

Indledning

Transnational Experiences

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Globalisation, migration and modern technology mean that it is possible to talk about today's society as stretching beyond the borders of nation states. Is this basic insight of transnational studies also valid if the borders are those of a predominantly Muslim Middle East and an increasingly migrant-hostile Europe? If so, what features does the transnational experience of Middle Eastern migrants in Europe have? A number of scholars set out to investigate these questions in a research seminar in September 2006.¹ Gender negotiations and expectations appeared to be central to the transnational experience and was addressed in most of the papers presented at the seminar. Thus the journal *Women, Gender and Research (Kvinder, Køn og Forskning)* provides an apt arena for taking these questions further. In this special issue of the journal, transnational experiences of families, individuals, networks and organisations are presented by some of the participants in the seminar and other invited contributors.

Transnational relations play an important role in the lives of many migrants. Keeping in touch with relatives and friends or maintaining ties to associations and institutions in various countries supplement connections made in their new places of residence. Involvement in the country of origin may help their new lives make sense, just as visits, marital relations, political commitment, and economic transactions may be a way of remaining a member of the communities they left behind. These kinds of relations have recently been analysed and theorised widely under the concept of transnationalism or transnational relations. The transnational perspective is now a common concept used not only in migration studies but also in anthropology and cultural studies. The concept both contests and complements the theoretical perspectives of diaspora and minority studies (Vertovec & Cohen 1999). In a transnational approach, migrants are not only studied when in the process of accommodation, integration, acculturation, exclusion, inclusion etc. in the receiving countries, but are studied as agents who might have relations crossing national boundaries and who identify with and have relations in different places (see, for example, Ong 1998 and 2003, Sørensen 2002, Levitt & Glick Schiller 2004).

In the current volume, this approach is applied to a variety of cases. Thus, the experiences of Egyptian men, Palestinian families, a Somali woman, Sudanese networks, Coptic organisations and Islamic councils are presented. The life and practice of these agents cannot be studied solely by addressing their position in the receiving country, and no more aptly by addressing their position in the sending country alone. The articles share a profound empirical basis, and an interest in agents and agency resulting in a focus on subject positions, narratives and strategies.

THE CONTRIBUTIONS: NARRATIVES AND NEGOTIATIONS ON GENDER

Migration in relation to gender has numerically and sociologically entered a new phase, where demands on women in the global service economy have changed in contrast to an earlier understanding of women as a residual category, as the ones who are left behind (Vertovec & Cohen 1999, Castle & Miller 1993). But how are the transnational relations, experiences and strategies between the Middle East and European countries gendered? How are gender identities negotiated, contested and preserved in the transnational spaces? And how does the politicisation of the Middle East affect gender constructions? The differentiation with regard to gender, age, class and ethnicity are in focus here, because these factors position migrants differently in the various societies in which they are involved.

The articles of this volume address these basic questions in various ways and provide an encompassing view on gender specifically in the transnational space. Reem Saad's article "Egyptian workers in Paris: Economic migration and the male burden under transnationalism" deals with an all-male world. She shows that, "the intensity of network activity, as well as the multiple strands by which they are constituted, are defined by a transnational framework, where 'origin' and 'destination' are a single social field." Based on this, she explicates what might be true for all the cases mentioned in this volume, i.e. that the meaning of the migration experience and its implications for the individual migrant cannot be fully understood without reference to gender roles in the place of origin.

This is also valid in relation to Lise Galal's contribution, "Guardians of contested borders: Transnational strategies for Coptic survival", but in a different sense for strategic measures. Constructions of Coptic women as victims of Muslim assault prove to be a useful transnational strategy,

argues Galal. She shows how different transnational strategies result in different gender constructions closely related to the definition of being a minority in Egypt.

Nauja Kleist's article, "A heart made of *habhab* but with Danish manners: Negotiating gender and political positioning in transnational fields" focuses on a single case about a Somali woman. Just as transnational belonging might be regarded with suspicion in national policy, transnational gender identity seems to be questioned by individuals who live their more stationary lives in one national framework. Thus, the woman presented in Kleist's contribution was not readily accepted as a 'real' Dane in Denmark or a 'proper' woman in Somaliland.

Anita Fábos' article, "Between citizenship and belonging: Transnational ethnic strategies of Arab Muslim Sudanese refugees" provides insights into similar traits about the experience of commuters in what appears to be a general pattern. She shows how gender systems in the 'Arab world', though historically constructed, processual and with distinct regional, national, class, and ethnic, differences, have not only been reified by 'Western' observers, but also by Arabs. The Sudanese in Fabós' work single out the woman's responsibilities for maintaining Sudanese cultural identity, where propriety is a key element.

In Lene Kofoed Rasmussen's, "Commuting for symbolic capital: Narratives of location and positionality of Palestinian refugees", the fathers in Palestinian families in Denmark feel obliged to fulfil the role of breadwinner. Moreover, if they are unemployed they fail not only as decent breadwinners, but also as good examples for their children. To these men, parenthood is the most critical aspect of their transnational experience. For women, the transnational experience not only reinforces the demands of cultural loyalty made on women, but also gives rise to new negotiations on their role. For example, a Palestinian woman in

Kofoed Rasmussen's article returned to live in Lebanon after having spent her entire in Denmark. Stripped of opportunities to act in the Danish context, she nonetheless feels well-equipped to take part in negotiations concerning her whereabouts and is capable of expanding the opportunities to make her own decisions in Lebanon.

In "Transnational intellectual influences between Muslim scholars in the West and in the Muslim world", Karen-Lise Karman presents fatwas, or legal opinions, on gender that are issued in a European context to illustrate how the communication between religious authorities "has expanded from being unidirectional to a multidirectional exchange of ideas." Within this communication gender issues are negotiated and the circumstances of minorities are taken into consideration without ignoring traditional influences.

Though not intended as part of the thematic issue, Nira Yuval-Davis' contribution, "Nationalism, belonging, globalization and the 'ethics of care'", remains within a discussion of migrants and multi-stranded belonging.² Yuval-Davis has shifted her former focus on notions of citizenship to the politics of belonging, emphasising emotions such as solidarity and loyalty. This shift implies a critical stand towards a feminist 'ethics of care'. Global care chains and the care drain of sending countries in the global South are prominent features of feminised migration patterns, fulfilling the needs of global capitalism. In this situation, she argues, the ethics involved are more likely to "facilitate and oil, rather than obstruct and resist, the smooth working of globalized neo-liberalism".

In Western discourse, the Middle East is gendered in a one-dimensional manner, reifying the Muslim woman as victim, whereas a reification of the Muslim woman similarly takes place in the Middle East. In the above-mentioned cases, it becomes evident that the confinement of Middle Eastern women in a post-colonial narrative em-

phasising authenticity and propriety might be reinforced in the migrant situation with its repetition of their dependent and low position in relation to the Western world. Little doubt can be left about that the imposition of cultural loyalty is a salient feature of the transnational experience of Middle Eastern women. Some indications are given, however, also in cases presented in this volume, that other gender processes take place in the transnational space. Male migrants seemingly live with their gender burdens, too. And the articles show that transnational space can give rise to new negotiations that challenge the one-dimensional way of perceiving Muslim and Middle Eastern gender.

THE TRANSNATIONAL MIDDLE EAST

The transnational perspective challenges national ideas and national boundaries as *the* determining factor structuring the life and feelings of belonging of immigrants. Belonging involves much more complex and transgressing realities than national ideas promote. In other words, there is no privileged model for belonging. Researchers have recently offered new perspectives on belonging, adding simultaneity, positionality, solidarity and loyalty to the concepts covered in transnational studies (Sørensen 2002, Anthias 2002, Levitt & Glick Schiller 2004, Yuval-Davis et al 2006).

Despite boundary-crossing experiences and identifications, migrants still have to cope with a global society, where the nation state is hegemonic in discourse and practice. While the transnational practice revealed in the cases in this volume testifies that life is not confined by the state, the authors also acknowledge and analyse that states still play important roles in structuring life conditions, including the mobility of migrants and the maintenance of ties.

If not the nation state, then the region is confining when it comes to the Middle

East. As Edward Said and many others have so convincingly demonstrated, the Middle East has been objectified as being of a certain kind regarding cultural identity. In light of this, it might be problematic to repeat the geographical delimitation by using the Middle East as the basis for this volume, because it can be argued that doing so means we take part in the continuous construction and objectification of the Middle East. Our argument, however, is that it is important to focus at the Middle East not despite of, but *because* of the objectification and overwhelming politicisation of the region that takes place globally and in the individual receiving countries. These realities constitute specific conditions and limitations of the transnational practices taking place between Europe and the Middle East. The way of perceiving migrants and the possibilities of migrants from the Middle East are structured hereby. Muslim Middle Easterners have been accused of cultural backwardness and are viewed as lacking the ability to take part in a modern society. In addition, increasingly after 9/11, but also before, transnational Muslim relations are viewed with suspicion and considered potentially radical or even as forming the basis for terrorist networks. One could raise the question of how far transmigrants from the Middle East are defined and confined by the objectified Middle Eastern Muslim.

One way of addressing this question is to examine new Muslim voices. While bypassing all prejudiced expectations, Karman examines what specifically happens to Islamic authority and thinking when a Muslim consultative body is established in Europe. She identifies vivid transnational communication and a dynamic exchange of ideas between Muslim scholars in Europe and scholars in the Middle East, yet has to conclude that, “despite the flow of thinking, the old patterns of religious authority regarding guidance only slowly give way to new authorities”.

Kleist's article also points to the politicisation of both gender and Islam, arguing that the ambivalent reception of Somalis (and Muslims in general) in Denmark and the Somali civil war, which is spilling over into the diaspora, are responsible for this. Kleist notes, "Gender, religion, and political positioning are, in other words, both local *and* transnational phenomena. Closely interwoven with each other, these categories constitute an embodied and social battlefield of 'proper' behaviour and social inclusion and exclusion – especially, perhaps, in conflict and post-conflict situations".

This politicising has wider implications than for just Muslim migrants. The Coptic agents in Galal's contribution constitute as Christians a moderation of the identification of the Middle Eastern migrant as Muslim. However, to legitimise their own strategies, Coptic organisations use a religious and human rights based strategy to negotiate transnational positions, while indirectly or directly making use of the Western objectification and politicisation of the Middle East as Islamic and non-democratic.

Also in Fábos' contribution it is stressed that Middle Eastern Muslims are not only objectified by the West. Here we are introduced to a complex frame of interpretation; in addition to European objectifications, factors influencing the transnational practices in this case also include the Islamisation project of the Sudanese state as well as the Sudanese diaspora's strategy of identification with an Islamic umma.

The overall picture is that constructions of the Middle East and Muslims affect Middle Eastern migrants and their transnational strategies differently, independent of their own identity or identification with a certain interpretation of Islam.

SPACES FOR TRANSNATIONALITY?

In public debates on migrants and integra-

tion in Europe, the transnational relations of migrants tend to be regarded negatively. Sustaining various ties to one's country of origin is thought to express a lack of will to integrate into the host society or as a prioritisation of the other country. The articles presented show a more complex reality, where transnational ties represent different models of belonging. Strikingly, most of the empirical cases presented concern marginalised, or at least not especially privileged, people's transitional practices. Most of the cases resemble the Cambodian war migrants' examined by Aiwa Ong (2003), who studied their experience of American citizenship from the bottom of society. A Middle Eastern parallel to the successful Asian investors featured in an earlier work by Ong (1998) is seemingly harder to find. This raises the issue, which others have also raised, that there is a need for developing a conceptual framework, "that is capable of incorporating and explaining diversity, inequality and enduring asymmetry among migrants and their transnational practices" that refers to differences of power, class, gender and generation (Sørensen 2002, 107).

Most of the individuals presented in this volume experience their new and their old country, if not from the bottom, then from an uneasy position. In her analysis of the life of a Somali woman that feels out of place both in Denmark and in Somaliland, Kleist concludes that some migrants might feel at home in two or more places, but others find themselves in an uneasy position in both their country of residence and origin, feeling that they do not really belong to either place. The analysis emphasises, "the complexity and relativity concerning marginality and privilege in transnational social fields spanning poor and rich countries". The author is compelled to ask whether this woman is, "part of an upper-class Somaliland elite or is she a marginalised Muslim black refugee in Denmark?"

Certain family patterns emerge for ad-

justing to these types of schisms. Fábos identifies a citizenship trade-off, “whereby families make decisions to divide their members between countries, which offer refugee status leading to citizenship (Europe, North America and Australia) and those whose social norms and policies support more familiar gender roles but which do not offer the possibility of naturalisation, such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia”. In a similar vein, in Kofoed Rasmussen’s article, Palestinian families marginalised regarding symbolic capital in Denmark, “tend to withdraw their family life from the Danish majority society. They divide their lives into work, on the one hand, and family building on the other, and they arrange these tasks across borders according to opportunity structures in Denmark and Lebanon”.

These kinds of considerations are of course influenced by economic motivations, too. The Egyptian migrant workers in Paris presented in Saad’s article are motivated primarily by economic considerations. They display a high degree of simultaneity in transnational practice by sending remittances home, thereby reinforcing the community at home at the same time as their participation in the transnational network is an instrument that perpetuates the flow of migrants. The migrants, who are marginal as villagers in Egypt and equally marginal as unskilled and often illegal immigrants in France, find a way to improve the conditions of the community using a transnational network.

Transnational practices can be instrumental in other areas besides financial ones. The Coptic organisations presented in Galal’s article, for example, make use of their transnational platforms to negotiate the marginal position of Copts in Egypt, while the Muslim intellectuals’ fatwas in Karman’s article are used as an instrument to place Islam in Europe rather than in a marginal position as a product of Middle Eastern Muslims alone.

The transnational practices between the

Middle East and Europe seem to contradict the celebratory tendency in some part of transnational studies, mainly emphasising the impact of a transnational global elite. Instead, the cases in question are shedding light on problems in relation to gaining citizenship and gaining a sense of belonging. The cases show that even though simultaneity in belonging to more than one society is possible, it might cause difficulties and have large costs for the individuals involved. While the articles in this volume do not suggest that all Middle Eastern migrants in Europe live on the margins of society, they nevertheless make us wonder whether marginality is the most common and unifying trait of an otherwise heterogeneous group in regard to its social, economic, religious and normative features.

We have pointed to some of the similarities in the cases presented in the articles. In what follows the cases also provide insight into the variations in the transnational experiences of Middle Easterners. Hopefully, the volume as a whole contributes to an understanding of gender specific aspects of transnational traits as well as matters specific to the particular setting put into focus, namely transnational fields spanning Europe and the Middle East.

NOTES

1. The Seminar “Connecting Europe and the Middle East. On Migrants and Simultaneity” was part of the festival “Images of the Middle East” taking place in Denmark in summer 2006. The seminar was organised by the Department of Anthropology, Copenhagen University and the Department of Culture and Identity, Roskilde University. Funding was provided by Images of the Middle East and the Danish-Egyptian Dialogue Center.
2. It is with pleasure that we present this article here, as it is a result of Nira Yuval-Davis’ stay as guest professor at Danish universities in spring 2007 and the exchanges that she on this occasion had with gender researchers based in Denmark.

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