

# Living apart together across borders : how Ghanaian couples form, transform, or dissolve in the context of international migration

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# VALORISATION ADDENDUM

## *Societal relevance*

This thesis addressed the role of international migration on how families, and couples in particular, are formed, transformed or dissolved. Family migration is a major policy concern as it relates to issues of border security, integration and multiculturalism. In the current context of stringent migration policies, family-related migration has become one of the last options for migrants to legally enter Europe (Kraler et al., 2011; OECD, 2014). Policy debates often discuss family reunification as problematic, associating it with mostly male migrants who bring their subordinate and dependent spouses to the receiving country, or with forced, arranged, or fraudulent marriages (Grillo, 2008; Fleisher, 2008; Kofman et al., 2013; Van Dijk, 2004). Despite these concerns, we still know little about family migration patterns or about how transnational families function. By providing a better understanding of migrants' familial lives in the context of international migration, this thesis informs these public and political debates.

International migration can impact the forms families take. The context of migration often makes it difficult for families to travel together, resulting in families living geographically separated. Yet nuclear families can also migrate as a whole, families can reunite in the receiving country, or families can be formed abroad. There is not much quantitative data about these different forms or about the prevalence of these forms (Levitt, 2001b; Portes, 2001; Vertovec, 2004b). This thesis contributes to this lacuna by investigating if, when, and where families live geographically separate from each other, the forms these families take, and if, when, and where they reunify.

This thesis has demonstrated that living apart together across borders is a widespread and common feature of many migrants' familial lives. Spouses as well as parents and their children live physically separated for extended periods of time. As these familial arrangements take place across nation states, conditions in both sending and receiving countries affect migrants' and their families. It is therefore crucial to take both

these contexts into account when advancing our understanding about transnational family life, or when designing policies and programs.

Comparing Ghanaian migrants with non-migrants in Ghana revealed that international migration influences transnational family life. It further showed how socio-cultural practices from the sending country, such as the prevalence of multilocal living arrangements, as well as the receiving country context, through restrictive policies and different normative contexts play a role in the formation and transformation of transnational family life.

### *Policy implications*

Estimates say that about 60% of all third-country immigrants in Europe came through family reunification (King et al., 2010). Family-linked migration is expected to have a multiplier effect, whereby migrants settle permanently at destination and subsequently bring over their family members. Resulting from concerns about family migration, migration policies have become stricter over the years in most European countries, and opportunities for families to reunify have increasingly become more difficult. These concerns are motivated by a notion of transnational family life as a temporary arrangement, with two implicit assumptions: 1) migrants' desire to reunify with their family, and 2) that this desire is always directed towards the country of destination.

This thesis has shown that these assumptions are not necessarily correct. Instead, we found that a large share of Ghanaian migrants arrives as singles without children, and that many migrants with families live transnationally for extended periods of time instead of reunifying. Moreover, many migrants do not reunify in the country of destination, but they also return to their origin country, where they reunify with their family. These findings highlight that the extent to which migrants enter Europe via family reunification is less than is believed.

Yet policies are not the only factor affecting migrants' reunification behaviour, and not all migrants desire to reunify. Together, our findings indicate that for some migrants, living transnationally is a choice, while for others it is the consequence of *constraints*, financially, legally or otherwise. We have argued that living apart together across borders can be a preferred choice. In Ghana, like many other West African countries, living apart together is a widespread practice among spouses as well as parents and children. For some, transnational living arrangements are a continuation of their previous lifestyle and as such, not necessarily problematic and reunification is not always desired. However, living apart together across borders can also be the result of socio-economic circumstances or the unwanted outcome of stringent reunification policies. This implies that in addition to the individual motivations of migrants and their left-behind family

members, state policies influence decisions on reunification. Family reunification also takes place outside the legal framework. Additionally, it is important to realize that family reunification processes can be lengthy and stressful even for those with the necessary documents. Other research has shown the emotional difficulties that families endure after and during long separations (Bernhard et al., 2008). We have also found that transnational family life is associated with recent arrival, undocumented status, and short term permits, indicating that family reunification policies are socially selective (Kraler, 2010), excluding more vulnerable groups from exercising their rights to family reunification.

Our results also show that migrants generally remain in touch with households in the sending countries. They do so by means of frequent phone calls, but also through remittances. We found that migrants send remittances to a wide range of people, such as nuclear family members, extended family and friends. Despite the proliferation of modern financial and communication technologies or cheaper travel opportunities, which typically eased the way migrants remit and keep in contact with those left-behind, these technologies do not benefit all migrants equally (see also Bledsoe & Sow, 2008).

In sum, this thesis has shown the existence of transnational families and the various means by which families maintain active ties between those who migrate and those who remain in the origin country. Yet despite this prevalence, there are no policies, either in sending or receiving countries that deal with this reality (see also Bernhard et al., 2008; Mazzucato & Schans, 2011). Instead, restrictive migration policies make it difficult to actively engage in transnational family life, as they limit the freedom to travel back and forth to visit family.

There are several ways in which policies can address transnational family life. On the one hand, the stringent conditions for family reunification, such as pre-entry tests, high-income requirements and higher age limits for spouses, make reunification difficult for those who wish to do so. By easing the conditions for eligibility, and recognizing different notions of the 'family', such as transnational families or extended families, reunification becomes equally accessible for more migrants. On the other hand, visas are usually quite expensive and difficult to obtain for family members in the sending countries, hindering their possibilities to travel for visits to their migrant family member in the receiving country. As this study has shown, short return visits facilitate transnational family life. Policies could therefore aim at facilitating traveling back-and-forth by lowering the costs for visas, or by issuing special visas for family members.

### *Innovation*

Even though migration by its very nature involves two or more countries, this multi-sited nature has rarely been taken into account in migration research. Instead, studies on

migration typically have focused either on immigration and integration in the receiving countries, or on the consequences of migration for sending countries, resulting in a limited understanding of return and circular migration, and transnational practices (Beauchemin, 2014; Mazzucato & Schans, 2011; Mazzucato, 2008b). Gaining insight into the consequences of migration on family life requires a counterfactual: a comparison between those who migrated and those who did not. The fact that these two groups are by definition in two different countries (migrants in receiving countries and non-migrants in sending countries) justifies a multi-sited survey. In addition, this comparison should not be made only at the time of survey. Instead, migrants and non-migrants should be compared over a similar time period, for which a longitudinal survey design is necessary (Beauchemin, 2014).

This thesis makes use of the MAFE-Ghana data, which entailed several methodological innovations. First, it has applied a multi-sited approach. Data was collected in the sending country, Ghana, and in two receiving countries, the UK and the Netherlands. This allowed for comparing migrants in the receiving countries with non-migrants in the sending country. Second, the MAFE-Ghana survey collected longitudinal information through a retrospective survey, asking detailed biographical questions about relationships and living arrangements. Identical questions were asked to migrants, non-migrants and returnees, which allowed for analyzing the linkages between union formation, living arrangements and international migration, the reunification behaviour of migrants, and the probability of divorce. The retrospective data also facilitated studying transnational relationships from a life course perspective (e.g. Kulu & Milewski, 2007; Wingers et al., 2011). While previous studies typically studied the pre- or post-migration situation of migrants, this thesis used the retrospective information to consider both the changing geographical and historical contexts in order to facilitate a better understanding of the implications of migration for family life.

### *Dissemination of results*

The results of this research have been made available to both academics and a larger non-academic audience. In addition to presenting the findings of this thesis at various international conferences and publishing in international peer-reviewed journals, this thesis is also embedded in a wider project: the MAFE-project. From the start of this project, researchers have been engaged in discussions with civil society, policy makers and other public institutions.<sup>1</sup> Several activities have been employed to reach various audiences. First, a detailed project description and all publications, scientific and non-scientific, can be found on the project website: <http://mafeproject.site.ined.fr/en>. Importantly, the data

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<sup>1</sup> [mafeproject.site.ined.fr/en/partners/civil\\_society/#r20370](http://mafeproject.site.ined.fr/en/partners/civil_society/#r20370)

have been made available freely accessible for research and educational purposes and can be accessed through this website. Second, several roundtables were held in which policy makers, NGOs, and academics engaged in discussions about the project and its implications.<sup>2</sup> Third, policy briefs were created to summarize the main findings for each working package, including the working package on transnational families.<sup>3</sup> Fourth, for educational purposes, several training sessions were organized, including one at Maastricht University.<sup>4</sup>

I have been involved in various teaching activities where I have used the MAFE-survey and my findings. Additionally, Miranda Poeze and I gave a workshop for the Belgian organization Kleurrijk, where we discussed our findings with a small group of men and women who were involved in transnational families.<sup>5</sup> I have been requested to write an article in *Demos*,<sup>6</sup> a Dutch magazine aimed at academic, policy makers, governmental bodies and others interested in population questions. Additionally, I will organize a special issue on family reunification for Versvak, a Dutch online platform that aims to make scientific research available for a wider non-scientific audience.<sup>7</sup>

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2 [mafeproject.site.ined.fr/en/events/policy\\_dialogue\\_meetings/](http://mafeproject.site.ined.fr/en/events/policy_dialogue_meetings/)

3 [mafeproject.site.ined.fr/en/publications/briefs/](http://mafeproject.site.ined.fr/en/publications/briefs/)

4 [mafeproject.site.ined.fr/en/events/train/](http://mafeproject.site.ined.fr/en/events/train/)

5 [www.kleur-rijk.be/gezinsstructuren](http://www.kleur-rijk.be/gezinsstructuren)

6 [www.nidi.nl/nl/demos](http://www.nidi.nl/nl/demos)

7 [www.nidi.nl/nl/demos](http://www.nidi.nl/nl/demos)