the law was

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<sup>44</sup>Written by Irene Tuzi.

<sup>45</sup>Gesetz zur Neubestimmung des Bleiberechts und der Aufenthaltsbeendigung, 27 July 2015, Bundesgesetzblatt, Teil I [BGBl I] at 1386.



amended and the right was abolished. It was replaced with a ‘humanitarian clause’, placing family reunification for beneficiaries of subsidiary protection at the discretion of the authorities. In effect, family reunification can be granted only in cases of particular hardship.

The general principle of family immigration in Germany is regulated by the Residence Act,<sup>46</sup> which includes only members of the nuclear family (spouses and minor children) and excludes other family members. Section 36 of the Residence Act allows other dependents to obtain a residence permit only to avoid particular hardship (Bick, 2018). As observed by Tometten (2018), the German Federal Foreign Office considers that such particular hardships must be ‘family-related’, not ‘country-of-origin-related’. In that sense, living in a war zone cannot be considered a particular hardship. It would rather apply to adult children in need of care, such as people with disabilities (Tometten, 2018, p. 49).

To be reunited as spouses, family members of refugees and holders of subsidiary protection must apply for family reunification within 3 months of a positive asylum decision and thus must have been married by this point in time. They may still apply at a later date, but in that case, they will have to meet specific conditions for family reunification, such as sufficient financial resources, proof of financial stability and a home with enough space for the family. The family member wishing to reunite must also prove language proficiency.

The main obstacle for Syrian holders of subsidiary protection attempting to leave Lebanon for reunification in Germany is undoubtedly the long waiting time. When claims started being collected in August 2018, there was already a 2-year waiting list. Since then, Germany has allowed only 1000 cases worldwide to be reunited per month. The wait for Syrians to enter Germany through family reunification lasts for years, and many families find it difficult to bear the separation. Many live in sub-standard conditions, having lost their income and being dependant on family members abroad. Although most Syrians waiting to reunite with their families in Germany reside in Syria, the process has to be done in Lebanon. Families must therefore travel between the two countries or send their documents across the border with someone else. In 2020, the border between Lebanon and Syria remained closed for some time due to the COVID-19 pandemic, creating further delays.

## 2.3 Discussion

In this introductory chapter, we first described the legal framework of human rights obligations related to family reunification. Some aspects of this framework are common to all of the countries discussed in this chapter, such as the prohibition of return (non-refoulement) and the obligation to respect and in some cases facilitate family

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<sup>46</sup>Aufenthaltsgesetz [AufenthG], 25 February 2008, BGBl I at 162, last amended by Gesetz, 30 October 2017, BGBl I at 3618, art. 10(4), §§ 27, 36.

reunification. Regional human rights law varies in the level of respect required from contracting states. For example, the European human rights system, with its more extensive case law, relies on a balancing test, whereas the Inter-American system has created further-reaching obligations in regard to the rights of the child. We can say that practices that arbitrarily, discriminatorily or disproportionately restrict family life are in violation of human rights. However, a lack of clear principles and case law hinder a proper legal analysis. Instead, we have pointed out laws, policies and practices that cause family separation and potentially amount to human rights restrictions and violations.

First we looked at the Nordic context, and at the two quite similar legal systems of Sweden and Finland. Juxtaposing these two Nordic countries nonetheless reveals interesting differences in their approaches to respect for family life as a human right. Both Sweden and Finland often require applicants to travel to embassies abroad, posing practical obstacles. In responding to the large inflow of asylum seekers in 2015, legislators in Finland saw no notable human rights problems in adding an income requirement and thus removing the realistic possibility for family reunification from many people receiving subsidiary protection. A similar restriction in Sweden was passed as a temporary law, which can be seen as a sign of stronger respect for family life. Sweden did introduce a housing requirement, however, which seems to have created practical problems for applicants. Both Sweden and Germany first temporarily restricted the family reunification of subsidiarily protected people and later made the restrictions permanent. The migration status of the sponsoring family member is significant in both Nordic countries and in Germany, as it is in the United States, which can be considered problematic from the point of view of non-discrimination.

In the United States, asylees and refugees have slightly different conditions for family reunification, but the two categories are treated similarly in some important aspects; both are exempt from the income requirement, for example. The different treatment is particularly noticeable in regard to travel arrangements and reception services, which are provided to family members of refugees, but not to family members of asylees. The case of the United States includes some shocking administrative practices that clearly lack respect for family life and family unity. Family members have been separated and children held in custody and not returned to their parents. Although these are not family reunification cases as such, the measures show disrespect towards family life and demonstrate readiness to use family separation as a deterrent.

We then continued to South America, to Brazil, where the family reunification legislation is rather liberal, but refugees still face political and administrative obstacles. In both Brazil and the United States, residence permits for family members are explicitly based on the extension of the refugee or asylee status of the sponsor, whereas in Finland, for example, family member permits are distinct and asylum status is granted separately if applicable. Perhaps inspired by the example of other countries, Brazil has now adopted the rule of applying for family reunification from abroad. The process for refugees in Brazil is now more similar to that of other migrants, marking the end of the facilitation of family reunification for refugees.

One of the problems associated with this transfer of duties and power to diplomats in consulates is their arbitrary interpretation of family ties when conducting interviews, exacerbating problems of administrative discretion. Similar problems with interviews have been detected in Finland.

In the Middle East, we first looked at Israel as a receiving country and then Lebanon and Jordan as sending or transit countries for family members in need of protection. In Israel, family reunification is rare for forced migrants since hardly anyone is granted the status of refugee. Family reunification is possible only for migrants with a formal residence permit, as is the case in all the countries we examine in this chapter. In addition, Israel has a long history of securitizing family migration and transnational family life. Legal rules designed to combat terrorism are applied in a manner that obstructs transnational family life, let alone family unity. Forced migrants also face restrictive administrative border practices that do not seem to have a basis in law.

The temporary host countries Lebanon and Jordan have received many asylum seekers from the region, especially from Syria, and provided them with temporary shelter and services. These countries are not bound by the Refugee Convention, but they have allowed asylum seekers entry, passing the responsibility for protection to international organizations. Like Israel, these countries are not ready to permanently host all the forced migrants residing in the country, and therefore migrants' possibilities for integration, work and study are limited. Since returning to the origin country is not always viable, many families look to third countries. Lebanon and Jordan can therefore also be considered transit countries. Family members either stay in these temporary host countries or in their country of origin across the border; in either case, they need access to the embassies in these countries.

The cases of Jordan and Lebanon are thus not about facilitating family reunification within their borders and in their societies, but about family members staying in or near these countries and applying for family reunification elsewhere. Our focus was thus on the obligation of those third countries to respect and facilitate family life. Research in Lebanon and Jordan reveals the obstacles related to applying for family reunification at some third-country embassies. From the point of view of sponsors in Europe, as well as of family members abroad, it has been challenging to follow the changing requirements for family reunification. For example, Germany has introduced quotas and restrictions for certain categories of migrants, such as those receiving subsidiary protection. Quotas on family reunification are problematic because limiting the number of people whose rights are to be respected is not compatible with the idea of equal and effective respect for human rights.

The case of Syrians applying for family reunification at the German embassy in Lebanon shows how, despite some facilitation, practical obstacles such as organizing travel and obtaining documents can be overwhelming. Such obstacles seem to be significant in almost all the examined countries. For example, Sweden, Finland and the United States require visiting a specific embassy, limiting the possibilities for a successful application. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought even more obstacles, closing embassies and stretching out waiting times, for example.

The narrow scope of family members accepted for reunification is a significant obstacle for forced migrants in Jordan and Lebanon. Unlike Brazil, where a wide range of family members are accepted, European states and the United States usually narrow the scope of reunification to the nuclear family, which may lead to separation from adult children or elderly parents. The conditions in Jordan and Lebanon also indirectly cause family separation when temporarily hosted migrants leave their families behind in search of durable solutions. Family reunification in third countries could be a way to relieve the pressure in refugee camps and allow a safe, complementary pathway to protection for family members left behind, as envisaged in the UN Global Compact on Refugees.<sup>47</sup>

From the point of view of human rights obligations, many countries limit family reunification in a way that undermines the right to respect for family life. The differential treatment of people receiving subsidiary protection seems especially discriminatory since human rights law does not make a distinction between different categories of international protection. Some restrictions, such as income requirements, are in principle allowed by human rights obligations, but the requirements cannot be disproportionate, such as in case of vulnerable people and especially minors. In cases where there are no major legal restrictions, but administrative procedures hinder the right to family reunification, states may be violating positive human rights obligations to facilitate the enjoyment of family life.

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**Part II**  
**Everyday Insecurities Faced by**  
**Transnationally Separated Families**

# Chapter 3

## Recognizing Insecurities of Family Members Abroad: Human Rights Balancing in European and Finnish Case Law



Jaana Palander

### 3.1 Introduction

Research has shown that migrants' wellbeing in receiving countries is affected in many ways by the difficulties of their family members and the challenges of family reunification (e.g., Palander, 2021; Strik et al., 2013; Wray et al., 2015). The hardship and insecurities faced by family members who apply for residence permits and wait for decisions abroad have been described in some earlier research in Finland (e.g., Hiitola, 2019; Leinonen & Pellander, 2020) and are also examined in various chapters of this book. In this chapter, I will investigate if and how the circumstances of family members abroad are taken into account in the case law of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), as well as in the administrative decision-making and court proceedings of family reunification applications in Finland. The point of view is thus that of decision-makers inside national boundaries, and the applicant's location outside the state's territory is legally relevant from the perspective of rights protection. I will also explain the possible legal reasons for the circumstances of family members abroad not being taken into account and how they could be better considered.

I use the term 'family members abroad' to refer to applicants for family reunification staying outside the country they are seeking to enter. The focus of my analysis is on forced migrants, since their family members are most likely to face insecurities, but forced migration has not been a strict criterion for selecting court cases for analysis. Human rights are not determined by migration category, but categories do matter more at the national level. The ECtHR more or less accepts this use of differentiated categories at the national level, but adjusts its standards to protect people who are more vulnerable. Often, in family reunification cases, the sponsor or applicant has received international protection or been an asylum seeker.

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Family members abroad may also be forced migrants in a wider sense, without proper migration status or internally displaced.

Research has shown that legislation and administrative practices related to migration have tightened in various countries, leaving many families separated. For example, even those who have received international protection may not be able to bring their family members to Finland (Hiitola, 2019; Miettinen et al., 2016). Many observers argue that states undermine, if not violate, human rights when they obstruct family reunification, especially when preventing minors from enjoying family unity, which constitutes a failure to respect the best interest of the child (e.g., Saarikoski, 2019; Sormunen, 2017, pp. 406–407; Wray et al., 2015, pp. 102–103). The analysis presented in an issue paper (Costello et al., 2017) published by the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights on the human rights aspects of family reunification of people receiving international protection suggests that despite states' strong moral obligation to facilitate family reunification, clear legal human rights obligations are challenging to formulate out of ECtHR case law. In this chapter, I will look at the question of human rights obligations from a slightly different angle than in previous research by focusing on family members abroad.

From a legal point of view, recognizing the situation of family members abroad is problematic because states usually do not have human rights obligations towards people outside their territory. However, extraterritorial human rights obligations do exist in some circumstances. This chapter will investigate whether family reunification can be considered such an issue, and what this means for human rights adjudication, in which the interests of different actors are weighed in search of a fair balance. The existing literature on extraterritoriality and human rights (e.g., Da Costa, 2013; Gondek, 2009) concentrates on issues other than migration control, while the existing research on the nexus of migration and extraterritoriality (e.g., Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2011) is more related to border management than to residence permit applications. For example, Gammeltoft-Hansen reveals protection and obligation gaps in human rights adjudication in the context of offshore migration control (Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2011, p. 237) and asks questions such as 'does rejection of onward passage by an immigration officer entail effective control in the personal sense?' (Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2010, p. 77).

To date, typical mechanisms of migration control such as residence permit applications have not featured in court cases related to extraterritoriality, nor has the ECtHR referred to extraterritorial obligations in migration cases. As a result, the topic has failed to attract interest in the legal literature. Da Costa (2013, pp. 9–14) writes that the extraterritoriality of human rights obligations is truly a controversial and debated issue, and Gondek (2009, p. 379) calls for more research on such controversial subjects. This chapter thus contributes to the general discussion on extraterritorial human rights obligations, while also bringing a new aspect to the research on human rights and family reunification.

The research questions guiding this chapter are as follows:

1. What are the general legal human rights principles relevant to the situation of family members abroad?

2. What are the legal principles used by the ECtHR to assess human rights compliance in family reunification cases?
3. How does the ECtHR take into account the situation of family members abroad in its balancing test?
4. How are the insecurities of family members abroad taken into account in national decision-making?

I will approach these questions with legal methods; for the first two questions, the method is a theoretical analysis of legal sources, while the last two questions are tackled with a more descriptive empirical legal analysis of court decisions. The theoretical analysis of guiding legal principles focuses on European human rights law, although many core principles are universal. Typically in legal human rights research, human rights obligations are taken as a yardstick to measure the legitimacy of state practice. However, I do not consider a proper analysis of human rights compliance possible at this point since there are no clear human rights standards for this specific context. Therefore, the focus is not on human rights compliance, but on detecting and conceptualizing a less-studied aspect of law and practice related to family reunification. Thus, the approach in this chapter is mostly theoretical, with the empirical material intended to show the types of situations in which the theoretical framework could be applied. The case law of the ECtHR serves to show that there is some support for applying the theory of extraterritorial human rights obligations. The case law of Finnish courts provides examples of relevant cases at the national level, where the human rights concerns of family members emerge and where the theory could be applied.

For determining the relevant human rights standards, I will concentrate on ECtHR case law and the adjudication of the rights laid out in the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). Academic literature on family life, refugee rights and extraterritorial human rights obligations is of great relevance as well. For a national point of view, I considered Finnish case law on family reunification, analysing all (221) Helsinki Administrative Court cases from 2017, the year the court started to receive complaints related to the large influx of asylum seekers in 2015. Documents related to these cases are not available to the public, but a research permit from the court has allowed me to access them. I also examined the publicly available Supreme Administrative Court cases from the years 2017 to 2021. The court cases described below are representative of my overall findings within this sample, but when making conclusions, it must be taken into account that the sample contains only negative residence permit decisions.

In the next section, I will analyse the relevant general principles of international law, especially the extraterritoriality principle, and show how that principle applies to the family reunification context. The extraterritoriality principle opens up the possibility to take family members' interests into account in a new way. The following section explains how the ECtHR has developed a balancing of interests in family reunification cases and the factors that allow the court to take into account the situation of family members abroad. I provide selected examples from the jurisprudence of the ECtHR of cases in which the situation of family members abroad has

gained a certain weight. Towards the end of the chapter, I turn to the national context, with a similar analysis of cases heard by the Helsinki Administrative Court and the Finnish Supreme Administrative Court. The conclusion offers a final analysis of the significance of the extraterritoriality principle for acknowledging the interests of family members abroad.

## 3.2 Relevant Principles of International Law

State sovereignty is perhaps the most referred to principle in the context of migration control. It is a starting point for the international system, but it is not a legal rule directly affecting decision-making. However, it is definitely implicit in the subsidiarity principle, for example, and in the principle of margin of appreciation, which emphasize a national perspective in adjudication. In becoming a contracting party to a convention and accepting the obligations of international law, states give away some of their sovereignty. The degree to which a state has sovereignty or is constrained by international law is always contextual. The scope of contracting states' human rights obligations is also determined by the territoriality principle.

From a general point of view, the *territoriality* (or *territorial*) *principle* of international law means that sovereign states exercise authority within their own territory. From the point of view of human rights law, it means that states are responsible for the human rights of people within their territory. Article 1 of the ECHR states that the state parties to the convention 'shall secure to everyone within their jurisdiction the rights and freedoms defined in Section I of this Convention'. The term 'jurisdiction' does not have a clear legal definition, but in subsequent case law, the meaning has been clarified to be essentially territorial.<sup>1</sup> The territoriality principle is the default starting point when determining the scope of state obligations, but there are also exceptions, which will be discussed later.

According to the territoriality principle, states do not have responsibility for the human rights of people outside their territory. This is also reflected in states' migration control and admission policies. For example, states do not need to consider an applicant's right to work, right to a basic education or right to a healthy environment when deciding on residence permits. Securing those rights is the obligation of the origin country, since every state is obliged to secure the human rights of people in its territory. The exclusion of the migration context from full human rights protection has its roots in the early history of the central human rights instruments, including the ECHR. Although it was rather clear that the protection of human rights had to be extended to everyone present in a state's territory irrespective of their nationality, migration control was considered to be beyond the scope of human rights supervision (Dauvergne, 2008; Dembour, 2015).

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<sup>1</sup>ECtHR, *Banković and Others v Belgium and Others*, decision, 12 December 2001, paras. 61 and 67.

This argument was successfully applied by governments before the ECtHR until the seminal case *Abdulaziz, Cabales and Balkandali*<sup>2</sup> in 1985. The case was brought by three women considered foreigners but with strong connections to the United Kingdom whose husbands were not granted residence permits (entry clearance) to live with their wives. The court stated that the exclusion of a person from a state where members of his family were living might raise an issue under ECHR Article 8 (the right to respect for private and family life), and that such was the case in the issue at hand (para. 59). Interestingly, the court stressed the fact that in this case, ‘the applicants are not the husbands but the wives, and they are complaining not of being refused leave to enter or remain in the United Kingdom but, as persons lawfully settled in that country, of being deprived of the society of their spouses there’ (para. 60). The rights holder in relation to the ECHR was thus the sponsor residing in the receiving country.

Human rights protection and the state’s obligation in family reunification cases are thus based on the interests of the person already in the country. What about the interests and human rights of family members outside the country? Should they be recognized as well and taken into account in decision-making? To answer this question, it is necessary to take a closer look at the territoriality principle and its possible exceptions. Gammeltoft-Hansen writes that the ‘the law on jurisdiction is geared to avoid overlapping or competing claims to jurisdiction by several states’, but also to avoid a gap in human rights protection (Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2010, p. 78). The ECtHR seems to have two tests for determining jurisdiction: a state’s control over a territory or control over a person (Gondek, 2009, p. 373). Determining control over a person is still quite exceptional and difficult to justify. However, recent developments in human rights adjudication concerning extraterritoriality offer possibilities to argue for a more lenient approach to the idea of territorial jurisdiction.

In the case *Hirsi Jamaa v Italy*,<sup>3</sup> the ECtHR pointed out that ‘the Court has accepted only in exceptional cases that acts of the Contracting States performed, or producing effects, outside their territories can constitute an exercise of jurisdiction by them’ (para. 72). Exceptions to the territoriality principle in state jurisdiction are well-explained in the *Al-Skeini* case<sup>4</sup> (paras. 134–140). All of the described exceptions concern acts of the contracting state in a foreign territory. One such exception concerns the acts of diplomatic or consular agents stationed in a foreign territory ‘when these agents exert authority and control over others’ (para. 134). Although from the point of view of international law, embassies and consulates are not the territory of the sending state,<sup>5</sup> their agents act under the jurisdiction of the sending state. However, this does not seem to mean that anyone who steps into a foreign embassy acquires the rights or human rights protection they would in the national territory of that state.

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<sup>2</sup>ECtHR, *Abdulaziz, Cabales and Balkandali v the United Kingdom*, 28 May 1985.

<sup>3</sup>ECtHR, *Hirsi Jamaa and Others v Italy*, 23 February 2012.

<sup>4</sup>ECtHR, *Al-Skeini and Others v United Kingdom*, 7 July 2011.

<sup>5</sup>Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations 1961, art. 21.



Gondek (2009) explains that a more lenient interpretation of human rights jurisdiction would always accept jurisdiction when a state has the authority to make a decision that affects a person's life and rights. He refers to the case *Ilascu*,<sup>6</sup> where Judge Loucaides stated, in his partly dissenting opinion, that “‘jurisdiction’ means simply actual authority, which is the possibility of imposing the will of the state on any person, whether exercised within the territory of a High Contracting Party or outside that territory. Everyone directly affected by any exercise of authority by such a party in any part of the world is therefore within the state party’s jurisdiction’ (as cited in Gondek, 2009, p. 375). Gammeltoft-Hansen describes this approach as a ‘*functional* conception of extraterritorial jurisdiction’, which ‘applies the basic principle of human rights law that power entails obligations’ (Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2010, p. 80).

A slightly stricter approach, the ‘gradual’ approach to jurisdiction, argues that a state’s obligation under Article 1 of the ECHR to secure the convention rights of a given person applies proportionately to the control in fact exercised over that person. Gondek explains that if the control is as extensive as occupation or territorial control, then all rights and obligations apply; if the control is more limited, a person is within jurisdiction only with regard to particular rights and obligations (Gondek, 2009, p. 376). The ECtHR has ruled that ‘whenever the State through its agents operating outside its territory exercises control and authority over an individual, and thus jurisdiction, the State is under an obligation under Article 1 to secure to that individual the rights and freedoms under Section I of the Convention that are relevant to the situation of that individual.’ In this sense, therefore, the court has now accepted that convention rights can be ‘divided and tailored’.<sup>7</sup> Possible restrictions to the extraterritoriality of human rights obligations would thus limit the material scope so that not all human rights would be applicable (Da Costa, 2013, p. 302).

Gammeltoft-Hansen (2011) has pointed out that the question of extraterritorial rights is truly complicated and that there is no easy way out, as experts are not ready to abandon the territoriality principle in international human rights adjudication. Gammeltoft-Hansen comes to the conclusion that balancing the territorial paradigm with the emerging functional understanding of territoriality has to be entrusted to national and international judicial bodies, along with the extraterritorial application of the non-refoulement principle and human rights obligations (Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2011, pp. 246–248). This is exactly what the ECtHR has been doing in family reunification cases. Therefore, it is important to look at the case justifications to see the court’s actual approach to balancing different interests, rights and principles. Similarly, the practice of national courts is of interest.

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<sup>6</sup>ECtHR, *Ilascu and Others v Moldova and Russia*, 8 July 2004.

<sup>7</sup>ECtHR, *Hirsi Jamaa and Others v Italy*, 23 February 2012, para. 74. See also ECtHR, *Al-Skeini and Others v United Kingdom*, 7 July 2011, paras. 136–137.

### 3.3 Balancing Interests in the European Court of Human Rights

In the aforementioned 1985 case *Abdulaziz, Cabales and Balkandali*, the ECtHR's first family reunification case, the court comes to the conclusion that there was no 'lack of respect' for family life and no breach of Article 8 of the ECHR taken alone (para. 69). Although the court judged in a separate assessment that the United Kingdom's national rules violated Article 14, the prohibition of discrimination between sexes, the rules that separated families were not a problem per se. It is possible to distinguish three factors that decisively affected the outcome concerning Article 8 alone (para. 68). First, the case was not about an already-existing family left behind, but a recently married couple wanting to choose their place of residence. Second, the applicants did not bring forward any obstacles to developing their family life elsewhere. Third, there was no element of arbitrariness, in that according to national law, the spouses' admittance could not have been expected. This case thus placed emphasis on the possibility of enjoying family life elsewhere (Storey, 1990).

When the ECtHR delivered the *Gül* case<sup>8</sup> in 1996, it established for the first time that determining state obligations in the context of family reunification requires balancing 'between the competing interests of the individual and of the community as a whole' (para. 38). Around the same time, in the case *Ahmut*,<sup>9</sup> the court clearly stated that the question concerned a positive obligation (para. 63), indicating that the state should promote the enjoyment of family life in certain situations. Although the ECtHR now explicitly referred to balancing in *Gül* and *Ahmut*, it proceeded in a similar manner as in *Abdulaziz, Cabales and Balkandali*, applying the aforementioned 'elsewhere' approach. In *Gül*, the ECtHR considered that the central question was whether family reunification with a son left behind would be the only way to develop family life (para. 39). The court paid specific attention to the immigration status and protection needs of the parents, who lived in Switzerland, and to the possible obstacles to developing family life in the origin country, Turkey. The parents did not have a settled status in Switzerland, no longer had a need for international protection and faced no obstacles to returning to their origin country. The mother's epilepsy was not considered an obstacle, as the court felt medical care would be available in Turkey (para. 41). The court stated: 'Having regard to all these considerations, and while acknowledging that the *Gül* family's situation is very difficult from the human point of view, the Court finds that Switzerland has not failed to fulfil the obligations arising under Article 8 para. 1' (para. 43). The case concentrated on the consequences of the parents' return to Turkey and suggested that even very difficult situations would not necessarily raise human rights obligations.

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<sup>8</sup>ECtHR, *Gül v Switzerland*, 19 February 1996.

<sup>9</sup>ECtHR, *Ahmut v the Netherlands*, 28 November 1996.

The first family reunification case to find that a state had violated a positive obligation to promote family life was *Sen*<sup>10</sup> in 2001, in which a Turkish couple who had settled in the Netherlands wanted to bring their eldest child to live with the rest of the family. In this case, the ECtHR suggested that the right to respect for family life should be given more attention than in previous cases and not only considered from the point of view of immigration control. Some new balancing aspects are mentioned: the court takes into account the age of the children, their situation in the country of origin and the children's dependence on their parents (para. 37). In its overall assessment, the ECtHR came to the conclusion that major obstacles to developing family life existed for the family in the country of origin and that the receiving state was the most adequate place for family reunion. The decisive factor, and the differentiating factor in relation to *Ahmut*, seems to be the couple's two other children, who were born in the Netherlands (para. 40). Although the situation of the child in Turkey was not decisive, it was still established as a relevant factor. The ECtHR noted that the Dutch authorities had considered but not found credible the parents' claim of no longer having adequate care for the child in Turkey (paras. 18, 21).

In the cases mentioned above, we can see more and more factors being taken into account in the court's balancing. In a case related to regularization of status based on the enjoyment of family life in the Netherlands, *Rodrigues da Silva and Hoogkamer*<sup>11</sup> in 2006, the ECtHR listed the following factors to be taken into account: (a) the extent to which family life is effectively ruptured, (b) the extent of the ties in the contracting state, (c) whether there are insurmountable obstacles to living in the country of origin for one or more members of the family, (d) whether there are factors of immigration control or public order weighing in favour of exclusion and (e) whether the persons involved in creating family life were aware of their family member's precarious immigration status (para. 39). Later, in 2014, the ECtHR restated these factors in another family reunification case, *Biao*.<sup>12</sup> In the case of *Jeunesse*<sup>13</sup> in 2014, the court introduced a new notion, the cumulative assessment of relevant factors, which seems to allow fairer balancing in family reunification cases (paras. 121–122).

In a recent judgement, *M.A.*,<sup>14</sup> in 2021, the ECtHR restated the principle of cumulative assessment (para. 135). The court considered that the three-year waiting period for family reunification imposed on a Syrian man who had received temporary international protection in Denmark and was seeking reunification with his wife was against the state's human rights obligations mainly because the decision-making process did not allow for a proper individual assessment of relevant factors, such as the situation in the country of origin (para. 192). However, the ECtHR did

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<sup>10</sup>ECtHR, *Sen v the Netherlands*, 21 December 2001.

<sup>11</sup>ECtHR, *Rodrigues da Silva and Hoogkamer v the Netherlands*, 31 January 2006.

<sup>12</sup>ECtHR, *Biao v Denmark*, 25 March 2014, para. 53.

<sup>13</sup>ECtHR, *Jeunesse v the Netherlands*, 3 October 2014.

<sup>14</sup>ECtHR, *M.A. v Denmark*, 9 July 2021.

not provide an example of how this assessment should have been done. The Danish authorities had noted the good health of both family members, which was reiterated by the ECtHR (paras. 19, 181), but any other factors related to the situation of the family member abroad were not considered. It was not disputed by any party, however, that the couple faced insurmountable obstacles in continuing family life in the origin country (paras. 184, 188). This has usually been a decisive factor, and was apparently in this case, as well, although the court was not very clear in its reasoning.

In *M.A.*, the ECtHR also considered how Article 3 of the ECHR on the prohibition of torture and inhuman treatment, when combined with the non-refoulement principle, narrows the margin of appreciation allowed the state in the balancing exercise. However, the focus is on the potential consequences of return for the sponsor, and not on the situation of family members in the origin country or elsewhere. Strikingly, Article 3 and Article 8 (on the protection of family life) are juxtaposed by stating that it is acceptable to reduce the number of family reunifications in favor of protecting more people (para. 145). However, the court does not explicitly recognize that when Article 3 considerations are relevant for the sponsor, they are often also at play for the family member. Allowing family reunification has the potential to protect the Article 3 rights of many family members.

As described above, the ECtHR assesses the human rights compliance of state policies through a fair balance test, in which the situation in the origin country is relevant. That aspect is most often assessed from the point of view of the sponsor, however, though it is the family members abroad who are requesting residence permits. This is probably due to the general principle of international law whereby human rights are attributed to people within a state's territory and the obligation to protect human rights is on that state. Therefore, the ECtHR principally secures the rights of migrants in the territory of contracting parties. However, there are some cases where the court has paid considerable attention to the interests and insecurities of family members abroad.

### 3.4 The Weight of Insecurities of Family Members Abroad

In the 2005 case *Tuquabo-Tekle*,<sup>15</sup> a child was left behind in the care of relatives in Eritrea while the child's mother, stepfather and siblings settled in the Netherlands. In this case, the ECtHR paid attention to the situation of the child in the origin country. On the one hand, the girl was already 15 years old and therefore less dependent on her parents. On the other hand, she had reached the age when it is common for girls in Eritrea to get married. The girl was staying with her grandmother, who had taken her out of school, and the girl's mother was worried that she was going to be married off. The court stressed that the mother had never intended to live without her children, but had had to flee from Eritrea when her husband was killed during

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<sup>15</sup>ECtHR, *Tuquabo-Tekle and Others v the Netherlands*, 1 December 2005.

the civil war; further, it was not her first attempt at family reunification (para. 45). The mother had first applied for asylum in Norway and had been granted a humanitarian residence permit there. Later she married a refugee living in the Netherlands and moved there. She was able to get a residence permit for her other child, who had been waiting in Ethiopia, but could not get a passport to her daughter still living in Eritrea. All of this was taken into account when assessing the existence of family life (paras. 48–50). However, the decisive factor in this case seems to be the best interests of the family's children who were born in the Netherlands (paras. 47–48). The husband's refugee status may have also weighed in the assessment of major impediments to the enjoyment of family life in the origin country.

In the case *Osman*<sup>16</sup> in 2011, the ECtHR was faced with the situation of a 17-year-old Somali girl in Kenya who was seeking a residence permit in Denmark, where her family was living and she had previously lived as well. Her father had sent her to care for her grandmother in a refugee camp in Kenya because she had had problems integrating in Denmark. Her visit to Kenya was supposed to be temporary, but her Danish residence permit expired and she could not return regularly to Denmark. The applicant alleged that when 'the Danish authorities became aware of her situation, they had an obligation to protect her best interest, namely to reinstate her residence permit, allow her to resume her education, and reunite her with her mother and siblings in Denmark' (para. 46). The court recognized the right of parents to make decisions about their children's upbringing while also noting that the refusal of a residence permit was made according to national law; in its decision-making the court stressed the weight of the child's best interest and found a violation of her right to respect for private and family life (paras. 73, 76). Although the court attributed substantial weight to the girl's circumstances abroad, her strong ties to Denmark were important as well, making it difficult to analyse the significance of the insecurities she experienced in the refugee camp.

In the case *I.A.A.*<sup>17</sup> in 2016, the ECtHR considered the situation of five Somali children living in Ethiopia who had requested family reunification in the United Kingdom. Interestingly, the UK government invoked Article 1 of the ECHR, claiming that the ECtHR did not have jurisdiction over this issue; the court dismissed this claim (paras. 26–27). In this case, the children had applied for family reunification with their mother, who was living in the United Kingdom with her new husband (a refugee) and three other of her children. The applicants had moved to Ethiopia with their aunt, who had been taking care of them. Later the aunt returned to Somalia, and the children were left in Ethiopia in the care of the oldest sibling. Eventually, this sibling left the others, and 'her current whereabouts [were] unknown' (para. 18). The circumstances of the children are not described further, but the ECtHR echoes the national tribunal in stating that the situation was 'certainly "unenviable"' (para. 46).

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<sup>16</sup>ECtHR, *Osman v Denmark*, 14 June 2011.

<sup>17</sup>ECtHR, *I.A.A. v the United Kingdom*, 8 March 2016.

The court's judgement in *I.A.A.* is alarming for many reasons. In the context of this chapter, the most relevant and worrying aspect is how the ECtHR undervalued the difficult circumstances of the children. Although the situation of the children was acknowledged, it did not prompt a consideration of Article 3, nor seem to gain significant weight in the court's balancing. Article 3 was invoked by the ECtHR when noting that the domestic tribunal had not considered whether the family could safely relocate to Somalia. However, the court decided to assess this rather lightly, stating that 'in a number of recent judgments the Court has found that removals there would not breach Article 3 of the Convention' (para. 45). The ECtHR also considered that 'while it would undoubtedly be difficult for the applicants' mother to relocate to Ethiopia, there is no evidence before it to suggest that there would be any "insurmountable obstacles" or "major impediments" to her doing so' (para. 44).

A case somewhat similar to *Tuquabo-Tekle* also came before the ECtHR in 2016: the case of *El Ghatet*.<sup>18</sup> In this case a 15-year-old boy applied for a residence permit in Switzerland based on family links with his father, who had entered Switzerland as an asylum seeker, received a residence permit through marriage and later received Swiss nationality. The court restated the principles established in earlier cases and emphasized the importance of the proper assessment of the best interest of the child and of taking into account the circumstances of the minor children concerned: 'especially their age, their situation in their country of origin and the extent to which they are dependent on their parents' (para. 46). In this case, although the court recognized the father's background as an asylum seeker, it was not convinced that the father had always intended to live in Switzerland with his son (para. 48). The court concluded that in the light of the established criteria, the circumstances of the case might not amount to a violation on the part of the state. However, the court considered that the authorities did not sufficiently balance the relevant interests and demonstrate that they would have taken the best interest of the child into account (paras. 52–53). This case is a departure from earlier practice in that the court expressly considered the welfare and best interest of the child outside the jurisdiction of the state and attributed decisive weight to this procedural fault.

The ECtHR case law described above shows that the situation of family members abroad can be taken into account when assessing the fair balance of interests. The situation of family members abroad has been a relevant factor in some cases when assessing ties to the origin country and obstacles to returning or staying abroad. The threshold for such obstacles has been high, although sponsors afforded international protection, especially refugee status, have been in a better position. There seems to exist a line of reasoning that would place more significant weight on a situation that could trigger Article 3 of the ECHR concerning the prohibition of torture and inhuman treatment, but this is explicitly applied only in assessing the possibility of return for the sponsor and not in considering the situation of family members abroad. Although we can see from these cases that the obstacles and insecurities of family members abroad have been referred to in national proceedings, the

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<sup>18</sup> ECtHR, *El Ghatet v Switzerland*, 8 November 2016.

ECtHR has not been very clear on their significance in its own balancing exercise. This may lead states to disregard the insecurities and difficulties faced by family members abroad. To gain some insight to this question, we will next look how these aspects are present in the national case law on family reunification in Finland.

### 3.5 Rights of Family Members Abroad in Finnish Courts

In 2017, the Helsinki Administrative Court considered a case<sup>19</sup> in which an Afghan national who had received subsidiary protection wanted to invite his 16-year-old sister to live in Finland with his family. Their mother had died and their father had disappeared, and according to the brother, he was considered her guardian. The sister's initial residence permit application in 2011 was rejected because the Finnish Immigration Service (Migri) did not consider her a member of her brother's family. According to Migri, the sponsor had cut family ties when he fled Afghanistan in 2008, leaving his sister with their uncle. Migri also determined that the sister was not a relative fully dependent on the sponsor. In 2015, the sister applied again. According to her brother, her situation had considerably worsened. He explained that his sister was living with their uncle's family under hard conditions, where she was enslaved, mistreated and threatened with forced marriage. She had attempted suicide with rat poison. The brother had been paying high sums of money for her maintenance, including extortion payments to the Taliban, but the uncle was not properly providing for her health or education, and the brother felt she was no longer safe in Afghanistan. Nonetheless, Migri and the Administrative Court did not consider her to be fully dependent on her brother and rejected the application and the complaint.

In this case, the Administrative Court focused on the question of full dependency between the siblings. In Finnish migration law, siblings are not considered family members, but 'other relatives', who must be fully dependent on the sponsor to be granted a residence permit (Ulkomaalaislaki [Aliens Act] 301/2004, § 115). This is broadly in line with the ECtHR case law. The difficulties of the sister were acknowledged in the judgement, but seemed to have no effect on the court's assessment. The court was satisfied that the sister was living with her uncle and gave her living conditions no role in its deliberation: the court did not consider that the inhuman treatment of the sister abroad was of concern to Finnish authorities.

Extraterritorial aspects are also apparent in a case<sup>20</sup> concerning the family reunification of an Afghan refugee whose family members were denied permits by Migri. The sponsor had received a residence permit and refugee status based on religious conversion. In the decision concerning the sponsor's refugee status, the authorities considered that the person would be in danger if returned to Afghanistan. However,

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<sup>19</sup>Helsingin hallinto-oikeus [Helsingin HAO] 30 January 2017, diary no. 10060/16/3101.

<sup>20</sup>Helsingin HAO 9 May 2017, diary no. 14078/16/3101.

Migri did not seem to take into consideration how the religious conversion of the head of the family would affect the rest of the family in Afghanistan. In addition, Migri considered the family bond broken when the sponsor fled the country, leaving the rest of the family behind. The Administrative Court, however, considered that the family bond could not be deemed broken, since the separation was due to compelling reasons, and quashed Migri's decision in 2017. The family members received residence permits and the family was allowed to reunite, but the Administrative Court did not grant refugee status to the family members. The court acknowledged that the family members might face harassment and pressure to abandon the head of the family, but felt they would not face the same risk of persecution as the sponsor.

In this case, the determination of refugee status for the family members seems insignificant, since they nonetheless were able to flee to Finland, but the court's decision demonstrates that the challenges faced by the applicants as family members of a religious convert were not taken seriously, as they were not afforded refugee status. Besides downplaying the consequences for family members, this is also against the principles of the Refugee Convention, which recommend 'ensuring that the unity of the refugee's family is maintained particularly in cases where the head of the family has fulfilled the necessary conditions for admission to a particular country'.<sup>21</sup> According to the United Nations Refugee Agency handbook guiding the convention's interpretation, the dependants of a recognized refugee are normally granted refugee status (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2019, para. 184).

In another case first heard by the Turku Administrative Court, an Iraqi man received refugee status in Finland and succeeded in reunifying with his spouse and child, but was not able to bring his elderly parents to Finland. In 2020, the case was accepted for revision by the Supreme Administrative Court,<sup>22</sup> but without success for the applicants. In this case, the applicants and the sponsor's family had lived together in Iraq before the sponsor escaped to Turkey and applied for asylum with the UNHCR. Later, his wife and child followed him to Turkey; his parents also visited them, but decided to return to Iraq for medical care for their many serious health issues. The elderly applicants told the court that they had been harassed in Iraq to pressure their son to return and because the persecuting agents thought that they were hiding their daughter-in-law. The sponsor was therefore afraid for their security, and as their only child, felt responsible for taking care of them. Although the court acknowledged the claim of insecurity, it did not consider it legally significant, instead concentrating on the questions of dependence and the disruption of family life between the applicants and their son.

Two recent cases from the Supreme Administrative Court show that the situation of family members abroad can also be relevant when assessing the income requirement. According to Finnish migration law, refugees' family members are not

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<sup>21</sup> Final Act of the United Nations Conference of Plenipotentiaries on the Status of Refugees and Stateless Persons, UN Doc A/CONF.2/108/Rev.1 (25 July 1951), sec. IV, recommendation B (1).

<sup>22</sup> Korkein hallinto-oikeus, KHO 2020:69, 10 June 2020.



required to meet the income requirement for residence permits if they apply within 3 months of the refugee being notified of being granted a residence permit (Aliens Act, § 114). Drawing principles from European Union case law,<sup>23</sup> the Supreme Administrative Court stated in these cases that proof of income cannot be required if the late submission of an application is objectively excusable. The court stressed that in this assessment, all factors need to be taken into account, including the factual circumstances of family members attempting to submit applications at embassies abroad.

The first of these two recent income requirement cases<sup>24</sup> concerned a sponsor with refugee status whose wife had to travel from Eritrea to Ethiopia to submit her family reunification application. The submission was made 7 months late, largely due to the border between Eritrea and Ethiopia being closed. Though the closure was taken into account, the court considered that she did not apply quickly enough after the borders opened. The appellants also described the difficult situation of the wife as a refugee herself, alone in Ethiopia, but the court did not find this relevant.

In the other similar case,<sup>25</sup> the Supreme Administrative Court considered that the applicants' late submission was excusable because it was made shortly after the deadline and because the date of submission was disputed. In this case, the family members contacted the Finnish embassy in Ethiopia 8 days past the deadline because they needed to acquire documents proving legal stay in the country from the Ethiopian authorities before making an appointment. The applicants brought up the difficulties they had faced in Ethiopia, but the lower court did not consider the circumstances relevant. The Supreme Administrative Court based its decision on other aspects of the case and did not comment on the difficult situation of the family as refugees in a foreign country.

The court cases from Finland, like the cases of the ECtHR, show a hesitant approach to the interests of family members abroad. The cases also show some of the challenges applicants face in proving they had compelling reasons to separate, including when the sponsor sought protection elsewhere, leaving family members behind in a difficult situation. As we see from other chapters in this book, that is indeed quite often the case in situations of persecution or indiscriminate violence. Many cases before the Finnish courts have involved extended family members, suggesting that the situation of extended family members abroad is seen as less significant in the assessment of residence permit applications than the situation of core family members. The Finnish courts do assess the situation abroad when deciding on refugee status for family members, but the threshold for persecution seems to be high. In addition, this decision is made only after granting family reunification, and those same factors might not be considered in the residence permit process. In other words, an assessment of the need for international protection is not part of the

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<sup>23</sup> Court of Justice of the European Union, case C-380/17, *K and B v Staatssecretaris van Veiligheid en Justitie*, 7 November 2018.

<sup>24</sup> KHO 2021:98, 7 July 2021.

<sup>25</sup> KHO 2021:99, 7 July 2021.

family reunification process, but is done afterwards. This chapter suggests, though, that a similar assessment should also be conducted when making decisions on residence permits.

### 3.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored the question of how the interests and insecurities of family members abroad are recognized in legal and administrative decision-making in the family reunification process. In family reunification cases, it is the interests and rights of the migrant sponsor already in the country that are the basis for human rights obligations. However, can the interests and rights of the family members abroad be taken separately into account, although human rights protection is usually only attributed to people within a state's jurisdiction? I started by explaining the general legal principle of the territorial application of human rights, as well as the exceptions to this principle that create extraterritorial obligations. Although the ECtHR has not explicitly connected extraterritoriality to family reunification, nor, to my knowledge, has the literature discussed it in this context, general legal principles apply to all fields of law.

Drawing on literature on other legal contexts, it seems that a functional conception of extraterritorial jurisdiction could bring family members abroad within the jurisdiction of ECHR contracting parties. When a state has the authority to make decisions that affect the lives and rights of those outside its territory, it also has the obligation to respect human rights in its decision-making. However, human rights protections in such cases might not be as strong as in the territorial application of human rights. As Gondek notes, jurisdiction is a question separate from state responsibility (Gondek, 2009, p. 370). Jurisdiction is the permission or obligation to take certain interests or rights claims into account, but a state's responsibility might still be limited for contextual reasons or due to the competing interests at stake. The territoriality and extraterritoriality principles thus affect the balancing of interests often undertaken by the ECtHR. According to the literature on extraterritoriality, some rights, such as the right to life (ECHR art. 2) and the prohibition of torture and inhuman treatment (ECHR art. 3) should be given more weight even in the extraterritorial application.

The fair balance test has developed in the ECtHR's practice over the past few decades. Recently, the court has added cumulatively to the types of interests taken into account and in some cases has sought the most adequate way to secure family life and family unity. However, the threshold for state responsibility is high, and the assessment of insurmountable obstacles (the elsewhere approach) remains central. In my view, the interests, insecurities and refugee status of family members abroad should be significant in assessing applicants' ties to the origin country and the obstacles to enjoying family life elsewhere. If concerns related to Article 3 of the ECHR arise, it should suffice to demonstrate insurmountable obstacles. However, in many cases these aspects are taken into account only as concerns the sponsor's

ability to return, and not from the point of view of the family members abroad. As Costello et al. (2017, p. 12) point out, family reunification can sometimes accomplish the same ends as humanitarian evacuation from conflict zones or refugee camps. However, the situation should not need to be that drastic for a cumulative assessment to find a state responsible for allowing family reunification. The assessment of insurmountable obstacles would then work as a backstop activated especially in the case of people receiving or needing international protection.

My review of both ECtHR and Finnish case law has demonstrated that the situation of family members abroad has occasionally been referred to by the courts when balancing interests and when assessing the existence of insurmountable obstacles to enjoying family life elsewhere, dependence on the sponsor or the reasonableness of certain restrictions. Based on this sample, it seems that the ECtHR has given more weight to the difficulties of family members abroad than the national Finnish courts have. The case law of the ECtHR shows that the cumulative assessment of relevant factors allows the situation of family members abroad to be taken into account when determining the most adequate place to continue family life together. There is room, however, to further develop the assessment of insurmountable obstacles by better acknowledging the hardships of family members abroad. The lack of clear legal rules means that an assessment of the human rights compliance of national practice with regard to this specific aspect of extraterritorial obligations is not currently feasible. Nonetheless, the national Finnish case law shows that despite occasionally considering the difficulties of family members abroad, the courts' cumulative assessment and consideration of family hardship is either lacking or has a very high threshold.

In both the ECtHR and in Finnish courts, judges have sometimes concentrated on detailed restrictions, such as time limits. Based on above mentioned cases, it seems that the courts in Finland are sometimes lost in details and tend to overlook the assessment of fair balance and insurmountable obstacles. While the Finnish Supreme Administrative Court has taken the actual situation of applicants abroad into account when assessing the reasonableness of the 3-month time limit for exemption from the income requirement for refugees' family members, the court disregards the ultimate test of a cumulative assessment of the most adequate place to enjoy family life. The difficult situation of the family members abroad should have also been relevant from the point of view of assessing the applicants' ability to enjoy family unity, not only for assessing the excusability of delays in submission. The possibility to continue family life elsewhere should be the centre of adjudication for determining the responsibility of the host state to secure family unity, analogous to its importance when using the extraterritoriality principle to assess which country must fill voids in human rights protection.

Within this sample of court cases from the ECtHR and from Finland, the situation of family members abroad was seldom seen as significant, although the applicants often referred to such issues. However, if a factor is acknowledged in a decision, it is legally relevant. The challenge is thus to determine the proper weight to be given to such a factor. If we accept Gammeltoft-Hansen's (Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2011) conclusion that it is the courts that should determine the reach of

states' human rights obligations towards people outside state territory, a review of case law indicates that the territoriality principle is still rather strong. However, the theory on extraterritorial human rights obligations can offer guidance and add to the balancing test by emphasizing the responsibility of a state when considering factors threatening life, health and security. Although based on the sample used in this chapter, we cannot know if the authorities have given proper weight to the insecurities faced by family members abroad in positive decisions, we can see that there are some cases where these aspects have not been properly recognized. Therefore, it is important that further theoretical research emphasize this obligation and that empirical research be undertaken to investigate whether decision-makers respect the rights of family members abroad.

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# Chapter 4

## ‘There Is No Family Here’: Refugees’ Strategies for Family Reunification in São Paulo



Patrícia Nabuco Martuscelli

### 4.1 Introduction

Although 85% of forcibly displaced people reside in developing countries (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 2020), there is little research on asylum and migration policies involving South–South influxes. This chapter builds on previous work on family reunification in Brazil (Soares, 2012; Calegari, 2014; Martuscelli, 2019) and the literature on the role of family in forced migrants’ decisions (Bastaki, 2019; Morris et al., 2020; Dubow & Kuschminder, 2021) to examine the strategies employed by refugees in Brazil when making decisions about applying for family reunification. Through quantitative data on Brazilian family reunification visas and an empirical analysis of 20 phenomenological interviews with refugees in the city of São Paulo, Brazil, between August and November 2018, I demonstrate how refugees in Brazil work to maximize everyday security for themselves and their families.

Brazil ranked sixth among the countries receiving the largest number of asylum-seekers in 2019 (UNHCR, 2020), and Brazil’s refugee policy, based on Lei No. 9.474 (1997), has been called exemplary by the UNHCR (Moreira, 2010; Jatobá & Martuscelli, 2018). Unlike many countries that adopted the definition of refugee laid out in the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, Brazil’s policy includes people fleeing grave and generalized violations of human rights. The designation of a situation as a grave and generalized violation of human rights is a political decision. For example, Syrians and others affected by the Syrian armed conflict have been recognized as refugees in Brazil based on this criterion. Venezuelans have been recognized as refugees since 2019. However, Haitians, for example, have not been recognized as refugees. Brazil also operates with an expanded definition of family for family reunification purposes, including

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ascendants, descendants, partners and other economically dependent family members of refugees. Moreover, Lei No. 13.445 (2017), the Brazilian Migration Law, recognizes a right to family reunification for all immigrants in Brazil, including refugees. In contrast, most countries in Europe and North America guarantee family reunification only for partners and underage children (Martuscelli, 2019).

Brazil's facilitated process for the family reunification of refugees, described in Chap. 2, does not include many of the structural obstacles present in other countries, such as DNA tests, minimum waiting times or integration requirements (Martuscelli, 2019). However, many refugees face long periods of separation from their families due to the length of the refugee status determination procedure (average 2 years) and the costs associated with bringing family members to Brazil. Refugees also face other problems in family reunification; for example, administrative changes in recent years have made the process more difficult at Brazilian consulates abroad (see Chap. 2).

Refugees in Brazil have physical security in the sense that they have legal status and are removed from the circumstances that forced them to seek asylum. However, they may not feel completely safe while separated from their families. The perspective of 'everyday security' (Crawford & Hutchinson, 2016), discussed further in the next section, allows us to examine how the wellbeing of refugees in Brazil is influenced by the security of their families left behind and how this informs refugees' decision-making processes when choosing which family members to bring to Brazil first. When faced with financial constraints and the goal of maximizing everyday security for themselves and their families, refugees adopt different strategies to decide which family members they will bring first.

Previous studies (Abrego, 2014; Bastaki, 2019; Morris et al., 2020; Bonizzoni, 2015) have discussed the importance of family decisions and strategies in migration. Dubow and Kuschminder (2021) have addressed the family separation and reunification strategies of Afghan, Iraqi and Syrian refugee families on the Eastern Mediterranean route between 2015 and 2018. However, most family separation and reunification decisions are constrained by host countries' restrictive family reunification policies, including limiting the definition of family to the nuclear family. In contrast, this chapter examines refugees' strategies for selecting relatives for family reunification in a context in which the family reunification process is based on an expanded definition of family.

This chapter's focus on refugees' own decision-making draws on the Autonomy of Migration (AoM) approach, which views migrants as central actors who engage in political struggles over mobility (Scheel, 2019; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013; Casas-Cortes et al., 2015). AoM provides a useful framework for understanding how people navigate migration and border practices, including family reunification policies. Adopting the perspective of AoM reveals the relational dimension of everyday security and demonstrates how family reunification is used strategically to maximize everyday security for refugees living in Brazil and for the relatives who will join them through the family reunification process.

In the sections that follow, I will introduce relevant literature and previous research showing the connection between everyday security and family reunification for refugees. I will then present my interview data and methodology, followed by new quantitative data on family reunification visas in Brazil. The findings section discusses each of the selection strategies that appeared in my interviews with refugees and highlights the relational dimension of these selection strategies that seek to create everyday security for refugees and their families.

## 4.2 Everyday (In)securities and Family Reunification

The everyday security of refugees is connected to their wellbeing. Crawford and Hutchinson (2016, p. 7) explain that everyday security involves mundane, ordinary routines and the day-to-day discussions and practices that people engage in to manage their own safety. Indeed, it is in part through such everyday security processes that ordinary people foster security for themselves and for others while striving to live with insecurity.

Therefore, everyday security for refugees in asylum countries has material, physical and relational dimensions that are connected to refugees' family members in their countries of origin and destination (Tiilikainen, 2019). Crawford and Hutchinson (2016) argue that "everyday security" has temporal, spatial and emotional/affective dimensions' (p. 7). That is, even if refugees face no direct threats in their country of asylum, they can continue to feel insecure due to separation from their families (the spatial dimension), the duration and indefiniteness of family separation (the temporal dimension) and the lack of emotional support due to family separation (the emotional dimension).

Since families create safety for refugees, family separation affects the wellbeing of refugees in asylum countries (Löbel, 2020). Family separation can exacerbate and reawaken the trauma and depression of refugees in asylum countries (Rousseau et al., 2001; Khan, 2013; Okhovat et al., 2017). In some cases, especially when refugees have lost contact with their families, family separation can mean a loss of hope for going on living after enduring traumatic experiences (Rousseau et al., 2001). Relatives of refugees may be at risk, deprived of rights (as in refugee camps) or living among armed conflicts and humanitarian emergencies (Jastram & Newland, 2003; Dench, 2006), which causes worry and stress for refugees who are safe in their destination country. Family members who were left behind may also face persecution based on their relationship with the refugee, putting their lives at risk (Khan, 2013). The persecuting agent may go after the family once the refugee is no longer in the country of origin (Jastram & Newland, 2003). Relatives may even be killed or disappear while waiting for family reunification (Tapaninen et al., 2019). In that case, family reunification can be a strategy to increase the wellbeing of refugees in the asylum country and to provide physical security for relatives who could be at risk in the host countries.



Sending money to family members left behind is a strategy to create financial security for the family abroad and ensure their survival. Sending remittances can also be a way to show affection, bolster transnational relationships and guarantee the everyday security of family members left behind (Abrego, 2014; McKay, 2007). Some refugees send as many remittances as possible to their families to alleviate feelings of guilt, even choosing to live in poverty to enable the remittances (Dench, 2006). However, sending remittances can also be a burden for refugees who feel responsible for the wellbeing of the family left behind (Lindley, 2009). Sending money abroad may impact the financial security of refugees in asylum countries, putting them in a difficult economic situation with little money to invest in themselves. Bringing relatives who are economically dependent on refugees to the host country can be a strategy to create financial everyday security for refugees and their families.

Relatives, especially parents and grandparents, support immigrant families and communities in destination countries by providing social, financial and psychological resources, professional skills, and caregiving for children and the home. Grandparents are important agents of socialization and wellbeing for immigrants and for the care of the younger generation by building a feeling of belonging, home, origin and continuity (Bragg & Wong, 2016). Therefore, bringing a relative to the host country can create everyday security for refugees by providing family support and childcare in the host country. In fact, in some cases, refugees are only able to be reunited with their children when they can bring another adult family member to care for them (Bonizzoni, 2015).

Family reunification is a strategy to guarantee the everyday security of refugees. Family reunification is a way to protect the refugee family and the refugee (Rohan, 2014), making sure that relatives are physically protected in the destination countries. The family acts as a network of economic, social and emotional support for the refugee in the host country, especially considering the refugee will have to adapt to a new culture and new social standard (Lippert & Pyykkönen, 2012; Khan, 2013). Hence, family reunification often improves the wellbeing of refugees (Telegdi, 2006; Löbel, 2020). Family reunification allows refugees to avoid having to send money to relatives in other countries (Telegdi, 2006; Lippert & Pyykkönen, 2012), creating financial security for both the refugee and their family members. The reunification of families has a positive emotional effect on many aspects of refugees' lives by removing concerns that the family left behind may be harmed or not have opportunities, as well as by providing care and family support to refugees in the host country.

Migration and family reunification policies constrain refugee family decisions about family reunification (Dubow & Kuschminder, 2021; Bastaki, 2019; Morris et al., 2020). The costs of family reunification are high, forcing refugees to choose which family members they will bring first. In cases where refugees have more than one child in the origin country, they often have to choose which child they will bring first, which generates stress and feelings of betrayal (Rousseau et al., 2001). The Autonomy of Migration (AoM) approach 'makes migrants' practices the starting point and focus of any investigation and theorisation of border regimes and

migratory processes' (Scheel, 2019, p. 4), helping us to understand how refugees navigate family reunification policies and the hard decisions they have to take. AoM shifts the focus 'from the apparatuses of control to the multiple and diverse ways in which migration responds to, operates independently from, and in turn shapes those apparatuses and their corresponding institutions and practices' (Casas-Cortes et al., 2015, p. 895). This chapter investigates the strategies that refugees living in Brazil choose when navigating the Brazilian family reunification policy, which allows them to bring relatives outside the nuclear family. Each of these strategies highlights the relational aspects of the everyday security of refugees in Brazil that are connected to the everyday security of their families abroad.

### 4.3 Methods and Data

This research is based on interviews with refugees living in Brazil in 2018. In this context, a refugee is a person recognized as such in Brazil according to Article 1 of Lei No. 9.474 (1997). In 2018, there were 6654 refugees in Brazil, 51% of them from Syria. Refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) were the second-largest group, with other large refugee populations originating from Angola, Colombia, Venezuela and Pakistan (Comitê Nacional para os Refugiados, CONARE, 2019). Nearly 22.9% of refugees arrived through the family reunification process (CONARE, 2015). Refugees who applied for family reunification in Brazil are a hard-to-reach population due to their small numbers and wide distribution across the large Brazilian territory.

Although Venezuelans are the largest refugee population in Brazil as of 2022, at the time of my research, Venezuelans were not yet recognized as refugees. In any case, like other Latin American refugees in Brazil, Venezuelans do not need visas to enter the country, which makes their family reunification procedure easier. Those affected by the Syrian armed conflict can apply for a special humanitarian visa, created by the Brazilian government in 2013, which offers a different entrance path for this group. It is therefore the African and Asian refugees who need visas to enter Brazil and do not have access to other types of visas who make up the main groups that apply for family reunification and are thus the main participants in my research.

Between August and November 2018, I conducted 20 phenomenological interviews with refugees who had applied for family reunification in the city of São Paulo. To recruit research participants, I employed a snowballing method. Because I had previously volunteered with civil society organizations working with refugees and asylum seekers in São Paulo, I knew refugees before initiating this project. Although I am Brazilian, white and a woman, I was able to build relationships of trust with my informants because they perceived that I was trying to help refugees in general and that I cared about their experiences. Refugees also told me they did not have many opportunities to share their views on issues that are crucial for them, like family reunification. My informants shared with me the contact information of their friends, and I conducted interviews until the saturation point, at which no new

**Table 4.1** Profile of the participants

Age (years)	Nationality	Sex	Year of arrival in Brazil	Number of family reunification requests	Marital status	Requested family reunification for
35	DRC	Female	2012	1	Married	Sister
28	DRC	Male	2013	3	Single	Father and brothers
28	Mali	Male	2014	1	Single	Brother
36	DRC	Male	2014	1	Married	Children
36	DRC	Female	2012	2	Single	Brothers
33	DRC	Male	2014	1	Married	Wife and children
30	DRC	Female	2014	2	Married	Brother and sister-in-law
53	DRC	Male	2013	1	Married	Wife and children
29	DRC	Male	2014	2	Single	Brothers
27	DRC	Male	2014	4	Married	Brothers and wife
35	DRC	Female	2013	2	Married	Mother and brother
27	DRC	Male	2015	1	Single	Brother
31	Syria	Male	2015	1	Single	Parents
32	DRC	Male	2013	3	Married	Wife, mother and brothers
34	DRC	Male	2014	5	Married	Parents and brothers
31	Cameroon	Male	2013	1	Married	Wife
46	DRC	Male	2015	1	Married	Wife and children
63	DRC	Male	2009	1	Married	Wife
24	DRC	Male	2012	1	Single	Sister

information was appearing in the interviews. Most interviews were conducted in Portuguese at the homes of participants or in other places selected by them at times that were convenient for them, including weekends, holidays and after work.

My interviewees were 4 women and 16 men with an average age of 34.5 years who had lived in Brazil for an average of 4 years, 8 months. All had resided in the country for a minimum of 3 years. One interview was ultimately excluded from the data because the person did not follow the formal family reunification procedure for refugees. Table 4.1 shows the profile of the 19 refugees whose data is included in this study. Most refugees were male, married and from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Interviewees also came from Mali, Syria and Cameroon.

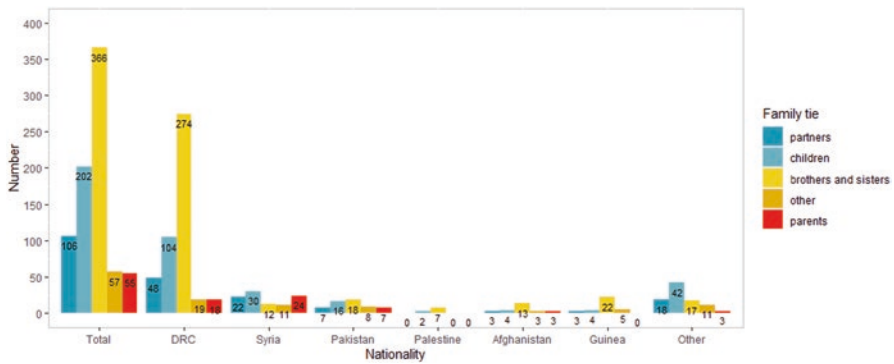
The interviewed refugees requested family reunification for their wives, siblings, parents and children. The 19 participants requested family reunification for a total of 64 people in 34 application processes. Most participants made only one family reunification request. One person made five different requests. The time of separation of refugees from their family members varied from 1.5 to 5 years, with the average time of 40 months. Some interviewees were still separated from their family members because their processes had not yet been successful or because they had not yet requested family reunification for some relatives left behind.

With the oral informed consent of the participants, I recorded and transcribed all interviews. I followed the International Association for the Study of Forced Migration (IASFM) Code of Ethics (IASFM, 2019), including procedures to avoid confidentiality breaches and to ensure the principle of ‘doing no harm’ to the refugee population. The research also followed the ethical principles of partnership, diversity, autonomy, competence and equity (IASFM, 2019).

To avoid confidentiality and privacy breaches, I conducted and transcribed all interviews myself, without the help of interpreters. The interview audio files were coded and the key with participants’ names was kept separate from the audio files during the process of transcribing the interviews, analysing the data, and writing the results. I used Atlas.ti8 to code the data, employing descriptive and emotional coding (Saldaña, 2009, pp. 261–263). I wrote coding memos during the analysis, and themes and patterns emerged from the data (Saldaña, 2009; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

#### 4.4 Family Reunification of Refugees in Brazil

Family reunification data on refugees in Brazil is not publicly available. However, during my fieldwork, CONARE, the Brazilian National Committee for Refugees, provided me with data from all 786 refugees who applied for family reunification visas for their families between 2015 and 2018, which I have analysed and present in Fig. 4.1. Refugees from the DRC applied for 58.9% of all family reunification visas requested between 2015 and 2018. Although Syrians were the largest group of



**Fig. 4.1** Relatives for whom refugees requested family reunification visas, 2015–2018. (Data provided to the author by CONARE. Family reunification visas were requested for people of 24 nationalities from the African and Asian continents: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Cameroon, Ivory Coast, Ethiopia, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Iraq, Lebanon, Mali, Nepal, Nigeria, Palestine, Pakistan, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Republic of Congo, Senegal, Syria, Sudan, Togo, Zambia)

refugees in Brazil during my fieldwork (before the recognition of Venezuelans as refugees in 2019), their family members had other mechanisms to come to Brazil because they could apply for a humanitarian visa for people affected by the Syrian armed conflict. Venezuelans do not need a visa to enter Brazil. The need for family reunification visas in Brazil is therefore also based on the nationality of the refugee, with certain groups, like nationals who do not need visas and those who can access other types of visas, having more facilitated alternatives to bring their families to Brazil.

Figure 4.1 shows that most beneficiaries of a family reunification visa between 2015 and 2018 were siblings (46.6% of the total), followed by children (25.7%), partners or spouses (13.5%), other relatives (7.2%) and parents (7%). This general distribution of visas is reflected among Congolese, Pakistani, Palestinian, Afghan and Guinean refugees. For Syrians, however, most visa beneficiaries were children, followed by parents and spouses. Among 'other' nationalities, children, spouses and siblings were the most common beneficiaries of family reunification visas. This data indicates the importance of siblings to refugee families in Brazil. The 'other relatives' category includes nephews, grandchildren, stepchildren, cousins, brothers-in-law, daughters-in-law, uncles, a stepmother and a mother-in-law.

This data confirms that refugees in Brazil commonly applied for family reunification for relatives beyond the nuclear family. That is, not only do refugees in Brazil have the legal possibility to bring family members besides their partners and children, but they actually use this strategy to create everyday security for themselves and their family members. Different and mixed strategies motivate refugees when choosing who to bring first to Brazil, as will be explained in the following section.

A representative survey of 487 refugees in Brazil conducted by UNHCR Brazil and Cátedra Sérgio Vieira de Mello (CSVM) (2019) showed that although refugees were, on average, more highly educated than the Brazilian population, 68% of them were not making use of their skills because of challenges of revalidating their diplomas and accessing the labour market (for example, due to language difficulties). Refugees also had higher rates of unemployment than the Brazilian population: 20% were looking for a job, and 25% were out of the labour market. Sixty-seven per cent of refugees said that their income was not enough to cover their expenses (UNHCR and CSVM, 2019).

Despite the fact that many refugees in Brazil feel that their income is insufficient to cover even their own expenses, many also send money abroad to their families and save to pay for family reunification. The UNHCR and CSVM survey (2019) also showed that 50% of the surveyed refugees sent money abroad to their families. The study concluded that 'the survival of those who did not migrate impacts negatively the quality of life of the refugees living in Brazil' (UNHCR and CSVM, 2019, p. 11).

Finally, the survey found that family reunification was important for refugees in Brazil: 57% of the surveyed refugees wanted to request family reunification, 40% having already arrived in Brazil with their families (UNHCR and CSVM, 2019).

## 4.5 Strategies for Selecting Relatives for Family Reunification

### 4.5.1 *Financial Strategy*

Family reunification with relatives who depend economically on refugees is a strategy to create everyday financial security for refugee families and to end the need for refugees to send money to their origin countries. Refugees need to support themselves in Brazil, send remittances to their families and additionally raise the money to bring their families to Brazil, often while working in low-paid positions. Therefore, bringing family members to Brazil is a way to improve refugees' economic situation, maximizing their financial everyday security. This Congolese refugee first brought his brother to Brazil, and then his wife:

Most of us are applying for family reunification to reduce this flow of sending money and sending money [abroad]. If family members are closer, it also makes it easier for us to live together. Because I have to send them money, I have to spend even more – not only sending, but the transfer fee is high. So if the person is closer to me, then if she works, she may also be able to support herself. She may be able to make another life, and we may be able to help ourselves. (Interview, 9 September 2018)

The costs of bringing a family member through family reunification are high. Refugees have to pay for airline tickets (which they have to buy at the last minute once visas are issued due to short visa validity periods), documents, passports and visas. For example, one Congolese interviewee explained that an airline ticket from Africa to Brazil could cost 5000 US dollars, and a Congolese passport costs 250 US dollars. Since these expenses are high, refugees are generally unable to bring all their family members to Brazil at once and have to make hard choices about whom to bring first.

Most of refugees I interviewed (16 out of 19 respondents) send money to family members abroad. This Congolese man reflected on the financial situation of his wife and children in DRC:

My family pretty much depends on me because my wife does not work. My older children do not work either. They all study. I need to send them money from Brazil. I need to send the money for them to survive. However, this is not easy. (Interview, 7 October 2018)

The Brazilian government creates additional pressure to send money abroad by asking for receipts of remittances during the family reunification process to prove the economic dependency of relatives who are not ascendants, descendants or partners. A Congolese man who applied for family reunification for his children explained:

You can work, yes, [though] you earn less. You have to pay for the house, you have to do many things. Then you have to send money to Congo to prove economic dependency, but you could be saving that money to bring [your relatives] here. You cannot save money if you have to send money. (Interview, 8 September 2018)

The high value of the US dollar and the devaluation of the Brazilian real put extra pressure on refugees sending money abroad, as a male Congolese refugee noted:

‘So you have to send them money. Rent, food. You do everything. And the dollar is more expensive now’ (Interview, 6 October 2018).

One refugee man explained that he brought his brother to Brazil because he was responsible for his family’s expenses in his country of origin and was no longer able to pay for both his house in Brazil and his brother’s college fees. If his brother came to Brazil, he could work and pay his own college expenses. Bringing a family member to Brazil can lessen the strain of sending so much money abroad. Another Congolese man explained how reunification with his wife and children would change his life:

It will allow me to save a little bit from everything I earn because I send to my country almost 70% of the money that I earn. What is left I use to pay the rent and for my survival. (Interview, 7 October 2018)

This concern with financial needs was also expressed by a Congolese woman who applied for family reunification for her sister before bringing her children:

Everything will change [when my family comes to Brazil] because each time you have 300 reais, you do not have to send it there. If the whole family is here, you buy food with 300 reais for everyone to eat together. Understood? Three hundred you share there in Africa, but you also need money here. I cannot do it. (Interview, 28 August 2018)

Having another family member working in Brazil makes it easier to send money to the family left behind and helps with saving money to pay for the family reunification costs of other relatives. This strategy appeared in multiple interviews. One Congolese man applied for family reunification for his brothers and sister: ‘If [my older brother] can get here, we can work together. We can work, we can collect money to send to others, because it is harder for me alone to work and also to pay rent’ (Interview, 29 September 2018). Another male refugee from DRC recognized that his financial situation changed after the arrival of his brother:

It changed because we are both working now and then we can save money to help our brothers who are in Africa. When I was alone, it was difficult because I had to eat. I had to dress. I had to pay for the house. Yeah, it was difficult. And now with him, we are sending money [abroad]. (Interview, 8 September 2018)

Bringing family members to Brazil increases the everyday financial security of refugees because they will then have more money to spend in Brazil. It also maximizes their wellbeing because they know their families will have the resources they need to survive. Family reunification contributes to the financial everyday security of the family that will come to Brazil and be supported by the refugee’s income. At the same time, financial needs are a factor when refugees decide which family members they will bring first to Brazil.

#### **4.5.2 Protection Strategy**

As discussed in the literature section, refugees in Brazil are worried about the lives and physical security of family members left behind. Many relatives of refugees in Brazil live at permanent risk in countries at war, like Syria and Mali, or are subject

to persecution, such as in the DRC. An emblematic case among the interviewees was that of a Congolese man whose wife and children were living in a refugee camp, a particularly risky situation. Protecting one's family from violence and persecution was another goal of refugees when deciding which relatives to bring to Brazil first. The urge to protect family members is a fundamental explanation for why refugees bring their relatives to Brazil: to provide them security and increase refugees' own wellbeing by allaying their concern for their loved ones. Whether due to widespread conflicts or individualized persecution, family protection was mentioned as a concern for 16 respondents. Almost all Congolese refugees (14 out of 15) worried that their families were at risk.

Congolese refugees stated that their relatives, especially their siblings, were suffering direct persecution because the government perceived them as a threat and because of their family relationship with the refugee in Brazil. A Congolese man explained that the persecution of his brothers and sisters motivated him to bring them to Brazil first: 'One of them was persecuted by a rebel group in eastern Congo. He was captured along with three other brothers and sisters who were raped for three months in the forest' (Interview, 06 October 2018).

Two other Congolese refugees also explained that their families suffered persecution because of their relationships: 'I was wanted, and my family received many threats. I can say my family is threatened' (Interview, 7 October 2018); 'My brothers stayed there when I ran away. The police went to pick them up. My sister was raped; my brothers went to jail' (Interview, 29 September 2018). Another Congolese man decided to bring his brother because he perceived he was facing the highest risk of torture: 'Men are tortured more than women. For his protection, I brought him' (Interview, 30 August 2018).

Coming to Brazil also improves the wellbeing of refugee families. One Syrian refugee reflected on the situation in Syria and how his parents found peace in Brazil: 'It was very messy there, as I told you. After they came here, they felt peace. They felt calm. They unloaded the war they carried there' (Interview, 1 October 2018). The refugees know that in Brazil, they and their families will not face the direct harm, persecution, torture or violations of human rights that forced them to leave their countries of origin. Bringing a relative at risk from the origin country contributes to the sense of everyday security among refugees settled in Brazil because they do not need to worry about their relatives left behind. Hence, family reunification not only creates physical security for the family members who arrive in Brazil, but it also increases the wellbeing of the refugees in Brazil.

### **4.5.3 Health Strategy**

During the interviews, some refugees mentioned the risk of never seeing family members again because of the health issues their relatives were facing. The armed conflicts and humanitarian emergencies taking place in many origin countries can make it difficult to access health care. Moreover, refugees residing in Brazil cannot



go back to their origin countries, as Lei No. 9.474 (1997) states that refugees traveling to their origin countries, even to visit family, may lose their refugee status, a common condition in countries that provide asylum to refugees. Thus, health concerns for family members represent another strategy for selecting which family members a refugee will bring to Brazil first. A Congolese man whose brother was being persecuted also considered his brother's health when deciding when to bring him to Brazil: 'My brother was feeling sick. So I said, if I am not careful, the one who is there, he will die. I will lose him' (Interview, 29 September 2018). Another Congolese man was motivated by the health of his mother to bring her first to Brazil:

Will I see my mother again one day? I don't know, because many things happen. Maybe something will happen today; my mom also has a health problem. Something may happen to her, and I do not know if I will be able to see her. (Interview, 30 August 2018)

Brazil has a universal public health system (Sistem Único de Saúde, SUS), and all migrants and refugees have a right to health care in Brazil according to Lei No. 9.474 (1997) and Lei No. 13.445 (2017). Refugees decided to bring sick family members to Brazil to provide them healthcare and improve their chances of survival. One Congolese man applied for family reunification for his sick father: 'My dad's process was quick because he had a [health] problem' (Interview, 30 August 2018). Another Congolese man who had applied for family reunification for his sick brother and felt the process was taking too long explained his logic for bringing his brother:

[I have] another brother who was ill. Another had no money to take him to the hospital because you have to pay for it there. Here the hospital is free. [...] The other one is dying there with a disease in his body, and he has no medicine, nothing. Then you begin the family reunification procedure, you wait one year, two years and then the person dies, right? Then it is hard. (Interview, 8 September 2018).

A refugee may also decide to bring a relative to Brazil if a family member in the country of origin gets sick and the refugee becomes responsible for supporting the family and taking care of the sick person. Bringing the sick person to Brazil can be a way to deal with this responsibility. A Congolese man explained that he decided to bring his mother because she was sick and could no longer work: 'Then things got a little difficult, right? My mother worked as an engineer, and when she became ill too, it was difficult [for me] to support the whole family there' (Interview, 6 October 2018). The strategy of bringing sick relatives to Brazil shows refugees' concern for their families. Knowing that their families are in good health or receiving treatment also increases the everyday security of refugees in Brazil and enhances their wellbeing. Considering the relational dimension of everyday security, bringing a sick relative through family reunification will increase both the physical everyday security of the relative and the wellbeing of the refugee, who will not need to worry about the health of their loved ones in the origin country.

#### **4.5.4 *Childcare Strategy***

Some refugees, especially women, decided to bring relatives who would help them care for their children who were already in Brazil. The arrival of a mother or siblings would allow the refugee to enter the labour market. These family members were also important for refugees seeking to bring their children to Brazil. That is, refugees first needed to have someone to take care of their children before asking their children to come. Adult relatives in Brazil also helped refugees to save money for further family reunification procedures. Such was the situation of a Congolese refugee woman who was pregnant in Brazil and decided to bring first her sister and then her other children, who were still in Congo. She could not bring her children first with no one to take care of them:

Because you know, when my sister gets here, she will help me bring my children. I work, she works, everybody works together to help. Got it? If my son had arrived first, there would have been no one to take care of him. There is no family here. (Interview, 28 August 2020)

Many refugees come from countries where extended family members are essential to raising children. Unlike the Brazilian society, in which parents are the main caretakers of their children, African refugees understand childcare as a collective responsibility of the broader family unit. Therefore, bringing relatives to Brazil, including extended family members, was necessary for raising children. This consideration appeared in interviews with both male and female refugees. One Congolese woman was upset with the delayed family reunification process for her siblings because her children in Brazil were being deprived of daily contact with her brothers, who were still in the DRC. She believed that living with uncles and cousins, as she had while growing up, was essential for her children's development in Brazil (Interview, 29 September 2018).

Another Congolese refugee reported that after the arrival of his mother and two brothers, his children were able to have daily face-to-face contact with their grandmother and uncles, improving the wellbeing of the entire family (Interview, 6 October 2018). Bringing extended family members is a strategy to increase the everyday security of refugee families and children living in Brazil because relatives provide care and family support, which also increases refugees' wellbeing. Having the support of these family members in Brazil can also allow refugees to plan to bring their children to Brazil in subsequent family reunification procedures.

#### **4.5.5 *Securing the Future of Family Members***

Many refugees are responsible for helping their relatives improve their lives. Providing relatives with the possibility to come to Brazil and have access to opportunities such as education or the labour market is a strategy to secure future security

for the relative arriving in Brazil as well as for increasing the wellbeing of the refugee who is already in Brazil.

Brazil has a public education system and guarantees a right to education for all children. Brazil also has public, tuition-free universities, as well as private universities that charge monthly fees according to a person's income. Some refugees decided to bring their siblings to provide them educational opportunities as a way to improve their lives and the lives of their families. Bringing a younger sibling in particular shows the concern of refugees for their family members' futures. A Congolese refugee explained why he decided to bring his younger sister to Brazil: 'I called her because she was the youngest, and she needed to study' (Interview, 6 October 2018).

Another Congolese refugee decided to bring her sister to Brazil to give her the opportunity to continue her education: 'I was thinking of bringing her here to continue her studies, to study here in Brazil' (Interview, 17 October 2018). The broader family context may also influence the educational opportunities of its members. One Congolese refugee brought his sister because she could not go to university after their mother got sick: 'She was in a very worrying situation because she really wanted to go to college and my mother was sick' (Interview, 8 October 2018).

This strategy combines with age as a way to secure the future of younger siblings by providing them with further educational and work opportunities in Brazil. That was the case of this Congolese refugee who brought his younger brother to Brazil: 'He is my younger brother. He is 28 years old. He is working now. I asked him to come, for him not to be alone. You know there is war in Congo – everything is difficult, right?' (Interview, 8 September 2018). Refugees feel responsible for their young siblings, who are 'fragile' and need someone to help them. One Congolese refugee explained his decision to bring his younger brother to Brazil in these terms: 'He was young, the youngest of all, the most fragile' (Interview, 5 October 2018).

#### ***4.5.6 Security Dimensions of Selection Strategies***

Family separation impacts the wellbeing of refugees in Brazil as it directly affects their sense of everyday security. Family reunification is a strategy that refugees in Brazil employ to create everyday security for themselves and their families. The relational dimension of everyday security means that the security of refugees in Brazil is connected to the security of their families abroad. The use of different family member selection strategies demonstrates how refugees in Brazil are agents of their own family reunification processes, consistent with the Autonomy of Migration framework. With their selection strategies, refugees aim to maximize certain aspects of their everyday security and the everyday security of their families, as summarized in Table 4.2.

**Table 4.2** Selection strategies and the everyday security of refugees in Brazil and their families

Selection strategy	Dimension of everyday security for the refugee in Brazil	Dimension of everyday security for the family
<i>Financial</i>	Financial	Financial
<i>Protection</i>	Wellbeing (concern for family abroad)	Physical security
<i>Healthcare</i>	Wellbeing (concern for family abroad)	Physical security (access to healthcare)
<i>Childcare</i>	Wellbeing (family support and care for children)	Wellbeing (family support)
<i>Securing the family's future</i>	Wellbeing (create opportunities)	Future security (educational and work opportunities)

## 4.6 Conclusion

Brazil presents a compelling case for examining family reunification because refugees may use family reunification to bring members of their extended families to the country. Financial constraints on refugees require them to select which family members to bring first, however. Within the Autonomy of Migration framework, refugees in Brazil are agents that navigate the family reunification procedure, a restrictive migration system, in order to maximize their security and the security of their families. This study identified five overlapping strategies employed by refugees to select family members for reunification: financial, protection, health, childcare and securing the family's future.

Together with homesickness, the search for familial companionship, and the fact that refugees cannot visit their origin countries, these five strategies appear in various combinations in the refugees' narratives. For example, some interviewees wanted to bring a relative to Brazil both to help earn money to send abroad and to protect the relative from physical harm in the origin country. Adopting the perspective of the Autonomy of Migration approach, these five strategies show how refugees navigate the Brazilian family reunification policy to create everyday security for themselves and their families.

Refugees' various strategies for making use of the Brazilian family reunification system are not an abuse of the system, as their selection strategies to maximize their everyday security are completely legal. The Brazilian definition of family unity makes this family reunification possible and is therefore important to the wellbeing of refugees settled in the country. The family reunification procedure in Brazil allows families to be reunited, creating everyday security for refugees. Brazil should work to facilitate the right to family reunification in practice by correcting problems and delays in reunification procedures, as discussed in Chap. 2, which would improve the everyday security of refugees living in Brazil and their families in need abroad.

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# Chapter 5

## ‘She Died While Missing Us’: Experiences of Family Separation Among African Refugees in Israel



Hadas Yaron Mesgena and Usumain Baraka

### 5.1 Introduction

In this chapter we explore the experiences of family separation among African refugees from Sudan and Eritrea living in Israel. In particular, we aim to understand the causes of family separation and how refugees who have been separated for years from their immediate and extended families due to harsh migration policies in Israel live with the insecurity caused by family separation.

Between 2006 and 2013, approximately 64,000 African migrants and refugees entered Israel across the border with Egypt (Population and Immigration Authority, 2020). Previously, migrants and forced migrants had mostly entered the country in small numbers through the airport, coming from Africa, Latin America and Asia (Sabar, 2008). The arrival of African newcomers on foot was therefore a new phenomenon, greeted at first with surprise and confusion.

Most of the Africans who reached Israel arrived from Eritrea, Darfur and South Sudan. While Eritreans were escaping political oppression, refugees from Darfur and South Sudan were escaping genocide and war. According to Amnesty International (2013), an initial cause of African asylum seekers entering Israel in large numbers from 2006 to 2013 was the unrest in Cairo following the demonstrations in front of the local UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) office in 2006. The huge obstacles in reaching Europe from North Africa made Israel, with its amicable border with Egypt, an attractive alternative destination.

Initially, forced migrants who encountered Israeli soldiers patrolling the border were in some cases jailed and in some cases left on the streets. Following public

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outrage and petitions to the courts, the state started to devise ways of handling the new situation. Scholars such as Kalir (2015) and Yacobi (2011) have documented the state's increasing institutional hostility over time towards African refugees. A significant number of asylum applications dating back to 2013 are still waiting to be processed, and only a handful have received refugee status. Most asylum seekers receive temporary resident permits that do not provide the right to work or access to social security, health insurance or basic social rights (Orr & Ajzenstadt, 2020, p. 146). Because Israel has granted refugee status to hardly any of the asylum seekers in the country, they have no chance for family reunification with spouses or children living in other countries. Their only options are to live separately or to migrate to another country where they can reunite. Hence, the legal status of African asylum seekers in Israel, or lack thereof, has a significant effect on the lives of their families.

Baldassar et al. (2014) have demonstrated that transnational families who reside in different countries can maintain a sense of familyhood, care and reciprocity across borders. However, family separation has emotional, economic and social implications that can affect family members differently according to their location, age and gender, for example. In the case of refugees, separation is often also connected to trauma, thus impacting emotional recovery and prompting a range of emotions, such as helplessness and guilt (Rousseau et al., 2001; Savic et al., 2013).

Previous studies have demonstrated that many refugees from Eritrea and Sudan have suffered trauma in their homeland and in their escape across countries. A study on the mental health of Eritrean mothers and their children (Mayer et al., 2020) and studies on Eritrean and Sudanese refugees who were exposed to trauma (Lavie-Ajayi & Slonim-Nevo, 2017; Nakash et al., 2015; Slonim-Nevo et al., 2015) have revealed the importance of acculturation, social and family support, and solid legal status for improving the mental wellbeing of refugees and their children. Obtaining a legal status in Israel has been shown to increase migrants' wellbeing, sense of freedom and empowerment (Babis et al., 2018).

However, as Israel generally does not grant legal status to refugees, depriving them of rights, Israel's asylum policy can be seen as a form of administrative violence (Beaugrand, 2011). Leinonen and Pellander (2020) have pointed out that prolonged family separation with no prospects for unification is an additional form of administrative violence, impacting refugees' quality of life and opportunities to build a new life in the new country. At the same time, refugees try to live with insecurity (Crawford & Hutchinson, 2016), including painful emotions in relation to family separation, and to 'do family' transnationally (Baldassar et al., 2014), as well as to create new social relationships in the absence of close family members. As described in Chap. 2, Israel's reluctance to grant a status to African refugees prevents them from starting the family unification process and from freely travelling out of Israel and back again, making it impossible to visit relatives. In this chapter we wish to explore the emotional impact of this policy on African refugees, their sense of security and how they 'do family'.

Next we will briefly present the Israeli political context, which strongly defines the experiences of the studied African refugees. This will be followed by a section

on methodology and data. Then we move on to the analytical part, which is divided into three sub-chapters exploring how governments and politics in refugees' countries of origin and in Israel have led to family separation, the emotions caused by family separation and how refugees try to manage everyday insecurity, and how refugees create new social bonds, friendships and family-like relationships.

## 5.2 The Emergence of the Asylum Regime in Israel

In order to understand the origins of and reasons for Israel's current asylum policy, we need to return to the formative years of the State of Israel and its ideology. Although Israel signed the 1951 Refugee Convention after World War II, the Israeli parliament has never passed a domestic refugee law (Giladi, 2015). In its earliest years, Israel passed new laws and amended colonial British laws to serve its immigration agenda, namely, to increase the Jewish population but not the non-Jewish or Arab population. For example, in 1950 it passed the Law of Return, which privileged Jewish immigration to Israel, while amending the British immigration law that had allowed non-Jewish immigration. In addition, in 1954 it passed the Prevention of Infiltration Law, which aimed to combat political violence by armed Palestinians and the return of Palestinian refugees (Kritzman-Amir, 2012).

When African refugees and migrants started to enter Israel 50 years later, the state had no asylum law or mechanism. Instead, following a court petition in the early 2000s, the state issued an asylum ordinance that placed most of the asylum process in the hands of the UNHCR (Harel, 2015; Ben-Nun, 2017). Later, the state assumed all responsibility for asylum, and the UNHCR's role shifted to monitoring the state. Harel (2015) has described the challenges faced by asylum seekers since the state started deciding asylum claims (on the basis of an ordinance rather than a law), including the extremely low success rate of applications. In many cases, applications are left pending and claimants are given only temporary permits, which need renewing every few months and grant very few rights – primarily only protection against deportation. For a long time, certain nationals such as Sudanese and Eritreans were not even allowed to apply for asylum, as they were handled under a non-removal policy that protected them on a collective basis from arrest and deportation.

Over the years the state has passed laws and issued ordinances aimed at restricting the lives of refugees and encouraging them to leave the country. These include the amendment of the Prevention of Infiltration Law and the establishment of the Holot detention facility in the Negev desert (Yaron Mesgena & Ramati, 2017). Since implementing these policies, the number of asylum seekers in Israel has decreased dramatically. In addition, the border was fenced so effectively that hardly anyone has been able to cross into Israel since 2013. In 2018, the Israeli government made attempts to deport refugees to a third country in Africa. This was prevented, however, by a massive public campaign. Nonetheless, liberalizing reforms, such as granting status to undocumented migrant children, remain limited for fear of 'upsetting [Israel's] national politics of identity' (Kemp, 2007).

Beyond laws and ordinances, uncertainty and insecurity are used as tools by the Israeli state to unsettle African refugees and push them to the margins and out of the country (Yaron Mesgena, 2015; Hashimshony-Yaffe, 2021). Frequent changes in visa policies, new governmental decisions and even statements released by the government to the press leave refugees emotionally, socially and legally vulnerable. African refugees are seen as a threat to state security and have been criminalized (Orr & Ajzenstadt, 2020), creating everyday insecurity due to fear of deportation.

The Israeli policy towards asylum seekers, which not only denies them rights and security but generates a sense of constant insecurity and instability, pushes refugees to migrate out of Israel. According to the Population and Immigration Authority, 16,232 asylum seekers have left Israel since 2015,<sup>1</sup> some with the assistance of the Israeli authorities and some in other ways. For comparison, only 18 asylum applications filed by Sudanese or Eritreans had been approved in total as of July 2021 (Association for Civil Rights in Israel, 2021).

### 5.3 Methods and Data

This chapter draws on ten semi-structured interviews conducted between 2018 and 2020. Eight of the interviews were carried out by the first author in 2018 with Eritrean and Sudanese migrants in their 20s or 30s (five men and three women). Interviewees were recruited in different ways. Some we were acquainted with as activists, while others were recruited through NGOs or by the snowball method. Six of the interviewees were single, while two were married and had children living with them in Israel. None of the interviewees had spouses or children in other countries, but they were separated from their siblings, parents, grandparents and other extended family members. All were living in rented apartments in Jerusalem or Tel Aviv and had been in Israel for 10 years or more. They had all arrived in Israel over the Egyptian border, escaping the dictatorship in Eritrea or the genocide in Darfur. Most were working in menial jobs such as cleaning or maintenance. Four of the interviewees had arrived in Israel as unaccompanied minors, like the second author of this chapter. They had all mastered Hebrew and were well-acquainted with mainstream Israeli culture. Some had completed their high school education in Israel and pursued academic degrees. The interviews were conducted in English, Hebrew or Arabic.

In addition to these eight interviews, one interview was conducted on the phone with a 27-year-old Sudanese woman, a friend of the second author from Darfur, who was living in a refugee camp in Chad. This interview helped us understand how

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<sup>1</sup>Statistic compiled from Population and Immigration Authority data available at [https://www.gov.il/BlobFolder/generalpage/foreign\\_workers\\_stats/he/foreigners\\_summary\\_2018.pdf](https://www.gov.il/BlobFolder/generalpage/foreign_workers_stats/he/foreigners_summary_2018.pdf), p. 7; [https://www.gov.il/BlobFolder/generalpage/foreign\\_workers\\_stats/he/ZARIM\\_q4\\_2020.pdf](https://www.gov.il/BlobFolder/generalpage/foreign_workers_stats/he/ZARIM_q4_2020.pdf), p. 9; [https://www.gov.il/BlobFolder/generalpage/foreign\\_workers\\_stats/he/foreign\\_workers\\_stats\\_q2\\_2021.pdf](https://www.gov.il/BlobFolder/generalpage/foreign_workers_stats/he/foreign_workers_stats_q2_2021.pdf), p. 4.

family separation is viewed from the Global South and examine whether the issues are similar to or different from those raised in the interviews in Israel. The tenth interview was conducted with an Israeli attorney from the Hebrew Immigration Aid Society, an NGO advocating for refugees in Tel Aviv. This interview gave us a legal and bureaucratic perspective on the situation of African asylum seekers in Israel.

The research was conducted according to the ethical principles of qualitative research. All names used in this chapter are pseudonyms. We explained the purpose of the research to the interviewees and received the interviewees' informed consent to participate in the research. We avoided questions or topics we understood to be uncomfortable for our subjects.

Our interviews with refugees dealt with the refugees' family relationships in their home countries and elsewhere from the time of their childhood until the present day, as well as their reasons for fleeing their country, what their journeys were like and their difficulties since migrating. The interviews were thematically analysed (Guest et al., 2012), identifying categories and issues and organizing them according to the core issues and their relevance to our research questions.

In addition to the interviews, we draw on our long acquaintance with the asylum-seeker community in Israel. Both authors are members of or activists in the studied asylum communities. We have spent many hours with Sudanese and Eritrean refugees and families and have therefore gathered information via official and unofficial observations (Hale, 2008). Some of the examples in this chapter are based on our encounters and relationships with members of these communities, and the chapter is informed by autobiographical reflections on the bonds within our transnational families across Chad, Sudan, Eritrea, Israel and the United States. As activist researchers, we are also driven by the desire to empower and give voice to refugees and to promote justice.

## 5.4 Families, Politics and In(securities)

### 5.4.1 *Governments Tearing Families Apart*

War is a main factor that has separated African refugees in Israel from their families. The story of Usumain, the second author of this chapter, serves as an initial example of how family life may drastically change as a consequence of politics in one's countries of origin and settlement.

Usumain was born in Darfur in 1994. When he was nine, his village was attacked by the Janjaweed militia during the Darfur genocide. On that day he lost many of his family members and his home. He and other surviving members of his family fled first to an internally displaced persons camp and then to a refugee camp in neighbouring Chad, where his mother and sisters remain to this day. Usumain left the refugee camp in search of a better life in 2007 at the age of 13 and spent a year passing through Chad, Libya and Egypt before entering Israel in 2008. Only in

2020, after a long battle for temporary residency in Israel, was he able to travel back to Chad and see his family again. He cannot, however, reunite permanently with his family in Israel: Israeli policy, which aims at discouraging refugees from staying in the country, does not enable reunification.

During the genocide in Darfur, entire villages were destroyed, many people were murdered and survivors escaped to other towns or across the border. Baruch, a 26-year-old man from Darfur, told us:

In 2003 my village was destroyed by the Janjaweed militia. It was at five in the morning, when we were still sleeping. When the village was attacked, a lot of people died. My big sister and my grandfather died. My parents and I escaped and went to a big village with a police station, which we thought could protect us.

Nadiv, a 28-year-old man from Darfur now living in Tel Aviv, fled to a refugee camp in Chad with his mother. The living conditions in the refugee camp were unbearable, and like many other young men, he was pushed to migrate to Libya in 2005, which, during the Gaddafi regime, was stable compared to other countries in the region. When Libya was bombed by the NATO coalition in 2011, Nadiv fled to Egypt and, finally, to Israel. When asked about his dream for the future, he said:

My dream is to become educated and to become a leader [...] and make peace in my country. So all the citizens of the country will live in peace, without war. And to have a normal life like they have in other countries, and to be close to my family.

For Nadiv, the dream of a Sudan without war is also the dream of being together with his family. He associates political harmony and security with normality and having a family life.

Political oppression is another factor separating African refugees in Israel from their families. Our interviewees from Eritrea told us their family separation started with their military service. They see the government of Eritrea as responsible for tearing families apart. Eritrea has been a totalitarian dictatorship since the 2000s, restricting and violating the rights of its citizens and prompting an ongoing mass forced migration to neighbouring and Western countries (Hepner, 2009). The state imposes life-long mandatory military service (until the age of 55) on both men and women. During this military service, Eritrean soldiers endure harsh conditions and cannot visit their families for months at a time. Some young Eritreans flee the country before they are recruited; others escape from the service. Some need to flee the country following an unauthorized visit home. When Eritreans escape the country, the authorities put pressure on close family members such as parents or spouses, often imprisoning them and forcing their families to pay a fine or ransom in exchange for their release, or targeting them for maltreatment, sometimes pushing them to flee as well.

Moshe, a 35-year-old single man living in Tel Aviv, told us he fled Eritrea because he had been forced into military service and was therefore unable to see his family: 'I was a civil servant. It was national [military] service. I was working for free. I suffered and was not able to see my parents because they lived in the south, close to Ethiopia.' Because of his family's proximity to the Ethiopian border, the authorities

suspected Moshe of wanting to flee the country and therefore prevented him from visiting his family.

Eden, a woman in her 30s from Eritrea, lives in Jerusalem with her husband and three children. Her husband escaped military service and was forced out of the country. His departure made Eden's life in Eritrea unbearable: she was harassed and even imprisoned and tortured as retribution for her husband's escape. She told us:

It was a difficult situation. I could not wander around since my husband had escaped. I had no rights. If they look at my ID, they can see that I am married, and because he was not in the country, it was very difficult [...] I travelled around looking for a job, and I had an ID saying I was married and had done military service [...] I was asked, 'Where is your husband?', taken off the bus and taken to prison. I was beaten for many days.

Guerrilla warfare dating back to the 1970s, the separation of Eritrea from Ethiopia, and the border conflict between the two countries in 2000, which resulted in mass expulsions from both sides (Campbell, 2013), have divided Eritrean families. In the case of Meshi, a 22-year-old woman living in Tel Aviv, her family's ties to both Eritrea and Ethiopia tore her family apart. Meshi told us:

We moved from Ethiopia to Sudan due to the war that started between Ethiopia and Eritrea. Back then the Ethiopian government arrested and deported Eritreans, and my father didn't want to go back and be enslaved by the army there. He was born and lived in Ethiopia, but is a citizen of Eritrea. So he decided to escape to Sudan, which was the closest country, and my mum and I then joined him, because we were also harassed due to our connection to Eritrea.

Once in Israel, refugees are safe from the persecution they suffered elsewhere but are still not fully secure, as Nadiv reported: 'In Israel I feel safe, but the Israeli government sometimes threatens to deport us to Africa.' Refugees are unable to travel and visit their families; they cannot reunite with their families in their home countries and cannot even secure the status of children born and raised in Israel. For this reason, many try to migrate to other Western countries such as Canada. They thus live in Israel in a state of semi-permanent transit, sometimes for as long as 10 years or more. While attempting to find a secure place of asylum, families may be partially reunited but also continue to face separation: once they reach other Western countries, many are reunited with relatives already living there or who soon follow, but they also leave family members behind in Israel.

As activist researchers, we have noted that children find it especially difficult to process the family separation experienced in Israel. One Eritrean family living in Jerusalem had shared their apartment with members of their extended family, who had left, one by one, for the Netherlands, Ethiopia and Canada. The eldest daughter expressed her sadness at this separation: 'Before, the house was full of uncles, and now they are gone.' Another Eritrean family, a couple and their young son, left Jerusalem for Canada in 2018, leaving behind the mother's sister and nephews. While the mother, a woman in her 30s, found it hard to leave, her son struggled even more with being separated from his cousins, whom he referred to as his siblings. As a child born and raised in Israel, he felt attached to his aunt and cousins. Yet, since his parents did not have status in Israel that would have provided them with the

opportunity to settle permanently and have civil rights, they chose to find a place where they would feel more secure, despite leaving their family behind.

In sum, family separation for Eritrean and Sudanese refugees in Israel started when they were initially persecuted and forced to leave their countries. Separation continues in Israel because they do not have access to refugee or other permanent status; they are unable to even visit their families outside of Israel, not to mention family reunification. For refugees who have family ties outside Israel, emigration to a third country may be possible. Migration and resettlement in Europe or North America, where other family members may already be residing, makes seeing one's family and face-to-face caring possible, but may leave other relatives behind in Israel.

### ***5.4.2 Painful Emotions and Living with Insecurity***

Many of our interviewees spoke about members of their families outside Israel, and in Africa in particular, with great sadness, often expressing a sense of deep loneliness. Michael, a young man from Eritrea who arrived in Israel as an unaccompanied minor and is now in his 20s, told us:

Family is family... I grew up in Israel. I could have an easier life if I had someone to talk to, someone who can listen to your pain. Sometimes you are upset, you ask: Who am I? What am I doing here? [...] As far as I am concerned, I would have gone back to Eritrea to live with my mother and brother [...] No one [in Israel] can hear me, everyone thinks that I am walking around wearing nice clothes and smiling. They have no idea.

The emotional toll of separation is apparent in Michael's interview. Although in many ways Michael has integrated into Israeli society and culture, he also feels different and estranged. These are difficult emotions, and he feels he has no one to share them with, except his family, who lives far away.

Eden also described the effect of separation on her emotional wellbeing: 'I don't think I have ever been happy in a celebration here. I had fun over there – less here. I miss the holidays. Now I don't even remember [when the holidays are]. I see on Facebook sometimes. Sometime we are at work [during the holidays].' For Eden, separation from her family, culture, holidays and homeland are all entangled and fill her with pain.

Not being able to reunite with or even meet their families fills many interviewees with a sense of helplessness. Refugees in Israel are often expected to support their families back in Africa and worry about changing circumstances in the places their families are living, for example, in refugee camps. While some try to locate lost family members, others avoid communicating with their families in Africa. Moshe told us he only speaks to his siblings and not to his parents:

You cannot travel, you cannot see your family [...] I don't like to call [my parents]. They worry about me. I speak to my siblings every six months. I speak to one of them every week though. He is the one calling and passing on news.

Likewise, Eden told us: 'We are not in touch so much over the phone... because if I call, then I want to return home to them. I miss them. It is difficult. If I call it is really difficult.'

Some of our interviewees reported a change in their view of what family is due to distance and separation. Moshe explained:

[Before] we had good relationships with the extended family. Now I don't want to hear about them. There is nothing I can do, so it's better not to hear. There are two groups: group one are those who are very connected and call their brothers and cousins, and group two are those like me.

This reaction, stemming from guilt and helplessness, has also been noted in recent research. Belloni (2020) found that Eritreans living in Italy maintain transnational family relationships around the world, but not with their parents in Eritrea. Only when they reach their final destination and can support their families do Eritrean migrants in Italy restore communication with those remaining in Eritrea. Our interviews, however, reveal the emotional component of refugees' avoidance of communicating, rather than guilt due to the inability to support relatives, as has also been described by Sabar (2008).

In addition to the emotional and moral dimensions of keeping in contact with family in Eritrea, communication is considered potentially dangerous because the Eritrean government may monitor telephone conversations. Communicating with relatives in refugee camps is also technically difficult.

Haya, our informant who was living in a refugee camp in Chad, told us in her telephone interview:

Some of my siblings have left for other countries. With some I am in touch and some not. I have a sibling living in another refugee camp whom I am not in touch with at all. I don't know what is going on with those I am not in touch with, and it scares me. I don't know what is going on in their lives.

Haya's feelings about her family are similar to those of our interviewees in Israel, despite their different circumstances. Both in Israel and in Chad, refugees lack a secure status and have no prospects for family unification, thus enduring insecurity and no sense of freedom. Lacking freedom of movement to visit relatives and a status that could offer the opportunity to reunite results in refugees feeling a sense of helplessness due to their inability to safeguard their relatives and family life.

Due to family separation, refugees often do not have the chance to care for sick relatives or say goodbye to dying grandparents or parents. A few years ago, while the first author, Hadas, was visiting her Eritrean friend Tsgai in Tel Aviv, a friend came to deliver the news that Tsgai's mother had died unexpectedly in Eritrea. The room was suddenly filled with loud expressions of loss and grief, and Tsgai cried, 'She died while she was missing us', expressing his sadness not only at losing his mother but also at the long, never-ending separation imposed on them. Having witnessed many cases of loss and mourning over the years, we have realized that losing close family members after a period of long separation is a common reality for many African refugees in Israel. They then need to find a way to grieve and to



process this loss while removed from other members of their family and from their original cultural environment and customs.

Separation from one's family as a refugee often also means separation from other circles of belonging, such as one's country of origin, village or town, culture and tradition, and language. For many, their families have not necessarily remained in their country of origin, but are scattered around the globe. For some, such as refugees from Darfur, their homes and villages were destroyed, and there is no place to go back to. Identity thus becomes a complicated issue, especially for those who were separated from their home country and families at a young age.

However, Meshi, who reached Israel at the age of ten, presents a different reality. Meshi travelled to Israel with her father, who died during their journey. Meshi's mother and brother lived in Israel for a while but subsequently left:

They went back because life was really hard for my mum, raising children as a single mother. So she preferred to live in Ethiopia. So when I was 16, she decided to go, and I wanted to stay here, so I did not go with her. I wanted to stay because back then I was about to finish high school, which was really important to me.

Meshi was surrounded from an early age by both her native Eritrean/Ethiopian culture and the new Israeli culture that she absorbed. Although her mother left Israel, Meshi remained. Ever since, she has been separated from her mother. Meshi's identity, divided between cultures and countries, created an expanding gap between her and her mother, adding to the geographical one. Her desire to pursue academic studies and the way she felt about her Israeli surroundings contradicted her mother's cultural and social norms. Only recently, after many years living apart, had Meshi been willing to reconnect with her mother.

For young men and women who made the journey to Israel as unaccompanied minors and have grown up there, identity is torn between different cultures and communities, and separation and distance add another layer to how they navigate their everyday lives. Many of these young people do not have a legal status that would allow them to feel that they belong in Israel. So, while they experience both a cultural and geographical gap with their families, Israel does not provide them with the legal option of belonging. As Meshi told us: 'I'll finish my studies in half a year. And I am sure that I won't be able to get a job without a visa or status. So this is another thing that is an obstacle for me.'

As young people growing up in a new culture, those who arrived at a young age or were born in Israel grow apart from relatives in their home country (Haan, 2011; Juang & Schachner, 2020). To counter this tendency, Eritrean refugees in Israel have established afternoon and weekend schools for their children to study in Tigrinya, even using textbooks sent from Eritrea. Such initiatives are common among Eritrean refugees in Israel, and also among West African refugees, but not among Sudanese, for reasons which need further exploration. Gebre, an Eritrean man in his 40s and father to five children who established an afternoon program in Jerusalem, told us it was important for him that his children speak his mother tongue, even though he speaks Hebrew fluently. Although migrants and refugees in other countries may also initiate similar projects, there is a difference: parents in

Israel are well aware that their children do not have legal status in Israel and may 1 day face deportation, as native-born Israelis of the Southern Sudanese community did in 2012. Since their residence in Israel is not secure, parents say they need to bear in mind the possibility of needing to reintegrate in their home country someday in the future.

Other parents we have encountered throughout our years as activists in the community also stressed the importance of preserving their language in order to maintain close relationships between children and parents and to allow communication between their children and their relatives elsewhere. This is especially important because due to Israeli policy, children are not exposed to their parents' culture by way of reunions and visits, as they may have been in a country that offered them status and the ability to meet their families. In addition, some Eritrean parents in Israel whose children study in Israeli schools, which are based on Jewish traditions and religion, make sure that their children regularly go to church and wear a cross, and do not encourage them to participate in social activities with their classmates. However, one should bear in mind that such parental choices are also designed to maintain control over younger generations, to monitor their behaviour and to preserve existing hierarchies and inequalities, especially related to gender.

Yet, these parents' active approach also aims to reduce the cultural distance between themselves and their children who are growing up in Israel – a distance which may become geographical if these children someday make the same choice as Meshi, opting to live in a place where they feel they belong culturally, while their parents choose to or are forced to return to Africa. Their actions pull them out of a state of helplessness and empower them, enabling them to feel they can shape their children's cultural identity and relationships with members of the family both in Israel and in Africa. While they may not be able to do much about the politics that imposed family separation in the first place, they can be active within the cultural arena and shape their sense of belonging and identity. Education is therefore a way of obtaining security in relationships between parents and children, and between children and their extended families in Africa, while also offering the ability to integrate into the parents' home country, culture, religion and language.

### **5.4.3 *New Bonds, New Families***

Several interviewees told us that in their home countries, they had lived among their extended family, with very loose boundaries between the nuclear and extended family. For example, Nadiv told us: 'My grandmother had many cows [...] After school I would come back home and go to help with the cows and see my grandmother.' Likewise, Moshe reported: 'I spent most of my time with my grandparents. I grew up with them and slept with them at night.' Others described living with other members of their extended family. John, a man from Eritrea in his 40s, often talked about the house he grew up in alongside 20 other children, a mixture of siblings and cousins.

While fleeing one's country removes closeness to one's family, it may also bring new intimacies: individuals who share journeys and lives in exile may become very close. Such relationships may function like families, sharing everyday life and providing support. Tov, a man from Darfur in his 20s who arrived in Israel as an unaccompanied minor, described his peers from boarding school as family: 'We were one group for five years. Some are in the army, some got married and went abroad, but still, still we are a family.'

Some of our interviewees have relatives in Israel – spouses, children, siblings or cousins; others have close friends from the same home country and ethnic group with whom they share a culture and a language. Some unaccompanied minors were unofficially adopted by Israeli families as minors or young adults. The meaning of these relationships varies. Meshi, for example, told us that although her uncle lives in Israel, 'I also have another family, Beit Hashanti [a shelter for homeless children and youth in distress], where I grew up for 6 years. They helped me a lot. I was born again at Beit Hashanti, so they are another family for me.' According to Meshi, in addition to differences in skin colour, there are also cultural differences between her two families, such as their approach to expressing and discussing feelings: In her African family, emotions are constrained and not named or discussed. In contrast, in her Israeli family, expressing, discussing and validating feelings is a legitimized form of communication. Baruch, on the other hand, told us:

I am not with the Israeli family all the time. In high school, I was with them once a week. But now we meet whenever I can. If they are home, and if I can. Now I'm busier and have a lot of things to do. So, I see them every month, sometimes every two months. But I call them, we always speak on the phone. So, I think the thing I got from my [Sudanese] family is that I can call and ask for anything. Anything. The Israelis, I can't ask for anything. There is a limitation.

Has refugees' idea of what family is changed because of separation, exposure to other cultures or changes in life style? Interestingly, when we asked interviewees directly who they call family, they referred to various family members, but not necessarily all of them and not necessarily their nuclear family. Eden defined her family as: 'The children and my husband, also my father and mother and brothers.' Haya, a 30-year-old woman from Eritrea who lives in Jerusalem with her husband and children, said that her family is her mother, who was still in Eritrea and with whom she was hoping to reunite in Canada. Similarly, Baruch told us that his family is his mother, who lives in a refugee camp in Chad, although he also said he is close to his older brother, who lives in Sudan and whom he talks to on the phone.

In contrast to refugees' past experiences of familyhood, their extended and nuclear families are now spread geographically. As a result, some refugees form new bonds, which provide them intimacy and security and are considered second or alternative families. Scattered families also lead refugees to define their families in inconsistent ways, or in ways that do not encompass all of their relatives in their different locations. The transition from one country and cultural setting to another may also redefine families and family ties. These findings echo the scholarship describing transnational families. Families living apart, residing in different

countries, often challenge normative Western understandings of family (Baldassar et al., 2014).

## 5.5 Conclusion

In this chapter we explored how refugees in Israel feel about and cope with family separation and how separation affects their transnational relationships with their families, their emotional wellbeing and their sense of security. We found that this separation is rooted in trauma, such as war, political persecution and harsh, extended military service. For refugees, family separation is connected to their reasons for fleeing their homelands; therefore, the story of separation is the story of persecution and escape.

Insecurity continues to dominate the lives of refugees when they reach Israel. As refugees in Israel do not receive asylum, they lack the status and papers that would allow them to visit or reunite with relatives. Israel's asylum policy does not provide a real option for permanent status or civil rights and has pushed many refugees out of the country in search of security. We therefore claim that politics, policies and different forms of violence are inseparable from refugees' most private relationships and feelings. States and conflicts are embedded in personal experiences of loss, loneliness and despair.

Prolonged separation caused by war or dictatorship in Africa and ineffective asylum in Israel has an effect on family relationships, on the emotional wellbeing of refugees and on the ways refugees define themselves and their families. On the one hand, it generates a sense of helplessness and loneliness. Communicating with their families is difficult, and when asked to describe their families, refugees find it hard to include all the various family members living in different locations. Their varying answers to this question may also represent the disintegration and fragmentation of their families.

On the other hand, refugees work to achieve everyday security by creating other social bonds and educating their children. Prolonged separation motivates refugees to bond with others originating from their home country, as well as with native Israelis and other migrants. Though these new relationships may be defined as a 'new family', they do not necessarily replace old relationships.

The efforts of refugee parents to teach their children their language and culture can be seen as an attempt to bring children closer to their nuclear family in Israel as well as to members of the extended family in other countries, thus maintaining continuity between past and present and managing geographical and cultural distances. Education bolsters refugees' non-Israeli identities and allows them not to rely solely on gaining status in Israel, instead broadening their options, including the option of returning to Africa 1 day. While individuals may not be able to change or bring an end to the politics and conflicts that tore their families apart, they are able to find ways to build new relationships and restore a sense of control and continuity in their lives.

Based on our research, we conclude first that it is clear that politics, violence and governmental policies are embedded in the life stories, daily actions and emotional wellbeing of individuals. Israel, on the one hand, enables refugees to stay in the country, giving them the space to have families and provide for them, and to educate their children in Israeli schools. But refugees' status is unstable and poorly defined, and refugees endure administrative violence. Losing one's family and living with no hope for reunification undermines refugees' wellbeing. Second, while individual refugees are unable to change government politics or immigration regimes, they may find ways to empower themselves and gain better control over their everyday lives and futures. They may not redefine altogether what family is, but they may be able to better accommodate to the gaps and uncertainties created by administrative structures and old definitions of family. Refugees may find micro spaces and mechanisms that, while unable to repair what was torn, can assist in finding ways to cope and replace despair with hope.

**Acknowledgments** We wish to thank our interviewees for sharing their stories with us. We also thank the editors for their comments and support of this article. This article is in memory of Usumain's brother, Sayid Baraka, who was murdered in 2021 while visiting his family in the internally displaced persons camp in Geneina, West Darfur, Sudan.

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# Chapter 6

## For the Greater Good: The Economic and Social Impacts of Irregular Migration on Families in Benin City, Nigeria



Allwell Oseahume Akhigbe and Efetobor Stephanie Effevottu

### 6.1 Introduction

This chapter offers an insight to the relationship between forced migration, economic security and family separation in Benin City, Nigeria. An individual's desire to migrate is often driven by a complex system of interrelated socio-economic, institutional, political, environmental and cultural reasons (Amrevurayire & Ojeh, 2016; Ottoh & Akinboye, 2016). Migration scholars have made attempts to divide migratory movements into two different types: voluntary and forced (Mukhtar et al., 2018). Nonetheless, the division between forced and voluntary migration is often blurry. In the case of Benin City, while some migrants were forced to migrate to escape extreme poverty and economic insecurity, others were pressured by their family members to migrate to uplift their family's status.

Irregular migration routes are often the only option for migrants with low socio-economic status to travel to Europe. In the context of this chapter, we refer to those who have left Benin City as irregular migrants because they have not used regular routes to migrate and do not have the required documents before setting out for their destination. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) defines 'irregular migrant' as a person who, owing to unauthorized entry, breach of a condition of entry, or the expiry of his or her visa, lacks legal status in a transit or host country (Perruchoud et al., 2011, p. 54). The participants in this study were family members of people who migrated through irregular routes and are currently without legal status in the receiving countries due to their lack of residence permits. This situation makes long periods of family separation inevitable.

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Nigeria has had a major role in both intra-African and international migration dating back to the pre-colonial period, when migration was associated with the slave trade and warfare. In the colonial era, Nigerians' international migration was mostly driven by the quest for labour opportunities and higher education in the United Kingdom, which was strengthened by Nigeria's colonial ties to Britain (IOM, 2017). During the post-colonial period, the pursuit of higher education and economic reasons have also acted as drivers of Nigerian international migration to countries in the Global North. Since the 1990s, economic decline and political repression has pushed Nigerians to migrate, mostly to countries like the United Kingdom, South Africa, Spain, the United States and Italy (De Haas, 2008). Italy, Spain and Ireland were the dominant destination countries for most Nigerian migrants in the 1990s. However, increasingly restrictive immigration policies in Europe have altered the regular migratory flow, driving most low-skilled migrants to look for alternative migratory routes to Europe (Adeniyi, 2019).

The twenty-first century has witnessed an increase in irregular migration from Nigeria to countries in the Global North. Ango et al. (2014) reported that Nigeria has witnessed a significant increase in irregular emigration due to factors such as poverty, civil unrest, ecological issues and the lack of sustainable livelihoods. In essence, the need to improve the socio-economic security of one's family in Nigeria leads to irregular migration to Europe and even drives families to decide to sacrifice family members and send them abroad.

Against this background, the impact of forced migration on families left behind in Nigeria is a pertinent issue that needs scholarly attention. While studies exist on the socio-economic impact of international migration on Nigeria and Benin City, especially in the form of remittances (Olowa et al., 2013; Odorige, 2016; Ndisika & Esin, 2019; Ndisika & Dawodu, 2019; Yeates & Owusu-Sekyere, 2019), less is known about the implications of forced separation for the families left behind (Haagsman et al., 2015; Mazzucato et al., 2015; Oyebamiji & Asuelime, 2018). This chapter asks two basic questions: (1) How do irregular migrants contribute towards improving the economic security of the families left behind? And (2) what are the social impacts of migrants' absence?

Benin City was chosen as the context for this research because it represents one of the largest hubs of irregular emigration and remittance receipts in Nigeria (Adeniyi, 2019). Benin City is located in southern Nigeria. It is the capital of Edo State and heavily populated by various ethnic groups, particularly the Bini and Esan. The region is widely known for intraregional and international migration dating back to the 1980s, when Italians established businesses in the region. Marriages between Italian businessmen and Bini women also fostered international migration in the region when these women moved to Italy and began conducting business in the textile, leather and jewellery industries. These women also brought other Bini women to work in Italy because of the high demand for low-skilled labour in the agricultural sector (Osezua, 2011).

The collapse of the Nigerian economy during the end of the 1980s due to sinking oil prices led to the loss of businesses, and many of the Bini women in Italy turned to prostitution to survive. They also began recruiting friends and family members

from home, who saw the wealth amassed by these women as motivating factors for them to migrate to Italy. With its long history of international migration successes and organized network of human traffickers and smugglers, Benin City became one of the most trafficked-through destinations in Nigeria, with most migrants believing they would be able to find smugglers to get them to Europe once they made their way to Benin City (Adeniyi, 2019).

Although Benin City is relatively developed compared to other cities in Nigeria, it has also witnessed rising levels of poverty, with over 80% of residents living below the poverty line (Awolabi et al., 2014). A large majority of the youths in Benin City survive by doing menial jobs, working in the private sector for little pay, or owning small- and medium-scale enterprises, including hairdressing, fashion design and petty trading. Due to this intense economic insecurity and poverty, most families are under pressure and see the migration of one or more of their family members as a way out of their current level of poverty.

Traditionally, it was Bini men who usually engaged in international migration, leaving behind their spouse or spouses and children and sending them benefits in the form of remittances; in some cases, the men established themselves financially to pave the way for eventual family reunification (Okojie et al., 2003). The 1980s, however, saw a shift in the pattern of migration as women began taking the lead in initiating international migration, leaving their children in the care of their parents, their husbands or other extended family members, and sending remittances (Osezua, 2011; Odorige, 2016). Single or unaccompanied adolescent migrants also leave their parents behind in the search for sustained economic livelihoods and an improved standard of living for the families they leave behind (United Nations Development Programme, 2019).

This chapter focuses on the experiences and perspectives of the families left behind in Benin City. It discusses the impact of the remittances sent by migrants in the Global North on the economic security and social status of family members in Benin City. In addition, it examines the impact of separation on migrants' relationships with their families. The next section offers a brief background of the previous research that underpins the chapter. This will be followed by a short methodological discussion and two sections that provide the findings of the research: Section 6.4 discusses how irregular migration impacts the economic security of families in Benin City, and Sect. 6.5 analyses the positive and negative social impacts of family separation.

## 6.2 Irregular Migration, Economic (In)security and Family Separation

Remittances sent by migrants constitute a major source of income for people in Benin City, and a large number of households there are dependent on remittances received from their families in the Global North (Osezua, 2011). A large majority of

these remittances are used by the family members left behind to take care of their daily needs. Apart from the economic benefits, remittances also affect migrants' patterns of family interactions, obligations, kinship networks and expectations in the households left behind because families often attach meaning to remittances and construct values from them (Akanle & Adesina, 2017).

The role that remittances play in providing economic security for families has been well documented (Akanle et al., 2021; Singh, 2017; Olowa et al., 2013; Odorige, 2016). Remittances serve as a basic means of livelihood for family members left behind, as they are often used to establish and support private businesses and self-employment (Oyebamiji & Asuelime, 2018; Ikuteyijo, 2020; Ndisika & Dawodu, 2019). Remittances in the form of cash or goods also constitute a basic source of income that covers the family's necessities of food, clothing and shelter and may allow them to acquire land and property (Odorige, 2016; Ndisika & Dawodu, 2019). Educational advancement is another critical use of remittances. When used to support the academic pursuits of both younger and older siblings, remittances empower young family members with the skills that are necessary to uplift the family left behind and establish them in their local society (Akanle et al., 2021). Moreover, remittances are powerful enough to realign social statuses and priorities in local communities, as seen in the enhanced power of female migrants in decision-making (Osezua, 2011; Ikuomola, 2015). Remittances also serve as a way for the migrant to express love and one's duty to the advancement of the family unit (Singh, 2017). The act of sending money home indicates that the migrant prioritizes the welfare of the family members left behind. Unsurprisingly, the lure of remittances fuels more migration, as other families witness the transformative power of remittances and plan similar migration journeys (Odorige, 2016; Adeniyi, 2019).

In Nigeria, the family plays a pivotal role in the development of an individual. The family is a close unit of kinsmen, related by blood, who care deeply for each other and look out for each other's wellbeing (Osezua, 2011). Like the immediate family, the extended family also plays an active role in care-giving and decision-making, such that one is also expected to take care of them (Bettmann et al., 2016; Adeniyi, 2019). This expanded concept of family and one's duty to uplift family members comes forth strongly as regards irregular migration. The family is part and parcel of the decision-making process, providing support during the actual migration and taking care of the loved ones left behind by the migrant (Carter, 2011).

Irregular migration brings tangible benefits for the family left behind, but comes at great cost to intimate relationships. On the one hand, the migrant's sojourn brings remittances that uplift the entire family. In light of the familial duty of each member of the family, the migrant is encouraged to make the torturous irregular journey to Europe to produce gains for the family (Adeniyi, 2019; Akanle et al., 2021; Osezua, 2011). On the other hand, the strain of separation leads to broken family ties, with some marriages breaking down completely and with children left behind more likely to become social deviants due to the absence of parental care (Ikuomola, 2015; Ikuteyijo, 2020). Intimate relationships such as marriages suffer, as prolonged absence increases the likelihood of both the migrant and his or her spouse seeking

intimacy from others or even maintaining a state of ‘transnational polygyny’, that is, being married both abroad and at home (Fleischer, 2011). This trade-off between uplifting the family and maintaining strong family relationships is one that every irregular migrant from Nigeria is required to make in light of the worsening economic situation in the country (Osezua, 2011; Ikuteyijo, 2020).

Existing literature discusses the importance of remittances, the role of the family in ensuring the success of migrants, and the breakdown of relationships due to family separation. There is a gap, however, in determining how these considerations play out in countries of origin, particularly from the perspective of the families left behind. This chapter fills this gap by determining how the absence of irregular migrants caters to the economic security of the family left behind in Benin City while simultaneously emphasizing the impact of this absence on migrants’ relationships with family members.

### 6.3 Methods and Data

The data for this chapter was drawn from two months of qualitative research undertaken in July and August 2020 that sought to comprehend the experiences of family members left behind in Benin City. The lived experiences of irregular migrants in the Global North were not explored in this study. This approach was taken largely because there is little academic scholarship that addresses the implications of irregular migration for the families left behind, especially with regards to migrants from the Global South (see, however, Chap. 7). The study therefore aimed to explore the perspective of migrants’ families on the impact of remittances received from the Global North on their socio-economic security, as well as on the impact of irregular migration on family relationships.

Thirty semi-structured interviews were conducted with family members who were left behind and received remittances in three local government areas in Benin City, Nigeria. All of the participants were selected on the basis of having kinsmen who were irregular migrants in the Global North.<sup>1</sup> The semi-structured nature of the interviews gave the respondents the opportunity to create their narratives in a manner that reflected a personal selection of their lived experiences. The interviews were conducted in places where the respondents felt safe, such as in their homes or workplaces, using a blend of English and Nigerian Pidgin to foster easy communication. Each interview lasted for about 30 to 45 min, with the researchers taking notes on important points highlighted during the discussion. Although each of the interviews was conducted in the presence of both researchers, the female researcher took the lead while interviewing female informants and the male researcher while interviewing male respondents.

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<sup>1</sup>According to the information provided by respondents, their family members remain undocumented in Europe. However, we do not know the details of their residence permits or life situations.

Having lived in Benin City for a long period of time, it was easy for us to utilize our social networks to identify persons with family members who had migrated to the Global North, particularly Italy, German, Spain, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Norway and the United Kingdom. Our respondents also referred us to other families of irregular migrants that were willing to share their experiences. Attention was paid to achieving as much gender parity as possible: out of the 30 informants, 17 were men and 13 were women. In contrast, we deliberately selected respondents older than 17 years of age, with 32 years being the average age. The educational qualifications of the respondents were high, with the majority holding at least a secondary school certificate. In terms of occupational status, 12 of the respondents were self-employed, 7 were employed in the private sector, 6 were unemployed and 5 were students in tertiary institutions.

Prior to the interviews, respondents were informed about the nature, aim and purpose of the study. The informed consent of the respondents was also requested, with the assurance that the information provided would be used strictly for academic purposes. To respect and protect the privacy of respondents, their names have been replaced with pseudonyms. With the promise of confidentiality, respondents were quite open in sharing their experiences of the positive and negative impacts of forced migration and family separation. The common background that we as researchers shared with some of the informants also made it easy for them to speak freely with us. The interviews focused on the reasons that had forced their family members to migrate to Europe, the impact of migration on their family's economic security, the difficulties they had experienced due to separation, and the coping strategies they had adopted to deal with the migrant's absence. After each interview, the data generated through note-taking were transcribed and later thematically analysed.

## 6.4 Economic Impacts of Irregular Migration

Irregular migration has significant economic impacts on the families left behind in Benin City. The fieldwork confirmed that remittances provided family members, especially siblings and parents, with the means to meet their financial needs. Osahon, aged 28, expressed his delight that he could afford to maintain a thriving fashion store business due to the goods sent by his older brother in Spain. According to Osahon,

My brother has been very helpful in raising the standard of living of our family. He sends all the 'Italian' [good quality] shoes that you can see in this shop. Every three months, he sends down dozens of good shoes for me to sell and earn a living. I was previously jobless, but I can now pay my bills, sponsor the education of our two younger female siblings and take care of our aged mother in the village. (Interview, 28 July 2020)

Osahon's sentiment was shared by most of the respondents, who attributed their means of livelihood to the remittances sent by their siblings abroad. The remittances

allowed family members to create and sustain businesses and thus helped to lift the family out of poverty. The respondents' businesses included hairdressing salons, electronics and appliance stores, fashion stores and automobile parts businesses. This economic impact is particularly important in light of the increasing youth unemployment in Benin City and across Nigeria. The safeguarding of their means of livelihood is thus a critical outcome of forced migration for the youth left behind in Benin City.

Elderly parents are also heavily dependent on remittances for meeting their needs. Elderly respondents attributed their wellbeing to their children, who sent remittances to them from abroad. Ese, aged 65, is an elderly retiree who has a daughter abroad in Germany. She was full of praise for her daughter, whose remittances have been Ese's sole source of income. Although she has three children living in Benin City, they are either in tertiary educational institutions or recent graduates who are not able to cater for her needs.

My daughter who is abroad is the reason why I am doing well today. She sends me monthly stipends and provides money for us to complete our projects and run our businesses. In fact, this house I am living in was single-handedly built by my daughter. I do not know what I would have done if she had not travelled abroad. (Interview, 29 July 2020)

Ese's comment echoes the beliefs of parents of forced migrants in Benin City who see their children's migration as the best way to enjoy a blissful retirement. This reveals the strong kinship relationships that exist, including the expectation that children are responsible for taking good care of their parents, especially in their old age. This familial duty of migrants abroad was emphasized by parents, who spoke highly of their children abroad in terms of the performance of this duty in spite of their irregular status. Though Ese's daughter remains an irregular migrant, she is still able to send remittances to her aged mother back home. Ese was full of praise for her child abroad while subtly dismissing the contributions of her Nigeria-based children to her wellbeing. Ese's disposition is typical of elderly parents in Benin City, who prefer that their children migrate abroad in order to take good care of them. This preference inspires children and youths left behind to plan their own migratory journeys, so as to receive similar respect from their parents.

However, remittances also led to a culture of dependency among some family members. The regular flow of remittances was critical to the survival of the family, but according to our interviewees, some young family members had become used to squandering these resources. Some respondents noted that some young men used the resources to buy extravagant gadgets and host parties, and that they generally failed to invest the resources wisely. Nene, a 25-year-old sales agent, explained her experience thus:

My elder sister has been working in Italy for the last two years. She sends us money and goods to sell to support our family. My younger brother, who is 20 years [old], often squandered the money to host wild parties and bought expensive phones and laptops without doing anything significant with it. I reported him to our elder sister, who threatened to cut him off from the money before he changed his ways. (Interview, 27 July 2020)

Nene captures a growing trend of overreliance on remittances by family members left behind in Benin City. Squandering the scarce resources sent by the migrant defeats the purpose of lifting the family out of poverty, thereby nullifying the essence of the migratory quest. In addition, it creates more demands for remittances from the migrant, which may not be convenient or possible to meet. The increasing demand for resources by family members left behind also leads more youths to undertake dangerous irregular journeys to Europe to generate more remittances for the family at home.

## 6.5 Social Impacts of Irregular Migration

### 6.5.1 *Upward Social Mobility and New Female Roles*

In addition to its economic impacts, irregular migration has also had important social impacts on the families left behind and on the social fabric of the people of Benin City. One impact is the increased status of women in the town. The traditional Bini society is strictly patriarchal in nature, with a high regard for male children and subjugation of female children. Inheritance was strictly for men, as women were not entitled to any property or decision-making power. Irregular migration, however, has had an impact on this social dynamic with the increased number of female migrants from Benin City to Europe. The social status of women has risen, with female migrants making important family decisions and determining the recipients of their remittances. Nosa, aged 30, runs a sports betting centre in Benin City that is supported by funds from his younger sister, who is based in Spain.

My younger sister, who is abroad, is the breadwinner of the family. Although we are three older brothers here in Benin [City], we are all struggling with our small businesses. My younger sister sends money to support our businesses, provides for family projects and instructs us on how to spend the money. Before she travelled, she was nobody in the family, but now we take instructions from her. (Interview, 27 July 2020)

Nosa's statement shows that irregular migration indeed redefines the social dynamic in Benin City. He noted the irony that he and his siblings now took orders and instructions from their younger sister, who became the breadwinner of the family by means of the money she sends home from abroad. Though Nosa and his siblings were not comfortable with the situation, they were resigned to their fate due to the significance of the remittances to their livelihoods. Women are thus able to accumulate decision-making power in spite of their absence. Men, on the other hand, especially those who depend heavily on the remittances of women, lose their standing in the family and often have to obey the directives of female migrants. A 20-year-old female respondent, Sarah, who is a secondary school dropout, explained how this scenario plays out in her family:

My older sister travelled to France two years ago. She is the third-born in our family of four and has two older brothers. All of us here in Benin [City] are struggling and are living from

hand to mouth. My sister sends money to each member of the family. We have used the money to build a house for our aged parents, buy land, purchase cars, and support our businesses. Whenever we have family meetings, my sister joins through video call and makes all the major decisions, because it is her money that we use in the family. (Interview, 29 July 2020)

Sarah has witnessed first-hand the power that her older sister wields simply because she is the breadwinner of the family. Recalling that her sister was not considered important when she was in Nigeria, Sarah revealed that she plans to join her sister abroad to become independent and gain a similar form of respect and admiration from her nuclear and extended families.

Migration also improves the social status of the whole family. All 30 respondents acknowledged that their families were well-respected in their local communities by virtue of having a family member abroad. Migration abroad is seen as a symbol of power and affluence. Those with family members abroad are perceived to be of a higher social class and able to afford a better standard of living compared to their peers. This social status was generally accorded to family members irrespective of whether they received significant remittances. Despite the fact that it is now common knowledge that those who migrate irregularly, particularly women, are often victims of human trafficking, their families left behind are held in high esteem and generally envied by the rest of the population. Osasu, a 30-year-old banker, described the improved social status accorded to his family:

Immediately when my elder brother migrated to Portugal two years ago, our social class clearly improved. We used the money he sent to build a house for our parents and open a boutique and mobile phone store in town. Our relatives and friends now consider us to be important people. My parents are well-respected in the community because they can see how our financial situation improved when my brother travelled abroad. (Interview, 30 July 2020)

Osasu traces the increased prestige that his family enjoys to the material benefits of his brother's journey, which are visible to other members of his community. His brother travelled irregularly to Europe through the Sahara Desert and now works as a bartender in Portugal. Although taking such a job in Nigeria would have been demeaning not only for Osasu's brother, but also for the entire family, he is now celebrated as the sole reason for the improvement of his family's status due to the remittances from his job.

The social status associated with travelling abroad leads other families to put pressure on their family members to migrate and likewise improve their own social status. When asked about what prompted their family member's irregular migration, most respondents admitted suggesting the idea and even putting pressure on the individual to undertake the journey. Omosigho, a 29-year-old artisan, explained how he raised the idea and facilitated his wife's trip abroad to improve their social status:

My wife was a petty trader selling food items in the market. I know of her friend who travelled to Italy and is doing quite well. I suggested that it was best for her to also travel to see whether it will be better for her. We raised the transport cost and she went by road. Now, she is settled in Italy and regularly sends money for the upkeep of me and our three children.



My friends and colleagues respect me since my wife is abroad and doing well. (Interview, 27 July 2020)

Omosigho insisted his wife was cultivating a thriving career working with her friend in a hair salon in Italy. He did not admit to the possibility that she had been trafficked for the sex trade, despite the fact that working in a hairdressing salon in Italy is a popular ruse used by traffickers in Benin City to woo unsuspecting victims.

Onome, a 22-year-old make-up artist, described a similar situation, recounting how her parents put pressure on her younger sister to travel to Spain in order to measure up to their friends who had children working in Europe:

My sister had just completed her secondary school education when my mum and dad put pressure on her to travel to Spain to work there. Three of my mum's friends had their children working in Spain, who built houses for them and sent back a lot of money for their businesses. My parents wanted to have the same benefits and contacted the man that helped my mum's friends to also transport my sister to Europe. She has been there for five years now and has performed even better than those other girls. She has built houses for us and invested in our businesses, including this make-up business I am handling. Because of my sister's support, we are considered rich and important people in my community. (Interview, 28 July 2020)

Onome's experience confirms that migration is highly prevalent in communities in Benin City and is a status symbol for families with children based abroad. The remittances received by the family members left behind enable them to adopt extravagant lifestyles, which makes them the envy of their peers. In turn, these tangible benefits of migration spur other families to adopt irregular means to send their children abroad, with the expectation of similar remittances that will transform their socio-economic conditions.

### ***6.5.2 Negative Impacts of the Absence of Family Members***

The interviews revealed that many were pleased with the outcome of the irregular migration journey of their kinsmen abroad because they were able to attain a higher standard of living, maintain a livelihood and achieve higher social status. This status, however, often came at enormous cost to intimate relationships, and separation had other negative consequences as well. First, the family member's absence resulted in the breakdown of intimate relationships, especially marriages. The absence of one's spouse puts enormous pressure on the spouses left behind. Peace, aged 35, explained how the irregular migration of her husband was just too much to bear and resulted in the breakdown of their marriage:

My husband migrated to the Netherlands five years ago to seek greener pastures. Our various efforts at getting jobs here and managing a business failed, and we decided that he should travel out first, and then I can join him over there later. It has not worked out as planned, and my husband has not once come back home to see me or our two kids in the last five years because he does not have the right papers. Although he sends me money and gifts

regularly, I can't bear the loneliness anymore. Two months ago, I asked him for a divorce and he accepted. (Interview, 30 July 2020)

Peace's situation reflects the sad realities of many family members who have been separated from their loved ones. Compelled by poverty and the harsh economic climate, these migrants have had to leave their family members behind to seek better opportunities abroad. Before leaving Benin City, most migrants promise to come back and reunite with their families. However, their lack of documentation, combined with strict European migration rules, means that this dream is seldom realized. Instead, migrants have to rely on virtual reunification with their families, which is insufficient. With long periods away from their loved ones, the intimate relationships of irregular migrants slowly unravel. For example, a respondent mentioned that she had not seen or heard from a close uncle for the last 10 years, since he travelled to Europe, due to his inability to secure the right documents abroad.

Second, some of our respondents reported that the absence of parents, particularly mothers, could sometimes result in inadequate support, care and supervision of the children left behind, which could lead to behavioural problems such as falling into the wrong peer groups. Akpos, aged 20, a ride-hailing taxi driver, described how his mother's absence contributed to the poor choices that landed his older brother in jail:

My mother travelled to Italy 10 years ago, leaving my brother and I in the care of an older aunt. My father has passed away, and my mother felt going abroad was the best way to take care of our needs. She always sent us a lot of money through our aunty, who was too old to supervise us. My older brother got mixed up in the wrong crowd and joined a notorious cult that terrorized the university campus. He was arrested and has been in prison for the last four years. I feel my mother's presence would have helped to guide us in the right path, which could have prevented my brother from becoming a criminal, rather than leaving us in the care of an old aunty who could barely handle two teenage boys. (Interview, 30 July 2020)

Akpos' regret is glaring. He feels his mother's action of showering them with remittances instead of motherly love failed to give them a better life and instead led his brother down the wrong path. His perspective shines light on an often overlooked aspect of family separation: that the absence of migrant parents may predispose their children towards social vices, especially in cases where there are no quality care arrangements in place. The literature's emphasis on the caregiving provided by the African extended family appears to suggest that it is sufficient that extended relatives take care of the children in the absence of nuclear family caregivers (Ikuomola, 2015; Akanle et al., 2021; Ikuteyijo, 2020; Adeniyi, 2019). Our interview findings, as well as our personal observations while living in the region, clearly contradict this claim and show that the absence of parents can lead children to embrace social deviancy despite the presence of the extended family. This is particularly evident in cases where the children receive insufficient attention and support from their caregivers. The findings from our study align closely with research conducted by scholars like Appianing (2013), Fiakuna (2019), and Kusi-Mensah and Omigbodun (2020). The negative impact of parental absence on the wellbeing and health of left-behind children has also been observed in the Chinese context (e.g., Lu et al., 2019).

In addition, the parent's absence can truncate the educational progress of children left behind. Such children are often relocated to live with extended family members and end up losing their educational status and progress. Extended family members are less committed to the development of the children, especially to their educational advancement. In many situations where children are sent to live in the villages, they end up dropping out of school entirely. Osaretin, an 18-year-old woman, explained that her educational advancement was halted when her father migrated abroad:

My mother and I had to leave Benin City and go to live with my father's parents in [a village] when he travelled to Italy years ago. I was in class three in the town when I left to attend a village school. The quality of education was so bad that I dropped out of school to become a petty trader in the village. If my father had not left us, I would have completed my education in the town and probably gained admission into the university by now. (Interview, 30 July 2020)

Osaretin now works as a sales attendant in a supermarket in Benin City. The job pays her very little, and she traces her limited livelihood options to the migration decision of her father, which led her to lose her educational status. Although her father still sends remittances home, they are managed by her grandparents and extended family, who rarely allocate significant portions of it to her and her mother. Osaretin has therefore gained very little from her father's migratory journey, which has limited her educational pursuits.

However, all 30 respondents were unanimous in insisting that although they missed the migrant greatly and could see the adverse effects of the individual's absence on their relationships, they did not want their family members to return home. Respondents maintained that the economic insecurities they faced, including poverty, unemployment, hostile business environments and poor social amenities, could only be ameliorated by the remittances provided by the migrant to sustain and improve their means of livelihood and social status. The family members left behind were thus willing to sacrifice their strong relationships with the migrants for the greater good of enhancing their economic security. To mitigate the effect of family separation, they used technology to keep in frequent touch with their loved ones abroad, especially through mobile communication, social media chat platforms and video calls.

## 6.6 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the relationship between irregular migration, economic insecurity and family separation within the context of Benin City, Nigeria. Our field research in Benin City corroborated the linkage between economic insecurity and irregular migration. Economic reasons such as poverty, low standard of living, growing insecurity and lack of sustainable livelihoods were identified by respondents as some of the major drivers of irregular migration in the region. To escape their socio-economic insecurities, individuals are forced, in some cases with the

support of or even pressure from family members, to emigrate to countries they believe can meet their economic expectations, a situation that has been described as survival migration (Betts, 2013; FAO, 2017; Ikuteyijo, 2020).

The respondents in our field research in Benin City noted that international migration, whether regular or irregular, held immense benefits for their families. The remittances received by forcibly separated families have been very useful in improving families' socio-economic status within their communities, providing them upward social mobility and leading to increased economic security. In addition, due to their economic importance, female migrants have acquired new respect and status in the eyes of their family members in Benin City. It was also confirmed that the migration of a family member to Europe further spurred the migration aspirations of the family members left behind.

Family and friends play an essential role in the everyday lives of people in the Global South, acting as major actors and drivers in migration. Despite this, less attention has been placed on understanding the experiences, fears and hopes of these family members, who are forcibly separated due to irregular migration. This chapter therefore contributes to the literature on irregular migration and family separation, drawing on the lived experiences of families left behind in Benin City. Our findings indicate that irregular migration and forced family separation have adverse effects on the wellbeing of children left behind (see also Chap. 7), as well as on spousal and familial relationships, with family members adopting coping mechanisms to deal with migrants' absence.

Furthermore, while it is not clear to what extent the families knew about the living conditions of their family members in Europe, it seems that some individual family members are indeed sacrificed for the good of the family. While some of the respondents indicated that, as irregular migrants, their family members might not be eligible to participate in formal labour markets or receive welfare benefits in the host countries, they also asserted that the money the migrants earn from their precarious jobs is enough to cover the financial needs of their left-behind family members.<sup>2</sup> Thus, while the respondents expressed pain at being forcibly separated from their family members, they stated that due to the unfavourable socio-economic climate in Nigeria, they preferred to suffer silently than risk the migrant returning home. Although irregular migration may separate families and often strain familial ties, the findings of the study are consistent with earlier research indicating that remittances symbolically connect migrants to their families (see also Haagsman et al., 2015; Mazzucato et al., 2015; Odorige, 2016; Oyebamiji & Asuelime, 2018). Hence, even if risky, irregular migration from Nigeria to the Global North is seen as a joint family project that is expected to yield cogent gains in terms of upward social mobility.

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<sup>2</sup>This notion raises the question of the status of the migrant in Europe. While it is true that the standard of living in Nigeria is much lower than in Europe, it may also be that some of the irregular migrants do not disclose their true legal status or occupation to their family members in the Global South.

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# Chapter 7

## ‘Mum, I Sleep Under a Bridge’: Everyday Insecurities of the Families of Rejected Asylum Seekers in Somalia



Abdirashid A. Ismail

### 7.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the impact of family separation on the everyday security of left-behind family members of Somali asylum seekers in Europe. Somali youth are driven to flee the regions of the former Somali Republic by the perilous fragility of state institutions, political instability, human rights abuses and a lack of livelihood opportunities. Their migration to Europe is often irregular. Based on data collected in the regions of Somaliland and Puntland,<sup>1</sup> I examine everyday insecurity in terms of the adverse effects of securitizing moves by European states on the everyday lives of left-behind families. I show that the everyday insecurity of left-behind families increases as a result of the consequences of forced migration for their family members who have migrated to Europe and are living there without a legal permit.

By separating loved ones across borders, international migration tears families apart. This separation is often associated with material and emotional costs for family members, both migrants and those left behind (Silver, 2014). Therefore, forced family separation is a source of everyday insecurity. Yet, family members migrate with the hope that the accrued benefits of migration will offset these costs, and most migrants live up to their obligations to help their families by providing both material and emotional support (Castañeda & Buck, 2014; Chap. 6). Migrants fulfil family obligations through financial remittances, visits and communication (Ismail, 2019).

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<sup>1</sup>Somaliland and Puntland are autonomous states of the former Somali Republic. Puntland is a regular member state of the Federal Republic of Somalia. Somaliland has claimed independence and functions as a de facto independent country. For simplicity and to strengthen the anonymity of the participants in this chapter, I use the ‘Somalia’ to refer to all these areas.

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However, these options are not always feasible due to structural constraints. Migration laws and policies constrain the ability of forced migrants to live up to their family obligations and thus worsen the consequences of separation (Castañeda & Buck, 2014). The legal status of migrants is central to the material and emotional wellbeing of both migrants and their families left behind (Abrego, 2014).

The irregular migration process from the Horn of Africa involves sophisticated human trafficking networks whose purpose is to generate massive profits by recruiting, abducting and torturing vulnerable migrants, including children. The migration process is costly and may take years, subjecting migrants to horrific human rights abuses (van Reisen et al., 2012; Micallef, 2017). If migrants are lucky enough to finally reach Europe, they often face further prolonged separation from their families because family reunion is highly unlikely in the short run, as both temporary visits and reunification in the receiving country are impossible without legal status. In addition, irregular migrants often face harsh everyday insecurity in destination countries, including a lack of opportunities, exploitation and powerlessness (Ismail, 2021; Bloch & Schuster, 2002; Crawley et al., 2011). This irregularity adversely affects the emotional wellbeing of family members left behind as well.

In the receiving contexts, irregularity means not only a lack of access to the labour market, but also limited access to social security benefits, both of which could help to materially support the families left behind. In addition to supporting the material wellbeing of left-behind families (for example, by providing upward mobility and schooling for children and siblings), financial remittances also improve the emotional wellbeing of migrants and their families (Abrego, 2014), as sending money can be a way of showing feelings and sharing emotions (Mckay, 2007). Although material support is not the solution for the ills of family separation, sending money, like maintaining close contacts, may reduce the pain of prolonged separation and enhance emotional wellbeing. By blocking migrants' possibilities to materially support their families, lack of status further intensifies the emotional consequences of family separation. Findings by Akhigbe and Effevottu (see Chap. 6) support this argument.

Transnational family research has delved into how the immigration laws and policies of receiving countries affect the transnational ties and practices of migrant families (Abrego, 2009, 2014; Menjívar, 2000, 2012). In addition, there is a growing literature on the impact of new restrictive European migration regimes on the everyday lives of irregular migrants in Europe (Crawley et al., 2011; Innes, 2014; Parker, 2017). However, we know very little about the implications of these policies on the lives of the families left behind (see, however, Ali, 2016; REACH, 2017). Several studies deal with transnational Somali families (e.g., Ismail, 2019; Al-Sharmani & Ismail, 2017; Tiilikainen, 2017; Hautaniemi, 2011; Al-Sharmani, 2010; Horst, 2006), but academic research on Somali families within Somalia is scarce. This chapter aims to address this research gap by scrutinizing how the experiences of irregular Somali migrants in Europe affect the everyday lives of their families in Somalia.

I employ the concept of *everyday security* as framed by Crawford and Hutchinson (2016) as a guiding analytic framework. In their framework, temporality, spatial

scale and emotion are the three essential dimensions of everyday security (for more on everyday security, see Chap. 1). This approach works well with understanding everyday family life (Daly, 2003; Rönkä & Korvela, 2009; Morgan, 2020). For Daly (2003, p. 771), the everyday life of the family is shaped by a complex intersection of material, health, moral or spiritual, temporal, spatial and relational dimensions. Similarly, Rönkä and Korvela (2009, p. 88) state that in addition to temporal and spatial dimensions, everyday family life is shaped by material, mental and social means.

A central feature of many Somali families is that they operate collectively; one of their primary functions is to serve as a social protection and insurance system for their members, including members of the extended family (Lewis, 1994). Mobility is a vital way of dealing with insecurity among Somalis, and migration was already a main channel for social mobility long before the Somali civil war (Gundel, 2002). In addition, making the decision to migrate and financing a family member's migration are perceived as collective responsibilities of the family (Al-Sharmani, 2010). As a result, the Somali family is highly transnational, with Somali migrants striving to fulfil familial obligations towards their relatives in the Global South. Migrants' contributions to their families' wellbeing back home are often significant, with migrants' financial remittances forming one of the most reliable sources of regular income and material security for families left behind. Naqvi et al. (2018) recently found that 36% of households receiving remittances fall below the poverty line, compared to 55.8% of households that do not receive remittances and 47% of households that have an earned wage as their primary income source. Female-headed households, mostly headed by widowed and divorced women, make up most of the households receiving remittances.

After the outbreak of the Somali civil war in the late 1980s, a large number of Somalis left the country, primarily as refugees or asylum seekers or through family reunification. This exodus was typically irregular (with the exception of family reunifications), as there were no formal channels for mobility. A relatively recent type of irregular migration from Somalia is known as *tahriib*, which refers to the emigration of Somali youth to Europe, primarily across the Mediterranean Sea (Ali, 2016, p. 7). Besides family reunification, *tahriib* has become almost the sole type of migration from Somalia to the Global North over the past two decades. *Tahriib* differs from previous Somali migration practices, in which the decision to migrate was made by the whole family; in *tahriib*, family members are usually not involved. Many Somalis consider *tahriib* a 'national disaster', rather than a social mobility strategy. It often leaves the family with devastating material and non-material consequences (Ali, 2016).

The experiences of families left behind in Somalia today are closely connected to two interrelated trends. First, over the past 10 years, many young people have migrated from the Horn of Africa, and in particular, from Somalia. In addition to the factors pushing Somalis to migrate, such as the failure or fragility of state institutions, security concerns and the search for a better life, there are also other socio-political developments in the region that have encouraged irregular migration, including the impact of the Arab Spring and the fall of Muammar Gaddafi and the

chaos in Libya, which has made room for traffickers to operate in the area. Second, the European Union and its member states have adopted increasingly restrictive migration policies designed to deter migrants.

In the sections that follow, I will first present my data and methods before exploring how prolonged family separation produces everyday insecurity among families left behind in Somalia. Drawing on the literature on everyday family life, I will study the everyday security of left-behind families through four broad domains – emotional, health-related, material and social – before ending with my conclusions.

## 7.2 Methods and Data

This chapter is based on 42 semi-structured in-depth individual interviews with 34 left-behind family members of irregular Somali migrants to Europe.<sup>2</sup> The data were collected in March–April 2019 and January–February 2020. During my second visit to Somalia, I conducted follow-up interviews with 8 of the 34 interlocutors I had spoken with during the first visit; seven of these follow-up interviews were face-to-face, and one was conducted by phone, as the interviewee was in a remote area.

The interviews were conducted in Hargeisa, Burao and Borama in Somaliland, and in Garowe and Bosaso in Puntland. Four local partner universities facilitated the fieldwork: the University of Burao and University of Hargeisa in Somaliland and East Africa University and Puntland State University in Puntland. At each university, two research assistants (one female and one male) supported the fieldwork by recruiting interlocutors and facilitating interviews. I also used my local networks for recruitment, and a contact in Finland helped me to recruit one interviewee. All interviews were conducted in Somali, and all, except five, were audiotaped and transcribed. Thirty-two of the 34 interviewees said that their family member had travelled to Europe via tahrīb. Some interlocutors were family members of multiple irregular migrants in one or more European countries: Germany was the most common destination country, followed by Sweden, France and Italy.

Table 7.1 presents the profile of the interlocutors. Although more than half lacked formal education, about one in four were university students or graduates. Two were university teachers. Despite our efforts to attain gender balance in our data collection, we ended up interviewing 22 women and 12 men. There are several possible explanations for our difficulty recruiting as many men as women, such as: many young migrants left behind a female-headed household; young women seem to be more closely connected to family issues than men; and it is the young men who left,

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<sup>2</sup>This chapter is part of the study ‘The New Migration Regime in Finland and Transnational Somali Migrants: Strategies and Lived Realities of Survival’, which is a substudy of the larger research project ‘Family Separation, Migration Status and Everyday Security: Experiences and Strategies of Vulnerable Migrants’, funded by the Academy of Finland and led by Dr. Marja Tiilikainen.

**Table 7.1** Profile of interviewees in Somalia and their relation to family members in Europe

Interviewee					Migrated family member	
No.	Relation to family member in Europe	Age	Family status	Occupational status	Number of migrated relatives	Gender
1	Father	56–60	Married	Unemployed	2	2 male
2	Father	51–55	Married	Unemployed	1	Male
3	Mother	60+	Married	Self-employed	3	2 male/1 female
4	Aunt	36–40	–	Self-employed	1	Female
5	Brother	21–25	Single	–	1	Female
6	Son	18–20	Single	Student	1	Female
7	Sister	18–20	Single	Unemployed	1	Female
8	Wife	18–20	Married	Unemployed	1	Male
9	Brother	26–30	Single	Employed	3	3 male
10	Sister	35–40	Married	Unemployed	1	Male
11	Wife	26–30	Married	Unemployed	1	Male
12	Mother	46–50	Divorcee	Unemployed	1	Male
13	Mother	61–65	Married	Self-employed	3	3 male
14	Mother	46–50	Married	Self-employed	2	2 male
15	Father	56–60	Married	Unemployed	2	2 male
16	Father	60+	Married	Employed	2	1 male/1 female
17	Mother	51–55	Widow	Unemployed	2	2 male
18	Sister	21–25	Single	Unemployed	1	Female
19	Husband	21–25	Married	Student	1	Female
20	Daughter	18–20	Single	Unemployed	1	Female
21	Wife	26–30	Married	Unemployed	1	Male

(continued)

**Table 7.1** (continued)

Interviewee					Migrated family member	
No.	Relation to family member in Europe	Age	Family status	Occupational status	Number of migrated relatives	Gender
22	Sister	18–20	Single	–	1	Male
23	Wife	18–20	Married	Unemployed	1	Male
24	Sister	18–20	Single	Student	1	Male
25	Mother	51–55	Widow	Unemployed	1	Male
26	Father	60+	Married	Employed	1	Male
27	Wife	21–25	Married	Unemployed	1	Male
28	Mother	56–60	Widow	Unemployed	1	Female
29	Mother	46–50	Widowed	Self-employed	1	Male
30	Father	60+	Married	–	2	2 male
31	Son	21–25	Single	Unemployed	1	Female
32	Daughter	21–25	Single	Unemployed	1	Male
33	Father	60+	Married	Unemployed	1	Male
34	Sister	21–25	Single	Unemployed	1	Male

while young women stayed. For instance, only 11 out of 46 migrated family members were female. The remaining 35 were young men, many of them underage.

Ethical issues were taken into consideration during data collection, analysis and dissemination. I tried to ensure that no harm was caused to the interlocutors or their family members in Europe. When conducting the interviews, I sought to ensure that participants felt respected and safe. I conducted the interviews in places participants considered safe, such as their homes, university classrooms and meeting halls, and hotel meeting rooms. I conducted one follow-up interview in my hotel room, accompanied by a research assistant who was an acquaintance of the interviewee. My research assistants gave potential interlocutors an overview of the research project during the recruiting stage, and before the actual interviews, I informed interlocutors about the background, aims and nature of the research and how the data will be used. Only then did I ask them to give oral consent. I have tried to guarantee the anonymity of my interlocutors throughout the research process, for example by using pseudonyms and obscuring some details of their backgrounds.

## 7.3 Everyday Insecurities of Family Members Left Behind

### 7.3.1 Emotional Insecurities

My data illustrate that the costly tahriib, prolonged separation and the precarious everyday life of rejected asylum seekers in Europe have serious emotional implications for the everyday security of family members in Somalia. Hufan, a widowed mother of ten, was struggling with the consequences of the migration of her two eldest sons. She was living with the rest of her children in an abandoned building, as she had sold her home to obtain the release of her two sons from *magafes*. *Magafe* is a name used to refer to the ruthless human trafficking networks in the region.<sup>3</sup> Hufan had been suffering severe pain due to kidney stones. Her only regular income was obtained by buying a goat, slaughtering and butchering it, and selling the meat to her neighbours on Fridays, when people are resting. She occasionally received USD 50 or 100 from the younger of her two sons in Europe and sometimes received small financial or in-kind assistance from her neighbours. She was happy that her smaller children were at schools where the fees were either waived by the school or paid by others.

However, during my first visit, Hufan was facing emotional challenges. She was worried about the situation of her younger son in Europe, who had developed mental illness and was institutionalized. (The son was probably hospitalized, but Hufan thinks he was jailed.) Hufan felt helpless because there was nothing she could do from a distance. Like some other interviewees, she quoted a version of a Somali saying, '*Ood ka dheeri kuma dhaxan tirto*' (A distant fence cannot shelter you from the cold) and added 'I can't visit him [...] I can't help him in any way. I pray for him.' She also felt sad about the behaviour of her older son, who chose not to contact her. 'He is not who I wanted him to be [...] I ask myself, "Why he is not contacting me?" If he had sent fifty [USD] to me, it would have been good. I am not happy about his lack of communication' (Interview, 8 April 2019).

During my second visit, Hufan's situation had become worse, as her younger son had been deported from Europe few days earlier after his mental health had seriously deteriorated. Earlier the same day that I met her, she had taken him to a *cilaaj*, a religious healing clinic. Hufan told me: 'Now he is chained up.'<sup>4</sup> I cried today in a way that I have never cried in my life. If the person dies, you accept the death. They attached chains on all parts of his body!' (Interview, 4 February 2020).

When irregular migrants in Europe are able to make remittances to their families in the Global South, their left-behind families may prefer them to stay in Europe

<sup>3</sup>Some of my interlocutors mistakenly think that *magafe* is a particular Libyan human trafficker. *Magafe* literally means 'one who never misses a shot'.

<sup>4</sup>In Somali territories, like many parts of the developing world, mentally ill patients are often kept in their homes or in extremely under-resourced mental health clinics in dismal conditions. In both cases, chaining is commonly used to prevent harm to the patients and to others. See Tiilikainen (2011) for more on the treatment of the mentally ill in Somaliland.

(see Chap. 6). Many of my interlocutors, however, wanted to be reunited with their loved ones, even if it meant doing so in their home country. However, no one was happy to see their family members deported back to Somalia. Hufan's story is an extreme case of how family reunification through deportation can be a threat to the everyday security of the family left behind in the Global South. She not only lost the badly needed funds that her son used to remit to her while in Europe, but his return in bad condition has overburdened her meagre material and emotional security.

Other family members, such as spouses and siblings, also feel the emotional insecurity generated by prolonged separation. Young adults often associated their everyday insecurities with the absence of their mothers. Hagar, a 23-year-old single man who lives in his paternal uncle's house, explained:

When you live in your mother's home, you live like a king. When you are an overburden to another household, it is difficult to even oversleep in the morning. If your mom is present, you come home whenever you want and wake up whenever you want to. (Interview, 4 April 2019)

He used the term 'overburden' (*dulsaar*) to signify his sense of insecurity in his uncle's household. Hagar feels that being in his uncle's household is not natural and thus perceives himself as a burden. Interestingly, he described his mother's everyday insecurity as an irregular migrant in Europe in the same terms, characterizing her life there without legal status as an 'overburden' to another society. Left-behind young adults also talked extensively about their feelings of familial incompleteness and their perceived lack of love, care, status and personal development. Even those who were doing well socially and materially were affected by family separation. Hagar, who holds an undergraduate degree and does not face material insecurity in his uncle's household, noted:

Your mother's farness is always out there. Even if you are not missing anything, your feelings of your mother's absence are always in your mind and are an integral part of yourself, and I think that never cools until you regain your mother. (Interview, 4 April 2019)

Others felt the pain differently. Hodan, an 18-year-old woman, felt loneliness due to the absence of her older sister, who was in Europe: 'I feel a lot of things. I feel the lack of a companion! We two are the only children of my mother, so I feel lonely. You don't have somebody at home with you' (Interview, 23 March 2019).

My data showed that left-behind family members face a number of emotional insecurities due to migration and prolonged separation. Emotional insecurity arises when they feel that they lack peace and harmony. This is particularly apparent with youth, who miss their parents and siblings, and spouses, who miss their life partners. For parents, emotional insecurity primarily emerges when they are uncertain about the situation of their children in Europe and are not able to help. Emotional insecurity also arises when parents feel that their children have abandoned them and are not willing to fulfil their familial obligations.

In contrast, Geeddi, a father in his 60s, found separation from his son stressful but not unbearable because his son had received necessary medical treatment and material support in Europe. In addition, Geeddi was financially secure in Somalia and not dependent on his son (Interview, 24 March 2019). Here, the improved

material security of the migrant and better financial situation of the left-behind family had a positive influence on the emotional security of the left-behind family.

### 7.3.2 *Health-Related Insecurities*

A majority of the interlocutors mentioned that left-behind family members in Somalia suffered from mental and physical health problems. In addition, they often associated the deterioration of their own health and the health of family members with migration, particularly with the horrific torture at the hands of magafes and the prolonged separation. Previous research findings have suggested that migration may adversely affect left-behind family members' health (Silver, 2014; Scheffel & Zhang, 2019). For example, family members may experience anxiety and emotional stress, and as a result, negative health consequences, if migrants travel without legal documents or face insecurity in destination countries (Antman, 2016). Legal residence status in the new country, remittances and regular visits to left-behind family may alleviate these adverse effects (Böhme et al., 2015).

Guuleed, a father in his late 50s, was a herder, and he and his family had lived a nomadic life. However, after his herds and nomadic lifestyle were heavily hit by harsh cyclic droughts, he decided to move to an urban area to educate his seven children. Working as a truck loader at construction sites in the city gave Guuleed a chance to send his children to school. However, after graduating from school, his oldest son left for tahriib in 2014, and a year and a few months later, the next-oldest son followed suit. Both left without Guuleed's knowledge. The magafe network abducted both sons and held them hostage in Libya for ransom. Currently, Guuleed's sons are in two different countries in Europe, and neither has a residence permit.

According to Guuleed, his sons' migration has dramatically changed the family's life and created new insecurity. He stressed that after his wife was informed that her son was at the mercy of magafes, her already-elevated blood sugar worsened, seriously damaging her brain and partially paralysing her. Later Guuleed's wife's condition developed into complete paralysis. During my first visit, Guuleed was not working and was instead taking care of his wife. During my second visit, I learned that Guuleed's wife had passed away only a few months after I first met him (Interview, 10 February 2020).

Samatar, a father in his early 70s, was struggling with the consequences of the irregular migration and prolonged absence of his daughter and son. He had sold four pieces of land and a house and paid more than USD 30,000 to magafes for their release.

It affected me psychologically. You see me, I had a stroke, and I developed high blood pressure. This is after they left. You are not able to sleep, and you become stressed and diabetic. I was even taken to Mogadishu and operated on in Erdoğan Hospital. (Interview, 8 April 2019)



Samatar's wife also developed severe illness, including high blood pressure and diabetes. She could no longer stand on her own and needed her sister's regular care. During my second visit, I learned that Samatar's stroke had developed into paralysis, and he was using a wheelchair.

According to a systematic literature review and meta-analysis, long-term separation from migrant parents can result in serious health-related insecurities, including conduct disorder, for left-behind children (Fellmeth et al., 2018). Research findings also show that for left-behind children, the caregiving practices and health status of their caregivers contribute to health insecurities (Lu et al., 2019). Suudi, an 18-year-old high school student, and his younger brother had been in their maternal grandmother's custody since their mother's migration 10 years ago. Suudi told me that his younger brother, who was barely a toddler when their mother left, had recently died (Interview, 18 March 2019). In an informal discussion, a neighbour noted that the grandmother's advanced age was a factor in Suudi's hyperactive brother being placed in a rehabilitation center. According to the neighbour, the harsh treatment he received there contributed to his sudden death.

Mental health issues were quite common among left-behind family members. Hani's mother-in-law became mentally unstable after Hani's husband went into *tahriib*. Hani noted that she often saw her mother-in-law endlessly pacing in the yard in the middle of the night. Hani also said that her mother-in-law, who was the head of their household, 'may go out without a *googarad* [underskirt]. I have to try to make sure she is properly dressed before she goes out' (Interview, 7 April 2019).

Although children are not immune to health-related insecurities, in my data, it was parents, particularly the elderly, who were the primary victims of health insecurities. There may be several reasons for this. First, the majority of those who migrated were young, and, as Table 7.1 illustrates, 15 of the 34 informants were parents. Second, it is parents, mostly mothers, who take the main responsibility for freeing their children from *magafes*. Ransom collectors often call the mothers of their victims to inform them that their child is in captivity. Sometimes the victim is being tortured and screaming when the mother is called. These experiences have serious emotional consequences for mothers. Samatar noted that when dealing with *magafes*, 'you become very soft' (Interview, 8 April 2019). It is also quite apparent that the role of young spouses, including husbands, is very limited in the ransom process, as they have limited financial resources and social networks. Third, many of the parents were of advanced age, had serious health issues or were impoverished even before their child's migration. However, I should note that although most of my interlocutors highlighted the adverse health impacts of migration on left-behind families, not everyone reported negative health consequences. Geeddi's example highlights how improved material security may balance the negative aspects of migration.

### 7.3.3 *Material Insecurities*

Sahra, a 21-year-old single woman and the third of seven children, completed high school in 2015 with a plan to pursue a university education. In 2014 her father, the sole provider for the family, became disabled in a road accident. Since then, the family has financially depended on the children's maternal grandfather. Her older brother, as a first-year university student, used to work part-time to cover his university expenses. Unfortunately, at Sahra's graduation, her brother suddenly disappeared. He later called his family from Sudan, informing them he was in the hands of a magafe and needed their immediate help for his release. The grandfather took responsibility for paying the ransom money and other costs of her brother's journey, totalling more than USD 9500.

Sahra understands her brother's decision. His employer's business had not been doing well and had moved to another city. Consequently, her brother lost his employment and was therefore unable to continue his schooling. He ended up staying at home for 4 months. His own and his family's situation, particularly that of his father, had prompted his decision to depart: 'When he sees his father lying in the house, *wallahi* [I swear to God], nobody can stay! [Voice quivering and fighting back tears.] You can tell that it is that challenge that made him decide to depart', she said (Interview, 5 April 2019). As in many other cases, there were everyday security issues in the family's life even before migration, as the father's situation generated material insecurity and impacted the family's emotional security.

Sahra's grandfather became indebted as a result of paying the ransom, and he could not bear the cost of university fees in addition to supporting the family. Sahra lost her dream of going to university, as did her younger sister. However, referring to culturally prescribed gender and generational roles, Sahra was more concerned about her younger brother's future:

Regarding the education of the family, the boy who is younger than [my] sister is now in the 12th year [the final year in high school] [...] Look, we are girls, but the other boy in the family will probably not get a university education [...] I am not studying, my younger sister is not studying, and this boy has already started worrying about ending up in a similar fate. (Interview, 5 April 2019)

Sahra believes that her undocumented brother in Europe should have filled the role of their ailing father because he is the eldest son. However, Sahra associates the family's insecurities with her brother's absence and his irregular status in Europe more than with his decision to migrate.

If he had stayed and completed his education, he would have paid for our universities. He is the eldest in the family, he should take the biggest responsibility in the family. As our father is ailing and weak, the one who is expected to take the responsibility is [my brother]. [...] He can't help us. He lives in uncertainty. He cannot help himself and has nothing because he is without legal status! (Interview, 5 April 2019)

This case reconfirms that *tahriib* generates an enormous material crisis for left-behind families. Many of my informants had lost their homes, land and other assets. In most cases, all money from these sales goes to the magafes for ransom. In

addition, as Ali (2016) has noted, their assets are usually sold at prices that are very much below, sometimes only half of, the prevailing market price. Families need the money on short notice to release their loved ones from the horror of the magafes and have no choice but to accept a reduced price from the opportunist buyers that have emerged in the main cities. For example, Cambaro sold her small house for USD 5000, and after a short period, the buyer resold it for USD 16,000 (Interview, 27 March 2019). Some, like Hufan, after selling their houses, were living in a *kharaabad*, an abandoned building (Interview, 8 April 2019).

Like Sahra, other interlocutors frequently emphasized the impact of migration on left-behind family members' educational opportunities. Irregular migration can also have a wider impact on the material security of left-behind families. In one case described by Batuulo, her deceased brother's entire family, five children and their mother, were forced to return to a semi-nomadic life with no educational or employment opportunities as a consequence of the migration and lack of status of her niece in Europe (Interview, 27 March 2019).

Left-behind families suffer when migrants cannot help them materially due to lack of status and access to entitlements in Europe. Only a few of my informants received occasional small remittances from family members in Europe. Some migrants had been the providers of their families before migration, while others would have been expected to contribute materially to their families had they stayed in their home country. In Batuulo's case, her niece in Europe cannot remit anything to her mother and siblings. She believes that had her niece stayed, she could have supported the family by, for instance, helping her mother with the household chores so the mother would have time for income-earning work. An income would have enabled the younger children to access schooling (Interview, 27 March 2019).

Barni, a mother of eight in her late 40s, was emotional when talking about her 22-year-old son in Italy. Although he had recently received a residence permit, he was still struggling with the consequences of long-term irregularity, and she was concerned about his living conditions. 'He tells me, "Mum, I sleep under a bridge" [...] I tell him to go to the [Somali] embassy and surrender himself.' Sometimes, she sends money to him, 'Fifty dollars, thirty or one hundred dollars... In the evenings, I ask myself, "Look, you are having your dinner, but he is starving out there." It touches you deeply.' (Interview, 23 March 2019). In addition to the emotional consequences of migration, the son draws on the family's meagre financial resources for his survival in Europe.

These cases illustrate that left-behind families face both financial and non-financial material insecurities. Economic insecurity rises when families lose their properties and other assets, when they fail to receive expected remittances from migrants, when they lose the potential contribution of the migrant had he or she stayed in Somalia, and when they send financial contributions to their migrant family members in Europe. Non-financial material insecurities, including lack of housing and access to education, primarily arise as consequences of financial insecurities. These are, directly and indirectly, related to irregular migration and prolonged separation from family members in Europe.

### 7.3.4 *Social Insecurities*

Habboon, a 20-year-old single woman, was living with her father, who was suffering from chronic heart disease, and three younger siblings. Habboon had been responsible for the household chores since her mother migrated to Europe in 2015. According to Habboon, her father's illness and the family's economic challenges had prompted her mother's decision to migrate. Although they live in their own house and are supported financially by Habboon's maternal aunts, the family faces financial hardships. Habboon also noted that their life is full of stress and sadness due to her mother's absence. However, Habboon's main concern was that her mother's prolonged separation had disrupted family roles, with Habboon now fulfilling her mother's role in the household. 'My father's illness is more of a burden on me than other household chores', she explained. 'When I see Dad, I do feel my mother's absence. Had she stayed, she would have helped him.' She continued:

It is my responsibility to raise [my siblings] well so they will be responsible people in the future. [...] I help them to succeed in education, putting my schooling aside and cooking for them, making sure they are on the school bus in the morning. I prepare lunch for them and help them eat after their return from school at noon. (Interview, 5 April 2019)

Habboon also mentioned that these changes had obstructed her own ambition for higher education. Thus, her mother's absence worsened the family's material and mental insecurities and generated social insecurities in the family's everyday life.

Like parental absence, spousal absence also alters roles and responsibilities within the extended family. Hani is a mother of two in her late 20s whose husband was in Europe without a residence permit. Before he departed in 2015, he and his mother were responsible for running the household, including providing an income for the family. After Hani's husband left, his mother assumed that role. However, in order to provide for the family and pay the heavy debt she accrued for her son's release from the hands of magafe, Hani's mother-in-law had moved to a rural area and established a small grocery for nomad shoppers. Now, it was Hani's responsibility to run the family, including serving as the primary caretaker of her ailing father-in-law and her two kids.

Before, when [my husband] was around, he was the head of the family. Whether he finds [a source of income] or not, it was his responsibility! After he left, his mother assumed the responsibility of providing for the family's needs. Now he is not here, and his mother moved to a rural area, and being head of the household is my role. In addition to that, I am the caretaker of his sick father. It is a big burden on me! (Interview, 7 April 2019)

Younger siblings have to take on additional family responsibilities due to their older siblings' migration, absence and lack of status in their destination countries. In some cases, the material insecurity of the family transforms the social role of young women, who become financial providers. Cosob, a young female university graduate, had taken on several gigs, including part-time cleaning, to help her family survive (Interview, 4 April 2019).

Hilowle explained that his wife and young daughter's absence due to migration had affected his social status as a father and husband in several ways. Hilowle was

not working, and his wife was unable to send him remittances. According to tradition, husbands are expected to support their wives materially, rather than hoping their wives will provide for them. Thus, by mentioning that his wife was not helping him, Hilowle was deviating from his traditional role as husband and father. However, in post-civil war Somali society, women are the sole providers in many families where husbands are unable (or in some cases, unwilling) to provide for their families (El-Bushra & Gardner, 2016).

Prolonged separation from his wife and daughter had also affected Hilowle's relationship with his daughter:

You know, for this small child, when you are with her, wake up beside her, hug her and play with her, it is only then that she can feel that you are different for her than others. [...] The role of fatherhood is absent. (Interview, 5 April 2019)

Hilowle also explained that his wife's absence had contributed his downgraded status within his extended family and the larger society. He noted that he had been living a recently established family life with his wife before her migration. Now, he said, 'I have moved back into my parents' house [...] I went back to the life of singlehood.' Returning to 'singlehood' in his father's house meant downward social mobility: 'You know, after you have established your separate household, to leave from the top and return down is a powerful downgrading, and I felt it!' He noted that having one's own family gives respectability in the eyes of others: 'You are a person with social standing! And you are counted on.' Now, however, 'You are back to the youthhood context, nobody is asking you anything. That creates a problem' (Interview, 5 April 2019). In Somali society, both age and establishing one's own family are sources of social status (Kapteijns, 1994). In fact, the inability to materially contribute to one's family and kin, and the associated loss of social status, respect and trust, is considered a factor pushing young Somali men into irregular migration (Ali, 2016).

Prolonged separation further hampers the stability of the family in several ways, including creating conflict and misunderstandings. Hilowle felt that his relationship with his wife had become strained and noted that virtual communications, such as WhatsApp calls, are no substitute for physical proximity and face-to-face discussions. He also stated that traditional means of conflict resolution, such as family mediation, cannot be used due to the spatial separation. Sometimes it was even difficult for him to find a way to apologize to his wife: 'She just turns off her phone' (Interview, 5 April 2019).

Long-term forced separation may even destroy families. Sagal, a 22-year-old mother of two, complained that her husband, who was living without a residence permit in Europe, had abandoned her and their two children. She attributed this to the geographical distance between them and felt that it was Europe in particular that made him abandon them. She highlighted that before his migration to Europe, he had always called and been concerned about them when travelling within Somalia (Interview, 8 April 2019). Another interviewee, Saado, a 20-year-old mother of two, wanted to divorce her husband in Europe because she did not want to bear the emotional consequences of spatial and temporal separation. Unlike Sagal's husband,

Saado's husband called her, occasionally sent money and was keen to maintain their marital relationship. When I asked why she wanted to divorce him, she said: 'He has been away a long time, and the two countries we are in are far away from each other.' She felt that he could no longer live up to his promise to support her and her two children, and that his failure to provide for her financially was the main challenge they faced (Interview, 23 March 2019).

In addition to creating emotional, health-related and material insecurities, migration and prolonged family separation shape social roles, negatively affect social status and generate additional obligations for left-behind family members. They also affect the family's harmony and stability, and may even lead to the dissolution of the family.

## 7.4 Conclusion

This chapter has explored the impact of prolonged family separation on left-behind family members' experiences of everyday security. The findings show that tahrrib and irregular status in Europe have severe repercussions on left-behind families in Somalia. Tahrrib often takes a long time, up to 3 years or even longer. The migrant's journey is very painful and has long-term implications on everyday securities of left-behind families. Further, because of their lack of access to entitlements in their destination countries, migrants live a precarious life in Europe. In addition, they are unable to live up to their obligations towards their left-behind families, who are devastated by their decision to migrate.

My findings have shown that forced family separation affects the everyday security of families in Somalia through four broad dimensions of family life, namely emotional, health-related, material and social dimensions. As Stewart (2005) has observed, everyday (in)security is multidimensional and also cumulative, with the presence of one insecurity often increasing the likelihood of others. For instance, migration may generate serious material insecurities, and these material insecurities may further increase social insecurities.

The findings also indicate that material security, whether provided by the migrant or the left-behind family, may contribute positively to other dimensions of the family's everyday security but is no substitute for physical proximity. These findings corroborate other research indicating that 'the joys of physical contact, the emotional security of physical presence, and the familiarity allowed by physical proximity are still denied transnational family members' (Parreñas, 2005, p. 333).

This chapter brought to light that migration policies in Europe can have serious implications for vulnerable families in sending countries. Most interlocutors emphasized the consequences of irregular migration and the absence of their family members, primarily associating their everyday insecurity with difficult migration routes and the lack of opportunities for their loved ones in Europe. There are clear signs that these factors primarily affect women and youth, but in different ways. Many of those who decide to migrate are young men, including a significant number of

underage boys. Among left-behind women, divorced or widowed mothers in particular are adversely affected by the consequences of irregular migration.

**Acknowledgments** I wish to thank Anisa Said and Mohamed Mohamud of Burao University, Farhiya Abdi and Abshir Mohamed of East Africa University, Yasmin Mohamed and Mohamed Mubarak of Hargeisa University, and Roda Ismail and Mustafe Adam of Puntland State University, who were instrumental in the data collection process.

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**Part III**  
**Affective Responses and Waiting for**  
**Family Reunification**

# Chapter 8

## Mapping Conditions of (In)security for ‘Dreamer Parents’ at the Mexico-US Border



Angel Iglesias Ortiz and Johanna Hiitola

### 8.1 Introduction

This chapter investigates the everyday securities of Mexican deportees who have experienced family separation as a result of being deported from the United States to Tijuana, Mexico. Tijuana, one of the largest border cities in Mexico, hosts an increasing number of deported persons and is a common place for migrants to cross into the United States. We concentrate on mapping the conditions that deportees in Tijuana endure and the impact of family separation after deportation.

A considerable amount of scholarship addresses transnational family relationships and maintaining these relations across borders (e.g., Baldassar & Merla, 2014; Al-Sharmani et al., 2019). Many of these studies focus on labour migration, but some empirical cases also deal with forced migration (e.g., Tiilikainen, 2020). The literature often concentrates on care relationships (e.g., McKay, 2006; Parreñas, 2005). Melander et al. (2020, p. 104) speak about gendered care triangles and point out that migrant women perform mothering even across borders, whereas migrating fathers are more absent in their children’s lives (see also Al-Ali, 2002). However, gendered patterns in transnational care also mean that fathers take up new roles and transmit the idea of migrant work as a life choice to their children, as Telve (2020) shows when analysing the generations of Estonian men who have migrated to Finland for work.

In our chapter we analyse both women’s and men’s experiences after being deported from the United States to Mexico and separated from at least some of their children, who remain in the United States. Our interest is in how these ‘dreamer

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parents' arrange their lives while separated from their family and perform their family life across borders. We use the term 'dreamer parents' because their children, commonly referred to as 'dreamers', arrived with them in the United States without residence permits, but have later been given the possibility to remain in the country under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) policy (Schreiber, 2018, p. 24). Some of our data also concerns individuals who were brought to the United States by their migrant parents as small children but were later deported to Mexico, while their own children and spouses (with different residency statuses) have remained in the United States.

To understand the years during which many of our informants lived under the threat of deportation and the uncertain situation they still endure while separated from their families, we have turned to the academic discussion on *deportability*, which has brought an understanding of the vulnerabilities embodied by migrants who are under the continuous threat of deportation (De Genova, 2002; Talavera et al., 2010; Willen, 2007). Deportability may also continue for many of our informants, who plan to go back to the United States to reunite with their families. Deportability can 'last for years, and even if a person is granted residence, deportation may still be possible in the future' (Horsti & Pirkkalainen, 2021, para. 3). Some analyses of everyday life post-deportation (Albicker & Velasco, 2016; Talavera et al., 2010; Velasco & Albicker, 2013) point out that the adverse effects of deportability are tied to an ongoing temporality rather than sudden trauma. However, scholars have also stressed that deportability is not the only defining aspect of a person's life; instead, the fabric of everyday life may contain many different supportive elements as well (Khosravi, 2018; Talavera et al., 2010). Nonetheless, scholarship on the psychological impacts of family separation reveals serious mental health outcomes for migrants (e.g., Rousseau et al., 2004; Nickerson et al., 2010) and suggests that the experience can be traumatic (Gulbas et al., 2015; Ruiz Marrujo, 2014; Ojeda et al., 2020).

The embodied effects of deportability, by which we mean the whole process of deportation and the years spent in limbo before being able to rebuild one's life, affect a person's sense of security. The concept of *everyday (in)security* helps to unpack this temporal precarity. Everyday in(security) sheds light on how groups of people who are targets of security projects are themselves often living in vulnerable situations that are worsened through popular discourses of danger and threat (Bondi, 2014; Crawford & Hutchinson, 2015; Philo, 2014; Waite et al., 2014). Feminist scholars have investigated such 'geopolitics of fear' from the perspective of everyday life and shown that certain discourses, such as the threat of terrorism, are used globally to legitimize more punitive and restricted societies (Butler, 2006; Pain & Smith, 2008).

The concept of everyday (in)security also includes the lived realities of one's sense of security while experiencing different types of bordering and securitizing processes related to the whole process of deportation. Everyday security can be understood as one's attempt to create one's own sense of security (Leinonen & Pellander, 2020). In our study, the dual condition of (in)security refers, on the one

hand, to the emotional and physical consequences of deportation, and on the other hand, to other possible outcomes of a sudden life change.

The chapter is structured as follows: The initial concern is to contextualize the particular conditions in Tijuana and the influence of this social context on deportees’ (in)security. Next, we describe our methodological frame and the three themes that emerged from our analysis. In the discussion, we engage with the findings about deportees’ conditions of (in)security and experiences of family separation and parenthood across borders.

## 8.2 Tijuana as a Destination City for Deportees

Tijuana has historically been a city where migratory movements and deportations meet, and this history affects the current conditions for deportees. Tijuana’s role as a border city has changed noticeably since 2005. Historically, Tijuana has been one of the cities in which persons aiming to cross the border from Mexico to the United States gathered. Nowadays, Tijuana receives more deportees from the United States than any other Mexican city (Albicker & Velasco, 2016).

Economic motivations were the foremost reason for emigration from Mexico and other countries of Latin America in the 1980s and 1990s. More recently, however, the threat of crime-related violence is the main cause of displacement and migration within the American continent (Ramos Vidal, 2018, pp. 302–304). Migratory movement through Tijuana cannot easily be divided into the categories of ‘forced’ and ‘voluntary’ migration. Instead, people leave their countries of origin for a variety of pressing reasons. As scholars have suggested, the categories of forced and voluntary migration are often overlapping and hard to separate (Erdal & Oeppen, 2018). The phenomena studied in this chapter would perhaps be best described as non-privileged migration, falling under several different categories and with the reasons for leaving varying. Gibney (2013) has pointed out that deportation can be considered a form of forced migration, due to the coercive logic behind it.

As part of the immigration control power of states, deportation is used to remove individuals who lack residence permits, overstay their visas or have been refused asylum. Deportation is also imposed in the case of violations of criminal law or as the result of a judgement by state officials that certain non-citizens represent a security or criminal threat (Gibney, 2013, p. 119). The majority of Mexican deportees from the United States are sent to the border city closest to the immigration detention centre where they were held. U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) does not consider migrants’ geographical origins when carrying out deportations. For nationals of other countries, ICE generally arranges charter flights to the country of origin, though some deportees from Central American countries are also deported to Mexican border cities.

The process of deportation generally results in the person being issued a prohibition on entering the United States at any port of entry. The prohibition can be permanent or last 3–10 years (United States Citizenship and Immigration Services,

2019). In the case of Mexican deportees, the prohibition on entering the United States is one of the main reasons for staying in border cities. First, the decision to stay is often motivated by wanting to be in contact with one's family. When staying in a border city, one's family can visit if they have the documents required for travelling to Mexico. Second, despite the risks, many deportees will try to cross back into the United States. If the individual is arrested again in the United States, they can be charged with a federal offense and face imprisonment (United States Department of Justice, 2008).

The situation in Tijuana includes endemic social exclusion, poverty, violence and high levels of criminality, as well as the constant arrival of migrants from different countries and the increasing number of deportations from the United States. This context is also a breeding ground for structural violence (Galtung, 1996) comprised of oppressive conditions and policies that are systematically used to limit migrants' possibilities for agency. This structural violence is reproduced across the social spectrum through daily practices in which social exclusion, discrimination and other violent situations affect the majority of the population in the city.

Governmental support is limited for Mexican deportees living in Tijuana, and deportees often have minimal opportunities for reintegration after being deported (Velasco & Albicker, 2013). The complexities of Tijuana's social context can be seen in the practical difficulties that deportees endure in their everyday lives. While some deportees are in regular contact with and receive economic support from family members in the United States, many others lose contact with their families and lack any kind of support. There are many reasons for losing touch with one's family: Economic and residency-related adversities may make it hard for family members in the United States to maintain contact. If the deportation was the result of committing crimes in the United States, the family might not want to be in contact with the deported family member. Sometimes deportees lose knowledge of their families' whereabouts after deportation.

Consequently, activists and shelters are often the only help deported migrants have in finding work and a place to stay. However, the difference in wage levels between the United States and Tijuana may be so large that it directly affects the deportee's willingness to start a new life in Mexico. In addition, some deportees are deeply distressed, which makes it difficult to start building a life after deportation. Loneliness and family separation play a big role in deportees' everyday lives at the Mexico-US border. The first years after deportation can be spent in a state of shock, and deportees have to start building a new life amidst the confusion. In words of one Mexican deported woman: 'You cannot believe the separation is actually happening. I ended up in Mexico having to start from scratch' (Mary, 2018).

The current situation in Mexico-US border cities involves the daily entanglement of migration, deportation and family separation (see Chap. 2). This was seen with the arrival of thousands of persons, mostly from Central America, at the border in 2018 and 2019. This migration was called 'migrant caravans' in the media. One critical issue was that minors were travelling in the caravans without other members of their family. Another issue was that members of the 'caravans' crossed the border and applied for political asylum in the United States. The response of the US

immigration authorities was to negotiate a deal with Mexico to allow asylum seekers to be deported to Mexico while their asylum petitions were processed. This agreement influenced all deportees in a negative way. Now they could not await their proceedings at US detention centres, and dozens of families were separated. As of the end of 2020, more than 500 migrant children remain in the United States, while the location of their parents is unknown because they were arrested and placed in different detention centres (Ainsley & Soboroff, 2020). Some parents who arrived with the ‘caravans’ have been deported to Mexican border cities, and others to Central America. This situation exemplifies the consequences of US immigration and border policies and their effects on personal and social contexts.

### 8.3 Methods and Data

Our data and research material builds on Angel Iglesias Ortiz’s fieldwork in Tijuana, which took place over 2 months in autumn 2020,<sup>1</sup> as well as on the digital archive *Humanizando la Deportación* (Humanizing Deportation), which is a large digital video storytelling project launched by the University of California, Davis. During ethnographic fieldwork investigating the everyday at the border, Iglesias Ortiz collected three interviews concerning deportees’ family separation. The interviews were conducted in Spanish with an activist, ‘Elena’, from *Madres y Familias Deportadas en Acción* (Deported Mothers and Families in Action), and with two Mexican deportees, ‘Lucy’ and ‘Ray’. We use pseudonyms for all three interviewees. The interviewee from *Madres y Familias Deportadas en Acción* consented to us revealing her name, as she was interviewed as a representative of her organization. However, since her real name is not of essence in our analysis, we have decided to use a pseudonym for her as well, though we have kept the real organization name. The limited number of direct interviews included in the data is due to the COVID-19 restrictions in place in Tijuana during Iglesias Ortiz’s fieldwork and is one limitation of our dataset.

Our second source of data, the *Humanizando la Deportación* (n.d.) archive, contains over 300 digital stories by 250 community storytellers, all of whom are deported migrants. The video stories are narrated mostly by adult women and men who share their experiences regarding deportation and their personal and family situations. The majority of stories are from Mexican deportees, but some are from people from Central or South America. The project staff has arranged the stories thematically to help researchers, journalists and other activists.

For this chapter, we carried out a thematic analysis of 35 of the 70 stories categorized by *Humanizando la Deportación* under the topic of ‘family separation’. The stories were selected based on their informative value: we analysed every story with

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<sup>1</sup>The fieldwork is part of Iglesias Ortiz’s post-doctoral project *Everyday Entanglements of Violence and Peace at the Limit(s)*. The author would like to thank Kone Foundation for its financial support of this fieldwork.

a somewhat coherent narrative about family separation and dreamer parents. One story is from a Peruvian man, and the rest are from Mexican deportees (19 females and 16 males). Some stories are narrated in English or have subtitles in English. Others are completely in Spanish, and in those cases, Iglesias Ortiz has translated the quotes used in this chapter.

We approached the 35 stories with an eye to the general and particular situations that parent deportees endure regarding family separation as well as the aspect of (in)security. We developed our analytical frame by identifying three central themes that illuminate the different ways dreamer parents endure insecurity and arrange or fail to arrange their everyday lives. The themes are: (in)security and precarity after arrival in Tijuana, the liminal state post-deportation and rebuilding a life. The first theme has a distinct temporal element, as it describes a stage that many storytellers and informants experienced immediately after deportation to Tijuana. The second and third themes are not temporally arranged. Instead, they describe different ways in which our informants were either stuck in a liminal state or were able to build a new life and rearrange their family lives amid adversity.

#### **8.4 (In)security and Precarity During the Deportation Process and After Arrival in Tijuana**

Our analysis starts with mapping the general conditions of the deportation process to understand its consequences on deportees. Here we focus on the constant insecurity that deportees face and the range of difficult conditions that appear in deportees' everyday lives.

A recurrent theme in our interview data and in the narrations of the *Humanizando la Deportación* project is the mistreatment and abuse experienced by deportees in detention centres. Deportees feel that they were treated like criminals during the process of being arrested, processed and deported to Mexico. The length of detention depends on the legal process and how quickly the immigration judge issues the removal order. One specific concern during detention is that many deportees have no opportunity to contact their families, who are understandably very worried that their loved one has just disappeared. Our interviewee Lucy was deported to Tijuana in 2017 after living more than 20 years in the United States. She describes how her attempts to contact her daughter were denied by the staff at the detention centre:

There are phones for the deportees, but they are broken. I spent hours and hours knocking on the door of the cell to get my call. I wanted to know something about my daughter. They never answered my request. They [the immigration authorities] do not care about our children; they don't care if our children are taken into custody or if they disappear.

As Lucy's experience reveals, being detained and then deported is often traumatic and worsens the precarious condition of deportees. The separation from and lack of contact with family members increases one's precariousness even before arrival in Tijuana. In fact, the emotional consequences of family separation is another relevant



theme repeated in the testimonies we analysed. The whole process of deportation has a traumatic impact on all members of the family. For instance, if the arrest by ICE agents is made in the family's home, children are exposed to the traumatic experience of seeing their parents arrested and removed from their house (Ruiz Marrujo, 2014, p. 397).

In our data, several of the deportees, mostly women who were single parents with small children, were unable to contact their families during their detention and after deportation. Family separation affects the overall wellbeing of members of the family. For example, the impacts of deportation on minor children include sadness, depression, loneliness and isolation, among others (Ojeda et al., 2020, p. 8). Our interviewee Lucy remembers the first Christmas after her deportation as the worst ever. She and her 6-year-old daughter were in Mexico, separated from her other children. She says: 'We were so sad that we went to sleep early. We missed my sons so much we could not stop crying.' Lucy was deported alone but decided that her daughter could not live in the United States with her two sons who have American citizenship. Lucy also has a third son, who is a dreamer. His residency in the United States is based on DACA. It was very common in our data that members of the same family had different residency statuses in the United States.

Lucy's story exemplifies how family separation is a permanent aspect of the everyday life of deportees. The emotional aspect of (in)security is directly related to the experience of family separation and the impossibilities of parenting under these adverse conditions. As scholars have noted, children in the United States whose parents are deported also experience negative emotional consequences (González & Morgan Consoli, 2012).

The emotional distress of deportees overlaps with their material needs in the place they have been deported to. The case of Gerardo shows the daily difficulties and significance of family separation in the early stages after deportation:

I was deported to the city of Tijuana, I lived in the United States for 12 years. During that time, I met my wife, with whom I had two daughters. Those daughters were left without a father. [...] They are young and miss their father, who is not around to be with them. [...]

The first few days [in Tijuana] were very stressful since I knew no one, I had nowhere to stay, I didn't have a bed, any food, I had to live on the streets. I also couldn't communicate with my family because I didn't have the phone number I needed to reach them. (Sánchez Pérez, 2017)

In one of our interviews, Elena, the founder of the organization *Madres y Familias Deportadas en Acción*, states that the first hours and days after deportation are critical. Elena's organization assists migrants and deportees by providing clothing and arranging activities and therapy. She explains that 'a deportee is in shock and remains in a state of denial for some time.' It takes time for deportees to realize and accept that their previous life in the United States is gone and that they may even lose contact with their family. According to Elena, the security of a deported person depends on whether they receive economic and emotional support. Additionally, Elena finds the ban on re-entering the United States to be the first emotional burden on parents. According to her, the first days after deportation is when reality strikes and the deported person realizes that crossing the border is dangerous and the

probability of success is low. Our interviews and the *Humanizando la Deportación* stories show that the majority of deportees remain in Tijuana, aiming to keep in contact with their relatives in the United States. Some have attempted to cross again, unsuccessfully.

Observations of the everyday in Tijuana during fieldwork revealed an institutional and governmental void, which increases insecurity and precarious conditions for deportees. While deportees' initial basic needs of a place to stay, food and clothing are often provided for by local activists, NGOs and shelters, all deportees face a risk of becoming homeless. In Tijuana, up to 91% of homeless persons arrived in the city as deportees, so this risk is very tangible and real (Velasco & Albicker, 2013, pp. 8–9). According to a local newspaper, about 3000 homeless persons were living in Tijuana's northern and central areas in 2018 (Torres, 2018). Furthermore, 69% of homeless persons living in this area of the city are regular consumers of narcotics (Velasco & Albicker, 2013, p. 11). In the testimonies we analysed, not having regular contact with one's family increased the likelihood of addiction and homelessness.

Being a *persona deportada* (deportee) also carries a social stigma that may cause further difficulties for starting a new life in Tijuana. Elena explains that 'the moment they step outside the detention office, their odyssey starts. They start walking on the streets and they are easily recognized because of the detention outfit, which is a white t-shirt, grey pants and sweatshirt.' Wearing the 'deportation outfit' brings the first difficulties for the deportee. They are easily recognized by members of criminal organizations, who may approach and attempt to recruit them. If the deportee speaks English, she or he will be more valuable for the criminal organization to smuggle across the border. Elena has witnessed the ways in which newly arrived deportees are socially rejected and framed as 'thugs'. In this way, deportees are subject to a double rejection as 'unwanted persons' in both the United States and in the Mexican cities to which they are deported. This rejection is grounded in the discourses of who represents a threat to society and who is seen as a valuable member (Bondi, 2014; Crawford & Hutchinson, 2015; Philo, 2014). Expressions of rejection are part of deportability and the structural adversities of poverty and social exclusion.

Precarity in the everyday of deported parents appears in different forms. They endure poor conditions due to the interrelation of social, personal and institutional adversities. Socially, they face stigmatization, discrimination and criminalization. On the personal level, deportees carry the emotional instability of family separation and may also grieve the loss of their previous life. This leads to a state of mental distress, which further complicates their efforts to build a new life in Tijuana. The more severe aspects of precarity include homelessness and addictions. In the following section, we discuss how the (in)securities experienced by deportees have a transitional aspect.

## 8.5 The Liminal State for Deportees

Deportation represents the end of one stage in a person’s life, but the transition to the following stage involves uncertainty and a sense of incompleteness. Various facets of the daily life of deportees are connected to a liminal state that may continue for years or even become permanent. This liminal state for deportees is characterized by uncertainty in their personal and legal status. The following extract from the poem ‘Somebody, Anybody, Help Me’, written by Felix Peralta (2018) and performed as part of his narrative for the *Humanizando la Deportación* project, exemplifies this personal uncertainty:

I am still the same, lost in a different world, so close but so far away. Maybe if I close my eyes, it will all disappear; No, still here, great big wall. Please, somebody, help. Anybody, help me.

Felix’s narrative illustrates an experience of disconnection with previous and current experiences in deportees’ everyday life. This quote shows intersecting temporalities and a complex personal relation with the context in the period after deportation.

Temporality in this liminal state is influenced by the administrative and legal status of deportees and their families. A frequent situation for Mexican deportees who had lived in the United States for many years or who had been taken to the United States as children is that they lack the necessary personal documentation in the Mexican institutional context. It is also common to have lost contact with family members in Mexico, and many deportees do not know anyone in the country. The lack of material and emotional support increases feelings of uncertainty, and the possibilities for re-establishing a sense of stability diminish. In her story ‘Broken Families’, Mary (2018) exemplifies how isolation develops into an identity crisis and sense of not belonging:

I did try to leave again but they caught me. We ran at night, we jumped the fence, we walked in the desert [...] I was detained for 30 days, and during that time, I realized that I did not want to return [...] to the United States illegally. [...]

[People don’t understand] you chose to leave [Mexico] and didn’t want to be here. You end up losing your close family [...] You feel like a stranger with them and you end up not belonging anywhere.

The quote shows that deportees experience rejection and difficulties in adapting to their new reality. Many deportees do not feel comfortable in Mexico, and they do not identify as Mexicans. They become outsiders in both countries at once. These sorts of experiences prevent or delay transitioning out of the liminal state.

Being reunited with one’s family would contribute to a positive transition to overcome this liminal state. However, the prospect of being reunited depends on the ability of the deported person to enter the United States or the possibility of the family living in Mexico permanently. However, in our interviews and the video stories we analysed, this was not possible for anyone. Deportees preferred their families to stay in the United States due to the economic conditions in Mexico. Thus, families remain separated.

In the cases in which family members have US citizenship or residence permits, family members can go to Mexico to visit their deported relative. These families, although separated, may be able to build their lives, as they are able to keep in regular physical contact. However, there are many cases in which family members lack residency in the United States and cannot leave the country. These instances represent a total separation.

The impossibility of visiting deported parents results in contradictory options for escaping the liminal state. As we explained before, the decision of deportees to stay in Tijuana or another border city is also directly linked to the inability of their families to travel to Mexico. These deportees stay close to the border so they can try to cross again. Elena explains that she has seen this situation dozens of times: ‘Many of them will try to cross back. Many of them have been caught and deported four, five, or more times.’ Every time a person is arrested and deported, their criminal record grows and the resulting penalty increases. Deportees are warned by US immigration authorities that they will be prosecuted with federal charges if they are arrested again in the United States. The chances of crossing the border without being arrested and deported again are very slim.

The dream of going back to the United States and reuniting with one’s family is often just a dream. For example, our interviewee Lucy was given a 10-year prohibition on re-entering the United States, but her legal process is still unresolved because she argues that her former lawyer’s carelessness contributed to her deportation. She has appealed the court’s decision ‘more than two times, but all have been rejected.’ At the time of the interview, she had been waiting for the results of her last appeal for 6 months. Lucy acknowledges that her appeal has slight chances of being successful, and she does not know when the final decision will be taken. The options for returning to the United States even after the ban period are limited. Deportees must apply for a waiver to get permission to return to the United States and then apply for an immigrant visa supported by an employer or a family member. Elena and Lucy explain that having the resources to go through this legal process and to pay for an immigration attorney is difficult. In cases like Lucy’s, the liminal state continues because the prospect of permanent family reunion depends on the opportunity to go back to the United States.

While some stay in a liminal state for years, others decide to settle in Tijuana. The story of Luis describes his whole process after deportation, including his transition out of the liminal state:

They separated me from my family and I arrived in Tijuana despondent [...] The event leading to my deportation brought me to detention centers [...] They have you handcuffed by the hands, by your feet [...] After my arrival here in Tijuana, I made three attempts, I wanted to cross. [...] [In the detention centre] they treated me very poorly, it was this reality that made me decide to stay here in Tijuana. I got into drugs, I lived in the canal [...].

I want to send a message to all my comrades, to deportees, I know that it’s difficult, it’s hard being deported because they separate you from your family, from the people that one loves so much, but I want to send them a message: that they have passion in order to move forward. (García García, 2017)

The story of Luis presents the dire circumstances that deportees face in Tijuana, but it also conveys the possibility for a transition. The harsh treatment during detention in the United States resulted in his decision to stay in Tijuana. Luis's liminal state included three failed attempts to cross back into the United States and a prolonged period of insecurity because of the negative personal and contextual conditions in Tijuana. Luis was homeless and used drugs. Nonetheless, he was able to overcome his precarious condition, eventually establishing himself as a street vendor and getting back in contact with his family.

The liminal state we have discussed in this section is the period, often prolonged or even permanent, in which the deportee does not know how to go on with his or her life. It is a stage in which practical issues and legal processes remain unfinished, and thus uncertainty continues to affect deportees' everyday life. In terms of temporality, the liminal state can also be a continuation of deportation, from which a deportee is unable to transition. This state appears as a by-product of deportability. Considering the number of homeless deportees in Tijuana, there is the potential for a permanent liminal state in which the insecurities of life after deportation affect the person on a daily basis. The ability of deportees to achieve stability in Tijuana is closely connected to whether they can live a transnational life with family visits across borders.

Transcending this liminal state depends on having legal, economic and social resources and emotional support. The prospects of reunification play a significant role in the liminality at this stage of transition. As seen through the stories presented, resources and support may not be available for all deportees, not only in Tijuana but in Mexican border cities in general. Nonetheless, there are also personal stories that show that the transition to a new life is possible.

## 8.6 Enduring Pain and Rebuilding Life

The data collected during fieldwork and the narrations in the *Humanizando la Deportación* project also include stories of successful reintegration and personal development. Some stories show a mixture of being stuck in a liminal state and elements of moving on and finding meaning. Nonetheless, the stories demonstrate that it is possible to create everyday security in the complex social context in Tijuana. Describing this possibility, however, does not mean that the adverse effects of deportation should be overlooked. Often, even positive life changes are judged in comparison to an even more difficult life as an undocumented migrant in the United States.

One of the interviewees, Ray, a 64-year-old taxi driver, described how his life had improved after deportation. In Tijuana he was able to make a living and had even saved money and bought a house. 'They did me a favour when they deported me. We are Mexicans, and we will never have a better life than in our country', Ray says. One of the key aspects of his improved life is that his children are adults and US citizens, so they can visit him. Thus, he does not have to endure family

separation, but can instead concentrate on building his own life in Mexico. When asked about the everyday violence in Tijuana, Ray says: ‘Yes, there are bad things, but I do not have anything to do with it.’ His everyday security is intertwined with better possibilities to earn a living, and transnational family life suits Ray’s life situation well.

Of the narrators of the 35 digital stories, seven mention that their life had either improved, or that they had developed ways to endure the loss of home and family. All but one of these narrations were by men, and many of them had been involved with criminal activities in the United States or committed an offence and served a prison sentence, after which they were deported. For these men deportation was an opportunity to change the direction of their life. The men who had been living in the United States since childhood were able to utilize their language skills in the job market in Tijuana, find employment and escape a life of crime in their new location. Miguel describes his path:

We use our English to our advantage. We put it in use out here. It’s a great thing. [...] I saw this opportunity out here and started to work at a call center. Second chance, you know, to start over. (Ángel, 2018)

Miguel’s story, like all the stories that were selected for analysis, also includes separation. Miguel was separated from his son, who was left in the United States when he was deported. However, Miguel does not consider separation as the main aspect of his everyday life. He narrates how his life has changed for the better since deportation. This may reflect gendered patterns of care, but also the difficulties racialized men encounter in the United States, especially if they live as undocumented migrants without supporting legal and social structures.

For women, deportation and the resulting separation from their children seemed in all cases to have been emotionally almost too much to bear. For single women, the insecurities of the everyday in Tijuana were especially heightened. Nonetheless, some women also found new meaning for their lives after deportation. Many women were engaged in activism and helping other women in similar situations. For example, one of the interviewees, Lucy, collaborates with *Madres y Familias Deportadas en Acción*. Mothers in the digital stories also told about their activism, including Yolanda, who started the group:

I asked the Lord to give me a signal telling me what to do with my life. What to do to endure this great pain. And that’s how I came to start this group, *Madres Deportadas*. Women of different nationalities started showing up. Even women from Europe were in our group. Central Americans, the majority Mexicans. The group started as a support group, offering comprehension, esteem. Over time we grew. We realized that our love for our children is so big that it was raising our expectations, expectations that we’d see them again. That we’d return again legally, thinking that they are our motivation, our strength, the reason why we get up every day despite living a daily mourning, a constant interminable loss. [...] The *Dreamer Moms* group is really a blessing, a gift from God. We’ve learned to be resilient, to be strong, to be brave. (Varona, 2018)

Yolanda’s story is an example of a different kind of future than that of economic success, which some of the deported men described. Like many other deported women, Yolanda has found new meaning for her life in the activism of the *Madres*

Deportadas. As she describes, the group has offered her a medium for transferring her difficulties into action. Yolanda's security is thus intertwined with the possibility of sharing her grief, as well as in agency to act for policy change.

Our analysis has revealed many of the horrifying circumstances brought on by deportation and family separation. Nonetheless, the consequences are not the same for everyone. The men whose situations we discussed in this section have in fact been able to turn their lives around and were living a secure life after deportation. This phenomenon was gendered, however, and our data did not show that women had similar life paths after deportation. Instead, they struggled to find meaning and security for their lives in Tijuana. However, some women sought out activism to find a purpose and to share their pain with other mothers in similar situations. The analysis in this section shows that the consequences of deportation vary, and deportees are sometimes able to produce securities even in the midst of greatly insecure circumstances.

## 8.7 Conclusion

For thousands of people in Tijuana, the triad of migration, deportation and family separation has become their daily reality. In our chapter, we have explored this phenomenon through the concepts of everyday (in)security and deportability. We found that deportees embody an experience of (in)security that is dependent on a multiplicity of structural and personal factors. As has been discussed by deportability scholars such as Talavera et al. (2010), we too found that the everyday life of deportees contains combined aspects of precarity, liminality and also the potential for building a new life. We pointed out the precarious conditions affecting deportees after deportation and found that the effects of deportation on informants' relationships with their families were gendered. Many deportees faced permanent separation, and men who were unable to see their families were particularly susceptible to addiction and extreme precarity. However, men were sometimes able to 'start over' after deportation, whereas none of the women in our data described being satisfied with their new lives after deportation. Women suffered from anxiety and other mental health problems, but were sometimes able to find meaning and belonging through activism.

In the beginning of this chapter, we explained how one's sense of (in)security is connected to the processes of inclusion and exclusion, which manifest in relation to who is presented as a threat to society and who is seen as a beneficial member of society. The figure of the deported migrant embodies a twofold sense of (in)security in the everyday: many of the informants in our study were seen as 'unwanted' in both of their countries of identification. In the United States they were presented as dangerous illegal immigrants, and in Mexico they were looked down upon and at risk of becoming outcasts from society. The concept of 'hyper-precarity' by Waite et al. (2014) describes well the state of these people and their families.

A secondary sense of insecurity develops after deportation due to the precarious conditions and severe risks surrounding the deportee. Unable to belong anywhere, deportees may wander the streets of Tijuana and sleep on the banks of the notorious canal with drug users and other homeless people. The majority of informants express that they were inflicted with permanent emotional wounds as a result of deportation and family separation. The situation of precarity in Tijuana is similar to the experiences of deportees of other countries (Golash-Boza & Navarro, 2018). In line with other studies on stigmatization after deportation (Golash-Boza, 2013), some deportees in Tijuana are stigmatized as a threat and framed as a social failure.

In contrast, following Leinonen and Pellander's (Leinonen & Pellander, 2020) argument about the possibility of achieving a sense of security, our analysis shows that despite the negative circumstances of deportation and its aftermath, the transitional process may develop into a stable life. For deported parents, the prospect of family reunification, or at least of having regular visits and permanent communication with their children and spouses, represents a possibility of achieving a sense of security and certainty. Some informants even found that deportation had turned their life around in a positive way. These people were, for example, able to find meaningful employment in Tijuana because of the resources they had from living in the United States. The change in their deportability was also significant: in Tijuana, they did not have to endure the constant fear of deportation, which had affected many during their lives in the United States, even during legal stays (Horsti & Pirkkalainen, 2021).

Deportees leave behind spouses, partners, children and other family members who have faced a traumatic family separation, unsettling many communities in the United States (Rubio-Hernandez & Ayón, 2016). For dreamer parents, the harsh consequences of deportation include personal experiences ranging from homelessness and emotional damage to remarkable stories of helping other disadvantaged people and fulfilling professional careers. However, the possibility of transition is not available for every deportee, as their social positions (such as lack of schooling) and social stigmatization may pose serious obstacles. It would be important to develop legislation, social awareness and everyday practices to increase the sense of security for deportees. This would offer the opportunity to feel a sense of dignity and make deportation and family separation more bearable.

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# Chapter 9

## Gendered Family Dynamics, Waiting and Mobilities Across Borders: Syrian Refugees Navigating Displacement in Jordan



Michelle Lokot

### 9.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on how Syrian refugees navigate everyday relationships across transnational borders based on ethnographic research in Jordan with Syrian women and men. It seeks to deepen the understanding of the lived experiences of refugees, drawing attention to how they navigate the state of displacement.

Leading refugee scholar Dawn Chatty (2010) critiques how refugees are depicted by humanitarian agencies and government actors, noting that the word *refugee* has come to refer to people ‘without homelands, torn loose from their culture’, who are seen ‘as an aberration to the way the world was meant to be organized’ and who therefore need ‘therapeutic intervention’ (p. 37). Refugees are often linked to narratives about ‘crisis and danger’ (Nyers, 2006, p. 4). They are also positioned by humanitarian agencies as ‘subjects who need to be rescued, protected, assisted, activated, controlled and reformed through humanitarian interventions’ (Olivius, 2016, p. 270). This relationship between humanitarian actors and refugees is often informed by ‘an unequal relationship between the one giving aid and the one being aided’ (Fassin, 2012, p. 193), making the lives of refugees potentially subject to the decisions of humanitarian actors.

Despite the limits placed on them by the humanitarian system, refugees may still be mobile. Exploring the everyday mobilities of refugees thus sheds light on daily experiences of life during displacement. Hyndman (2004) writes: ‘Mobility is an outcome of various economic, geopolitical, gendered, and racialized relations and is constitutive of people’s locations as social and political subjects’ (p. 169). Mobility, in contrast to immobility, has positive connotations (Bissell, 2007, p. 278) and is linked to modernity (Cresswell, 2010, p. 19). Mobility shapes and is shaped by power relations (Hyndman, 2004, p. 170), making it particularly interesting to

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M. Tiilikainen et al. (eds.), *Forced Migration and Separated Families*,

MISCOE Research Series, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-24974-7\\_9](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-24974-7_9)

feminist scholars (Cresswell & Uteng, 2008) who seek to understand the gendered underpinnings of ‘whose bodies belong where’ (Silvey, 2006, p. 70). Women may, for example, be positioned as belonging at home while men are active agents who leave the safety of home (Sheller, 2008, p. 258). Indeed, masculinity and mobility are often linked, which is evidenced by the perceived security threat presented by refugees on the move (Hyndman & Giles, 2011, p. 363). Mobility must be acceptable and apolitical to be a non-threat, otherwise these threats are best kept waiting ‘in place’ (Cresswell, 2006, p. 55).

As well as being tied to space, mobility is also connected to time (Peteet, 2017, p. 127). The analysis of time within refugee literature has often focused on ‘waiting’ given the nature of protracted refugee crises (Hyndman & Giles, 2011, pp. 361–363; Peteet, 2017, p. 177). Waiting is said to be key to the subaltern experience (Bayart, 2007, pp. 272–274), an indicator of having less power: those who wait are classified as lacking because of their position within hierarchies such as race, class and gender (Bourdieu, 2000; Schweizer, 2016). In contrast, those who force others to wait exercise power through ‘adjourning, deferring, delaying, raising false hopes, or, conversely, rushing, taking by surprise’ (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 228). Peteet (2017) notes that making refugees wait ‘infantilizes and subjugates’, reinforcing the fact that their time is less important and that the spaces they occupy do not belong to them (p. 177). During periods of waiting, there may be a sense that time is in surplus and needs to be used up, which Jeffrey (2010) refers to as ‘timepass’ (p. 471). Waiting, which is often framed in opposition to mobility, is often gendered feminine because of the precarity and vulnerability it is seen to represent (Hyndman & Giles, 2011). However, time continues to proceed even during the waiting of displacement (Brun, 2015, p. 34). The act of waiting itself may allow refugees to remain hopeful and even become active subjects (Brun, 2015, p. 33; Manjikian, 2010, pp. 53–55). This expands the idea of waiting beyond the dominant representation of being in ‘limbo’ (Kits, 2005) towards the idea that waiting may also represent a ‘liminal’ space (Brun & Fábos, 2015, p. 10) for new relationships and solidarity (Turner, 1964) and the use of new strategies (Brun, 2003, p. 32).

The nature of social connections during displacement has long been a topic of interest to scholars. Transnational research explores how populations on the move create and sustain social relations across international borders (Glick Schiller et al., 1995, p. 48), demonstrating that concepts like family belonging and caregiving are not localized practices but may take different forms in the context of migration and displacement (Baldassar & Merla, 2014; Marlowe, 2017). Transnational research has often focused on transnational relationships in the context of permanent resettlement (Ager & Strang, 2008; Marlowe, 2017). However, there is a growing focus on relationships and social networks during displacement in the context of the Syrian refugee crisis (Achilli, 2016; Sharif, 2018). Some research, including analyses by humanitarian agencies, tends to overemphasize the collapse of social relations among Syrians during displacement (Stevens, 2016; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2014). It is also important to note that scholarly research on transnational migration has been critiqued for being blind to gendered power hierarchies that affect people’s negotiations of ‘home’ (Al-Ali &

Koser, 2001, p. 5; Pessar & Mahler, 2003, p. 812). Women may feel the impacts of lost support networks as they bear the primary burden of caregiving for children while away from home (Al-Ali, 2002, pp. 253–254). Gender norms may be both reinforced and challenged across transnational spaces, which at times lead people to seek the relations associated with home and at times offer new opportunities for gender norms to be contested (Pessar & Mahler, 2003, p. 819).

This chapter focuses on family dynamics and relationships among Syrian refugees. Since the beginning of the ‘Syria Crisis’ in early 2011, some 5.6 million Syrians have been registered as refugees in the surrounding countries of Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon, Iraq and Egypt, with the largest numbers of refugees hosted regionally within Turkey (66%), Lebanon (15%) and Jordan (12%) (UNHCR, n.d.). At the regional level, around 92% of registered refugees are self-settled, living in urban areas and informal settlements, while the remainder are in refugee camps within these host countries. In Jordan there are currently over 665,000 registered Syrian refugees, 80% of whom are self-settled, living in communities among Jordanians, Palestinians and other groups (UNHCR, n.d.).

This chapter explores the everyday experiences of self-settled Syrian refugees living in Jordan, recognizing that even routine and mundane experiences, such as maintaining relationships, completing administrative processes and being ‘mobile’ or ‘immobile’, sheds light on the power hierarchies and gender norms refugees are subject to (Marlowe, 2017, p. 2). It examines how Syrian refugees navigate displacement and how they find their ‘place’ (Hammond, 2004) even during a state of flux. The section that follows outlines my research methods. The findings are then divided into three key themes: gendered family dynamics, transnational waiting for bureaucracies and gendered mobilities.

## 9.2 Methods and Data

This chapter is based on anthropological fieldwork carried out in Jordan over a nine-month period from September 2016 to May 2017. This fieldwork was part of a doctoral research project which sought to unravel humanitarian narratives on gender norms among Syrian refugees, exploring (im)mobilities, social relationships and gender. My research was conducted with self-settled Syrian refugees living in the areas of Zarqa, Irbid, Jerash and Amman. These refugees were aged 18–60 and were largely from Dar’a, Damascus and Homs in Syria. I also conducted interviews with local and international humanitarian agency staff who were currently working in Jordan or had previously worked in Jordan.

In Jordan, Syrians have been continually interviewed by humanitarian agencies, journalists and donors, and many may have experienced research fatigue. As such, my research methods were designed to challenge more traditional academic and humanitarian agency methods of knowledge production. To enable this, I used a feminist research approach. Letherby (2003) emphasizes that the imperative of feminist research is ‘to produce useful knowledge that will make a difference to

women's lives' (p. 4). In her book on sensitive research methods, Liamputtong (2007) asserts that feminist research requires the use of multiple methods that are flexible and participatory (p. 13). Methods themselves can reduce gaps between the researcher and participants (Rodgers, 2004). I used a range of methods, including participant observation, semi-structured interviews and life stories, alongside approaches that allow participants a greater role in constructing knowledge, specifically focus group discussions (FGDs) and participatory photography. These methods are flexible, leave room for creativity and hopefully helped to reduce the extractive nature of the research. However, power hierarchies may still be present even when using more participatory methods like FGDs (Smithson, 2008, p. 363), due to the power dynamic between the researcher and participants.

For me, taking a feminist approach to research meant not behaving like a detective whose sole purpose is to 'ferret out "the facts"' (Malkki, 1995, p. 51). During fieldwork, I spent time building relationships of trust through sharing food and information about my own life and discussing issues important to participants beyond the scope of my own research. As part of trying to implement feminist research, my interactions with Syrian women and men were informed by the idea of reciprocity- of 'giving something back' to participants (Liamputtong, 2007, p. 60). I sought to uphold the principle of reciprocity through the friendships that were formed, in how I responded to the research participants' generosity and hospitality, and in my efforts to obtain information or assistance from humanitarian agencies.

The research began with participatory photography workshops that incorporated FGDs. Participants discussed their daily life in Syria and Jordan, using photographs they had taken to help to describe their experiences. Refugees who attended the photography workshops were invited to participate in semi-structured or life story interviews. I conducted 20 semi-structured interviews with Syrian women and men, as well as 10 semi-structured interviews with international and local humanitarian workers. The interviews were used to triangulate FGD and life story data. To address power inequalities, I used open-ended questions and gave participants the opportunity to ask me questions (Nusair, 2013, p. 66). During the interviews, I asked follow-up questions and used verbal and non-verbal methods to probe the responses of participants. In a few cases, participants who were friends or relatives were interviewed together.

I also conducted 10 life story interviews with Syrian men and women. Life stories are distinct from other interview methods in that they require multiple prolonged sessions (Leavy, 2006, p. 154) to provide wider social context to the experiences of individuals (McLeod & Thomson, 2009, p. 41). Across multiple sessions, in homes, cafés and parks, I asked refugees to share their life stories with reference to the following periods in their lives: childhood, adolescence, adulthood, leaving Syria and life in Jordan. I began the discussion by asking 'What did it mean to be a girl/boy growing up in Syria? Can you tell me about your childhood?' I used a similar question structure to invite narratives about later life stages.

Participant observation was also carried out within local humanitarian agencies, in cafés and at markets. I focused on key spaces where I had access, particularly humanitarian agency spaces, the homes of refugees and cafés. I paid attention to

people's tasks, the tone of voice people used, how people reacted to each other, facial expressions, and the way people spent their time. I took detailed notes on what I observed and was careful not to interfere with any activities (Angrosino, 2005, p. 730), although my presence itself likely affected people's activities and interactions.

The research was conducted with translation assistance from two research assistants. I also had support in transcribing the interview recordings into English. We retained the phrasing, flow and grammar used by participants, even if it did not result in a perfect English translation as part of a feminist commitment to letting participants speak for themselves and avoiding acting as mediator of their narratives. The transcripts were analysed alongside my fieldnotes, which included detailed reflections made during the fieldwork process. Within ethnographic research, the researcher's personal experiences may be part of the data that is analysed (Davis & Craven, 2016, p. 81). Taking a feminist approach extends to data analysis, including decisions about which narratives to include and exclude (Buch & Staller, 2006, p. 215). Throughout the analysis, participants' experiences were positioned as the starting point, instead of the data being used to prove a hypothesis. The data was analysed and coded thematically using Nvivo. In the accounts in the sections below, identifying information has been removed and all participant names are pseudonyms.

### 9.3 Gendered Family Dynamics

Power dynamics within families may affect the decisions made by Syrians when they assess the viability of remaining in Jordan or seeking refuge elsewhere. Issues of family dynamics arose most strikingly in the accounts of Dina, a young married woman who lived in Homs with her husband and children before the war. After some time in Jordan, her husband decided to seek refuge in Europe with their oldest son, age 9. Dina explained the context of this decision, which she attributes to the jealousy of her mother-in-law:

Frankly, the person who advised us to travel was my mother-in-law! [Laughing, making a dancing movement to imitate her mother-in-law.] She was the one who told him, and she told him to take a child with him.

According to Dina, her mother-in-law's suggestion that her husband and son leave for Europe was sparked by malice and jealousy, which she has felt from her mother-in-law since she married. Dina viewed her husband as vulnerable to the suggestions and inclinations of his mother and his sisters, sharing examples of how they banded together to make life difficult for her. Here, gendered family dynamics influenced her husband's departure and provides the context within which Dina now struggles for reunification within the humanitarian bureaucracy, as discussed in the next section.



Family dynamics may also be protective. Dina, for example, said that at one point her husband even suggested they should not continue with their reunification efforts: ‘He told me, “Maybe it’s better if you didn’t come.” But of course, he... he says that just to console himself.’

Protective family dynamics also arose in the case of Khadija, an older widow who lives in Zarqa with one adult son while some of her other adult children and relatives remain in Syria. Khadija shields her children from knowing that she is doing well or even that she has cooked a favourite Syrian dish, *kuba*. In her role as mother, which transgresses geographical boundaries, Khadija decided it was better not to add to the suffering of her children with demonstrations of how her life was better in Jordan. In this example, hiding information had a protective function.

The decision to seek alternative solutions to indefinite displacement in Jordan is not easy. Yasmeen and Ibrahim, whose two oldest sons are now in Europe while they remain in Jordan with their younger children, have been left questioning the decision they made to stay:

Yasmeen: They told us the future there for their children is better.

[Ibrahim exhales deeply].

Research assistant: Is there no reunification?

Yasmeen: Inshallah. The procedure is very, very bad. There is, but one has to wait.

Ibrahim: I sent them, and I wish I didn’t send them.

Yasmeen: Don’t say such a thing. It’s their *naṣīb* [fate, luck or destiny]. But everyone advised us it’s good to send them because there they have a future. This is their *naṣīb*, don’t say that. Whatever will happen is already written. They say, whatever will happen to a person and how long one will live is already written.

The concept of *naṣīb* refers to fate, luck or destiny – the idea that whatever happens has been ‘written’ by God and therefore cannot be changed. Here, the notion of fate was used to justify Yasmeen and Ibrahim’s decision and soften their regret. In a separate interview with Yasmeen, she explained the sadness of her eldest son leaving: ‘I feel like when my son travelled, it broke my back, as they say. I mean, not the war in Syria, not leaving our homes, leaving our families, but my son leaving, I found hardest of all.’ Yasmeen and Ibrahim talk to their sons on the phone every day. They also discussed others’ decisions to go or not go:

Yasmeen: I know Syrian people who left their children behind! This woman has four children. They are 13 and younger.

Research assistant: Did she leave them behind?

Yasmeen: Yes. She has a relative who lived across from them who will look after them. She has a child who is three years old, like younger than my little one. Honestly, the way we Syrians think is not complete. There is something missing in our thinking.

Ibrahim: Because of the circumstances of war we have been through, we didn’t know right from wrong anymore. We consult with my wife’s family and mine. We want to learn their opinion. We like to consult the people who are older than us. We are old, but we still need the ones who are older than us.

In this account, Yasmeen and Ibrahim imply judgement of the actions taken by others. Yasmeen’s tone suggested that for a mother to leave her children behind was shocking, and she and Ibrahim attribute this decision to the effects of displacement

on Syrians. At one point, Yasmeen and Ibrahim considered travelling to Saudi Arabia for the pilgrimage to Mecca, but decided against it:

Yasmeen: Imagine us then, one part of the family is in [Europe], another in Saudi and in Jordan. If that happens, I will officially go crazy! [Laughing] There are people who are leaving without getting the approval, but praised be Allah, they can make it back into the country.

Ibrahim: That's right.

Yasmeen: No, that is a risk! No way, we don't have any luck to begin with! [...] We don't have the *naṣīb* to see the house of Allah. All my sisters have done *Umrah* [pilgrimage to Mecca], apart from me. They went with my parents.

*Naṣīb* was intertwined with narratives about decision-making even for shorter-term trips like the pilgrimage to Mecca. Yasmeen and Ibrahim were interviewed for resettlement to the United States, but the fact that their sons were in Europe affected their resettlement: 'But when I told them my two oldest sons are not with me, they asked me, "Where are they?" I told them they went to [Europe]. [...] They rejected us.' This may compound the regret they feel at sending their sons to Europe; this decision has resulted in the loss of other opportunities to leave Jordan, and in a longer period of waiting in Jordan.

The accounts above highlight that while mobility may be desired (Bissell, 2007, p. 278), it may also carry judgements depending on who is mobile. For Khadija, being able to leave Syria caused her to feel guilt as the matriarch of the family during her displacement in Jordan, which resulted in her hiding information from her children. Yasmeen and Ibrahim blame themselves for their sons being in Europe and feel guilt for causing their mobility. However, when a mother left her young children behind, Yasmeen and Ibrahim's judgement carried particular gendered implications. While Yasmeen and Ibrahim state that not knowing right from wrong is a consequence of war, there is a judgement implied towards a woman who moved across borders without her children, stepping outside the bounds of expected behaviour for a mother. Her mobility across borders challenges expectations of where women belong: in the home (Sheller, 2008, p. 258).

## 9.4 Transnational Waiting for Bureaucracies

My experience conducting field research with refugees in Jordan illustrated the complex hierarchies refugees are situated within. As part of conducting feminist research, I sought to live out the principles of reciprocity, reflexivity and addressing power hierarchies within the research process. Acting on the basis of reciprocity meant at times taking people's UNHCR registration information and making phone calls to find out about access to services, eligibility for cash assistance and the status of resettlement processes. The last was perhaps the most challenging to obtain information on, and I found myself frustrated at the complex bureaucratic processes that meant refugees had little information beyond the fact that their claims were

being processed and they would be informed of updates. Refugees did not always know that this process may take months or even years.

During the participatory photography workshops I organized, participants were encouraged to share existing photographs and talk about their lives in Syria and Jordan. They also discussed their favourite and least favourite places in Jordan as part of an activity that involved taking photos of some of these spaces. At times, these least favourite places could not safely be photographed. For example, police buildings or the UNHCR office were commonly mentioned as least favourite places, but we decided they could not be photographed. In the case of the UNHCR office, it was the time and bureaucratic processes associated with the space that made people dislike it: '[Y]ou go out at six [...] you come back at two in the afternoon or three in the afternoon, if you were lucky.' Another woman added, 'There is no place to sit, and the sun is strong above you. If you begged the employee, he let you in. If you did not beg the employee, you will stay standing outside.' In a women's FGD during the photography workshop, a few women described the invasive process of being physically searched before being allowed to enter the UNHCR office. One woman suggested the searches take place because 'they [UNHCR] are afraid of something'.

The challenges Syrians face while waiting are not limited to queues at the UNHCR office, but may extend to any kind of waiting required within a humanitarian bureaucracy. For Dina, waiting was required because she and her husband did not have the documentation they needed for reunification. When her family left Syria, they did not anticipate being gone for long. Shortly after they left, however, their house was bombed, destroying the documents they had left behind. Receiving copies of documents from government authorities was a significant challenge: '[I]n our area, in Homs, you can't get a marriage certificate and accreditation of papers unless you know someone very well to issue those for you.' Dina explained that her family went through a difficult process of paying third parties to acquire documents that proved she and her husband were married. One person took their money and disappeared with the documents, delaying the process further. Dina also described the challenges she faced when dealing with a European embassy in Jordan about their reunification claim. One female government official acted 'as if she wanted to finish with us quickly, and as if I was there to disturb her or take something from her.' When Dina explained their situation, the embassy official repeatedly asked, 'Have you finished? Is there still more?' On another occasion, Dina realized her statements were not being correctly translated by the Arabic translator provided by the embassy.

While Dina tried to negotiate with people in Syria for her documents, her husband was facing challenges in Europe, illustrating waiting at a transnational level. Dina explained that it was challenging for her husband to find a lawyer who could help with reunification: '[H]e would find a lawyer but they would tell him, for instance, "No, we work on residency issues."' Her husband was 'like a blind and deaf person', forced to grapple with bureaucracy while uncertain of the process and unable to speak the language. The pressures on her husband extended across international borders to Dina:

And me from here, I felt fire here [pointing to her heart]. I'm feeling like I'm on fire! *Ya'nī* [it means]... *ya'nī*, a little more of this and my husband will explode from frustration there and I will explode here... Because this is the situation, that's it. So now you have to wait for what people tell you to do.

Waiting was a transnational experience for Dina and her husband, such that obstacles and challenges he experienced in Europe were also felt by Dina in Jordan. Both husband and wife were subject to the decisions and timing of others. This is disempowering in the best of circumstances, let alone when a family is separated. Like Yasmeen and Ibrahim, Dina and her husband attribute these circumstances to fate:

He said, 'I don't have *naṣīb*. I don't have any luck, not with my siblings, my friends or with the people I know!' Yes, he doesn't have any luck. *Ya'nī*, even our application at the embassy – we don't have any luck with it.

Blaming fate may be a coping mechanism, a way of shielding or protecting refugees from the prospect that they exist within complex, unfair structures.

The accounts above demonstrate the challenges refugees face while waiting for bureaucracies. While waiting at the UNHCR office, refugees are subject to the decisions of UNHCR staff, who hold the power, echoing Petee's (2017) reflections that making refugees wait treats them as if they are children (p. 177). In this example, the bodies of refugees, even those of women, were viewed as a security threat. The examples from Dina and her husband draw out the complexity associated with transnational waiting. For them, *naṣīb* was an everyday coping strategy, a way of making sense of delays and the apparent maze of humanitarian bureaucracies. Attributing a situation to fate might mean that the everyday becomes more manageable. For Dina and her husband, waiting reinforced their positions as subaltern within their respective contexts (Bayart, 2007, pp. 272–274). However, the many obstacles they faced did not stop Dina and her husband from continuing to try to be reunified. They were not passively waiting, but were indeed active agents who tried to change their situation (Brun, 2015, p. 33; Manjikian, 2010, pp. 53–55).

## 9.5 Gendered Mobilities?

Syrian refugees' everyday experiences of mobility in Jordan, as described by the men and women who participated in FGDs and interviews, are a useful way of understanding the lives of refugees during displacement. While Syrian men in Jordan had both opportunities and pressure to find work, women talked about being bored and having nothing to do. Some mentioned they had no one to visit in Jordan, while for others, visiting family and friends in Jordan was very important. One woman described the enjoyment she felt when visiting neighbours and having them visit her: 'They are good women. I enjoy myself when I visit them. They are loving!' Another described visiting her friend's Palestinian-Jordanian mother, who then visited her in return. One young Syrian woman had made new Jordanian friends who would visit her at home. They also exchanged gifts and went on trips together.

In this way, although immobile in the sense of being at home and waiting during displacement, women maintained cross-national friendships through visiting each other.

Although women's (im)mobilities are sometimes attributed solely to gendered power hierarchies, when Syrian women talked about where they go and how they spend their time, the reasons were rarely gendered. For example, for many refugees, cost was a barrier to mobility in Jordan. One woman summarized it thus: 'Going out costs [money].' The expense of public transportation or a taxi is often too high to justify, and therefore 'to stay at home is better'. When disposable income is limited, going out may be viewed as an unnecessary expense. Alongside cost, the hilly terrain of Jordan was mentioned by many female research participants as an obstacle to walking outdoors. Women explained that in Syria, the landscape is predominantly flat, making walking to visit friends or relatives easier. They felt that Jordan's terrain made walking exhausting. One woman complained, 'You feel your heart will stop.' Interestingly it was largely women who reflected on the difficulties of walking in Jordan. This may be linked to 'an ideology which encourages women to be physically frail, or to think that they are' (Ardener, 1981, p. 28).

In other cases, mobility was limited by not knowing others. Some Syrians said that their social interactions were often limited to family members, while others said they also had relationships with neighbours in Jordan. Unfamiliarity with the new location and new people was a barrier to engaging with Jordanians. This perhaps explains one comment from an interview participant in Amman when I asked if she liked the café we were meeting in. She said, 'I only go to the places you take me to.' Similarly, when participants in an FGD were asked about where they go during the week, one woman laughed, saying, 'We haven't seen anything. We leave our house, come here and from here go to our house. There's nothing else, nothing at all.'

Women's mobility may also shift during displacement compared to before the war. One man explained that in Jordan, his wife has started to go out more than she did in Syria. Many of these excursions are accompanied: 'Her children are all grown up, you know, so she takes her son and goes out!' For him, this shift has been amusing. He laughed as he told the story of how his wife wanted him to travel to Ramtha with her. He told her, 'You go, and take your son! Am I going to spend all my time with you? Enough! [...] It's OK, go. Your children are grown up now. They are men. Go with them!' On another occasion, when his wife wanted him to accompany her on a shopping trip, he told her, 'Go out to the street, watch for the bus that has the name of the village on it, hop on it and go!' The journey turned out well for his wife. This man seemed to contradict common humanitarian agency narratives about men being afraid for the safety of their wives and therefore restricting their movement in Jordan (Regional Syria Response Hub, 2015; Women's Refugee Commission, 2014). He said, 'I want her to become more independent.' This account is contextualized, however, by the fact that he and his family live in Irbid, which historically had close ties to the border area of Dar'a in Syria. His siblings married Jordanians, and Jordan is not an unfamiliar place for him. Therefore, his comfort with the physical environment may explain his attitude to his wife's mobility.

Mobilities also require contextualization across time. Cresswell (2010) suggests that ‘new mobilities’ need to be understood in the context of ‘old mobilities’ (p. 29). Experiences of mobility or immobility do not occur in a vacuum but are shaped by the past. One young woman living in Amman explained that during her childhood, her family moved constantly due to her father’s work. These experiences led to her family being isolated from their extended family and friends, but also prepared them for their subsequent experience of displacement to Jordan: ‘Maybe if I did not have that experience of continuously moving in Syria, maybe I would be affected more. [...] The moving in Syria and changing places served me. So here I didn’t suffer as much, and I adjusted.’ Similarly, a woman who moved to another governorate to pursue university studies before the war felt that this first mobility, although uncomfortable, helped her to be more responsible and independent. Mobility across governorates or international borders may have been a pre-existing experience for some Syrians. Alongside the practice of family members working in the Gulf, some Syrians also experienced forced displacement from the Golan Heights during the war with Israel or internal migration which was implemented by the Assad regimes in various governorates of Syria prior to the conflict. These experiences of being uprooted and resettled by the state may have prepared some Syrians for their displacement in Jordan and other countries.

Everyday mobilities have also taken new forms during displacement through the use of social media. During FGDs and interviews, Syrian women and men drew attention to their use of social media in Jordan, which was something that none of the participants mentioned when discussing how they formerly spent their time in Syria. One group of men of varying ages said the first thing they do in the morning is check Facebook. One woman talked about making WhatsApp calls to multiple countries each day to speak with her children, siblings and parents. In each location where I conducted photography workshops, WhatsApp groups were established to communicate with the participants. These proved to be vibrant, active spaces for engagement; on multiple occasions I woke up to find 50–100 new WhatsApp messages from participants, including emoticons, questions about the services provided by humanitarian agencies, memes containing encouraging or religious statements, and, most common of all, messages just saying ‘hi’. These mediums have been recognized as important for enabling connections with relatives and friends in different countries (Twigt, 2018, p. 5; Wall et al., 2017, p. 242).

Through social media, refugees who are physically immobile can maintain relationships across national borders (Twigt, 2018, p. 5), building and sustaining virtual communities through WhatsApp groups, Facebook messages and calls to loved ones, and sharing important information. Waltrip (2013) suggests that social media platforms offer ‘a specific form of constructed space’ (p. 562) where ‘place’ can exist in a ‘non-place’ (p. 565). Similarly, Aouragh (2011) suggests that social media can be seen as ‘almost an embodied experience, the hands and fingers touching the screen, the tears and smiles wrapping the faces, and the voices and noises transmitted’ (p. 383). Thus, ‘virtual mobility’ can become a substitute for physical mobility (Aouragh, 2011, p. 392). For women who otherwise feel unable to leave the home, engaging in these virtual spaces can be empowering (Waltrip, 2013, p. 557);

conversely, they may create further opportunities for freedom to be limited (p. 566), as was the case for one woman who was experiencing intimate partner violence. She disclosed that her husband restricts access to her phone and removes WhatsApp from it, preventing her from making social connections in response to her perceived misbehaviour. The everyday mobilities enabled by mobile devices may be limited or expanded by gender inequalities in the home.

## 9.6 Conclusion

This chapter uses feminist, ethnographic approaches to contribute to knowledge on transnational family dynamics, gender, waiting and mobilities, presenting detailed accounts of Syrian women and men living in Jordan.

The findings from this research elucidate how Syrian refugees are positioned within power hierarchies that may cause them to be subject to the decisions of those in positions of power (Bayart, 2007, pp. 272–274), drawing attention to everyday practices during periods of waiting. These practices include dealing with family dynamics and coping with feelings of regret, guilt and jealousy. The findings show that power dynamics within families may affect decision-making about the future or result in concealing information to protect other family members. Power dynamics are not fixed, however, nor do they consign refugees to abject powerlessness. This research highlights that refugees may remain active even during the waiting of protracted displacement, making decisions about their future or seeking to change their present circumstances (Brun, 2015, p. 33; Manjikian, 2010, pp. 53–55).

During periods of waiting, refugees may invoke particular coping strategies (see also Chap. 10). This chapter explores *naṣīb* as a coping strategy that may shield refugees from the reality of the power hierarchies that shape their daily experiences. *Naṣīb* is infused into refugee narratives and represents how Syrians make sense of life choices. This research builds on existing work on waiting among refugees (Hyndman & Giles, 2011; Peteet, 2017), demonstrating how *naṣīb* may be utilized to help refugees navigate everyday processes of waiting for bureaucracies.

This research also details the experiences Syrians face in navigating social and physical spaces in Jordan, including the context-dependent nature of mobilities, which may not necessarily always involve a gendered dimension. While mobility may appear to be the optimal condition (Bissell, 2007, p. 278), mobility may nonetheless result in gendered judgements towards women who transgress expected mobilities by moving across borders (Sheller, 2008, p. 258). This chapter also builds on existing research (Waltorp, 2013) to highlight that although Syrians may experience physical constraints to mobility, mobile phones offer opportunities for both sustaining and controlling relationships (Waltorp, 2013, p. 566).

This chapter contributes to deepening the understanding of the diverse experiences of Syrian refugees. It presents a rich picture of family life and relationships to enable academics and policymakers to better understand the challenges and nuances of refugees' everyday experiences during displacement.

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# Chapter 10

## ‘Doing Family’ as a Separated Household: The Experience of Syrian Refugees in Germany and Lebanon



Irene Tuzi

### 10.1 Introduction

In January 2019, when I had been doing fieldwork in Germany for almost three months, I met Abu Mohammad, a Syrian man from Hama in his late twenties who lived in Neumünster, a city in Schleswig-Holstein, in northern Germany. His wife and children had made the first part of the journey from Syria with him, but then stayed behind in Turkey to avoid the most dangerous part of the crossing, choosing to wait for Abu Mohammad to arrive safely in Germany before joining him through family reunification. However, due to delays in the reunification application as a holder of subsidiary protection (see Chap. 2), Abu Mohammad had not seen his family for almost 4 years at the time of our interview. He described his separation from his family with the Arabic term *intizār*, waiting.

A few months earlier, in Lebanon, I had met Em Walid, whose son had migrated to Turkey with the intent of reaching Europe. Since then, she had lived in a constant state of anxiety and apprehension, which influenced her daily activities and made her feel ‘*ajez*, paralysed. These and other life stories I collected in Lebanon and Germany made me realize that family separation was one of the biggest challenges for Syrian families in both countries, and that for many of them, it was not a matter of *when* they were going to be reunited, but *if*. I realized that not only did these people live transnational lives, embedded in two different contexts for an indefinite amount of time, but that they had established several ways to *do family* in separation. The concept of ‘doing family’, where ‘family’ is embedded in a verb phrase rather than used as a noun (Stiles, 2002) and refers to a ‘doing’, rather than a ‘being’ (Smart & Neale, 1999), entails fluid and transitional configurations of family that can occur when life is disrupted, such as when households are separated.

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Transnational families have been a long-standing area of interest in migration studies (see Al-Sharmani et al., 2017; Baldassar & Merla, 2013; Crespi et al., 2018; Greschke, 2018). Scholars have paid considerable attention to different aspects of transnational family lives, including practices such as transnational marriages (Ferrero, 2015; Schmoll, 2007) and the transnational dimension of care (Baldassar & Merla, 2013; Vietti et al., 2012). The literature has also dealt with family separation (Slack et al., 2018; Shruti, 2019) and its effects on left-behind families (Ambrosini, 2008; Antman, 2013; Cortes, 2015). A consistent stream of studies focused on Europe have concerned family reunification and the legal aspects of separation for refugees (Grote, 2017; Bick, 2018; Tometten, 2018; Damir-Geilsdorf & Sabra, 2018; Sauer et al., 2018; Kraus et al., 2019). However, significant gaps remain. For example, while the literature has considered the transnational activities of forced migrants and refugees (Al-Ali et al., 2001; Horst, 2006; Van Hear, 2014), significantly less is known about the dimension of forced separation in displacement, everyday insecurities for refugees and left-behind families, and the various ways in which separated households do family from afar. Moreover, forced migration movements in the Global North have rarely been studied from a relational viewpoint considering interconnected sets of relationships, or jointly analysed with those in the Global South.

This chapter aims at filling some of these gaps by looking at family separation among displaced Syrians in two different countries, Germany and Lebanon. The research questions that have motivated this study are as follows: How do Syrian households in Lebanon and Germany deal with the everyday insecurities brought about by displacement? And how do they do family in separation?

I argue that separated households in both countries experienced separation not only as a geographical estrangement, but also as a temporal separation. Despite the conditions imposed by Western states on the entry and stays of family members, for Syrians in displacement, the idea of family had wider boundaries and multiple dimensions. In fact, the idea of family for Syrians in displacement did not synch with the definition used by the family reunification regimes of Western countries, namely the nuclear family consisting of father, mother and children.

In this chapter, I focus on families who have remained forcibly separated across international borders after fleeing the Syrian war. I call these families ‘separated’ instead of ‘transnational’ because separation best represents the way they feel about their circumstances and how they do family across borders. These families are connected by relationships of interdependence across borders and the motivation to be reunited. However, the principles of formal family reunification are often based on narrow ideas of family that fail to take into consideration different meanings of family in different contexts (Georgas et al., 2001; Kofman, 2004; Fonseca & Ormon, 2008; Strasser et al., 2009).

This chapter aims at analysing the difficulties families face when separated by international borders and at exploring the strategies they put into practice to do family in separation. I adopt a grassroots perspective to help to gain an intimate understanding of refugees’ experiences of transnational family life. This focus on refugees’ subjectivities will serve to demonstrate, for example, how

transnationalism is experienced as a separated family and how agency is exercised to come to terms with the hardships of separation.

In the following sections, after introducing my methodology and the research background, I will explore the difficulties posed by separation and everyday insecurities for Syrian families in Lebanon and Germany before delving into the strategies that participants in both countries put into practice to cope with separation in displacement.

## 10.2 Methods and Data

This chapter is based on fieldwork conducted for my doctoral thesis (Tuzi, 2022) in Lebanon and Germany. My fieldwork in Lebanon was conducted in 2018 and 2019 in the cities of Beirut and Tripoli and in several rural areas of the North, Akkar and Beqaa governorates. My research in Germany was conducted in 2019 in the states of Berlin, Brandenburg, Saxony, North Rhine-Westphalia, Schleswig-Holstein and Bavaria. In this chapter, I report the experiences of 19 Syrian women and men between 26 and 62 years old who were displaced in Lebanon (6 people) and Germany (13 people) and forcibly separated from members of their nuclear or extended family. The two groups of informants were not directly equivalent, as the interviewed families in Germany and Lebanon were not related. Yet there was a correspondence between the two displaced groups in their lived experiences, everyday insecurities and the way in which they coped with forced separation. For this reason, comparing the two groups allowed a double perspective on the experience of separation that helps overcome monolithic understandings of displacement.

Before starting each interview, participants were asked in Arabic to give their oral consent. I connected with participants through my pre-existing networks, such as Syrian families I had met on previous visits to Lebanon, and through local organizations and civil society networks. I then expanded the sample through snowball sampling, asking participants to connect me with other Syrians they knew. Interviews were carried out in Arabic with the assistance of local research assistants and then transcribed and translated. Interviewees participated voluntarily and the research was explained to them in detail. They were free to withdraw their participation or not to answer questions they did not feel comfortable with. I used pseudonyms to protect participants' identities. My analysis of these interviews focused on the nature of separation, the challenges family members experienced and the coping strategies they employed to overcome difficulties.

The definition of 'refugee' posed a question for my methodology. In Lebanon, where the 1951 Refugee Convention does not apply, only Syrians registered with the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) are considered *de facto* refugees. Yet this category excludes many families who fled human rights violations and humanitarian crises in Syria and arrived in Lebanon after the UNHCR closed registrations in 2015 (Dionigi, 2016). In Germany, over 90% of Syrian applicants have been granted

asylum, but only a minority have received full refugee status; most Syrian nationals have been granted subsidiary protection. As forced migration experiences varied widely among Syrians in Lebanon and Germany, I decided not to apply narrow definitions to my research and included in my study all Syrian nationals who were displaced in either country as a consequence of the Syrian civil war (2011–present). In this chapter, I consider the experiences both of Syrian families in Germany who were waiting for reunification with their left-behind families in Syria, Lebanon and Turkey, and of Syrians in Lebanon who were hoping to join their close relatives who had migrated to Egypt, Sweden, Germany or other European countries.

### 10.3 Everyday Insecurities of Syrian Families in Lebanon and Germany

In my fieldwork in Lebanon and Germany, it was clear that for the Syrian participants, the idea of ‘family’ had blurred boundaries and multiple dimensions: family had not only a physical or spatial dimension, but also a temporal one. Separation was experienced as both a geographical and temporal estrangement, and associated with feelings of anticipation and waiting. For instance, Abu Mohammad, whom I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, said that the separation from his wife made him feel suspended in a waiting state, *bintizār* – stuck in limbo – and that his life would finally start only when his left-behind wife could join him in Germany:

When I talk to my wife in the evening, we always imagine how our life will be when she comes here. I tell her that we will go to the park to make a barbecue, or to the cinema – we have never been to the cinema together! Oh my God, I cannot wait for her to be here and for our life to finally *start!* (Interview, Neumünster, Germany, March 2019)

Similarly, Saad, a Syrian man from Aleppo who arrived in Berlin in 2015, leaving his wife and children in Syria, explained:

The problem is not only not knowing *when* I will be able to see my wife and my kids, but *if* I will be able to see them again. I feel powerless because there is nothing I can do. I can only wait. But I do not know if all this waiting will lead to something eventually. (Interview, Berlin, Germany, February 2019)

The experience of separation for participants in Lebanon resonates with these feelings of suspension in Germany. Syrians in Lebanon also felt stuck in limbo, or in a double space – the resettlement country and the country where their loved ones were. Abu and Em Walid, a couple from Homs, lived in a state of constant worry and distress for their son, who was in Turkey and intended to attempt the dangerous journey to Europe. The couple remained in Lebanon, unsure of when or if they would ever see their son again. Em Walid was terrified at the idea of her son’s journey to Europe. She knew someone whose son had attempted it unsuccessfully and could not bear the idea that the same could happen to her son.

I didn't want him to go. I told him, 'Don't go, it's too dangerous!' But he wouldn't listen, and now he's in Turkey. He's working to collect the money, and then he will travel to Greece. [...] If anything happens to him, I will never forgive myself. (Interview, Tripoli, Lebanon, June 2018)

Abu Walid, her husband, explained to me that the separation from their son caused his wife a sense of paralysis. She lived in a continuous state of suspension and waiting.

Sometimes, if we don't hear from him for the entire day, she stops doing everything and starts worrying about him. She just sits there and doesn't do anything. [...] When she feels like that, I take care of the house and the chores because she's paralysed. (Interview, Tripoli, Lebanon, June 2018)

Among the Syrians I met, family separation referred not only to being separated from spouses and children, but included being apart from one's parents, siblings and extended families in general. Moreover, separation can occur in the course of different North-South migration trajectories and involve transit countries. While Germany was mostly a receiving country in terms of family reunification, Lebanon was both a sending country and a transit country where families waited to be reunited with their loved ones abroad. Some of the families I met in Lebanon considered themselves left-behind by close relatives in the West or in other Arab countries, especially Egypt, a destination for many Syrians after the outbreak of the Syrian war. Many families in Germany, on the other hand, had left family members behind in Turkey, a transit country for those who aimed for Europe.

The experiences of separated families in the two countries were especially similar in terms of the sense of insecurity that separation caused. These insecurities were not static but changed spatially and temporally (see also Tiilikainen, 2019, p. 149). Family separation among Syrian families engendered multiple everyday insecurities (Crawford & Hutchinson, 2016) that took a variety of forms and affected their wellbeing on many levels. Drawing on White (2010) and Tiilikainen (2019), I observed that for separated Syrian families in Lebanon and Germany, everyday insecurities had three main dimensions: material, relational and ethical (see also Al-Sharmani et al., 2019). Within the material dimension fell insecurities related to tightening financial and living conditions, which concerned most people in both countries. Relational insecurities were related to the multispatiality of relationships lived across borders and the double positionality sensed by separated families between the resettlement country and the home or transit country. The ethical dimension was especially evident in the sense of guilt that Syrian men and women in both countries felt for having left family members behind or for being a burden to close relatives who had migrated abroad.

These often-overlapping dimensions of the everyday insecurities experienced by Syrian families in both Lebanon and Germany serve as a backdrop for understanding how separated family members try to cope with the difficulties they face. Three main coping strategies emerged in my interviews: establishing new social networks and activities, consolidating family relationships, and reinforcing religious beliefs and practices. In the accounts of Syrian families in both countries, these coping strategies intersected with everyday insecurities in multiple ways.

## 10.4 Coping with Forced Family Separation in Displacement

### 10.4.1 *Establishing New Social Networks and Activities*

Many Syrian families in Lebanon and Germany searched for new networks and activities to reduce the stress, worries and tensions caused by forced family separation. Social networks are essential to establishing a new social space after migration (McKenzie & Rapoport, 2010). The literature has emphasized that even in protracted displacement, individuals are keen on rebuilding their social capital and social networks in the new environment (Uzelac et al., 2018). Often, migrants and refugees seek to build networks among communities with similar traditions, language or culture; in other circumstances, they build networks with local communities (Hagan, 1998). Migrant men are often expected to be the main participants in public social networks (Moliner, 2020) and to be the bridge between the household and the receiving country.

Although men's social networks may no longer be primary for many families, as migrant mothers have engaged more readily with networks around kindergartens and schools than migrant fathers, for example, this seemed to be what Ibrahim, a man from Damascus in his late thirties who lived in Munich, expected. While waiting for his family to be reunited with him in Germany, Ibrahim had initially tried to establish new networks with the goal of creating a new social environment for them. However, as his family separation became protracted, he used these networks himself to construct a new individual self in his new community.

Ibrahim told me that he had experienced a great deal of stress related to his separation from his wife and children. Like many refugees, he had faced financial problems upon his arrival in Germany. Because his family was separated and he did not know when or if he would be reunited with them, he would also have to support his family in Syria for an indefinite amount of time. He was therefore experiencing material insecurities. However, Ibrahim was also experiencing ethical insecurities associated with his privileged position as compared to his family, their future as a household, and the traumatic experiences he had faced during his journey. Because he had survived forced migration and was now safe in Germany, he felt guilty that his family was still in danger in Syria.

I should not be here without my family. I should be with them [in Syria]. They are in very dangerous conditions. They cross the Lebanese border to reach the [German] embassy in order to keep this [family reunification] process going. [...] I feel ashamed because I am here and they are not. (Interview, Munich, Germany, March 2019)

This 'survivors' guilt' has been identified by other authors (Bemak et al., 2002; Bughra & Becker, 2005; Goveas & Coomarasamy, 2018) as a condition common to many refugees that contributes to emotional stress and jeopardizes migrants' sense of safety, wellbeing and integration in the resettlement country (Bemak et al., 2002, p. 35). To overcome these anxieties, Ibrahim tried to re-establish a state of mental health by engaging in something that 'made him feel good' – playing football.



The first year in Germany was very hard. My family was not here with me, and I was very stressed all the time. I know I am luckier than others because I have a good job and a good salary – the highest I have ever had! But I could not help being miserable all the time. [...] My days were all the same, and the only thing that made me feel happy was to talk to my family in the evening. But I could not bear the fact that they were away, and I could not sleep. Then, a colleague from work, a German man, invited me to play football one evening, and I went. And you know what happened? I remembered how much I liked playing football. I forgot about the journey, all the worrying and the stress. Now I play with them every week. I feel much better because playing helps me to be mentally fit, and my wellbeing is also the wellbeing of my family, even if we are separated. (Interview, Munich, Germany, March 2019)

While doing something for himself and his health, Ibrahim was also reaffirming himself in a new social space. He was able to access local networks in Germany to establish his role in a new social environment and negotiate a new sense of belonging.

Afaf, a Syrian woman and mother of three who lived in Lebanon, had a similar experience with yoga. For a long time, Afaf had lived in a state of anxiety and stress due to the harsh living conditions in Lebanon, financial insecurity and separation from her husband, who had forcibly migrated to Turkey. Finding a job in Lebanon while caring for three children had not been easy for Afaf, and she was almost completely dependent on the money her husband sends her. These material insecurities, together with the ethical insecurities of being a burden for her husband abroad, caused her a great deal of stress.

I would like to find a better job and be able to pay the expenses, the rent and the food so that I don't have to ask my husband. [...] My older kid told me that he wants to go to work, but I don't want that. I want them to study. (Interview, El-Marj, Lebanon, September 2018)

Afaf struggled with both material and ethical insecurities, but like Ibrahim, she actively searched for help to support her wellbeing. She decided to take up yoga through a local humanitarian organization in order to take care of her mental and physical health, which had deteriorated due to the dire living conditions she was experiencing.

Being separated from my husband and not having any idea of when I'm going to see him again caused me a lot of stress. Yoga helped me to reduce stress and tension. It's a different kind of treatment, but it's my medicine. I've learnt how to breathe and relax, how to take care of myself. (Interview, El-Marj, Lebanon, September 2018)

Activities introduced by new friends and NGOs helped some participants, like Afaf in Lebanon and Ibrahim in Germany, to reduce the tension, anxiety and stress caused by being far from their families in a resourceful, non-harmful way.

The experiences of Iman, a woman from Aleppo in her thirties who was living in Chtoura, and Farid, a man from Damascus in his forties who was living in Berlin, were similar in the way they responded to the relational dimension of everyday insecurities. Both participants had been separated from their families for several years at the time of their interview, and they both had suffered the loss of their sense of emotional closeness with their families. In order to come to terms with these insecurities, they both sought support from their host communities. Iman was living

in the Beqaa Valley region of Lebanon, in an unfinished house with her two children and her parents. Her husband was in Sweden.

Life as a woman alone in Lebanon is not easy. Even if less than in Syria, the community's control over us is still strong. My parents are very open-minded, but our relatives are not. I felt alone when my husband left, and I had nobody to talk to or to laugh with. (Interview, Chtoura, Lebanon, August 2018)

Iman lived in precarious conditions, with material insecurities and a general sense of discomfort, while waiting for a new life to start once she would be able to reunite with her husband. However, Iman did not allow these insecurities to become an obstacle for her life in Lebanon. Instead, she deliberately chose to use this time to improve her life:

I started attending vocational training at an NGO for refugee women, and soon I found a really strong network of friends. I had two choices: sitting at home waiting for my husband to take me to Europe or doing something good for myself. (Interview, Chtoura, Lebanon, August 2018)

Through a local NGO that supports refugee women, Iman found a new support network on which she could rely.

I made really good friends within this network. If I have a problem, I can talk to at least three people I consider good friends. We help each other to overcome the hardship of life in Lebanon. (Interview, Chtoura, Lebanon, August 2018)

Farid had a similar experience in Germany. He was separated from his wife, who was still in Syria waiting to be reunited with him. Through the help of a German friend, he established a new network of connections in the local community. He did not let the solitude and seclusion of separation bring him down. Instead, he decided to engage in the new social space, even though he did not speak the language:

It's not easy to live alone. I have to work double: outside the house and inside. In the beginning, it was difficult. I felt lonely most of the time, and I didn't know how to organize my life. Maybe I was depressed. Then I made a German friend who helped me a lot. Even before we were really able to communicate, because I didn't speak good German, he was taking me to the Jobcenter, helping me with everyday duties and responsibilities. He even helped me to find a job! Now we are good friends, also because I speak German and we can communicate. (Interview, Berlin, Germany, March 2019)

Through new connections, Farid was able to build a new sense of belonging that made life in separation more bearable.

I have been waiting for my wife to be reunited with me for three years now. I don't know how much longer it'll take. But I decided not to waste my life and to use this time to improve myself. Establishing good connections and friendships is a way to improve. (Interview, Berlin, Germany, March 2019)

Instead of waiting in limbo in the absence of his family, Farid established new social networks that support his wellbeing and developed new skills.

Previous studies on transnational migration confirm these results. In particular, Bryceson and Vuorela (2002) use the term *frontiering* to refer to the multiple ways in which migrants put into practice specific strategies to navigate different

normative systems and to develop their lives in a new country where they lack support networks and social capital. Through frontiering they also define new identities, new spaces and new roles (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002, p. 11). Farid's and Iman's strategies also demonstrate how well-being takes place in reciprocity and in relationships as a process of meaningful engagement in a new environment (Al-Sharmani et al., 2019).

### ***10.4.2 Consolidating Family Relationships***

The second type of coping strategy used to respond to everyday insecurities was the consolidation of family relationships and mutual support among family members during the difficult time of separation. The account of Fatma, a woman from rural Damascus who was living in Leipzig, Germany, demonstrates this strategy. Her husband, with whom she was hoping to build a family, had stayed behind in Turkey. She had fled to Germany, only to realize that the migratory project they had envisioned would probably never come true. Fatma experienced relational insecurities due to her double positionality and transnationally divided intimate relationship:

Most of the time, I feel I'm not fully here [in Germany]. But I'm not there [in Turkey] either. I don't feel I'm alive. I carry on, I live my life, but I'm not alive. (Interview, Leipzig, Germany, January 2019)

The frustration she felt at not being able to fully enjoy life in Germany did not, however, prevent her from establishing herself in the new social space or from creating a space in which she could turn insecurities into possible securities. She was able to transform the frustration brought about by her transnational positionality and to use this newly acquired strength to create a new way to do family in separation.

When my husband and I speak over the phone, we speak about the future. We come up with projects, we imagine he is here with me. This is the only way we have to be together at the moment, but planning the future helps us not to lose hope that this future is still possible. (Interview, Leipzig, Germany, January 2019)

Planning the future was a mechanism Fatma used to cope with separation and to project herself and her husband into a dimension in which they could exist as a family. In this way, they maintained hope and kept their aspirations alive.

Another participant, Amal, a 30-year-old Syrian woman living in Berlin, had also made an effort to establish a space for her family to exist in separation. She had fled Aleppo 5 years earlier, leaving her parents and siblings behind. At the same time, she escaped her violent ex-husband, with whom she had had a difficult divorce. In Germany, Amal's financial burden increased considerably, as she still had to support her parents, but now without the help of her husband. In Berlin, Amal received state assistance and worked only occasionally as a freelance translator. These material insecurities, together with the trauma related to her divorce, being separated from her family and finding herself alone for the first time in her life, made her struggle

greatly with her life in Germany. She told me that when she arrived, she felt depressed and constantly anxious due to the pressure of needing to support her parents.

I wasn't able to do anything. For one year, I couldn't even start studying the language. I wasn't able to take care of myself, and I was living in a state of distress that affected everything. [...] I needed help to overcome my trauma, the loss of my life in Syria, the failure of my marriage. But I couldn't find the right way to live. I couldn't even enjoy my regained freedom from my husband. [...] Now I'm doing better. I have good days and bad days. But the pressure of my parents in Syria is something that affects everything else. (Interview, Berlin, Germany, March 2019)

Because extended families can rarely be reunited and left-behind family members in Syria lack other options for welfare assistance, refugees in Germany often need to deal with these financial pressures indefinitely. These economic difficulties can limit people's options and opportunities in the host country and cause them to experience material insecurities – a precarious life with no alternative solution.

I'm sending almost the whole [state] allowance to my parents in Syria. Here I can work as a teacher of Arabic, and I do translations when I get the chance. [...] My dream is to study here in Germany, but I can't afford it because I have to support my parents. (Interview, Berlin, Germany, March 2019)

As Amal's words demonstrate, sometimes the pressure to provide for one's family in the country of origin or transit paralyzes people to the point of making them unable to find 'the right way to live'. When I met Amal for the first time, I had the feeling that she was still struggling with finding a balance between her responsibilities towards her left-behind family in Syria and her life in Germany. However, her attitude towards the future was rather positive, as she had high expectations for her new life. She argued that her relationship with her family had improved since they had been apart and that she had started putting more effort into it.

In the beginning, I felt the responsibility of supporting my parents emotionally as well as economically. They are old and alone. It is my duty to do so. But then I realized that in fact they are also supporting me. Even if we do not know if this separation will end, we help each other to get through it. (Interview, Berlin, Germany, March 2019)

Amal also claimed that her parents in Syria had gradually become more understanding of her needs and more open-minded towards her.

They no longer put pressure on me about getting married again or starting a family... or at least not like before. They understand that my position has changed, that I live in another environment, and I can make different choices. [...] I think it also depends on the fact that I provide for them now, and they respect me more for this. [...] They were not close-minded before, but 10 years ago, what I did [migrating to Germany and living alone] would have been impossible even to imagine. (Interview, Berlin, Germany, March 2019)

The consolidation of her relationship with her left-behind parents helped Amal to create a space for them in her new life and to build a sense of togetherness. At the same time, this connection helped her to build her resilience in the face of daily struggles. After an initial period in which Amal suffered from the stress of her multilayered trauma, she was able to strengthen her sense of closeness to her parents

and do family from afar, which helped her to create wellbeing and cope with the hardship of displacement. These findings therefore confirm that sending financial remittances is a way to maintain the emotional wellbeing of migrants and their families, recreating a sense of family in separation (Mckay, 2007; Abrego, 2014).

Maisoun, a woman in her thirties from rural Aleppo whose husband was attempting the journey to Europe at the time of our interview, was facing both material and relational insecurities in Lebanon. Like many Syrians in Lebanon, Maisoun was experiencing precarious living conditions. She shared a two-room apartment on the outskirts of Tripoli with her sons and some relatives. She worked occasionally as a cleaner and tried not to depend on her relatives.

They gave me a place to live, and I appreciate it a lot, but I want to be independent. I want to reach the point where I can buy clothes for my kids without asking anything from anyone. (Interview, Tripoli, Lebanon, June 2018)

Maisoun also faced relational insecurities. In particular, she struggled with maintaining the stability of her family, which she perceived to be at risk because of the distance that separated her from her husband. The multispatiality of her relationship with her husband made her feel that their connection was more fragile than before:

Before, in Syria, we used to sit together and drink a cup of coffee after a long day. We used to talk about our day. We used to share everything. [...] It's not easy to be apart. Sometimes you feel closer [to your partner], sometimes further. (Interview, Tripoli, Lebanon, June 2018)

In order to keep the family together, Maisoun said she now put more effort into her relationship with her husband. She talked with him over the phone and followed him virtually on his journey.

I talk to my husband every night. [...] Now even if we are separated, we try to maintain stability in our relationship. (Interview, Tripoli, Lebanon, June 2018)

Maisoun's efforts to maintain family stability through contact with her husband from a distance also involved her children, with whom she shared information and stories about their father. In this way, her husband's presence was also felt strongly by the children, creating a new way to do family from afar.

These accounts resonate with what Joseph (1993) calls 'family connectivity' and Bryceson and Vuorela (2002) call 'familial relativising'. In other words, many participants were able to maintain family continuity in the transnational space and seemed to see themselves as an extension of their families and their families as an extension of themselves (Joseph, 1993).

Syrian women and men in separation were able to do family from afar by establishing relationships in which their boundaries as individuals were fluid and blurred enough to feel that they were a part of their significant others even during separation (Tuzi, 2022). For example, they imagined a possible future together in which they would be reunited as a family. In this way, they also kept hope, expectations and aspirations alive. My findings confirm that individuals are able to do family under different circumstances and in multiple dimensions (see Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002; Kofman, 2004), including during separation.

### ***10.4.3 Reinforcing Religious Beliefs and Practices***

The final category of coping strategies identified in both fieldwork investigations is the reinforcement of religiosity. Syrian participants in Lebanon and Germany engaged or re-engaged in religious activities and practices, especially as a way to cope with the ethical dimension of everyday insecurities. The most significant expression of ethical insecurities was ‘survivors’ guilt’, a feeling associated with having survived traumatic events such as wars or natural disasters (Bemak et al., 2002).

Nevertheless, participants who were displaced in Lebanon also felt guilt over being a burden for their family members abroad. For example, Khawla, a young woman from Damascus whose husband was in Sweden, lived off the money he sent her from abroad. Although her husband had not yet established himself financially in Sweden, she was dependent on him and felt the pressure of being a burden on him.

Participants who experienced these ethical insecurities often used religion to cope with these feelings that elicited emotional stress and jeopardized their sense of safety and wellbeing (Bemak et al., 2002, p. 35). Religion plays a fundamental role in the lives of many migrants, both individually and at a community level (Frederiks, 2015). Practices of ‘religious reflexivity’ (Martí, 2015) encompass problem-solving dynamics in a framework of self-construction (Tuzi, 2022). In this sense, religion becomes a reflexive action, not in deliberate religiosity in every sphere of life, but in reacting to settings that do not adhere to one’s religious values, commitments or desires (Martí, 2015; Archer, 2012).

Khawla explained that in religion she found a safe space where she could feel free from the pressures of her circumstances.

In my religion, I found a safe space. I was not so involved in religious practices before. I am a Muslim, but neither my husband nor my family are into religion so much. When [my husband] left, I decided to wear a veil as a way to protect myself. Praying came gradually, but it helped me to handle difficulties and to keep having hope for the future. (Interview, El-Marj, Lebanon, September 2018)

Khawla used religion as a tool to cope with harsh living conditions and with life as a lone woman. By reapproaching religion and religious practices in displacement, she constructed a new, resilient self. Similarly, Nabil, a man from Homs in his late twenties who lived in Berlin, found in religion the strength to manage the relational insecurities of separation. Nabil had been separated from his family for 3 years when I reached out to him in March 2019. He engaged in religious practices to find the strength to keep hope alive.

Praying helps me to believe that there will be a better future for my family and me. I did not know it could be so beneficial. I was never very religious. I believe in God and everything, but I have never truly engaged in practices. (Interview, Berlin, Germany, March 2019)

Nabil and Khawla had embraced a more religious life-view that provided them with meaning and support in their difficult family situations.

The relational insecurities experienced by research participants were not solely a result of their separation from family members, but also due to the loss of support networks and the difficulty of establishing new ones in displacement. For example, Abdallah, a man from the Golan Heights who lived with his sister's family in Münster, Germany, was especially concerned about his lack of friends.

In Germany, I found no one I could really trust. People saw me either as a terrorist or as a broken thing. I really miss having friends and sharing my thoughts with them. (Interview, Münster, Germany, March 2019)

For Abdallah, religion offered a way to compensate for the loss of his support networks:

When I feel lonely, I pray. I read the Qur'an. [...] I feel better after that. [...] I have suffered a lot in my life. I escaped from bombs, I had no food, I ran away from oppressors, and I have been without documents [...] I was not so religious before, but the discovery of religion helped me to get through all this, as I had only God to support me. (Interview, Münster, Germany, March 2019)

The 'discovery of religion', *āiktishāf al-dīn*, sustained him and helped him to heal from the painful experiences of war, violence, imprisonment and forced migration. As Abdallah's experience demonstrates, experiencing or re-experiencing a religious self is a way to cope with the multilayered structures of separation in displacement.

These findings resemble what other authors have found. For example, Khawaja et al. (2008), in a study on Sudanese women in Australia, found that although refugee women had gone through life-threatening experiences and traumatic events during displacement, they had developed a series of coping strategies, such as reliance on religious beliefs and inner resources, and a focus on plans and aspirations. Religious beliefs were tied to the process of resilience and endurance in forced migration, but were also employed to adapt to life difficulties (Khawaja et al., 2008).

## 10.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined the experiences of separated Syrian families in Germany and Lebanon. Despite the different displacement contexts and the fact that there were no connections between my Syrian interviewees in the Global North and the Global South, I found parallelisms in the strategies displaced people employed to come to terms with the hardship of family separation. Family separation is a disruptive experience for everyone, but even more so if it is prolonged and there is no chance of reunification in sight. Separation for the participants in this research was an unwanted condition that was often experienced with great discomfort and concern. As my interviewees in Lebanon and Germany have explained, separation was experienced as a suspended state or limbo that created multiple everyday insecurities and impacted their lives as well as the wellbeing of their family members across borders.

Syrian women and men in this study used common strategies to come to terms with the overlapping material, relational and ethical everyday insecurities experienced in separation. In particular, families in both Lebanon and Germany established new networks and activities to improve their wellbeing, maintained and consolidated family relations from afar, and reinforced religious beliefs and practices in a framework of self-construction to heal from the painful experiences of separation. In this way, displaced Syrians in Lebanon and Germany exercised agency not only through tangible actions but also as 'intangible, cognitive processes of reflection and analysis' (Kabeer, 1999, p. 438). For example, they were able to do family from afar by establishing relationships in which their boundaries as individuals were fluid and blurred enough to feel that they were a part of their significant others even during separation. Some people imagined a possible future in which they would be reunited as a family. In this sense, separation was conceived as multidimensional, with not only a physical or spatial dimension, but also a temporal one.

However, separation should not be normalized, and separated families should not be considered merely a new way to live relationships in forced displacement and during migration. Family separation remains a disruptive experience that brings about great discomfort and concern for many migrants.

My work suggests three avenues for future research. First, it would be interesting to look at the impact of family separation on gender relations from an intersectional perspective. An intersectional lens would help to capture the multidimensional importance of different socially constructed categories that shape identities and to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the structural constraints on separated refugee families. Second, it is crucial to understand how family separation affects the social inclusion of Syrian refugees in resettlement countries. Finally, I suggest that more research be done on how coping strategies affect families once they are reunited. Some of the coping mechanisms identified in this chapter can be transformative and hence potentially divisive and challenging for reunited families. This chapter therefore invites further research as well as urging practitioners to focus on micro-level perspectives in order to shape more efficient macro-level responses.

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# Chapter 11

## Navigating Affective (In)securities: Forced Migration and Transnational Family Relationships



Johanna Hiitola, Zeinab Karimi, and Johanna Leinonen

### 11.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the emotional and affective dimensions of family separation as experienced by forced migrants separated from their transnational families by Finland's family reunification policy. Most migrants undergo temporary or permanent separation from their family members during the process of migration. For some, family separation is an expected result of a family member's decision to work or study in another country; for others, it is an unwanted – and occasionally unexpected – consequence of the tightening family reunification policies in many countries. Regardless of the specific circumstances, a growing number of migrants (and their descendants) are maintaining family ties across borders. Especially since the 2000s, the vast scholarship on transnational families has examined transnational family constellations, remittances and communication across borders, care practices between migrants and 'those left behind', and the ways in which transnational life moulds gender relations (e.g., Parreñas, 2005; Baldassar et al., 2007; Kilkey & Merla, 2014).

While the early scholarship on transnational families analysed *how* family members managed to maintain a sense of family unity, researchers have more recently started to inquire *why* family members continue to do so across time, space and generations – as Wise and Velayutham (2017, p. 117) ask, what *compels* people to maintain relationships despite distance? Research on emotions in the context of

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M. Tiilikainen et al. (eds.), *Forced Migration and Separated Families*,

MISCOE Research Series, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-24974-7\\_11](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-24974-7_11)

transnational families has argued that emotions should be considered a ‘constitutive part of the transnational family experience itself’ (Skrbiš, 2008, p. 236; see also Baldassar & Gabaccia, 2011; Baldassar & Merla, 2014). For instance, scholars have examined the emotional labour involved in transnational parenting, care giving and care chains. Although research has primarily focused on the transnational care work undertaken by women, recent work points out that men perform emotional labour within transnational families as well (Charsley & Liversage, 2015; Schmalzbauer, 2015).

Transnational families are typically studied in the context of the globalization of labour mobility. Scholarship that considers the emotional webs of transnational families formed by forced migration is harder to find (see, however, Tiilikainen, 2020). This is surprising when we consider that the basic functions of family – protection, safety, intimacy, cultural survival – are challenged or made impossible during forced migration (Dellios, 2018). The circumstances of forced migration may require family members to flee at different times or through different routes, separate them along the way, or result in sending one family member first to seek asylum with the hope of family reunion later on. While migrants of various backgrounds and statuses may face involuntary family separation due to strict migration policies – and, consequently, experience stress and anxiety about their family’s future – the situation may be even more difficult for forced migrants. Research shows that a majority of forced migrants end up involuntarily separated from their family members for a long period, which can seriously affect their health and well-being (e.g., Rousseau et al., 2004; Nickerson et al., 2010).

In our own research on forced migrants’ experiences of family separation,<sup>1</sup> we have also found that the consequences of separation can be emotional and traumatic for many forced migrants. While many of the forced migrants we have interviewed felt personally secure in Finland, their emotional and embodied responses to the prolonged family separation they were experiencing pointed to a sense of profound insecurity as a result of their family’s situation, evidenced by signs of significant mental distress (Hiitola, 2019; Leinonen & Pellander, 2020). This observation led us to the present investigation of the role of *affects* when families are coping with family separation. While research on the emotional aspects of transnational family life is an established field, the study of transnational affect is only just emerging (Wise & Velayutham, 2017). We argue that a focus on affects can help researchers understand more deeply the sense of insecurity experienced by separated transnational families. After all, security is, in its essence, emotional. The *affective intensity* of emotion can augment or reduce a body’s ability to act (Murphy, 2012). One can be paralysed by fear and a sense of insecurity, or spring into action, as we will discuss later.

In Finland, most forced migrants face significant challenges in the family reunification process due to legal and bureaucratic obstacles devised to curtail family

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<sup>1</sup>The research presented here is part of a larger project, Family Separation, Migration Status and Everyday Security: Experiences and Strategies of Vulnerable Migrants, funded by the Academy of Finland for the period 2018–2021 and led by Marja Tiilikainen (grant number: 308249).

migration. Forced migrants may be granted one of four different categories of residency: refugee status/asylum, subsidiary protection, residency based on compassionate grounds or residency for victims of human trafficking. Additionally, some migrants may apply for other statuses such as those based on work or studying. Once residency is granted, forced migrants must fulfil various requirements to proceed with the process of family reunification. According to current Finnish legislation (Palander, 2018, pp. 375–380), forced migrants who have been granted residency based on subsidiary protection or compassionate grounds or as a victim of human trafficking must satisfy an income requirement for family reunification, even if they are minors. Furthermore, if a person who has been granted refugee status or asylum on the grounds of persecution does not submit their application for family reunification within 3 months of receiving residency, they must demonstrate the same high income level as any other third-country national who wishes to bring a family member to Finland. For example, the monthly income requirement for a person trying to bring a spouse and three children to Finland is 2900 euros after taxes, which corresponds to a monthly salary of close to 4000 euros. This figure is more than the average monthly income in Finland, and higher than what is required in the other Nordic countries.<sup>2</sup> Many face additional bureaucratic obstacles, such as the difficulty of reaching a Finnish embassy abroad, where family reunification applications must be lodged (Hiitola, 2019). In the following pages, we discuss how families cope in these dire circumstances by bringing into focus the connection between affect and everyday insecurity.

## 11.2 Affect, Everyday (In)security and Family Separation

When interviewing forced migrants, we found that family separation is an intensely emotional experience, which was evidenced by participants' embodied and emotive responses to their situation. This crucial aspect seems to disappear when concentrating theoretically only on the strategies migrants employ to survive. Emotions have the potential to spur action, but can also almost paralyse interviewees into a catatonic state. Feminist scholarship on affect (Ahmed, 2010, 2013; Berlant, 1997, 2011; Sedgwick & Frank, 1995) can help understand why this is the case, as such scholarship allows for the study of emotions, but also delves deeper into the body's capabilities to have an affect or to be affected by other bodies; in other words, affect can 'move' subjects under impossible circumstances. This 'movement' also serves as a link between affect studies and structural analysis: the body's responses to the world tell us about the world and the societies we live in (Berlant, 2011).

In this chapter, we do not systematically separate emotion and affect. However, it is essential to note that as a theoretical concept, affect is more than mere emotion.

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<sup>2</sup>Based on the websites of the Swedish Migration Agency (2021), the Danish Immigration Service (2021), the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (2021), and the Finnish Immigration Service (2021).

Affect is considered precognitive, meaning that it happens prior to emotions (Coleman & Ringrose, 2013). Emotion, then, is the consequence of a certain affect. However, scholarship on affect has several different ways of approaching the concept, and it is sometimes also used to describe embodied emotions (e.g., Ahmed, 2004b). Walkerdine (2010) distinguishes between three aspects of affect: the sensation (for example, pain), the ideation (the understanding that a feeling is pain), and the defence against pain. Thus, affects can also be grasped through language or through the actions they incite. Following Ahmed (2004a), affect is not about what emotions *are*, but rather what they *do* (in the world or in societies). For example, scholars such as Imogen Tyler (2013) and Judith Butler (2006) analyse various categories of ‘others’ who are stigmatized through affective rhetoric of disgust and danger.

Wise and Velayutham (2017) have extended the analysis of affects into a transnational setting by introducing the concept of *transnational affect*. They connect affective intensities to transnational situations in six ways that also provide a starting point for empirical research: Strategic intensity refers to the act of intensifying affect, such as slapping a table when speaking to amplify the body’s affective engagement with the situation at hand. Moral intensity concerns social codes and norms that are resisted or followed. Embodied intensity can compress time and space and make remembered traumatic incidents seem ‘closer’. Intensity of family ties is maintained through keeping in contact by phone and digital methods. Additionally, material objects such as monetary remittances may intensify affective ties. Finally, Wise and Velayutham suggest that in the absence of family, affective displacement may occur, in which one’s family is replaced by new social ties. Ultimately, Wise and Velayutham (2017, p. 117) argue that it is ‘nonmaterial affective conditions that foster and underpin transnational networks and relationships.’

Transnational affective intensities may become more pronounced when families are forced to stay apart for an extended period. Our research shows that a crucial factor in this is the sense of *everyday insecurity* that family members in Finland and in origin or transit countries experience. We take inspiration from feminist geographers, who have shifted scholarly attention from state-level security to everyday emotional and embodied encounters where security measures are lived, felt and resisted. In particular, feminist scholars have highlighted how geopolitical and everyday securities are ‘interconnected and interdependent’, so that, for example, the securitization of international migration can produce embodied and emotional everyday insecurity for people who are the targets of such measures (Botterill et al., 2019; see also Crawford & Hutchinson, 2016). As Ahmed (2004b) has noted, people’s mobility can be constrained through ‘affective politics of fear’, through which the security of some is enhanced by producing insecurity for others. Our interviewees and their family members are living the embodied and emotional repercussions of security measures enforced by the state, and because of this, their transnational family life is characterized by affective insecurity.

Our research shows that prolonged family separation can produce a generalized state of insecurity, of ‘being unable to predict one’s (and one’s family’s) fate’ (Waite et al., 2014, p. 316), which applies to family members both in Finland and in other

countries. Scholars have described such affective states as *ontological insecurity* (Waite et al., 2014; Innes, 2017; Botterill et al., 2019). The concept of ontological security derives from psychology (Laing, 1960) but has been incorporated into social science research, where scholars have understood it as a ‘psychological need for a sense of predictability and continuity’ (Waite et al., 2014, p. 314). Giddens (1991, p. 92) has elaborated the theory and defined the term as the ‘confidence that most human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the surrounding social and material environments of action.’ Importantly, the concept carries a temporal element; a sense of security involves anticipatory affects and action (Anderson, 2010). Affects can push people to engage in anticipatory acts to improve their and their families’ security. However, if one feels ontologically insecure, this affective state can also diminish one’s ability to act – one can become essentially paralysed by fear or hopelessness.

### 11.3 Methods and Data

The analysis is based on 45 transcribed group and individual interviews with 55 forced migrants in Finland (18 women and 37 men) who were either in the process of trying to bring family members to the country or had eventually been able to do so. Sixteen interviews were conducted with migrants who came to Finland as unaccompanied minors; the rest arrived as adults. All the interviewees had a Finnish residence permit that allowed them to apply for family reunification. The interviews were conducted in Finnish, English, Arabic, Somali or Dari, some with the help of a research assistant. Of the authors of this chapter, Hiitola carried out the substudy as a whole and conducted 41 interviews, Karimi interpreted 6 interviews and translated and transcribed 13 interviews from Dari to English, and Leinonen conducted 4 interviews and participated in designing the research project.

Research ethics were carefully considered and re-evaluated throughout, since most of the interviewees were living in extremely difficult circumstances. All the names used below are pseudonyms. Questions of anonymity have been assessed individually for every story reported in this article. An important ethical choice has been to keep in contact with many of the interviewees after the interview – though, of course, only if they considered it necessary. Recent scholarship on research with refugees stresses that in addition to the ‘do no harm’ principle, it is essential to give back to the community, not just ‘steal stories’ (Krause, 2017; Pittaway et al., 2010). This has been taken into account by trying to influence migration policies through active dissemination of our results outside of academia.

The interviews were emotional, and the interviewees expressed different feelings (anger, sadness, grief, hopelessness, joy). The participants’ stories affected us deeply (see also Knudsen & Stage, 2015) and made us express our own emotions during the interviews (e.g., crying with the participants or expressing sympathy to calm down an interviewee) (see also Blackman, 2012; Blackman & Venn, 2010; Ezzy, 2010). Hearing about experiences of separation from children, sexual or



physical violence, or violent administrative processes invoked emotions in us according to our own vulnerabilities. The intensity of some of the interviews stayed with us and pushed us to write this chapter.

To analyse the data, we first went through the interviews to identify affective intensity (rhythms and peaks) and patterns of circulation of affect in relation to the participants' transnational family life (Knudsen & Stage, 2015). To capture the relational dynamics of affect, we underlined the *everyday flows of forces* (Kolehmainen & Juvonen, 2018, p. 2) that helped us identify the main themes. The themes explained how affects are relational, entangled and embodied in the lives of transnational families (e.g., Blackman, 2012; Blackman & Venn, 2010, p. 8; Seyfert, 2012). In the following pages, we explore the affective dimensions of the everyday insecurity of separated families by focusing on three themes: affective judgement, affective disparity and transnational affect. Together, they bring out how families' insecure futures crucially influence the affective work that family members engage in transnationally. In addition, our discussion brings out how transnational flows of affect are impacted by a family member's intersectional position within the family, the community and the surrounding society.

## 11.4 Affective Judgement in Transnational Families

Previous scholarship has pointed out that affect shapes everyday encounters and relationships through influencing interpretation and judgement. Relationships such as marriage and parent-child relationships are strong 'affective investments', partly because they are valued over other relationships (Kolehmainen & Juvonen, 2018). Several studies show that social norms and hierarchies connected to gender, sexuality, ethnicity and class are maintained and articulated through affective judgement (e.g., Ahmed, 2004a; Kolehmainen, 2012; Tyler, 2013). Affect manifests in connection to structures and hierarchies in intimate relationships through what is seen as desirable, disgusting, pleasurable or dirty, for example (see Kolehmainen & Juvonen, 2018). This also means that affect intensifies as a result of societal and community norms about respectability. Our research shows that affective judgement has a transnational scope, as separated families are under 'the collective evaluative gaze of the transnational community' (Wise & Velayutham, 2017, p. 123). In our study, it was often men who were forced to leave their families, and women and children who stayed behind. Because of gendered expectations regarding men's and women's roles in the family and in the community, women waiting for family reunification for a prolonged period felt affective judgement more often than men. In many cases, the judgement led to experiences of everyday insecurity, from community pressure or ostracism to life-threatening situations.

Lina, an Iraqi woman in her forties, was one of the women who had felt affective judgement from her community. After having waited for family reunification for almost 5 years, Lina had just arrived in Finland to join her husband. Lina's husband, Ali, had been granted a residence permit already in 2015, but had struggled to fulfil

the income requirement. Lina had awaited reunification in several different countries and in difficult circumstances with their three children. She explained how society's judgement intensified her affective responses, such as shame:

Often the woman is stigmatized by the society and ashamed when her husband leaves her for a long period. Many people gossiped a lot. They asked: 'How is it possible for you to live alone?' But we were forced to live that way.

Lina's description, like many other narrations of shame in the data, referenced societal norms by which women living alone without their husbands are considered unrespectable. The community in which the women wait – a refugee camp, a relative's house or society at large – often fails to understand the bureaucratic difficulties that prolong family reunification. Patriarchal norms may guide community members to think that women living without their husbands are not successfully fulfilling their societal roles as wives. These pressures apply to both women and men, but in terms of affective insecurity, the consequences are often more serious for women, especially if there are doubts as to whether the husband will return.

Some women make the courageous decision to stay married even if it threatens their personal security. A 35-year-old Iraqi man, Elias, explained how, as a result of his conversion to Christianity while in Finland, his wife had to flee from her family's home and, later, from the refugee camp she was staying in:

They couldn't stay there [in her parents' home] anymore, because her family was pressuring her to leave me, just to separate from me. They said to her: 'You are done with him. He's gone, and he became a Christian. He is not legally your husband anymore.' My wife has been refusing to leave me. She even had to flee the displacement zone [a refugee camp in Iraq] and to go to live with her friend. Her friend lives 2 h from the displacement zone. Her family told her: 'We would take you to live with us, but you must leave your kids.' And you know, she is a mom, and she cannot leave her kids. They want to insult me by letting my children sleep in the street.

Elias tells the interviewers that his wife's family refused to give shelter to his children because of their connection to him. Here, the community's normative judgement has consequences for his family's safety, as Elias's wife has almost nowhere to go. While certainly affective for Elias, these circumstances are life-threatening for Elias's family. Elias himself was unwell, which highlights the transnational scope of affective judgement and, relatedly, the sense of everyday security. He said that his children's situation was too much for him to bear:

Sometimes I would sit at the park nearby Kela [the Social Insurance Institution of Finland] until 3 am. Because of my psychological state. Thanks to the pills that I am taking, that helped me to relax a little bit. Once I've tried to commit suicide. I can't imagine seeing my kids like that.

While affect pushed some migrants to find solutions to improve their family's security situation, others were paralysed into inaction, like Elias, who described just sitting outside the social insurance office at night. Elias had exhausted his resources and had even attempted suicide. At the time of the interview, he felt he had no possibilities for changing his situation in any way. Elias had received a residence permit based on subsidiary protection, which meant that in order for his family

reunification application to be successful, as a father of three, he would have to earn 2900 euros a month after taxes. Elias was illiterate and had never gone to school. Thus, his possibilities for attaining such a level of income were close to non-existent. The interviewer kept in contact with Elias for a few months after the interview, but then lost touch with him. When Elias was contacted again, about half a year later, he had received the news that the Supreme Administrative Court had also refused his right to family reunification. When contacted again he was angry, still unwell and did not want to have a second interview. One could grasp the hopelessness of the situation.

Affect as a result of judgement manifested at the intersection of gender and class, as well as in other positionings. A 28-year-old Afghan man, Qasim, who had been successful in bringing his wife and two children to Finland, described the relationship between affect, social position and moral judgement as follows:

This separation among Afghans is normal and does not affect their life, because in Afghanistan there are many people who are apart from their family for five or six years when they go for work. This is almost a normal matter. (...) There are people in some places that cannot be away from their wife and children even for one night. Because being by family's side is very sweet. (...) When a child makes a joke or laughs, this means the whole world. In Afghanistan, women do not get upset about being away from their husband, but they get upset because of other's judgements. People say, 'Your husband does not think of you or about you being alone here.' This bothers her but being apart is not difficult for her. Only people's gossip is bothering.

Qasim's description of affect is telling. First, affect manifests differently depending on what you are used to. For Qasim, a poor farmer, it was a norm that men in the family would work abroad. In his opinion, separation, though not pleasant, was not very affective. He brought up the community's judgement, 'gossip', which in his words was the only thing 'bothering' his wife. However, it should be noted that to be away for work and to flee persecution are distinctly different circumstances of family separation. For Qasim, who had escaped persecution, there was no possibility of visiting his family in Afghanistan. This undoubtedly intensified the community's judgement.

In most of our cases, women were waiting for reunification decisions abroad without their husbands, while men were waiting in Finland with their wives and children abroad. It was uncommon for mothers to be separated from their children. However, there were two women in this situation. One of them, Amira, an Iraqi woman in her late forties, described the difficulties she faced while her husband and two children were living in temporary housing in Turkey. She said: 'When I received a negative decision, my husband became psychologically tired. So he said, "I will figure out my own problems and I will take the children and go back to live in Iraq."' Patriarchal norms allowed Amira's husband to live alone with his children, since in Iraq children often go to live with their father after a divorce. Women did not have similar possibilities for rearranging their lives, as they were often dependent on their families or husband's families for protection while waiting for family reunification decisions abroad.

The affective response to family separation is gendered in complex ways. It is connected to societal norms and even laws that treat men and women differently. In addition, affect is connected to gendered expectations that lead to affective judgement. As a result, women waiting abroad may experience intensified affect that also results in feelings of insecurity. Furthermore, other differences, such as class, contribute to affective responses. The lack of economic resources or everyday security in a material sense may force women to become more dependent on the support of their families and communities, which further intensifies affective judgement. Poor families, families from certain areas, or those practicing certain trades may be more used to family separation. Thus, the norm of a nuclear family living together may not be as significant for them as it is for others. These patterns of affective insecurities are, again, complicated by class, ethnicity, sexuality and age.

## 11.5 Affective Disparity

Research on transnational families typically highlights how families strive to stay in touch despite distance (e.g., Wise & Velayutham, 2017). Emotional labour performed by family members may involve remittances, phone calls and other exchanges, and these transnational flows contribute to family unity. However, what has perhaps received less scholarly attention is the *affective work* involved when migrants and their family members purposefully *avoid* sharing certain information with each other. Baldassar et al. (2007) points out that exchanging support transnationally always involves negotiation – some things bring the family together, but others are better left unsaid. We found that migrants often compared their situation in Finland to that of their transnational family members. Alternatively, they compared their own circumstances to those of Finnish citizens or permanent residents. The result of these comparisons was often perceived as disparity in terms of everyday resources and security. To avoid clashes between family members, many sponsoring migrants performed affective work to shield their families from suffering as a result of these inequalities. As noted above, ontological security involves a sense of predictability and continuity of identity and the surrounding environment. Our participants were in a situation where the continuity of family unity was in jeopardy. In these circumstances, affective work to maintain family ties involved selectively choosing what information to share.

Nasir, an Iraqi father of seven children, had an 18-year-old son living in dire circumstances in a refugee camp in Greece. His three older daughters were already married and living in Iraq, and three minor children lived with him and his wife in Finland. Nasir described his attempts to shield his son in Greece from affective responses to disparities between family members:

Nowadays, I have three sons living with me. I prohibited them from posting any pictures on their Facebook. They are also not allowed to post any photos on their Snapchat. The reason I prohibited them is that I don't want my son in Greece to see their pictures, how happy they

are here. Because then he would be sad. He has complained to his mom twice, saying: 'You have a luxurious life in Finland, while I'm living in such circumstances.'

Nasir's affective work had the goal of limiting affect. His younger children were not allowed to post on social media because these posts could cause affective responses and suffering for their brother. Another Iraqi man, 34-year-old Ras, also told us about affective work. He attempted to lift his wife's spirits while she waited with a strategy opposite to that of Nasir. Ras had two children who were waiting for reunification with his wife.

I was trying to push my wife away from feeling hopeless and desperate and frustrated, so I began to tell her that now my life has become stable, and I hope that you come. Finland is a beautiful country. I started to see it myself. I felt that my view has been changed since I became a refugee compared to the time when I was still an asylum seeker. I've been telling her that the life here is beautiful.

Because Ras had received his residence permit as a refugee, his family reunification application had no income requirement. Ras was confident his application would be successful, as he and his family were able to arrange the travel and visas needed for the process. During our research, it became apparent that the ability to arrange such matters was also dependent on social class (see also Hiitola, 2019). Financial, cultural and social capital offered the possibility to reaffirm positive affects transnationally. Ras's affective work was also connected to his own sense of security and faith in the future: 'I started to see it myself.' In contrast to Nasir's situation, where his son had little hope of regaining control over his destiny, Ras was able to plan his family's future. The affective work performed by these men shows that the transmission of transnational affect depends on the specifics and intensity of the precariousness of the family. It also illustrates that migration status and its related requirements crucially shape the kind of affective work migrants feel compelled to do transnationally.

Disparities also caused affective responses when the interviewees compared their own situations to those of Finnish citizen or resident families who were able to live together. Liban, a 45-year-old Somali man, and his 19-year-old daughter Sahra reflected on their family members' responses to their different living situations. Liban and Sahra lived in Finland together and had already attained Finnish citizenship. The mother of the family and five younger siblings were living in Kenya at the time, in temporary housing paid for by Liban. Their residence permits had been refused by every level of the courts. In response to the researcher's definition of the violence of administrative barriers, Sahra reflected on her younger siblings' affective responses:

Johanna H.: Because many people don't understand that it can also be violent if you can't have your family come to Finland. It can be as hurtful as many horrible things before.

Sahra: Because they have not experienced anything. They eat and drink. They have their own house, and everything is alright.

Liban: Yes, sometimes when I speak to my children, they say that everyone is leaving for Europe, but maybe you don't want us to come. They don't understand what ...

Sahra: Because they are children. They don't know. They think that all of this is in the hands of our father.

Johanna H.: Because the father is so important to them.

Sahra: Because all of their neighbours have left. Not to Finland, but to Holland or... Everyone has left and stayed in those countries for a long time.

Liban: But here if one has one job, it's not enough. You should have two jobs to support [to reach the income requirement]. I do two jobs, and everything is expensive here.

Sahra compared her family's situation to other families in Finland who are able to be together, to 'eat and drink' together. Affective disparity may intensify children's experiences of exclusion as they compare their family life to that of their peers (Wise & Velayutham, 2017). In addition, Sahra discussed her younger siblings in Kenya, who compared their own family reunification process with others who had been able to be united with family members in Europe.

The affective work required of the sponsoring migrant in order to maintain a sense of unity and faith in a joint future was often demanding. This shows how one's ontological security is intimately intertwined with the security of one's family members. For many interviewees, it was impossible to enjoy their physically and materially secure life in Finland or make any plans for their future because of loneliness, social isolation and the constant worry over family members. In some cases, family members who had waited abroad to be reunited commented that the sponsoring family member probably suffered *more* than them, despite the material benefits of living in Finland. This excerpt is from an interview with the recently reunited family of a 35-year-old Iraqi man and his wife:

Johanna H.: I have to say, because we did two interviews with your husband before, and he was – you were very, very sad about the decisions [addressing the husband] – and then when he wrote me about the decision that you will get here to Finland, I have never seen a man that happy [interviewer laughs] and when I talked to him on the phone...

Mina: So, he probably had suffered more than us, because he was left here alone and his children were far away from him, and he had to cope living here.

This quote shows how disparities are not only about material circumstances but also about social relationships and the security they provide. As acknowledged by Mina, the sponsor may suffer more and feel insecure because of loneliness. In addition, the affective labour of the sponsoring migrant may become pronounced when family members are waiting in desperate circumstances. Thus, affect is context dependent and intersectionally intensified.

## 11.6 Transnational Affect

The transnational circulation of affect has become more intense in recent decades as communication technologies have become more widely available (Wise & Velayutham, 2017). The forced migrants in this study kept in touch with their family members with varying frequency. Some interviewees called their families every day or were in contact 'almost all the time', as one interviewee described. Others were in touch weekly and a few only sporadically because their family members did not have regular access to a phone or the internet. Some family members were missing

at the time of the interview. Individual circumstances were crucial in influencing how affect circulated transnationally via communication technologies. Nonetheless, we found that flows of emotions or other manifestations of affect had a tremendous effect on experiences of insecurity.

Jamila from Somalia was 20 years old at the time of the interview and 16 when she came to Finland as an unaccompanied minor. She narrated how her biggest hope was for her family to be safe, as they were currently living in a refugee camp. Jamila described how her mother's phone calls incited bodily responses:

Johanna H.: So how do you think your life would be different if your mother and brothers were here?

Jamila: Really different. I would be always happy and hanging out with my friends. Go somewhere, travel in vacations. I would be happy even if they would get a good place elsewhere. Not only from Finland, any place where they could have a good life. I would be so happy. I would always be happy for them. I would go to work and live my life. Not always think that if I don't pick up the phone, something has happened to, for example, my mother. It's really hard to get a phone call, 'Hello, hello?', in the middle of the night. Sometimes my mother calls and I ask quickly: 'Hi, is everything alright?' Every time she calls, I think: 'Has something happened?' My heart says boom, boom, boom.

During the interview Jamila held her phone in her hand, showing it to the interviewer as she described her heartbeat. For Jamila, transnational affect manifested through her body. She *felt* the insecurity as intensified heartbeats. Though phone calls maintained affective ties, Jamila also associated her phone with fears about her family's situation, an example of how affects tend to attach themselves to objects (e.g., Hemmings, 2005).

For many interviewees, news from countries where family members resided also incited strong affective responses. Affect was intensified for participants whose family members were missing. Twenty-year-old Azin, who came to Finland as an unaccompanied minor, described feeling his everyday security affectively when hearing news from Afghanistan. In response to a question about feeling secure, he said: 'I feel that I won't die here, but I am really anxious when I hear news from Afghanistan.'

For young refugees, the worry was often insurmountable. Twenty-year-old Habib from Afghanistan described how he suffered from severe anxiety due to constant worrying:

I have been seeing a psychologist. I can't sleep at night since I came to Finland. I can't sleep. When I want to sleep, I close my eyes, but everything comes to my mind: What me and my brother are going to do? What my parents are going to do? I don't know if you know this or not, that when there is someone very dear to you, they are much more important than yourself. If it would be possible, you change your life for that person, and it's like guilt, or not guilt, but that instead of me, my two brothers should be here.

Strong responses to severed affective ties often resulted in psychological struggles, such as insomnia. When closing his eyes, Habib travelled transnationally and was together with his family members. The shrinking of space and time is one of the qualities of transnational affect (Wise & Velayutham, 2017). Many also felt guilty for being safe while their family members were in harm's way. Another

unaccompanied minor described how he had ‘forgotten himself’ and was unable to think of himself as a deserving human being who had the right to feel positive emotions despite his family’s difficult situation.

Some interviewees were in constant contact with their family members when possible. When interviewed, Husain, a 30-year-old Iraqi man, had just received a positive family reunification decision, but his wife and three children were still in Turkey. He told us about his transnational communication during their separation:

Johanna L.: How often do you talk with your family?

Husain: Every day.

Johanna L.: Through your phone or... ?

Husain: My phone. Every day, through Viber, WhatsApp, Messenger. (...) After meeting them, three and a half years I didn’t see them. When I returned back to Turkey and we met there, I started to see there is a big connection between me and them. So when I left them, the kids started to feel really bad. So I was trying every day to send a message for each of them: ‘Hi, how are you? (...) What are you doing? Do you still think about that? Blah, blah, blah ...’ Trying to show them that I am really thinking about them. I will not leave like before. Because they thought I will leave them again for three years. Even I promised them: ‘No, it will not be like that. I will travel again soon. Just three months after finishing the course, I will be back there.’ But they don’t believe. So it was a big challenge for me and hard to send them a message every day telling them: ‘I will be there. I will be there.’

Husain tried to maintain his parental bond with his children through phone calls and travelling to Turkey. Nonetheless, Husain’s children had a difficult time understanding the reasons behind the separation. Another Iraqi interviewee said: ‘It is not only me who is psychologically tired, but the kids as well.’ Children’s sense of security was often damaged in the long waiting process. The sponsoring migrants often went to great lengths to perform affective work to maintain the spirits of their transnational family members.

Interviewees whose family members had gone missing suffered severe psychological consequences. Mohammad, originally from Afghanistan, had to leave his wife and five children behind in Turkey when he was forced onto a smugglers’ ship at gunpoint. He ended up in Finland, where a social worker helped him find his family through the Red Cross’s missing persons service. He found out that his wife and children were in Iran as undocumented migrants. At the time of the interview, Mohammad’s family had already been found and brought to Finland through successful family reunification. Mohammad’s daughter Alya described what it was like to be reunited:

Alya: It was like, we didn’t even know whether we’ll get a residence permit or will we get to see our father. It was like a feeling of living in ignorance, that we didn’t even know how it would all happen. First of all, we did not even believe that it was true. Could we get there or not, it was a feeling of not knowing. Yes, we were happy. Yes, we were happy. Dad was alive and there and... but it was like happiness and confusion at the same time.

Mohammad: But before I found them [the rest of the family], I didn’t know where they were. Almost a year and a half. That whole time I said many times that I want to go back to Afghanistan.

Johanna H.: Yes, of course.

Mohammad: And the social worker told me: ‘Where do you want to go? We haven’t found your family yet.’



Johanna H.: How were you able to withstand this? [The father starts crying.] Yes, I know these questions are really hard.

Mohammad: I can't think about it [continues to cry].

As the interview progressed, Mohammad became very emotional as memories of the separation resurfaced. In fact, here again, it seems that the family members living in extremely precarious circumstances were shielded from some of the psychological harm, as they still had each other's support. Unlike his daughter, Mohammad could not even talk about his feelings about the separation. We found out that Mohammad had been hospitalized for ill mental health in Finland before finding his family. He was still, 4 years after the family's reunification, unable to sleep alone and had frequent night terrors remembering the violent separation.

## 11.7 Conclusion

It is evident from the results of this study that the consequences of family separation are wide-ranging and serious for many forced migrants. We investigated how affect and everyday insecurity were intertwined in the lives of the interviewees and their transnational families. Murphy (2012), in an examination of the affective dimensions of security, has described security as an 'affective atmosphere' that is precognitive and not knowable, a 'background' emotion. However, Murphy points out that changes in the affective atmosphere can make security or insecurity more intensely present, bringing it into the affective foreground. These changes can occur suddenly, for example, when someone is unexpectedly threatened, or build over time, as is the case with the people we interviewed. Many of them had faced difficulties during their journey to Finland and in the processes of seeking asylum and family reunification – not to mention the reasons that had forced them to seek asylum. Their family members often waited in dire circumstances. Scholars have pointed to the significance of emotional and affective ties for one's sense of security (e.g., Innes, 2017). Our chapter provides new knowledge on the nexus between transnational family separation, forced migration and everyday security and insecurity by showing that the material security found in Finland was insufficient to negate the emotional and embodied effects of ontological insecurity linked to the experience of prolonged family separation. Our analysis of forced migrants' family relationships adds to the existing literature on transnational families and emotion (e.g., Skrbiš, 2008; Baldassar & Merla, 2014) by suggesting that affect flows transnationally and is intensified when family members are in the midst of a conflict or otherwise challenged by their surroundings.

We found two ways in which affect and insecurity were intertwined with structures and norms. First, affective judgement influenced the sense of security of transnational families, especially for women separated from their husbands. Previous research has also pointed out how norms are maintained through affective judgement (Kolehmainen, 2012). We conclude that affective investments in gendered

norms and the maintenance of gendered rhythms in intimate relationships may become more intensified when living amid conflict and war or in other precarious conditions. Insecurities are amplified if women are dependent on their extended families, husbands or communities for support. Second, we found that transnational disparities incited affective responses. Emotions, such as guilt over being the one who was 'saved' or a sense of inequality perceived in everyday environments, inflicted insecurities. Many interviewees engaged in transnational affective work to maintain their family members' sense of security. This affective work was often performed by men who lived alone in Finland. This is an important observation, as the feminist concept of emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) and scholarship on the gendered caring subject (Skeggs, 1997) highlight women's embodied work to maintain emotions. We found that men's role in affective work was also prominent when families faced forced separation.

Finally, we discussed how affect is circulated transnationally via news sharing and digital communication. The sponsors may appear to have a safe life after being granted residency, but their sense of security is affected by the circumstances of their transnational family members. We found that everyday insecurities were entangled with flows of information. Affect manifested through interviewees' bodies and sometimes resulted in severe psychological distress. We see that ontological insecurity (Botterill et al., 2019), manifesting when a sense of continuity is severed, describes well the affective consequences of family separation for forced migrants. We also found that how insecurity is *felt* depends on people's intersectional positionalities. Affective insecurities were intensified when entangled with and attached to individual circumstances.

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# Chapter 12

## Forced Migration and Evolving Responses to Queer Identity in the Muslim Family



Laine Munir and Anila Noor

### 12.1 Introduction

Asylum documents tell the story: Hassan<sup>1</sup> had always loved to sing and dance in his home in rural Pakistan. He would dress in his mother's clothes and sway to the sounds of traditional Punjabi music. Although this was not how sons typically behaved there, his mother came not only to 'accept her son's feminine behaviour, but [to] love him as God made him' (Association for the Social Support of Youth (ARSIS), personal communication, 2019).<sup>2</sup> However, once Hassan left the house for school, socializing or travel, his gender expression posed an extreme danger in public, one that finally forced his family to send him to Europe at age 17 to seek asylum.

Hassan's earliest memories of harassment based on his sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) began when he was 5 years old at his primary school in the Punjab region. In research interviews, he described how other children abused him verbally and physically and were often encouraged to do so by adults. He said:

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<sup>1</sup>The research participant's name has been changed to protect his anonymity. He chooses to be addressed with masculine pronouns.

<sup>2</sup>Throughout this chapter, 'ARSIS, personal communication, 2019' refers to the EU's *Best Interests Assessment Form for the Purposes of Implementing the Dublin Regulation* that was completed on Hassan's behalf. 'ARSIS, personal communication, 2020' refers to a completed version of a free-form report on Hassan's case, *Social Report*. Both were composed by a social worker at the Association for the Social Support of Youth (ARSIS) NGO in Thessaloniki, Greece, and are unpublished.

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There would be complaints about my behaviour from teachers and other villagers. My father would react to those complaints by thrashing me in an effort to 'correct' me once I got home. The societal pressure on my father to have a 'normal' child was so great that he felt pressured and embarrassed. The beatings would get intense. (Interview, 5 February 2020)

Eventually, Hassan's father sent him to live 2 h away at a madrassa, an Islamic religious school where they thought he could earn respect by becoming a hafiz, one who has memorized the Quran by heart. He did, but this achievement made no difference. The verbal and physical abuse continued at his madrassa. 'It would start with bullying and verbal abuse and build up to sexual abuse. They would hate me for being different and tried to sexually abuse me. At one point my fellow students even tried to rape me', he described (Interview, 5 February 2020).

During these years, some people in Hassan's life—his mother, his religious teacher and his maternal uncle in Spain—tried to protect him, but their efforts were never enough to counter the homophobia and violence from outside. At his mother's request, out of fear that community members would kill him or that he would eventually commit suicide, his parents gathered the money to have a smuggler send him by land across Iran and Turkey to Europe. They informed Hassan of the plan the night before his departure. He endured a month of treacherous travel by bus, truck, van, boat and on foot with about 25 other displaced people, including several days crammed into a shipping container in the mountains without food. Hassan finally arrived in Thessaloniki and became one of the over 50,000 asylum seekers who arrived in Greece in 2018, and was among an estimated 17,000 asylum seekers under the age of 18 (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), [n.d.](#); United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), [n.d.](#)). Upon arrival, he requested family reunification with his maternal uncle, who was living in Spain.

Hassan was received at the Association for the Social Support of Youth (ARSIS) in November 2018. ARSIS is an NGO that houses 30 unaccompanied minors in a group-home setting outside Thessaloniki. Residents attend classes, receive therapy and live in dormitories among other asylum seekers. The ARSIS social workers endeavour to help residents with their adjustment to Europe and advocate for their asylum cases with the relevant immigration authorities by building case files on their behalf. In Hassan's case, his social worker arranged for his uncle to fly from Spain to Greece for an official DNA test for their family reunification. While waiting for reunification,<sup>3</sup> Hassan has been navigating the challenges of living among fellow refugees and exploring new ways to express his gender identity in Europe. Meanwhile, he enjoys a loving but geographically distant relationship with his parents and siblings, one in which his gender, religious and sociopolitical identities have been continually reconstructed over time and space, sometimes vis-à-vis his family's community belonging.

This chapter explores the nexus of gendered securities, forced migration and family dynamics as illustrated through Hassan's life history. The central research

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<sup>3</sup>Hassan's case was still pending with the Spanish immigration authorities at the time of this research.

question is one of cause and effect: How did a transgender youth and his family members experience insecurity due to his SOGI, and what were their strategic responses aimed at reducing their individual and shared vulnerabilities across contexts?

Displaced children began migrating to and within Europe in large numbers after World War II. They had few codified protections until the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child officially named refugee minors as rights-bearers, though the exercise of these rights is dependent on how children's claims are recognized, respected and implemented in international and national systems (Lawrence et al., 2019). Today's migration of unaccompanied minors to Europe shows no signs of abating, evidenced by the almost 6000 children who arrived by land or sea in Greece alone in the first half of 2019. Of these, 17% were without an adult, an 18% increase compared to the same period the year before (UNHCR et al., 2019). Some minors may be turned away or viewed with suspicion as false petitioners. This case study describes the experiences of a relatively fortunate minor who was welcomed into the Greek refugee system and housed based on his age and SOGI minority status.

Sexual orientation-based rights abuses are recognized as a compelling reason for flight and as grounds for receiving refugee status based on the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. Since at least 1990, courts have found sexual orientation to be a fundamental part of human identity and to constitute membership in a particular social group with a well-founded fear of persecution in many countries (Goldberg, 1993, p. 617). Nevertheless, the asylum process for those fleeing due to sexual orientation is not unproblematic. First, asylum seekers must ensure that their narrative aligns with the destination state's 'checklist' for LGBTQIA+ identity (Lee & Brotman, 2011). Lee and Brotman (2013) find that asylum assessors tend to look for a linear and essentialized sexual identity trajectory, as conceived of in Cass's six-stage model of identity formation (1979). Berg and Millbank (2009) argue that psychological 'stage models' of sexual identity development are based on white, middle-class men and may not be relevant for non-Western refugees with limited experiences of SOGI categories. They also found that Western assessors judge whether asylum seekers are 'out' enough according to their own standards. Benedicto (2008) calls these notions an imagined 'gay globality'.

Scholarship on LGBTQIA+ forced migration from the Islamic world to Western countries has revealed that the insecurity of belonging is a constant struggle for refugees. Belonging is a point of strain for Muslim LGBTQIA+ refugees because their SOGI endangers them in their countries of origin, and their 'refugeeness', as Lee and Brotman (2011) term it, endangers them at their destinations. Jaspal's (2014) studies of gay Iranian migrants in the U.K. show that migrants receive a psychological reconceptualization cue fraught with tension in the period after their arrival. Anyone outside the gender binary can be labelled 'gay' in their home country, and then the applicant is retraumatized as immigration officials force them to label themselves during the intake processes, even if inaccurately, for purposes of asylum-seeking (Jaspal, 2014). Additionally, refugee reception centres may be unable to mitigate the cultural pressures LGBTQIA+ asylum seekers face when housed with others from their home countries; there are ample reports of



homophobic violence within displaced populations in Europe (Reading & Rubin, 2011; LaViolette, 2013). These experiences were all salient in this case study of Hassan.

In line with this book's inquiries into everyday security, this chapter adopts a framework inclusive of the practices that people engage in to govern their safety, offering a critical vantage point to understand the nexus of gender identity and insecurity. More specifically, it embraces a transnational intersectional approach to account for multitudinous vulnerable identities within the forced migration context. This approach is vital because Hassan self-identifies as a *khwaja sira*, a transgender woman from South Asia who dresses and behaves in ways that conform to female gender roles (Khan, 2014, p. 173).<sup>4</sup> Pakistani *khwaja sira*s number about 30,000<sup>5</sup> and endure severe human rights abuses despite legal rulings in their favour since 2009. They face persecution in terms of access to housing, employment, education and healthcare, as well as profound violence at the hands of their families and the larger community (Munir, 2019; Ming et al., 2016). This particular cultural and gender identity is pivotal to understanding Hassan's contextualized identity formation, thus aligning this case study with critical feminist scholarship focused on gender, the differential experiences of immigrants and quotidian deprivations (Safi, 2010).

## 12.2 Methods and Theoretical Framework

This chapter examines the vulnerabilities and strategic responses of a gender minority and his family through a case study based on interviews with Hassan and an information-oriented sampling of the relatives who supported him within a cultural milieu of public persecution. The first methodological decision in designing this study was to determine which questions we sought to answer. The research design's driving inquiries were based on Elizabeth Cole's (2009) guidance on intersectional research. Cole encourages researchers to ask three questions in intersectional investigations: Who is included within a social category? What role does inequality play? Where are the similarities? These questions are not mutually exclusive; in fact, each question builds on insights generated by the previous one.

The chapter adopts transnational intersectionality as its theoretical framework to delve into Hassan's multiple identities across place and time. As pioneered by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), intersectionality is a feminist theory that identifies how interconnected systems of power affect those with the most vulnerable identities, with multiple vulnerable identities often coexisting and interacting to create either

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<sup>4</sup> *Khwaja sira* refers to individuals, while *hijra* refers to the culture or community. *Khwaja sira*s often live together in *hijra* communes. *Hijra* derives from the Urdu word 'to migrate' and comes from the notion of migrating in the body, from one gender to another (Hadid, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> The Pakistani federal government's census figure in 2017 was 10,000; LGBTQIA+ activists estimate 50,000 ('Pakistani eunuchs' 2009; Baig, 2012; Haider, 2017; Mustafa, 2017).

group or non-group membership that leads to inequalities. Moreover, as Rahman (2010, p. 944) points out, 'queer is necessarily intersectional'. In this case, Hassan's status as a sexual minority youth from a poor agricultural family created discriminatory conditions that would not have existed if he was just one or the other. Hassan's experiences after arriving in Greece demonstrate a particular form of 'transnational intersectionality', a term espoused by Grabe and Else-Quest (2012). The transnational element to the discussion acknowledges that the classic canon of intersectionality is based on a globally insufficient trifecta of gender, race and class: it interprets identities primarily within the borders of individual nation-states and is a form of 'domestic intersectionality' (Patil, 2013). Not only are these three categories limited in their nuance, but migration scholars point out they are socially and culturally constructed based on context and thus not static across continents (or even necessarily nearby communities) (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002).

Hassan's case was selected on the basis of its richness and depth of family relations across time and space from among the first author's qualitative data set collected from 20 transgender respondents in Pakistan and four European countries from 2017 to 2020 (see Munir, 2019). In light of Hassan's unique and information-rich life trajectory as a transgender minor refugee who fled public persecution but retained a loving relationship with his family, we adopted the case study method for our emic investigation.

Hassan's history meets the criteria of a compelling case study since it is a new and complex functioning unit in its natural context that was investigated with many methods. This chapter's analytical approach combines two explicative strategies: qualitative and interpretation-historical. These two strategies have in common a holistic approach to the case. The former allows the research participant to construct their interpretation of their reality, true to postmodernist empirics, while the second is dependent on a constructed logic of that interpretation by the researcher. The goal of these data interpretation modes is to give voice to the vibrant life of the individuals involved, voices that may be unheard, suppressed or purposely ignored and often get lost during the refugee's journey. In the words of Olive (2014), it hopes to 'serve to disrupt the commonly held beliefs which are widely considered to be 'the truth' regarding a certain group of people' (p. 2).

The main research participants were Hassan and his uncle, whose in-depth interviews were mutually constitutive in building a narrative of vulnerabilities and responses. We interviewed Hassan first and his uncle afterward, with the expectation that the uncle's timeline would align with Hassan's while adding an extra dimension to the narrative. The uncle's interview data extended Hassan's by showing the secondary effects of Hassan's life trajectory on his family members in both Pakistan and Spain in a way Hassan himself had not perceived. An additional three interviews with Hassan's social worker in Greece served to undergird Hassan's and his uncle's accounts from a bystander's perspective. Hassan's mother and father in Punjab did not wish to be interviewed again after their interview with Hassan's Greek social worker, but fully consented to the record of that interview being used to analyse this case.

The investigation's interviews were guided by a semi-structured protocol consisting of 20 exploratory, open-ended questions regarding perceptions of sexuality, migration, and family and community security. The most general questions were presented first, with the following questions becoming progressively more specific; hence questions about the general community preceded those about specific family dynamics. Questions were also posed in chronological order to aid memory recall. Questions that pertained specifically to Hassan, such as 'How did you come to identify as queer?' were altered when asked of his uncle in order to interrogate how Hassan's family perceived his experiences and how they were affected by them (e.g., 'How do you believe Hassan came to identify as queer, and how did that impact his family?').

At its core, the essence of the case study methodology is triangulation, meaning the combination of different techniques, methods, strategies or theories in gathering and analysing data (Natow, 2020). For this investigation, triangulation was based on comparing our interviews with the three interviewees, the voice memos we exchanged with Hassan and his uncle (Noor corresponded with Hassan in their native Punjabi language, Munir with the uncle in their shared Spanish language), non-sensitive NGO case documents from ARSIS, emails with the Greek social worker and photos of Hassan at the safe zone for unaccompanied migrant children in Greece. The analysis also draws from Munir's 2017–2020 data (Munir, 2017, 2019). The combined information was analysed in three stages based on positionality: first from Hassan's perspective, then from his parents and his uncle's perspective, and finally from a bystander perspective as represented by his child protection officer. Together, these sources of information offered 'insights into what the individual interviewee considered significant and reportable while pointing to issues that may be of significance to a wider segment of society', as is the purpose of the case study method (Palmer, 2010, p. 530).

## 12.3 Persecution in Pakistan

### 12.3.1 *Individual Insecurities*

The case study analysis below details the sexuality-based persecution that propelled Hassan's forced migration, which has negatively impacted his family. It reveals his three strategic responses to the vulnerabilities he faced because of his gender identity: first to hide, then to work harder to be a 'good Muslim' and later to migrate to Greece for safety. During this process, his family followed a similar trajectory of responses, first hiding his sexuality within the home, then sending him to madrasa to 'correct' him and demonstrate their religiosity to others, and finally sending him away. After detailing these strategic responses, we describe how Hassan and his family navigated multiple individual and collective identities within their community to balance Hassan's personal security needs with their group security needs.

When Hassan describes his early life outside his family home in Pakistan, nearly all his accounts include violence. He was mocked, isolated, physically assaulted and threatened with his life (ARSIS, personal communication, 2019). Classmates often called him pejorative names like ‘hijra’.<sup>6</sup> They followed him home from school, beat him in the streets, attempted to remove his clothes and threatened to rape him as a form of correction for his ‘abnormality’. He said in his interview that by the time he reached adolescence, ‘I tried to conform to the norm and forced myself to “act normal”, to be more acceptable to those around me, but it was too painful’ (Interview, 5 February 2020). He felt that there was nothing he could do to end the abuse because:

Everyone seems to think I do not deserve to live with dignity and respect. There is a lack of education in general in Pakistan on how to treat others who are not cisgender like the majority of the population. The treatment of the transgender community is similar throughout the country. This includes the extended family, neighbours, schoolmates and teachers. They all feel entitled to ridicule us for being different. (Interview, 5 February 2020)

Feeling marginalized at school, Hassan sought out relationships with others who were also gender-fluid, a group within which he felt he could ‘disappear’. While out with a group of older khwaja siras in 2015, he witnessed an act of extreme violence against one of his friends that traumatized and transformed him. This friend was living in a commune for khwaja siras and being forced into dance performances and transactional sex by the commune’s abusive leader. Hassan described the incident:

My unlucky friend was one of those who got killed before my very own eyes. One night, the landlords of the village raped him after he danced for them. They then killed him for fun, as they know that they [khwaja siras] are not considered people and no one will miss them if they die. It was horrifying. I still cry for him. I cannot express how much pain I feel when I remember that night. I did not tell anyone about it, as we are made to believe that no one cares about people like my friend, a poor, helpless hijra. (Interview, 5 February 2020)

Hassan understands that violence against the LGBTQIA+ community remains the norm despite Pakistan’s position as a leading country in terms of transgender protections: a Supreme Court decision gave khwaja siras the right to vote and run for public office, and the federal government granted the transgender community a distinct gender category within Pakistan’s National Database and Registration Authority in 2009. It has since added the ‘third gender’ option to the national census, identity cards, passports and voter registration data, starting in 2017 (Khan, 2019a; b, p. 1194). Nevertheless, there is widespread bottom-up opposition to LGBTQIA+ equality at the local level, with the police themselves often committing the most egregious human rights violations (Associated Press of Pakistan, 2017; Human Rights Watch, 2017, p. 5). Because of this, Hassan told us, ‘there is no law or protection against it.’ There are indeed laws on the books to protect the transgender community, including the federal Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act of 2018, but they are relatively new, and there is no indication they have been implemented in Hassan’s semi-rural community.

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<sup>6</sup> *Hijra* is an outdated pejorative term when used to address a transgender person in Pakistan.

### 12.3.2 *Family Vulnerabilities*

Having an LGBTQIA+ family member resulted in secondary discrimination against Hassan's family. Despite a family's own acceptance of their LGBTQIA+ child, the child's SOGI can threaten the entire family's social security in the larger community. When asked how his SOGI threatened his family, Hassan said, 'There was general hatred from outside of the home. They never took us seriously as human beings, and they felt it was their right to get cheap laughs at our expense. I think it made them feel powerful and better than us' (Interview, 5 February 2020). In countries with weak state services like Pakistan, acceptance into local socioeconomic networks is vital for a family's well-being, determining access to local financial support mechanisms in times of need, potential marriage partners, and employment opportunities for sons that will act as financial security for elderly parents.

Hassan's parents are farmers living at the poverty line. Their agricultural income is vulnerable to weather patterns, transportation routes and world markets. Hassan's stigmatization threatened his father's inclusion in rural economic support networks for farming based on cooperation, such as informal lending and insurance schemes.<sup>7</sup> These traditional solidarity networks depend on both a shared sense of moral obligation and salient in-group membership; thus, they punish forms of deviance, including gender non-conformity (Banerjee & Duflo, 2012, pp. 144–146). Hassan's family was less likely to receive these socioeconomic benefits because his gender identity was seen as anathema to Islam and community standards.

Hassan also faced limited employment opportunities due to his SOGI. In particular, he mentioned that older family members would never hire him. The extended family plays a pivotal role in economic outcomes in rural Pakistan. 'In Pakistani society, extended family like aunts, uncles, cousins are also very involved with day-to-day family business. I got the same discriminatory treatment from the extended family, and I was ridiculed a lot at family gatherings. I had no hope [of employment] with them' (Interview, 5 February 2020). As the eldest male child, Hassan had the particular burden of supporting his parents and his siblings, which in Pakistani society is accomplished by getting married and starting a family. In this way, fear of future economic uncertainty was thrust upon Hassan, rendering his immediate daily life insecure. Crawford and Hutchinson (2016) point out that for people to feel secure, they require assurances that their safety will continue in the future, and people tend to have more confidence about future risks that are taken on voluntarily compared to those 'imposed' upon them by outside actors and forces (p. 1194).

Hassan's lack of marriage value in his community endangered his parents' financial future. There was scant chance he would take a wife who would provide a

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<sup>7</sup>There are several examples of these in his family's area, such as 'merry-go-round' savings plans, in which 12 people pool their money each month to receive the entire pot themselves once per year, and coordinated bank deposits and withdrawals to maximize interest payments and minimize fees. Informal rural networks of lending and borrowing may allow those who suffer an economic shock to repay less of a loan (Banerjee & Duflo, 2012, p. 189).

dowry or produce children who would grow up to be economic agents. His public gender identity also lowered his younger sisters' marriage value, posing a socio-economic danger for the entire family. This issue of marriage prospects is essential because South Asian households use marriage to diversify the 'risk portfolio' of their families, as in-laws can call on each other when in financial trouble (Rosenzweig & Stark, 1989). Overall, Hassan's SOGI made the rigid life trajectory he was supposed to follow impossible.

## 12.4 Individual and Shared Strategic Responses

### 12.4.1 *Social Avoidance*

Our in-depth interviews revealed three strategic responses by Hassan and his family. First, Hassan and his parents tried to hide him in the privacy of their home whenever possible; second, they turned to Islam as a means of changing his identity and establishing heteronormativity; third, they placed his wellbeing in the hands of the European immigration system, which incentivized his public identification as transgender. In discussing the earliest strategy, Hassan describes his time attending his village school as his years of 'hiding'. He would walk to and from school as fast as he could, taking less-travelled routes. He did not leave the house to socialize voluntarily and stayed inside with his siblings and mother. He gender-expressed openly at home in the hopes that he could 'let it out' and then be able to hide his SOGI more easily in public. 'I could not bear the pain. I contemplated committing suicide a lot. I just wanted to escape in any way' (Interview, 5 February 2019). Hiding Hassan at home was a strategic response fully shared between him and his family.

According to both Hassan and his uncle, his family's attempts to shield him within the confines of their home whenever he was not at school was not motivated solely by shame, but because they loved him. Although Hassan's father was not initially comfortable with Hassan's gender expression, his mother and siblings were less troubled by it. He explained:

At home, I always preferred to dress like a girl. My siblings loved me a lot and they joined me in dancing and singing. It was hard for my mother at first, but gradually, she accepted my 'behaviour' and the fact that I did not behave like the rest of the boys because she loved me. (Interview, 5 February 2020)

He also said, 'I was the eldest, which means I got a lot of love from my parents. It always disturbed my mother that I was mistreated by the people around us. She always stood up for me.' Hassan's mother believed that 'These people are not good Muslims. It's these people's minds and not the Quran that obstructs my son's freedom' (ARSIS, personal communication, 2019).

Although hiding at home protected Hassan from public physical abuse, he still endured abuse from his father as a means of 'guiding' him to more socially acceptable behaviour that would keep him safe. Even while detailing his father's beatings,

Hassan maintained in interviews that he felt loved. ‘It took a long time for my father to accept it. My father used to beat me badly until the age of 11 or 13 because of [religious] pressure that I did not behave like other boys.’ Based on Hassan’s narrations, beatings are a regular part of rural Pakistani parenting and a sign of engaged childrearing. Hassan explained that his father would feel guilty and apologize afterwards because he did not know how else to modify his son’s behaviour to keep him safe (Interview, 5 February 2020).

During this cloistering period in the home, Hassan’s family briefly considered seeking out police protection but quickly dismissed the idea. Hassan’s mother said, ‘We couldn’t go to the police. The nearest police station is far, and we are too poor to go to the police. You cannot turn to the police’ (ARSIS, personal communication, 2019). Indeed, the nearest police station is 30 km from their family home, and it is common practice in Pakistan that complainants offer a ‘fee’ to the police to get their case investigated, which was not financially possible for the family.<sup>8</sup> Police regularly fail to pursue cases of violence against the LGBTQIA+ community (Munir, 2019), and worse still, are often the perpetrators of the gravest violations against the vulnerable populations they are supposed to protect (Lieven, 2012, p. 25). In Hassan’s view:

No one cares about [transgender people] and the local police and public service officials humiliate them too. It is considered normal to beat and mock them for being different. There have been incidents where activists from the hijra community have been brutally murdered, and since their status in Pakistani society is low, they are not heard or supported by the local law enforcement agencies. (Interview, 5 February 2020)

Hassan and his family felt he had no legal protection because, in their legal world, Hassan was on his own. For his father, in particular, there was an additional fear of what visiting the police would mean: ‘We felt such shame, that then everyone would really know about Hassan’ (ARSIS, personal communication, 2019).

### ***12.4.2 Increased Religiosity***

When it became clear that hiding was not enough to protect Hassan, Hassan and his family’s second strategic response was to help him to ‘be a better Muslim’ to prove he was heterosexual. At that time, they believed that Muslims could not be gay, so if Hassan was a good Muslim, they thought he would not be gay. Hassan prayed ardently to strengthen that tenant of Islam for himself and tried to use prayer to try to control his thoughts and behaviours. As the culmination of his attempt at increased religiosity in 2014, he agreed with his father that he would go away to a madrasa 2 h from his home to study. Hassan said he and his family thought it would help ‘cure this predicament’ and make him become a ‘normal boy’ (Interview, 5 February

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<sup>8</sup>There is approximately one police station for every 50 villages in the Punjab region (Lieven, 2012, p. 148).

2020). Hassan's Greek social worker sees this second stage of response as an extension of the first: 'Sending Hassan to madrassa was, on the one hand, an effort to confront the harassment they faced, but on the other hand, it was also part of a strategy of further concealment' (NGO social worker, interview, 17 January 2020).

Madrassas are controversial Islamic institutions of education that stress memorizing the Quran over basic literacy and math skills. Hassan's suffering increased in this extremely conservative environment. He responded by memorizing the Quran because he felt it would increase his chances of entering paradise and also be a blessing for his parents—which he felt he owed them for all their struggles because of his SOGI. He also increasingly turned to his religious teacher, who tried to shield him from the other students' harassment. This teacher was empathetic and understood Hassan's difference. He even advised Hassan's father to accept his son's identity based on Quranic scripture, with the reasoning that 'this is how God made him, so you should accept him and protect him' (NGO social worker, interview, 17 January 2020). This one religious teacher could not keep Hassan safe once he was outside the madrassa walls, however.

During this time, Hassan's more religiously conservative extended family murdered his aunt's daughter in an honour killing to assert their Islamic ideals. Hassan's cousin had continued seeing her boyfriend after being married to a man in a nearby town against her will. Hassan described the situation:

Relatives never approved of the man she was seeing before and forced her to marry someone they considered appropriate for her. When it became known that the girl was still meeting her ex-boyfriend, the relatives strategized to kill her with electroshock and strangulation. The incident remained unreported. (ARSIS, personal communication, 2019)

As Hassan told his Greek social worker, he immediately understood that this could be his fate as well because homosexuality and extramarital relations bring the same shame upon a family in Pakistan. A public killing or an honour killing by their extended family was Hassan's and his parents' greatest fear for him. Hassan recounted:

My mother always felt my pain. She did her best to explain my suffering to my father. I realized later that my mother convinced my father I should be sent away from home for my safety. My mother anticipated that I would either be killed, just like my friend, or I would commit suicide if I stayed in Pakistan. (Interview, 5 February 2020)

When it became clear that Hassan was unsafe both at home and at his madrassa, his parents' concern that he would self-harm became too great. His parents ultimately decided to send him away to where they thought he would be safe: Europe.

### ***12.4.3 Forced Migration***

Sending Hassan to Greece in October 2018 was initially his mother's idea, but his father followed through and made the arrangements. Hassan said, 'Initially, I was against their decision and my sisters felt the same. We expressed our disagreement



but we couldn't change my father's mind. My father had already contacted a relative who had all the necessary contacts for the trip' (ARSIS, personal communication, 2019).

Upon initial intake at the living facility for unaccompanied minors in Thessaloniki, 17-year-old Hassan identified as 'gay'. However, he said the support and mental health services he received at the facility helped him verbalize his transgender identity. He told us, '[Greek people] have acceptance. Now, I feel comfortable accepting my own gender identity and difference as an individual. I feel more confident speaking about it' (Interview, 5 February 2020). Hassan's third strategic response—to migrate to Europe for his security—provided him with a new environment that allowed him to identify as a *khwaja sira*, a specifically Pakistani transgender person.

Hassan's identification as a *khwaja sira* served the dual functions of placing him in the European LGBTQIA+ in-group while also maintaining his Pakistani identity during his migratory transition. This was compatible with his protection goals in the European asylum system as a transgender person whose asylum claim benefitted from entrenching this LGBTQIA+ identity, while also mooring him in the unique *hijra* tradition from Pakistan. Meanwhile, his Pakistani 'foreignness' also undergirded his place in asylum deliberations in Greece. He simultaneously embraced Pakistani culture and thwarted it by identifying as LGBTQIA+.

Hassan's strengthened outward *khwaja sira* identity persisted in the Greek living facility despite the homophobia and violent ideologies of other Pakistani youth refugees there; such attitudes are not uncommon in ethnically homogenous refugee centres in Europe. Hassan recounted that he was name-called, threatened and physically harassed in classes, during recreation and in shared sleeping quarters. Some residents of the facility accused him of pretending to be gay and 'weak' to gain favour with the safe zone's staff and for his asylum case to be promoted. His peers insisted he 'reveal his identity', 'confess his crime' and apologize for his sexual orientation (ARSIS, personal communication, 2019). When describing his experience before moving from the facility to an independent apartment, Hassan said: '[I was] getting the same ridicule from other boys here as at home. [Being] outside of Pakistan is no different for me' (Interview, 5 February 2020). Despite this treatment at the living facility, Hassan maintained that he would no longer hide from his *khwaja sira* identity.

Hassan's maternal uncle had always shared his sister's support of Hassan and readily agreed to a family reunification application. The uncle has taken proactive measures to be reunited with Hassan in Spain, promptly assisting with asylum interviews and paperwork (ARSIS, personal communication, 2020). The uncle explained to us that he feels 'like a European' after 15 years in Spain, despite having previously had negative views of the LGBTQIA+ community when he lived in Pakistan (Interview, 13 February 2020). The uncle formally attested in the asylum documentation and numerous interviews that Hassan would be free to gender-express as he wishes in Barcelona. Hassan says of his family now, 'My parents are relieved that I am in a safe space, or much better place, now', and that their lives are easier as well (Interview, 5 February 2020). They have expressed relief that he can gender-identify

as he wishes. Sending Hassan away protected both him and their social position in their home community from even greater insecurities, threats and risks.

## 12.5 Individual Identity as a Threat to Communal Needs

Hassan and his parents experienced a significant tension between his gender non-conformity and their shared Muslim identity. This tension of identity extended to their belongingness to the larger Pakistani and Muslim community—their nationality and religion being mutually constitutive for them. Their home community reinforced the incompatibility of Hassan's LGBTQIA+ and religious identities at every turn. Hassan's life is a powerful example of the experiences of many queer Muslims, demonstrating how religion and sexuality converge, yet are forced apart by spiritual and cultural ideology. This conflict has also been identified and studied by scholars such as Siraj (2012), Kugle (2014) and Minwalla et al. (2005) across a variety of immigration contexts. Individuals navigating these extreme nexuses often feel both endogenous and exogenous pressure to choose one side of a binary to feel secure: being straight and Muslim or being gender non-conforming and a 'bad Muslim' (or not Muslim at all).

The interconnectedness of religious and Pakistani national identity is key to understanding transnational intersectionality and security in this case. Pakistan's political and military elite has always endeavoured to define a robust Pakistani state as a religiously fundamental Islamic republic above all else, with Islam mobilized as a masculine political and nationalistic power resource necessary to ensure public safety (Mirza, 2013; Afzal, 2018). This has created a common notion that a good Pakistani is a good Muslim, placing khwaja siras and their families at the crossroads of individual and group identity with the perceived potential to threaten collective security. This configuration of religious and national identity presents questions as to how LGBTQIA+ Pakistanis and their families can belong to a secure Muslim nation. This clash between sexuality and the Pakistani national identity is only exacerbated when the displaced queer family member migrates to Europe, as gender non-conformity is commonly seen as a Western construct that could undermine the Islamic state. Hassan's identity therefore made him vulnerable to additional ethnic and national identity and security trappings beyond religion.

Hassan's case both challenges and buttresses other findings in the larger scholarship on forced migration, vulnerability, and insecurity, and demonstrates the limits of traditional gender concepts in the 1951 Refugee Convention and in studies of gay asylum seekers. We still do not fully understand how migrants with multitudinous and sometimes conflicting identities, such as transgender and Muslim, navigate these identities to their own benefit during the asylum process. Hassan's fluctuating intimacy with his mother's family in Spain, periodically falling in and out of touch with them over the years, does not fit with studies of reunification (see Chaps. 2 and 4). However, Hassan's case resonates with other cases in migration studies in terms of individual agency. Like many migrants, his strategic responses to vulnerability

are not only reactive, but also proactive. This degree of agency is also found in Chaps. 9 and 10 on Syrian refugees who employ relational coping mechanisms to rebuild a sense of belonging through new networks and the consolidation of social bonds. As Lafleur and Vivas Romero (2018) write, ‘immigrant families may actively design their social protection strategies to counterbalance the less advantageous position they have in one space with a more privileged position they have in the other.’ In this sense, Hassan and his family are subjects of their environment, but also dynamic actors simultaneously experiencing multiple standpoints in a transnational context, characterized by geographical distance and their socioeconomic and political involvement in different nations. His family demonstrates the formidable and responsive agency of migrants everywhere.

## 12.6 Conclusion

As this chapter demonstrates, the everyday vulnerabilities and strategic responses of forced migrants and their families left behind are shifting, temporal and environmentally contingent. This is particularly so when migrants navigate multiple and fluid gender, religious and national insecurities over time and across space, as in the case of displaced LGBTQIA+ youth. Moreover, identifying as a gender minority often pits the individual human right of self-expression against a family’s collective need for socioeconomic acceptance within the home community. This case study focused on everyday realities of migrant life within the theoretical orientation of transnational intersectionality, helping to move the traditional security conversation away from armed conflict, sovereign interests and state centrism and towards examinations of informal institutions, private processes and non-state actors. Such a perspective serves as an antidote to past security studies in international politics, which have lent insufficient attention to the views and experiences of gender minorities and other marginalized groups. Thus, this chapter also contributes to critical feminist scholarship. Above all, it illustrates how security is produced and managed by individuals in enabling and productive ways, lending novel insights into what Crawford and Hutchinson (2016) aptly term ‘security’s messy everyday world’.

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# Epilogue

**Johanna Hiitola, Abdirashid A. Ismail, Jaana Palander,  
and Marja Tiilikainen**

We started this book with an interest in family separation and its impacts on forced migrants and their families. According to our conceptual and analytical framework, everyday security is central for understanding these impacts and the strategies forced migrants and their transnational families employ to endure and cope with family separation emotionally, socially, materially and legally. In this epilogue, we summarize the main observations and takeaways from our collaborative work.

Involuntary family separation is strongly shaped by migration policy regimes and legal opportunities – or the lack thereof. The findings of this book highlight that physical protection, material security and a certain level of individual welfare are often insufficient for rebuilding one’s emotional, social and ontological security if one is forced to live in separation from close family members (e.g., Chaps. 7 and 11). At the same time, the findings in this volume indicate that even under very restrictive regimes and in marginal positions, and despite the adverse effects of prolonged forced family separation, forced migrants are not bereft of agency and devise strategies to come to terms with hardships (e.g., Chap. 10).

Experiences of everyday security have both spatial and temporal dimensions. National and political contexts and individual migration statuses present forced migrants with differing opportunities in daily life. Inclusion in or exclusion from a given society may enhance or detract from one’s sense of security, and thus impact future prospects and plans (e.g., Chaps. 5 and 8). Security is concretely experienced, lived and created in daily spaces and interactions, including in transnational spaces. In this book, the temporality of everyday security has been primarily evident as waiting, but also as imagined futures in which families will be reunited (e.g., Chap. 10).

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Many chapters revealed that the emotionally straining aspects of family separation limit forced migrants' possibilities for action and creating everyday security. Chapter 8 demonstrated that deportation may result in family separation and cause extreme suffering, especially in situations where transnational family life (through visits, for example) is not possible. Deportees experiencing family separation may end up living in an extended state of liminality, where they are unable to reintegrate or build their lives anew. Chapter 11 developed the discussion on transnational affect, which remains an underdeveloped field of study. The chapter explored how emotions and affects travel across borders and how they may serve to uphold norms connected to maintaining transnational family ties.

The analyses presented in this book have demonstrated the centrality of the extended family in producing everyday security in situations of prolonged separation, but the situation of transnational family members is also a source of grave concern and worry. Forced migrants and their separated family members may try to protect each other's emotions by not disclosing certain information or bad news (e.g., Chaps. 9 and 11). Another coping strategy among forced migrants is to make sense of waiting and obstacles in everyday life through the concept of *naşīb*, meaning luck or destiny (Chap. 9). In addition, forced migrants may try to maintain existing family relationships, while also building new social relationships and reinforcing religious practices (Chap. 10). Refugees may also actively utilize the structures of official family reunification systems to maximize the security and wellbeing of themselves and their transnational families (Chap. 4). For their part, family members left behind may try to cope with the social and material insecurities caused by prolonged separation from loved ones by reshaping social roles and responsibilities, changing lifestyles and diversifying sources of livelihood (Chap. 7). The coping strategies forced migrants rely on are thus manifold and dependent on context, but similarities can also be found among migrants in all the studied geographical locations.

The intersectional approach we have applied in this book has proven fruitful in highlighting gendered, generationalized, racialized and classed vulnerabilities in forced migration. For example, it has been seen that forced migrant men may do a considerable amount of affective work (Chap. 11), which has not previously been sufficiently noted. It is also evident from many of the cases in this book that the adverse effects of precarious residency accumulate in the lives of forced migrants and their left-behind families who live in poverty and have limited resources to change their lives for the better. Consequences are gendered and generationalized as well. For example, there is a real possibility of intensified harm due to long-term separation of women from their husbands in patriarchal societies (Chap. 11). In other cases, daughters left behind are morally obliged to take their migrant mothers' roles in the household (Chap. 7). More research is urgently needed on sexual and gender minorities and their experiences of everyday security and forced migration (Chap. 12).

The studied countries differ in terms of migration policies, legislation and family reunification prospects. Migration status, the residence permits required and the related legal rights of migrants are all consequential. Whether the possibility of



residency and citizenship are provided to different migrant groups in a certain country is a political decision, as shown, for example, in Chap. 5. As Chap. 4 shows, a more open family reunification policy can allow for more security in forced migrants' lives in general. Chapter 3 revealed a lack of legal recognition of security concerns related to the family members of migrants and refugees, even in the European human rights system. The territoriality principle, which holds that states are responsible for the human rights of people within their territory, partly explains the weak recognition of the rights of family members abroad. However, this principle also opens up the possibility for taking migrants' family reunification needs into consideration in cases where family members face security threats in their places of origin or residency. Applying the extraterritoriality principle to family reunification would require states to acknowledge the insecurities and inhuman treatment faced by family members abroad and to allow for family reunification as a protective measure. This implies that the use of family reunification as a protection strategy can be supported through human rights arguments.

The book has also shown the importance of removing administrative barriers to family reunification (Chap. 2). Some of these barriers may not be readily apparent in immigration policies, instead relating to factors such as the housing market, the ability to reach embassies to submit residence permit applications, difficulties acquiring documentation or lack of opportunities to learn the language of the receiving country (e.g., Chap. 11). Our survey of the conditions in different countries shows that, contrary to human rights principles, most countries lack effective policy-based facilitation of family reunification for people receiving international protection. Though people often first flee to neighbouring countries when escaping conflict, integration and family reunification may be impossible in these countries (Chaps. 9 and 10). As a result, people try to relocate to countries where it is possible to live with dignity and be reunited with one's family. Forced migrants' hopes for family reunification contribute to increased movement across borders.

As we write this epilogue, we are in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has caused additional border restrictions all over the world and seriously disrupted family reunification procedures. The pandemic has once again revealed and exacerbated inequalities between the Global North and the Global South, including uneven access to vaccines and high-quality health services. In the post-pandemic world, the COVID certificates and tests that will be required for international travel will be most readily accessible for residents of the Global North. In addition, it is likely that COVID-19 will be used as another justification for restrictive migration policies and the continued securitization of migration.

The empirical findings presented in this volume show an urgent need to examine the effects of the securitization of migration in the transnational context: political decisions made in the Global North and in other refugee-receiving countries have a transnational reach, impacting the families of forced migrants in their countries of origin or transit. Moreover, since it has become increasingly difficult to migrate legally to the Global North, forced family separation is likely to become a long-lasting condition for many, young people and adults alike, including for those who

manage to obtain a residence permit. Family separation will also continue to impact migrants' prospects for integration, likely even more so than before.

This volume has produced novel insights on the relationship between state-centred migration policies and experiences of everyday security among forced migrants and their transnational families. Our exploration has revealed a clear discrepancy between legal recognition and lived experiences of (in)securities. We argue that these unrecognized security concerns, big or small, affect people's well-being and sense of trust and belonging. Using the everyday security frame for analysis has allowed us to emphasize the seriousness of the effects of family separation.

The book has also demonstrated that the impacts of family separation differ significantly in different contexts and need to be analysed carefully. Thus, there is a need for further research, particularly outside of Europe, in order to build a more profound and multifaceted picture of forced migration and its impacts. For example, the irregular migration of young Somalis to Europe was considered a tragedy by the family members left behind in Somalia (Chap. 7), whereas in Benin City, Nigeria, the benefits of irregular migration were seen as outweighing the sacrifices (Chap. 6). Several factors may shape families' responses to mobile situations: their involvement in migration decisions, differences in migration routes and smugglers' tactics, migrants' gender and age, and the consequences of migration on the migrant and family members left behind.

Taken together, the chapters of this book demonstrated the analytic power of the concept of everyday security in exposing the material, social and psychological experiences embedded in the securitization of migration. The chapters lay bare a global trend of policy-infused family separation that causes enormous distress for individuals and families. As we proposed in the beginning of this volume, we have shown that the insecurities experienced by forced migrants and their transnational families in relation to family separation are many and multifaceted – material, financial, social, relational, emotional, moral, ethical and legal – with profound implications for migrants' wellbeing, even for sustaining their lives. These insecurities are also cumulative, in the sense that the presence of one insecurity generates another. However, forced migrants should not only be perceived as vulnerable victims, but people who are actively trying to maintain and improve their everyday security. As editors, we thank all the research participants who made the empirical analyses presented in this book possible by telling us about their lives, struggles and methods of coping with these hard realities.

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