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Family lives on hold: Bureaucratic bordering in male refugees' struggle for transnational care

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Abstract

This article analyses practices of transnational care and the lives of male asylum seekers and refugee families in the context of increasingly restrictive border and migration regimes. Research on transnationalism, transnational families, and care among forced migrants has emphasised the importance of the institutional context in transnational care and family relations across borders. This article contributes to the extant literature by examining how bureaucratic bordering – within nation states and beyond – restricts the possibilities of refugees in providing care to their family members and reuniting. The article also examines the struggles experienced by male refugees at bureaucratic borders. These struggles reveal a central dimension to transnational care that relates to the bureaucracy of visas and residence permits. The article highlights the importance of temporality and examines how the lives of refugee families are affected by extended and bureaucratically induced waiting. The article is based on ethnographic research conducted on Iraqi and Afghan asylum seekers in Finland in 2017–2019 and focuses on three asylum seekers in particular – namely, Amal, Sajed, and Yasin.

Key words: transnational families, transnational care, refugees, asylum seekers, men, border regime, bureaucratic bordering



1. Introduction

“Amal has three children aged six, seven, and eight, respectively. He received the news that his youngest daughter has been in a car accident in Iraq. His wife is no longer speaking to Amal, because he has been in Finland for the past two-and-a-half years. Amal’s wife feels that he has abandoned his family and has threatened to divorce Amal if he does not return to Iraq. She refuses to speak to him on the phone and instead, only communicates by sending pictures of his daughter in the hospital. Amal has been involved in organising an asylum seekers’ sit-in protest in the centre of Helsinki. He is waiting for a new decision about his asylum application from the Finnish Immigration Office (Migri). The Administrative Court has accepted his appeal and returned his case to Migri for re-evaluation. When he received the news that his daughter was in hospital, he decided to return to Iraq. He told me: “I don’t know what to do. If I leave, people there might put me in jail. I’m in a real danger there, they will put me in jail, but if I stay here, my wife might leave me, and I miss my children so much.” In the end, Amal’s friends took his passport, leaving him unable to return to Iraq” (Field notes, March 31, 2017).¹

In the autumn of 2015, during the ‘long summer of migration’ (Kasperek & Speer 2015), thirty-two-year-old Amal fled Kirkuk, Iraq, for Finland. During this time, the borders of the European Union (EU) were temporarily opened from Greece to Central and Northern Europe. I met Amal during my fieldwork in an asylum-seekers’ sit-in protest that he had been organising with other Iraqi and Afghan asylum seekers in the centre of Helsinki in the spring of 2017. The above extract illustrates the importance of transnational family and care relations for humanitarian migrants as well as the restricting effects of nation-state borders that a sudden crisis in a transnational family such as Amal’s highlights (Baldassar 2014). The extract draws attention to the devastating impact that bureaucratically induced waiting can have on intimate relations. The long wait, combined with insecurity about the future, has led to the deterioration of Amal’s marriage, thus emphasising the importance of considering time in the analysis of transnational refugee families’ care relations.²

There is now important research on the importance of time, temporality, and waiting in contexts of restrictive migration regimes (e.g. Conlon 2011; Elliot 2016; Griffiths et al. 2013; Sutton et al. 2011). This literature has emphasised waiting as a liminal experience (Sutton et al. 2011) that can lead to ‘paused’ subjectivities (Elliot 2016) and differentiated experiences of temporalities (Griffiths et al. 2013). The focus on transnational intergenerational care emphasises that *waiting* should not only be considered from an individual perspective, as a family-based perspective reveals the diverse effects that waiting has on both children and adults.

Research on transnationalism, transnational families, and care among forced migrants has emphasised the importance of the institutional context, state policies, and migration and asylum regimes (Al-Ali 2002; Kilkey & Merla 2014; Merla & Baldassar 2011;

1 All the names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

2 This article is part of two research projects. The first is ‘Insecure Lives: Irregular Migration and Precarious Labour in Finland’ (2015–2018, Academy of Finland, nr 1284178), and the second is ‘Struggles over Home and Citizenship – Neighbourhood Solidarity as a Response to the “Asylum Crisis” (2018–2020, nr 4705839), funded by the Kone Foundation.

Merla 2014) in enabling or disabling transnational care and family relations across borders. However, only considering the migration regime and policies in the settlement context is insufficient, as possibilities for migrant mobilities depend on diffused bureaucratic bordering practices that extend from contexts of arrival to the countries of origin and their neighbouring countries. Thus, I argue that considering how nation-state borders are implemented in practices of *bureaucratic bordering* is a useful analytical addition that helps us to understand the ways in which transnational care can be practiced. Bureaucratic bordering refers to the ways in which mobility is controlled and managed through administrative and bureaucratic practices. Said practices range from the implementation of legislation for visas and residence permits in the consulates of countries of origin as well as residence permit processes in countries of migration (see e.g. Alpes & Spire 2014; Dahlvik 2017; Ditlova & Näre 2018; Könönen 2018) to various biometric border control systems (Scheel 2019). Bureaucratic borders are not stable – they are constantly redrawn through the introduction of new restrictions and regulations and through bureaucratically induced waiting. This, in turn, affects the transnational care of refugee families. Unlike relatively stable geographic borders, bureaucratic borders are structured temporally. Hence, temporality is key to understanding how bureaucratic borders operate.

This article contributes also to the growing literature on the role of men in transnational migrant families (Fresnoza-Flot 2014; Kilkey 2014; Näre 2010; Näre 2012). I analyse the practices of transnational care and family reunification of male asylum seekers from Afghanistan and Iraq who are living in Finland. I focus on three illustrative cases drawn from my larger ethnographic study – the cases of Amal, Sajed, and Yasin. In what follows, I present the context for my research, the theoretical concepts that have guided my analysis, the analytical and methodological strategy, and a discussion of the three cases.

2. Research context: The long summer of migration, 2015

The sudden increase in the number of asylum seekers, combined with the Europe-wide public discourse on the ‘refugee crisis,’ depicted as a continuous and uncontrollable flow of people on their way to Europe (Krzyzanowski et al. 2018), started a ‘race to the bottom’ in the Nordic countries. This ‘race’ was comprised of countries such as Finland striving to appear as unattractive as possible to humanitarian migrants. The alarmist way of addressing the legal rights of refugees to seek asylum in Europe as a ‘crisis’ labelled migrants and worked as a means to legitimise the introduction of border controls between Denmark and Sweden. It brought to an end the historical principle of free movement within the Nordic countries that had existed since 1954. In Finland, this race to the bottom was implemented by introducing new restrictions to the Aliens Act in 2016 and restricting the grounds on which asylum could be granted (see Näre 2018).³

3 According to my calculations, by April 2019, the Aliens Act had been amended 78 times after it came into effect on April 30, 2004. For example, in 2015, as many as 13 amendments were made to the act (Finlex 2018). Although some of the amendments have been small and technical in comparison to amendments made to other acts, according to my calculations, the act has undergone over 50 significant changes to its

The tightening of immigration policy that resulted from the 2015 ‘summer of migration’ (Kasperek & Speer 2015) did not, however, emerge from nowhere: The recent account of policies limiting asylum-seeking has a longer history. Migrants without official resident permits have long been presented in political discourse as ‘illegal immigrants’ (Schuster 2011; Tyler 2006; Wroe 2018). In the 2000s, migration related to asylum seeking began to be referred to using water metaphors (e.g. ‘flood’, ‘drowning’) to underline the uncontrollability of migration and its threat to the nation state (Ahmed 2004). In Finland, all the largest parties have resisted immigration to Finland, and humanitarian migration has been an extremely politicised subject for many years (Keskinen 2009).

The increase in the annual number of asylum seekers from 3,600 in 2014 to over 32,400 in 2015 created a novel situation for the migration administration system in Finland. The Finnish Immigration Service (Migri henceforth) had to respond to the rising number of applications by recruiting and training new staff who often had little prior experience in this role. It soon became clear that the quality of asylum decisions deteriorated and that the decision-making process changed. A recent study of the asylum cases of Iraqi refugees has demonstrated that during 2016, Migri changed the way in which it interpreted the stories of individual asylum seekers, in that it demanded that applicants proved their personal persecution by providing objective evidence (Saarikkomäki et al. 2018). If unable to do so, the asylum application was denied – grounds formulated in the decisions made by Migri as ‘your fear is not objectively justified.’

Due to public pressure, Migri conducted an internal inspection in 2018 in which it admitted to problems in interpreter services but not in the asylum processes itself (Migri 2018). In addition to changing bureaucratic practices, changes to the Alien’s Act were quickly introduced in 2016 in order to reduce what politicians called the ‘pull factors’ or ‘attractiveness’ of Finland as a destination for asylum seekers. In an amendment to the law, the rights of adult asylum seekers to the presence of a legal aid counsel in the asylum interview were restricted to those cases in which the applicant was underage and without their parents or to cases in which ‘the presence of an assistant is necessary for extremely pressing reasons’ (Finlex 2018 Aliens Act 301/2004 §9; see also Lepola 2018). Moreover, a crucial change that affected the possibility of family reunification for recognised refugees was introduced in 2016. While previously a refugee or person who had been granted protection on humanitarian grounds could apply for family reunification at any point after receiving the residence permit, with said crucial change, only those who had been recognised as refugees were exempt from the tough income requirements when applying for family reunification. Those who were granted protection on humanitarian grounds had to earn an income sufficiently high enough to support a family in order to be allowed to reunite with their family members. However, recognised refugees have to apply for family reunification within three months of receiving the permit, and the application needs to be handed in by the family members who want to be reunited, not by the person who has received refugee status, thus creating a new kind of bureaucratic border that family members need to overcome.

content, many of which come from EU directives. The Aliens Act is thus now a complex piece of legislation, which makes interpreting the law difficult.

3. The conceptual approach: Bureaucratic bordering and its effect on transnational families

I follow critical migration scholars in the analytical approach used here. Critical migration scholarship problematises both the general economic–rational view of immigration, which is common in immigration research, and the humanitarian approach, which views immigrants and refugees as victims (Casas-Cortes et al. 2015). The starting point for critical migration studies is the subjective experience of the migrant. From this subjective experience, it is possible to problematise the categories used in immigration policies, categories that rarely correspond to the migrants' own experiences (e.g. Casas-Cortes et al. 2015; Crawley & Skleparis 2018).

The tradition of critical migration studies has long criticised the need for political and research discourse to define refugees as belonging to a different category to that of immigrants (Casas-Cortes et al. 2015), as from the perspective of an individual, refugee status often seems to be gained by chance (e.g. Khosravi 2010). International and national refugee and human rights organisations highlight the difference between immigrants and refugees, especially the fact that immigrants are able to return to their native countries. The criteria for being a refugee is that the state from which the person originates cannot offer them safety (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2016). However, the definition of refugee status overlooks the fact that many asylum seekers may already have lived for years as refugees in countries other than their birth country before they officially sought asylum. They may have become adults in countries other than that in which they have citizenship by virtue of their parents' nationality, as is the case for many of the Afghan refugees I interviewed, who were born in Iran. However, the categories and concepts used to categorise migrants are not purely metaphorical: They also define opportunities to obtain residence permits, and in this way, have judiciary significance (e.g. Crawley & Skleparis 2018).

The ways in which Afghan and Iraqi refugees can pursue family life and caregiving within and across nation-state borders depend on the effects of bureaucratic bordering (i.e. the state, its immigration policies, and their implementation)(see also Näre 2018). By 'bureaucratic bordering' I refer to the various ways in which borders are enacted and reproduced in legislative regulations as well as the bureaucratic processes and practices of various state and non-state actors (see Diatlova & Näre 2018). The concept of bordering practices relates to the de-territorialisation of borders (Balibar 1998), where the practices that would have taken place at the physical border become diffused, and the task of enforcing the border regimes falls to individual actors as well as governmental and non-governmental organisations (see also Anderson 2013).

Literature on the bureaucracy of asylum and migration has revealed how asylum decisions are socially constructed and rely on the discretionary powers of street-level bureaucrats (Alpes & Spire 2014; Dahlvik 2017; Diatlova & Näre 2018; Könönen 2018; Näre 2018; see also Calavita 2003). What has been less discussed, however, is how bureaucratic bordering affects asylum seekers' family life and possibilities for care provision across states.

Research on care in transnational settings has demonstrated that care at a distance can take different forms (Baldassar et al. 2007; Baldassar et al. 2014). Baldassar et al. (2014: 159) distinguish five dimensions of care – namely, financial and material (e.g. re-

mittances or goods), practical (exchanging advice and assisting with tasks), personal (like feeding and bathing), accommodation (providing shelter and security), and emotional or moral support. Similarly, Kilkey and Merla (2014) present a typology of transnational care that includes direct provision with physical co-presence, coordination, delegation of support, and/or direct provision from a distance. For asylum seekers and refugees, direct provision with physical co-presence is rarely possible, unless their family members live in a third country, as visits back home are not possible when waiting for asylum, and if they have received their asylum status, visiting home might endanger their asylum status. This is why family reunification plays such an important role in the lives of refugees. For refugees, practical and personal support can only be hands-on if the family is reunited through reunification or permanent return. Transnational caregiving is thus mainly provided through the coordination and delegation of direct provision and distanced support. Transnational caregiving takes many forms, including sending remittances, organising shelter from a distance, and providing emotional and moral support, mediated through information and communication technologies, especially through regular contact via smartphones (see Baldassar et al. 2016).

Existing research on transnational families has highlighted the importance of migration regimes, institutions, and policies for families' possibilities for caregiving across nation states (e.g. Baldassar et al. 2007; Fresnoza-Flot 2009; Kilkey & Merla 2014; Merla 2014). What I want to highlight here is that migration regimes are not fixed but dynamic and changing, meaning that asylum seekers and migrants can employ various tactics to manage and overcome restrictive bureaucratic bordering. Thus, it can be argued that an overlooked dimension of practical support within transnational refugee families is the coordination of paperwork and bureaucracy related to family reunification from a distance. For instance, Stevens (2019) proposes a related concept of *migration literacy* to refer to migrants' ability to read and interpret migration legislation. Moreover, this study follows the few existing research studies that have emphasised how fathers continue to provide care for their families, despite not being physically present (see e.g. Nobles 2011). Similar to Nobles' (2011) research, this study demonstrates how separation from one's wife and children is not a sign of abandonment but rather a strategy for survival.

As I will discuss, the effects of bordering practices on transnational families and caregiving are not only visible in legislation but also in the ways in which legislation is implemented by state bureaucrats in consulates, consulate affiliates, and immigration offices. The bureaucratic bordering conducted by immigration officers and other street-level officials is an important instance of bordering.

4. Data and methods

This article is based on extensive, long-term, and multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork among Afghan and Iraqi asylum seekers and refugees who arrived in Finland in the autumn of 2015. The work began as an ethnography of a sit-in protest that took place in the centre of Helsinki in the spring of 2017 (Näre 2018) but quickly evolved into a multi-sited ethnography of refugee and asylum-seeker families in Finland. I interviewed Iraqi and Af-

ghan asylum seekers about their journeys to Finland and the reasons for it, their families and everyday lives, and the asylum process. All of those whom I interviewed were waiting for the decision on their asylum application and some received refugee status during the fieldwork. I also made observations and conducted interviews in four different reception centres in Finland as well as the detention centres in Metsälä and Joutseno. I interviewed 41 asylum seekers who were from Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Of these interviewees, 31 were men, and 10 were women, and they ranged from 20 to 55 years of age. In addition to the qualitative interviews, I also conducted ethnographic interviews on specific topics during my observations. I spoke to 37 other research participants (30 men and seven women) during my fieldwork. The gender division reflects the overall gender composition of the asylum seekers in these groups. The family constellations amongst the interviewees varied. Most of the interviewed men (20) were unmarried, and of those who had their own family, only two had travelled with their family. Of the 30 other men I spoke to during the fieldwork, most had left their families behind.

For most families, the strategy had been, if possible, for the men to make the dangerous journey alone with the hope of applying for family reunification after receiving their residence permit in Europe. The three cases discussed in this article are thus representative of the experiences of those nine fathers who had left their wives and children behind and had made the journey alone.

Most of the women had travelled with their family members – either with their husband and children or with their siblings and/or parents. All of the mothers who had small children had travelled with their children. It would have been culturally and emotionally more difficult for women to leave their children behind. As one of the interviewees stated: ‘I could not have left my children behind.’ Thus, their migration strategies differ greatly from female labour migrants, such as domestic workers or nurses, who often leave their children in the care of female family members (Näre 2012).

Most of the interviews were conducted face-to-face in English. In six of the interviews, a friend of the research participant who spoke English well acted as an interpreter, and four interviews were conducted in the Persian language with the help of a Finnish-speaking translator. Two interviews with Afghans were conducted in Finnish, as these asylum seekers had learnt to speak Finnish fluently. I conducted follow-up interviews on specific themes in the spring of 2019. These interviews focused on experiences of family separation and reunification.

Throughout the research process, reflexivity was my main guideline for conducting the research. I understand reflexivity as a central method that turns research ethics into ethical research practices (Guillemin & Gillam 2004). Using reflexivity as my research ethics practice enabled me to contemplate my own position in the research field during the study as well as my observations and interviews, and strive to interpret the signals given by the asylum seekers to highlight their discomfort, anxiety, and distrust. In terms of the observations, this meant that I did not write notes when I was in the field, but afterwards; in terms of the interviews, this meant that I strove to keep the discussions as informal as possible. The interviewees whose interviews were recorded with a dictaphone received information about the study in both Dari and Arabic. This information explained the ethical principles of the research in terms of the use and storage of the study data and the princi-

ple of anonymisation. The interviewees also signed Arabic or Dari versions of the consent form.

In migration research, research ethics must also be contemplated from the perspective of the types of ethical issues that are related to the methods themselves. The interview method is not a neutral form of gathering information – it can be perceived of as quite a Western method that is based on an individualistic view of the subject who is used to talking about him/herself according to a linear concept of time. During the interview, the researcher gives the interviewee categories that are also not neutral but that contribute to forming the field to be studied and the position of the study participant in this field (Näre & Holley 2015).

For asylum seekers, the interview situation and the format of the interview might remind them of their asylum interview, which can lead to feelings of distrust towards the interview and its purpose. Many of the interviewees had negative experiences of the interpreters used in asylum interviews. For this reason, I did not want to employ professional interpreters. Instead, I interviewed those who had a sufficient level of English or those who trusted a friend to act as an interpreter. Many expressed their gratitude for being allowed to tell their own story in a way they considered quite free. I used sensitivity and mindful listening (Back 2007) as my ethical guidelines in the interview, during which I strove to pay attention to the emotions and reactions of the interviewee. This kind of micro-ethical (Guillemin & Guillam 2004) reflection was also part of my observations.

Reflexivity also determined the data analysis. The analysis progressed at different intensities during the stages of the study. Although an analysis cannot be completely separated from data collection, I consciously aimed to distance myself from the field and research object in order to analyse the data. In my analysis, I read the interviews and my research diary several times, along with the research literature, after which I classified the data into themes. I took my interpretations of the data back to the interviewees for their reflections. For example, in this article, I received feedback and comments on my analysis from Sajed, Amal, and Yasin.

5. Bureaucratic borders as temporal and financial: Sajed's struggle for family reunification

I got to know Sajed in March 2017 during my ethnographic fieldwork at the sit-in protest. Sajed had received a negative decision on his asylum application in October 2016. He had appealed to the Administrative Court, and when we met in the spring 2017, he was waiting for the decision. Sajed had fled from Afghanistan to Iran with his pregnant wife and their eight-year-old daughter. Sajed had left his family in Iran because the journey – on foot across the border from Iran to Turkey, on a dinghy from Turkey to Greece, and then across Europe – would have been too difficult for their daughter and Sajed's wife, who was expecting twins at the time. Sajed had never met his youngest children – the twins who were born three months after his arrival in Finland. The internet connection in the countryside in Iran was poor and did not allow for video calls, only phone calls (see Benítez 2006 on the digital divide in transnational families), but Sajed had seen photos of his

youngest children. One of the twins had been born with a kidney problem and had been in hospital since birth. He told me repeatedly that waiting and worrying for his family was making him ill: His worries for the safety of his family, for his sick daughter, and the negative decision had led Sajed to become depressed and take anti-depressants.

In early 2018, he got the news he had been waiting over two years for. The Administrative Court had returned his case to Migri and, after a new assessment, he was granted refugee status. But getting a residence permit brought only partial relief: From that point on, his battle against time to get his family to safety began. According to the amendments made to the Aliens Act in 2016, the timeframe within which those who receive refugee status can apply for family reunification without having to prove sufficient income (itself a near prohibitive border, with, in Sajed's case, a monthly net income of €2,900 being required) was restricted to three months from receipt of the permit. For Sajed, overcoming this particular bureaucratic border was especially difficult because he had lost contact with his family at that time.

"We are celebrating Sajed's residence permit. Finally, the wait is over. But Sajed looks worried. A mutual friend tells me that Sajed doesn't know where his family is. They have been hiding in the mountains in Iran from where his daughter called Sajed four months before. [...] After that, no news. We discuss different options. Sajed says he is afraid of using the common method used by the Red Cross to find families by going around villages showing pictures of his missing family members, because this would endanger their safety. His thought is to use trusted personal contacts. His idea is that he will use smugglers to help his family back to Afghanistan and then from there to Delhi, India. But first he needs to get in touch with them. Markku comes up with the most imaginary idea of trying to find a Finnish documentary filmmaker who would be willing to go to Iran and find them with Sajed" (Field notes, March 8, 2018).

As the field notes illustrate, getting refugee status does not bring relief, because protection for one family member does not help the other members of one's transnational family. This discussion also presents the different constraints that refugee families are confronted with. Without a stay permit, Afghans living in Iran face the constant threat of deportation.⁴ A family who is hiding cannot rely on official help from non-governmental organisations such as the Red Cross, as that might reveal their location. Yet getting the information to his wife is crucial so that they can apply for family reunification, but they need to be found and the application filed within the imposed time limit of three months. Sajed's case draws attention to the diffused nature of transnational care that includes organising funding, travel, and safe accommodation, but also organising for information to travel across state boundaries.

Later, Sajed found out that his family had been arrested by the Iranian police and had been detained in a camp for a month. After detention, they were deported to Afghanistan. Sajed managed to get hold of them. He was able to bring them the good news that he had been granted refugee status and had started organising the family's reunification. Due to earlier restrictions on family reunification made in the Aliens Act in 2012, the application for family reunification has to be filed in a Finnish consulate or an affiliate – often a pri-

4 According to the International Organization for Migration (2019), over 770,000 Afghans were returned or deported from Iran to Afghanistan in 2018.

vate visa processing company – by the family members abroad. The family members have to be legally present in the country where they hand in the application. Due to budget cuts and austerity measures, the number of Finnish embassies and consulates as well as the services they offer have been reduced. While there is a Finnish consulate in Kabul, Afghanistan, it does not offer visa services. Visas to Finland have to be applied for in Delhi, India, where the procedure has been outsourced to a private visa-handling company, originally from India, but now owned by a Swiss private equity firm. This makes family reunification costlier and more difficult for aspiring migrants from non-EU countries. Sajed sold his house in Afghanistan to pay for family reunification.

Another bureaucratic bordering practice is that family members have to prove their identity when handing in the application with verified documents that are recognised by Finnish authorities. For instance, the Afghan Tazkera – the Afghan national identity card – is rarely accepted as sufficient proof of identification, meaning that individuals need a valid passport. For the family members of a refugee persecuted in his/her country, applying for travel documents might in itself constitute a risk.

“I met Sajed today at the World Village festival. It was so nice to see him. Sajed tells me he is organising his family’s reunification process from Finland. He tells me that next Monday his wife will know whether she has received a passport so that she can travel to India with the children. He has received a flat in Helsinki and is happy to be finally moving away from the reception centre. He is sending money to his family who is now in Kabul so that they can organise the travel to Delhi in order to hand in the family reunification application in India. Then they need to wait for the interview. They can only get a tourist visa for one month to India, but the interview will be scheduled for August at the earliest. There is a little hope but still many obstacles that need to be overcome. Sajed tells me that family reunification is all he can think about at the moment” (Field notes, May 24, 2018).

The analysis of Sajed’s struggle for family reunification reveals how bureaucratic bordering extends beyond the country of origin and the country of migration. The bordering practices that Sajed and his family are facing are not only territorial and physical but also bureaucratic. Moreover, these bureaucratic borders are structured financially and temporally. Sajed’s case also highlights an overlooked dimension of practical transnational care – namely, the coordination of the bureaucracy related to family reunification.

Sajed’s wife received a visa to India and later, in May 2018, she travelled to Delhi with the family to hand in the application. Against all odds, they were able to hand in the application within the three-month time limit. Sajed tells me he tried to arrange so that they could live in India, where they would be safer during the waiting period for the interview, but they only received a visa for one month, after which they had to return to Kabul, where they were living in hiding. Unlike other transnational migrants who can visit their families, Sajed, who has been granted refugee status, does not even think of going back to Afghanistan to meet his family during the waiting period. He is doomed to immobility in relation to his country of origin because returning could jeopardise his right to asylum.

In July 2018, we exchanged text messages about the family reunification. I asked him how it was proceeding. He replied; ‘Still waiting for their interview, and their situation is very bad.’ In Kabul, the family was living in constant fear of violence. Later, Sajed’s wife tells him that one evening in Kabul, a kidnapper tried to take their son from her but that

passers-by came to her rescue. Finally, they received an appointment for an interview in November in Delhi, for which they had to apply for a visa and travel to India once again.

The temporal bureaucratic border, which is temporally structured by the waiting period for the interview at the embassy and the waiting period for the processing of the application in Finland, can take anything between nine to 24 months – according to Migri, the average time is nine months. In December 2018, over three years after Sajed applied for asylum in Finland, and after nine months of waiting in fear in Kabul, Sajed's family received their visa to come to Finland. Sajed and his family managed to overcome the various bureaucratic and financial borders and bring his family to him. Sajed tells me that his family's birthday is the day they arrive in Finland. At the time of writing this, his family is still recovering from fear. The bureaucratic bordering practices and the waiting induced by these practices have had long-lasting traumatic effects on Sajed's family.

6. The effects of waiting: Amal's struggle against bureaucratic borders

Amal received refugee status in the spring of 2017, soon after the episode recounted at the beginning of this article. Immediately after receiving his status, he began his struggle against the three-month period. When I meet him in May 2018, he tells me that he has been able to pay for passports and travel documents for all his family members and organise their travel to Turkey, where they have been able to hand in the application for a family reunification visa. I am amazed at how quickly he has been able to organise everything, and he tells me, 'Well, it takes paying quite a lot of bribes, but with money, anything is possible.' He tells me that now, the waiting starts and that it might take as long as nine months for the family reunification application to be processed. A year later, he is still waiting for a decision.

When the news broke that the US was brutally separating migrant families caught at the US–Mexico border in summer 2018, Amal posted a message on social media, reflecting on the effects that bureaucratically induced waiting for a family reunification visa had on his family. In the post, he described how his three children (aged six, seven, and eight) had been waiting for 14 months for a decision on his family reunification application. He writes that his children are not going to school and that they are asking him why they are different from other children. Amal has no answers to give them. His youngest child was two-and-a-half years old when Amal came to Finland, and she does not know him. He describes the effects that waiting has on his own mental health and the mental health of his daughter. He is not able to focus on his Finnish language studies because of the constant fear. His daughter is very sick, and his mental health is falling apart.

Amal's story emphasises, first, how the state and its immigration policies enter into and define the intimate family lives of asylum seekers (cf. Boehm 2012) and the arbitrariness of the bureaucratic processes of family reunification (Näre 2018). Second, it draws attention to the emotional connectedness of the transnational family, despite distance and separation. Third, it speaks volumes to the brutal effects of waiting on the well-being of Amal and his daughter. As research into the experiences of temporal limbo amongst asylum seekers and irregular migrants has demonstrated (Gray 2011; Griffiths 2014), waiting

is a contradictory, complex, and heterogeneous experience that can lead to political mobilisation (Bendixsen & Eriksen 2018; Näre 2018), productive use of time (Rotter 2016), and also to extreme stress and harm (Brekke 2010). Similar to time, waiting is a subjective experience (cf. Bergson 1913). For an adult, waiting might feel like wasted or ‘empty time’ (Griffiths 2014) and experienced as affective because it comes with anticipation and desire (Rotter 2016, 82), while for a child, living in temporal limbo might be more difficult to grasp and could have long-lasting effects related to gaps in their educational trajectories. Finally, Amal’s story demonstrates the cruel effects of bureaucratic bordering practices on the transnational families and care of asylum seekers and refugees. Amal’s wait came to an end in September 2018 when his family finally received the family reunification visa. He was successful in coordinating and organising the paperwork for the family reunification at a distance.

7. Extended waiting leading to separation: Yasin’s care across borders

Yasin was 40 years old when I first met him in the spring of 2017. He came to Finland in the autumn of 2015 from Baghdad, Iraq, where he worked as a driver, construction worker, and tailor. He had lost two brothers in the Iraq wars, with one brother dying on the first day of the US bombings of Baghdad in 2003. In 2015, he decided to leave Iraq in order to ensure a better future for his children:

‘This situation, bad situation from ISIS [Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant], every day I saw many people die, and every day I looked at my kids, and I was like, just thinking, they will have the same life like me, or I can... make something for them. [...] I have maybe this opportunity to change this life for them, I don’t care, I am 40, maybe I got ... maybe, half the way, and [it] doesn’t matter if I die or, I don’t care actually, but they are just kids, and there’s not any future for them. So I decided to leave, because of them’ (Yasin’s interview, March 29, 2017).

In Bagdad, Yasin had a wife and four children, who were aged 15, 12, nine, and seven in the spring of 2017. His 80-year-old mother was also living with his wife and children, so in Finland, he had to start earning as soon as possible:

‘I take care of her, absolutely, because she is my mother and this is not like, I make favour or anything, I should do this and [so] my mother, my wife, and four kids, is [a] big responsibility, I should work many, many hours to bring everything for medicine, medical things, food, clothes, for living, everything, you know?’ (Yasin’s interview, March 29, 2017).

Yasin received a negative decision from Migri regarding his asylum application in November 2016, but he then appealed to the Administrative Court. Through a private temp agency, he got a job as a kitchen helper and dishwasher in a restaurant in autumn 2016. Although he was working long hours most of the week, he had a zero-hour work contract, which is not accepted for a work-based residence permit. When I meet him again at the end of May 2017, he tells me that if he cannot apply for a work permit, he will go to the police and opt for voluntary return, stating: ‘Why am I killing myself with work here if I can’t stay and bring my family?’ (Yasin, May 30, 2017). He tells me that his wife and four

children are tired of waiting for him. He has been in Finland for a year and nine months and needs to decide whether it is worth losing his family over his migration project. If he gets a work-based permit, Yasin plans to first bring his eldest son over because said son will reach adulthood in two years. Eventually, Yasin ends up returning to Iraq. He sends me a message in early September 2017 saying; 'I returned to my country. I lost hope of getting a permit to stay and I decided to return.'

In April 2019, I hear from Yasin again. He is back working in Finland. After returning to Iraq, he and his wife got a divorce because of the relationship Yasin had with a Finnish woman he had met through work in late spring 2017. He tells me that he then got married to the Finnish woman, thus allowing him to get a residence permit and return to Finland. He now wants to bring his younger children to Finland so that they can have the life and education he dreamed of for them.

Yasin's story brings forth how bureaucratic bordering practices limit humanitarian migrants' possibilities of pursuing family life across borders. Although Yasin was earning enough money and working full-time to qualify as a work-based migrant, because Migri requires a permanent work contract with stated full-time working hours, Yasin was excluded from the possibility of legalising his residence in Finland. His story also emphasises how border practices mould humanitarian migrants' intimate lives and the effect they have on transnational families. On the one hand, Yasin's marriage did not survive the extended separation, but on the other hand, Yasin's new relationship and marriage to a Finnish woman opened up possibilities for Yasin, and possibly also for his children, to pursue a life in Finland.

8. Conclusions

As the cases of Amal, Yasin, and Sajed demonstrate, men have an important role to play as providers of transnational care in refugee families. For the men in this study, the wish to provide a better future and security for one's family members, especially children, was a key motivation for migrating and seeking refuge in Finland. Thus, contrary to a surprisingly common claim that fathers abandon their families when they migrate, my research demonstrates that migration can comprise a strategy for survival and transnational care. My study suggests that it is the extended waiting, rather than the physical separation alone, that leads to family separation, as in the case of Yasin. All three men struggled against bureaucratic bordering that entered the family lives of the asylum seekers and refugees in various ways.

The diffused effects of bureaucratic bordering are not only legislative and not only related to a lack of permits. The externalisation and diffusion of borders to third countries, as seen in the cases of Sajed and Amal, illustrate that borders are also financial. Only those who have sufficient means to organise travel and bribery have the chance of having their families reunited, but only if the temporal dimension of the bureaucratic borders is met. My findings suggest that time and various temporalities structure bureaucratic bordering and hence also the intimate lives of transnational families. In other words, bureau-

cratically induced waiting emerges as a key mechanism through which bordering is practiced in countries such as Finland that are hostile towards humanitarian migrants.

Waiting has detrimental effects on the well-being of refugees and their family members. For small children who are missing crucial years without an education and who do not have the possibility of creating a relationship with both parents, waiting can have durable negative effects. Waiting induced by bureaucratic bordering can expose families to violence, and extended waiting can deteriorate the intimate relations within the transnational family, especially when the relationship is difficult to sustain due to a digital divide. The bureaucratic temporalities that asylum seekers need to overcome, including the three-month period in which to apply for family reunification and the expensive processes related to bureaucracy, can prevent refugees from having the right to family life. However, my analysis also reveals the strength that the men have in struggling with and overcoming bureaucratic bordering. Despite the diffused bureaucratic, temporal, and financial bordering, all three managed to receive residence permits, and Amal and Sajed have been able to get their families reunited. Yasin's struggle for family reunification continues. Finally, the analysis also sheds light on an overlooked dimension of practical transnational care that relates to the coordination and organisation of visa and residence permit bureaucracy at a distance. There is need for future research on the various ways in which transnational families organise paperwork and deal with bureaucratic bordering across borders.

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Information in German

Deutscher Titel

Familienleben in der Warteschleife: Bürokratische Grenzen in den Bemühungen männlicher Flüchtlinge um transnationale Betreuung

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Artikel analysiert Praktiken der grenzüberschreitenden Betreuung sowie das Leben männlicher Asylbewerber und Flüchtlingsfamilien im Kontext zunehmend restriktiver Grenz- und Migrationsregime. Forschungen zum Transnationalismus, zu transnationalen Familien und zur Betreuung von Zwangsmigranten haben die Bedeutung des institutionellen Kontexts für die grenzüberschreitende Betreuung und die familiären Beziehungen unterstrichen. Dieser Artikel trägt zur bereits vorhandenen Literatur bei, indem untersucht wird, wie bürokratische Grenzen - innerhalb von Nationalstaaten und darüber hinaus - die Möglichkeiten von Flüchtlingen einschränken, ihre Familienmitglieder zu betreuen und ihre Familien wieder zusammenzuführen. Der Artikel untersucht ebenso die Hürden männlicher Flüchtlinge an den bürokratischen Grenzziehungen. Diese Hürden offenbaren eine zentrale Dimension der grenzüberschreitenden Betreuung im Zusammenhang mit der Bürokratie von Visa und Aufenthaltsgenehmigungen. Der Artikel hebt die Bedeutung der Zeitlichkeit hervor und untersucht, wie das Leben von Flüchtlingsfamilien durch längere und bürokratisch bedingte Wartezeiten beeinflusst wird. Der Artikel basiert auf ethnografischen Untersuchungen, die in den Jahren 2017–2019 an irakischen und afghanischen Asylbewerbern in Finnland durchgeführt wurden, und konzentriert sich insbesondere auf drei Asylbewerber: Amal, Sajed und Yasin.

Schlagwörter: Transnationale Familien, transnationale Betreuung, Flüchtlinge, Asylbewerber, Männer, Grenzregime, bürokratische Grenzen

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