

Migration, family separation and caregiving across borders

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Valorisation addendum

The university's regulation stipulates that doctoral students include in their dissertation a valorisation addendum. These last pages of the dissertation force researchers to think about the social relevance of their study. As a researcher studying vulnerable people I am in favour of this regulation for it offers the opportunity to discuss the relevance of my findings beyond the academic community and to highlight the different ways in which my research may benefit the people I have studied over the past years.

In the next pages I will discuss recommendations for policies that target transnational families and indicate how state and non-state actors may play a role in reducing the risks and enhancing the benefits of migration for individual family members both in the origin and destination countries. Since such policies are a shared responsibility of the host and home country, I have formulated recommendations for both the Netherlands and Ghana. In the last section I describe how my research results have been disseminated to a larger audience and stress its importance in the light of policy development.

Policy Recommendations for the Netherlands

One of the aims of this study was to provide a deeper understanding of how the mechanisms of migration policies impact those who are affected by them. This is particularly relevant for the Netherlands where over the past decades the policy climate has become more restrictive and demanding in the formulation of regulations and requirements for those who wish to enter and stay in the country. Moreover, given the short term focus on reducing the influx of 'unwanted' immigrants, policy makers have largely turned a blind eye to the long-term social, emotional and financial costs for those who are affected by these policies. From my research findings I have discerned several policy lessons for the Netherlands.

Firstly, the application of the income requirement for sponsorship in family reunification policy deserves attention. When the guidelines of the European Directive on Family Reunification (2003/86/EC) were translated into Dutch migration policy in 2004, policy makers failed to prioritise the Directive's goal of securing third-country nationals' right to family life. Rather, restrictive family migration requirements – among which standardised income requirements - were implemented that aimed at selecting migrants at the border on the basis of financial capacity (COFACE, 2012). While policy makers stressed that a certain level of income is crucial to promote integration and to reduce dependency on the state's resources, the income requirement in family reunification policy has never been evaluated - leaving unknown whether it reaches its intended goal and how it impacts vulnerable groups (The Netherlands Institute for Human Rights, 2014).

My study demonstrates the gendered impact of the income requirement. I found that women are more likely to express a wish to reunite with their children compared to transnational fathers. Whereas some women resign themselves to a life separated from their children or even consider this the most favourable family situation, instable care

networks in the origin country and the wish to reconnect emotionally may engender a need for reunification. Women, especially single mothers, however, face particular difficulties meeting the income requirement. Alongside their vulnerable labour market positions in the host society that result from language difficulties, discrimination, and unrecognised diploma's and work experience from the origin country, they also tend to carry the burden of care for Dutch-based children. It is therefore not surprising that most transnational mothers from Ghana, but also from other African origin countries in different European countries, are single compared to nontransnational parents and transnational fathers (Caarls et al., 2018). The difficulty to combine paid work with care for underaged children prevents single mothers from meeting the financial requirements of family reunion with stay-behind children. As my study made clear, single mothers who for different reasons wish to reunite with their children, tend to end up in dependent and vulnerable partner relationships in an effort to meet the income requirement. This subsequently diminishes women's autonomy and produces inequalities. Or in case of protracted separations when reunification is hindered due to formal requirements, the consequences for mothers and their children in the origin country are devastating especially when a care crisis unfolds, for instance when the caregiver in the origin country dies or falls ill. Other unintended side effects of, among others, the income requirement are alternative routes to reunification, such as reunification via the Belgian route or via human smuggling.

Based on these results and in line with others (COFACE, 2012; The Netherlands Institute for Human Rights, 2014), I want to re-emphasise the need to move away from strict and standardised requirements towards individual assessments of the income requirement in family reunification applications. The Netherlands Institute for Human Rights (2014) stated that the income requirement for family reunion as interpreted in the Netherlands is too strict. In other words, the income requirement is applied as an absolute norm whereas it should be a guideline that can be interpreted with some flexibility. For instance, when a person earns less than the income requirement this should not immediately result in a rejection. Moreover, the immigration services should take into account the individual needs of the sponsor to consider what is 'sufficient income'. The Netherlands Institute for Human Rights therefore suggests that in individual applications, securing the third-country nationals' right to family life, not denying them this right, should be prioritised.

Interpreting the income requirement in individual applications with increased flexibility does not mean that children should be reunited with mothers and fathers who live below the poverty line; stable and regular financial resources which are sufficient to support the family may be expected. However, parents should not have to worry that their application is rejected because their monthly wage is 20 euro below the necessary income level. Moreover, what is sufficient income is not a fixed given but may be dependent on the personal needs and circumstances of the sponsor and his or her family. It is this flexibility that should be applied to individual assessments for family reunion. Certainly, this shift would add to the already long waiting time for the assessment of

applications, but it would potentially increase women's chances to reunite with their children when the need arises and it diminishes the negative consequences for women and their family members.

Second, the IND should improve data registration with regards to decisions of individual applications. Collecting motivations for rejections helps improve the assessment of policy consequences for specific groups of migrants. For instance, proving the family bond between parents and children—or a genuine love relationships in case of partner reunifications—may turn out to be an important reason for rejection among certain groups of migrants compared to others. This is potentially problematic. Registering motivations for decisions would make the immigration services' decision making process more transparent and receptive to adjustment. Third, immigration clerks at the IND should be offered specialised training to enhance their knowledge of migrants' life conditions as well as non-Western family practices to understand what family and parenthood mean in other contexts. This helps reduce the chances that migrants' applications get rejected or that migrants experience obstacles during the decision making process, based on normative frameworks of what constitutes 'good parenting' practices, a few cases of which I came across in my study. For instance, a woman's application for family reunion was initially rejected because the immigration clerk did not believe that the woman had sent her Dutch-born child to the origin country at a young age to be raised by the grandparents. She believed that 'a real mother' would never do this. Whereas from the point of view of the single and undocumented mother, whose own cultural framework did not prioritise proximity in the mother-child relationship, sending her child to the origin country was perceived an act of 'good mothering'. Although the hospital papers proved that the child was indeed born in the Netherlands and the application eventually received a positive decision, the objection by the immigration clerk delayed the process and imprinted in the migrant woman's head an image of 'bad mothering'.

Fourth, my study highlights the long-term effects in case of strained relationships on both parents and children, an issue which deserves wider awareness and attention, not only in academia but also among policy makers. In line with others (Parreñas, 2005; Smith, 2006), my research has demonstrated the centrality of parental care for long-distance parent-child relationships, and its impact on the life chances for both children and the migrant parents. I found that a lack of emotional exchanges can easily lead to feelings of resentment and anger towards overseas parents and may even result in children ostracizing all contact with their migrant parent. Other studies have also reported lower school performance among Ghanaian stay-behind children (Cebotari and Mazzucato, 2016), and lower levels of well-being in case of strained relationships with the migrant father (Mazzucato and Cebotari, 2017). Likewise, parents who are unable to establish affectionate relationships across distance express feelings of guilt, emotional hardship and material compensation. A strained parent-child relationship may also associate with worse job outcomes amongst transnational parents (Haagsman, 2015). To mitigate the negative implications of family separation on family members in both

countries, I suggest that policies facilitate rather than obstruct long-distance intimacy between migrant parents and their stay-behind children, a few suggestions of which I will discuss below.

In Ghana, as elsewhere, economics and intimacy are closely intertwined, meaning that the sending of remittances is often understood by both parents and children as a way of showing affection. Priority should therefore be given to policies that aim at improving the position of documented and undocumented immigrants on the Dutch labour market. Programmes and measurements should open up pathways to legal work for undocumented migrant workers, for instance by facilitating temporary migration, but should also more generally aim at reducing racism on the labour market and at facilitating the recognition of diplomas and skills that immigrants bring from their home countries. Moreover, efforts should be made to reduce fees for money transfers to family members in the origin country.

Alongside economic concerns, policies could improve emotional exchanges through facilitating short-term visits of children to their migrant parents. Moments of face-to-face contact are highly valued by migrant parents and stay-behind children for they provide opportunities for children and parents to spend time in each other's presence. Personal exchanges help build relationships of trust, generate feelings of emotional closeness, and alleviate negative feelings in case monetary remittances are insufficient. However, visiting children in the origin country is hampered by the high costs in case parents have to bring along their Dutch-based children and migrants' instable labour market position that prevents long term job leave. Policies to improve migrants' labour market position can facilitate return visits, but at the same time policies could facilitate visits of children to their parents in the Netherlands. Applications for short-term visits of family members, including underaged children, from countries in the Global South, are often rejected because of fears that children—and other family members—do not return to the origin country on the preset time. This is especially the case when the visiting family member cannot prove attachment to the origin country or when a family reunification application has been rejected in the past. I suggest that policies prioritise the long-term consequences on the life chances of migrant parents and stay-behind children over potential risks for society, by improving the possibilities for short-term visits as a means to reconnect emotionally.

Policy recommendations for Ghana

Whereas supporting the wellbeing of transnational families is not only a responsibility of the receiving country, policy makers in migrant-sending countries rarely implement policies that aim at improving the lives of stay-behind family members (Yeoh and Lam, 2006). In line with the focus of my research, I formulate policy recommendations that target stay-behind children. For policy recommendations regarding caregivers I refer to Dankyi (2014).

First, the impacts of family separation on stay-behind children should be recognised and data collection, analysis and dissemination could be improved to present a clearer picture of the long term social, educational and psychological impacts of children growing up in transnational families as a way to strengthen the evidence base of policies. This will enable state and non-state actors to better address the needs of this group of children, particularly the most vulnerable, to reach their full potential despite challenging circumstances. For instance, support in terms of counselling in schools and community centres could be offered to those in need. To this end, specialised training programmes could help school staff and social workers to better equip themselves to signal problems among stay-behind children and to respond to the children's needs. Likewise, family counselling programmes could be developed whereby counsellors in Ghana and the Netherlands work together transnationally to improve long-distance family bonds and communication.

Second, awareness-raising programmes that point future migrants to the potential implications of family separation could be implemented to ensure that parents make an informed decision with regards to their migration and the care arrangement of their children, prior to departure. Such programmes should include realistic information about possibilities for reunification, work and family life in the host country, as well as information about what informal care work entails for kin and non-kin caregivers and their families in terms of emotional, financial and social demands. Such programmes would therefore ideally include embassies of popular host countries, family organisations—preferably those that operate transnationally—, local NGOs and experiential experts, notably previous and/or current caregivers and stay-behind children.

Dissemination of research results

I am well aware that the influence of my research—like research in general—on migration policy processes and agenda-setting is limited, especially when it involves recommendations via academic publications and research that is not carried out by national policy institutions or in close collaboration with government agencies (Iredale et al., 2002). In the Netherlands specifically, academic research has lost its foothold in policy processes since the policy climate became more polarised from the 1990s onwards - unless research plays the card of politicians (Penninx, 2005). The position of research in migration policy development can at present therefore at best be described as marginal.

The migration policy-agenda tends to be more responsive to the public opinion than to mere research findings (Iredale et al., 2002). As Penninx (2005: 46) argues, in a policy climate that has significantly reduced researchers' political influence, 'researchers do not have much choice other than to act as "responsible citizens"'. Hence, it is in the public debate that the researcher has to operate and to share knowledge with a broader

audience. In collaboration with colleagues, Ghanaian organizations, and artists, I have pursued various avenues to disseminate research findings in an effort to inform the public and political debate:

- Several actions were taken to inform the Ghanaian migrant community about the research. At the start of my research, prof. dr. Valentina Mazzucato and I presented the TCRA-project at an Amsterdam-based Ghanaian radio station. We also organised a session around the topic of transnational families in the talk show of Veronica van der Kamp, an excerpt of which was included in the introduction of the thesis. Together with five invited Ghanaian immigrants, Veronica van der Kamp discussed the implications of parent-child separation in the context of long-distance migration. The show aired several times in July 2010. A few years into the research, Ernestina Dankyi and I presented the research findings at another Amsterdam-based Ghanaian radio station.
- The TCRA-team organised two conferences—one in Ghana (2012) and a closing conference in the Netherlands (2014) —with policy makers, practitioners and other stakeholders, to share research results and to discuss how our results could be of use beyond the academic community.
- In preparation for the closing conference in the Netherlands, two policy briefs were written that translated the research findings into policy recommendations.⁴³
- Two newspaper articles were published that discussed the topic of Ghanaian transnational families and reflected on key research findings. One article appeared in Dutch quality newspaper *De Volkskrant* (Bolwijn, 2013)⁴⁴ and one on the website of *Graphic Online* (Ardayfio, 2014).⁴⁵
- I co-authored a publication for *NORFACE* newsletter, which discussed the transnational methodology of the research to a wider academic audience (Poeze and Dankyi, 2014).
- I am preparing a photobook together with photographer Bas Niemans and graphic designer Paul Wolterink for which we received generous funding from *WOTRO*. The photobook contains vivid and intimate narratives and pictures of Ghanaian migrant parents in the Netherlands and their stay-behind children in Ghana. Its objectives are to raise awareness and understanding among the wider public of transnational families' experiences; to challenge common ideas about family separation; and to expose the sometimes destructive consequences of current migration policies for cross-border family members.
- A project website was developed that contains all information about the project, as well as publications, events, photos and related research projects.⁴⁶

⁴³ See http://fasos-research.nl/tcra/files/2013/05/TCRA-POLICY-BRIEF_def.pdf; http://fasos-research.nl/tcra/files/2015/04/MU_POLICY_BRIEF_02_2014-06-15.pdf

⁴⁴ See <http://fasos-research.nl/tcra/files/2013/Artikel-Marjon-Bolwijn1.pdf>

⁴⁵ See <https://www.graphic.com.gh/features/features/left-behind-when-parents-migrate-and-children-stay-behind.html>

⁴⁶ See <http://tcra.nl>

In my present role as lecturer at the Social Work department of Vives University of Applied Sciences, I integrate my doctoral research into teaching about migration and intercultural work. By presenting my research findings and showing examples of real cases I try to make my students aware of the implications for families whose lives are organised transnationally. It is for future social workers important to realise that transnational families are not only victims of global inequality, but that alongside their vulnerabilities, such families can thrive and often display a high degree of resilience. Moreover, my teaching helps social workers understand that the experiences of transnational parents in the host country is an interplay of individual and family wishes on the one hand, and of opportunities and restrictions of the origin and receiving countries, such as migration policies, labour market position, (il)legality, and transnational care networks and normative frameworks of care, on the other hand. In this way, my research informs future social workers about the transnational context in which many migrants live today and helps them to adequately respond to the needs of vulnerable transnational families.