

Gendered mobilities and transnational identities

In this short introduction to a themed section on gendered mobilities and transnational identities the papers are introduced and the three key conceptual themes which emerge from the collection are discussed. It is argued first, that gendered migration patterns reconfigure all the social relations within transnational family formations. Second, that chains of care need to be conceptualised in more complex ways recognising multiple forms and circulations of care. Finally, it is suggested that attention needs to be paid to the ways in which institutions intersect with migration and transnational family formations.

Keywords: mobility; transnational families; care; migration

This special issue brings together a collection of papers first presented at a special session organised by the Commission on Gender of the International Geographical Union (IGU) for the IGU Conference in Krakow, Poland, August 2014. The session, entitled ‘Gendered mobilities and transnational identities’, brought together international scholars whose range of work sought to extend the parameters of existing scholarship on the gendering of transnational networks and identities. The significance of gender in understanding migration patterns, processes and outcomes is emphasised in contemporary migration studies (Oso and Ribas Mateos 2013; Fiddian-Qamiyeh 2014). Feminist critiques of macro-economic approaches to understanding migration decision-making and the need to understand household strategies is now well-established, as are the dynamics shaping distinctive migration flows related to gendered employment and settlement possibilities. There is also a growing scholarship on transnational family formations (Bryceson and Vuorela 2002; Baldassar, Vellekoop Baldock and Wilding 2007) which examines both how caring and familial reproductive labour is organised across distances and how gendered migration flows reconfigure familial gender roles and practices. The work of feminist geographers has been at the forefront of this scholarship characterised by

careful attention to the gendered geographies of transnational networks (Pratt and Yeoh 2003) and the specificity of place in the ways in which migration and gender intersect. The work of feminist geographers has also foregrounded the emotional and affective dimensions of gendered mobilities and transnational identities (Walton-Roberts and Pratt 2005).

The papers in this special issue build on this scholarship through papers that explore: the gendered and generational transnational care networks of Sri Lankan-Australian transnational families (**Menusha de Silva**); the negotiations of gender identities in Indonesia and the Phillipines in the context of maternal migration (**Theodora Lam and Brenda Yeoh**); the contested gender roles of marriage migrants or 'foreign wives' in Taiwan (**Jun-Hua Lin**); and negotiations of gender identities by Polish child migrants in Norway (**Stella Strzemcka**). Although drawn from diverse contexts in South Asia and Europe, these papers explore intersecting themes which extend existing ways of thinking about the gendered dimensions of migration and transnational social formations. First, the papers offer a perspective which extends the lens of transnational family formations beyond the traditional focus of transnational mothering to include an examination of wider familial relations. This perspective is important in developing a second key cross-cutting theme which is an analysis of how the transnational practice of care is negotiated and re-worked suggesting new ways of theorising care chains and circuits. Finally, these papers reiterate the role of state institutions, including both those focused specifically on migrants and others such as schools, in shaping how gendered norms and practices are transmitted.

The well-established analysis of the feminisation of migration has produced an important wave of scholarship focused on the experience of transnational mothering (Parreñas 2005). This research documents the ambivalent experiences of female labour migrants undertaking paid work

abroad, often in traditional feminine roles such as domestic work and childcare, while also negotiating their role as mothers for children left behind in their home countries. Studies of transnational mothering in different contexts (Hondageneu-Sotelo and Avila 2008; Parreñas 2005; Madianou and Miller 2011; Zontini 2004) explore strikingly similar narratives of loss, grief and guilt about the difficulties of providing materially for children while also being away physically during their childhood and how different strategies of transnational care offer some comfort (Madianou 2012). Such studies offer important insights into how ideas about expected gender roles as mothers are re-negotiated by mobile migrant mothers. However, there is an increasing concern with broadening the lens of gendered migration studies to focus on the wider dynamics of transnational family formations and to understand better how gender relations for all members might be re-negotiated through migration. These might include partners, children and the extended family.

There are a few studies of transnational families which have highlighted the experiences of the husbands left behind, often portrayed in negative terms as refusing or avoiding taking on the role of the absent mother and instead leaving that role to other female family members (Parreñas, 2008). However, understanding the wider experiences of 'left-behind' fathers remain limited and lacking the nuanced attention to gendered dynamics given to the study of migrant mothers. Similarly, there are few studies which examine intergenerational dynamics within transnational family formations particularly the experiences of parents whose adult children have migrated who must learn new modes of living contrary to previous expectations of extended families (King and Vullnetari 2009). The papers in this special issue take this broader lens of thinking about the impact of gendered mobilities on how transnational family formations are configured and experienced. Theodora Lam and Brenda Yeoh suggest in their study of

Indonesian and Filipino fathers whose spouses have migrated for work that new norms of masculinity and fatherhood are negotiated. Similarly Menusha De Silva argues that studies of highly-skilled migration from Sri Lanka to Australia have focused solely on the experiences of the migrants themselves rather than situating these migrants within their wider familial networks which include their elderly parents at home in Sri Lanka. Likewise Stella Strzemecka chooses to interrogate the experience of migration for Polish families in Norway by interviewing young children in school and at home, thus opening up a space to understand the complex ways in which new gender norms and practices are absorbed. Taken together these approaches offer a broader frame for understanding the relationship between gender and mobility focusing beyond individual, often female, migrants to understanding their embedding within wider transnational family formations. The papers in this collection suggest the productive insights gained from multi-sited research (both quantitative and qualitative) which is able to access experiences of multiple actors within migrant and transnational families. Of course, such a transnational familial approach might also be limiting and recognition must be given to gendered migration flows which seek instead an escape from and a denial of fixed or normative family formations (Mai and King 2009, Binnie and Klesse 2013).

Nonetheless a wider focus on the dynamics of transnational families allows a more nuanced and complex understanding of processes of care giving which are often central to studies of transnational mothering but have been been critiqued for focusing only on uni-directional flows (Baldassar, Vellekoop Baldock and Wilding 2007). Although the conceptualisation of care-chains has been important in understanding the unequal dynamics of gendered migration it may be more effective to think instead of 'care circulations' within transnational networks where caring relationships are more complex and multi-linear. This more

complex conceptualisation enables better understanding of the multiple dimensions of care-giving relationships, expectations and needs within the stretched social relations produced by increased migration and globalisation (Baldasser and Merla 2014). Menusha De Silva in this collection argues that it is also necessary to expand definitions of care-giving to include the expectations and understandings of both care-givers and care-receivers and also recognising that care encompasses emotional as well as financial support. This extended definition of care circulations also acknowledges that different forms of care are framed and enacted through gendered practices. Such practices may reinforce normative ideas of caring or traditional gender roles although there is also scope to challenge these.

The navigation of normative performances of care-giving through the performance of the role of traditional Taiwanese wife is also explored in Jua-Hua's paper which explores the contradictory role of the NGOs in Taiwan tasked with supporting 'foreign wives.' This paper also foregrounds the third theme which emerges from this special collection of papers which is the intersection of institutions, particularly those controlled or affiliated to the state, with transnational family formations and gendered processes of migration. Of course there is an established literature which has documented the ways in which state policies frame the possibilities for gendered labour migration and transnational family formation (Silvey 2007, Neveu Kringelbach 2015) however less attention has been paid to the role of institutions on the lives of migrants once they have successfully migrated. In this collection Stella's paper on Polish migrant families in Norway explores the role of the Norwegian elementary school in defining normative 'progressive' gender and sexual equality and how such values are transmitted to and interpreted by migrant children from different backgrounds. Her paper emphasises the ways in which ethnic and cultural values are gendered and how expectations of cultural transference are

unsettled in the migration context. This work echoes recent debates within other parts of Europe about how migrants from particular backgrounds may find that state policies of ‘integration’ require confirmation to particular normative gender roles through citizenship tests or classes (De Leeuw and van Wichelen 2012). In Taiwan Jun-Hua suggests that the so-called ‘empowerment classes’ are instead self-consciously inculcating the marriage migrants from other countries into their role as ‘proper wives’ in Taiwan. Here, in contrast to the Norwegian example, state sponsored institutions appear to reinforce patriarchal authority. These opposing examples suggest the need for more work on the role of institutions in shaping the lives of migrants and their families not simply at the point of entry. These papers open up a wider theme, provoked by migration, of the intersection between familial negotiations of gender identities and roles and their embedding within specific national and cultural contexts underpinned by normative institutional practices.

Having highlighted some of the key themes of this themed section the key arguments of each paper need to be laid out. In the first paper, ‘Migrant mothers, left-behind fathers: the negotiation of gender subjectivities in Indonesia and the Philippines, Theodora Lam and Brenda Yeoh draw on a large-scale study of child health in migrant families conducted in Indonesia and the Philippines to tease out the impact on domestic gender relations and care-giving in households where mothers are labour migrants. They emphasise that transnational labour migration has been a long-term livelihood strategy for many Southeast Asian households with prolonged feminisation of labour flows to meet demand for caregiving in richer countries, resulting in a ‘care-deficit’ in migrant households. Their paper draws on the narratives of both migrants and left-behind fathers to explore how gender mobilities are producing new ways of both ‘doing gender’ and ‘doing family’ for husbands taking on the responsibility for caring for

children and the household. Against previous studies which have often emphasised the failures or refusals of men to take on the role of their absent spouse, Lam and Yeoh suggest that their respondents have embraced a care-giving role but have sought to 're-package' or redefine their identities as 'the responsible father', 'the productive man' or the 'mothering father'. Thus through narratives of responsibility, retaining a wage-earning role alongside caring, or developing confidence in performing the caring role men were able to re-define their identities in ways which re-worked rather than undermined more traditional discourses of masculinity. Thus they conclude that their evidence of changing gendered *practices* of care does not necessarily suggest a transformation of gender *ideologies* but instead that normative gender practices and identities are 'in flux' within a highly mobile context.

In the second paper 'Making the emotional connection: transnational eldercare circulation within Sri-Lankan-Australian transnational families' Menusha De Silva explores both the gendered and intergenerational dynamics of transnational families. Focusing on 'transnational family case studies' of skilled Sri Lankan migrants based in Sydney, Australia, their elderly parents based in Sri Lanka and the locally-based caregivers who are usually other family members remaining in Sri Lanka, Menusha foregrounds what she defines as 'emotional transnationalism' exploring the tensions and disconnections around perspectives on caregiving from migrants, the caregivers, and their parents, the care-receivers. Her study reveals a desire for emotional, as much as financial, support and teases out the gendered dimensions of how such transnational concern is expressed, by daughters (and daughters-in-law) rather than sons, and how gendered norms of care are rehearsed when parents visit Australia. Her paper extends the limited existing literatures on the transnational care for elderly relatives by migrant children

through this nuanced articulation of how desires for emotional care are expressed and interpreted.

In the third paper of this collection, 'Towards transnational gender identity: a case study of Polish children growing up in Norway,' Stella Strzemecka shifts the focus of transnational family formation to the experiences of migrant children. Stella's study of children from Polish migrant families growing up in Norway takes the perspective of the children themselves, focusing on these young children's experience of recent migration to Norway and how they are negotiating changing ideas about gender identities. The paper suggests that while the values of the migrant family remain important in shaping gendered identities, normative ideas about egalitarian gender roles expressed through socialisation at the Norwegian school and by their peers requires negotiation and may offer challenges.

The final paper in this themed section, **Jun-Hua Lin** 'Assisting you to become a local': NGOs and constructed foreign spouses in Eastern Taiwan' also explores processes of adaptation for new migrants here focused on the experiences of ethnically Chinese women from mainland China, Hong Kong, Vietnam and Indonesia who come to Taiwan after marriage. Jun-Hua focuses in particular on the role of agencies, organised by NGOs but funded by the state, which provide care and assistance to migrant wives suggesting that these are contradictory spaces where narratives of 'empowerment' produce practices by which foreign wives are disciplined into normative forms of gender identity and performance while also essentialising their 'exotic' cultural difference. Jun-Hua questions the role of the state suggesting that the agencies are a 'social and cultural mechanism to discipline these women'.

Together these papers offer a diverse collection of perspectives on the core themes of this themed section on gendered mobilities and transnational identities. They suggest that migration

is a dynamic process through which gender identities, practices and social relations are renegotiated, navigated and challenged. These papers offer a perspective which broadens the lens of transnational gendered migration to include not only 'left-behind' male partners but also the wider intergenerational dynamics of transnational families through an emphasis on children and elderly parents. They also continue to complicate our understandings of circulations of care through a nuanced interrogation of how care-giving and receiving is articulated by different actors within transnational families. Finally, they emphasise that studies of gendered mobility and transnational families must also include the dynamic role of state and other institutional actors in shaping normative gendered frames against which migrants are defined and disciplined.

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