

# FAMILY TIES, FEMALE DEPENDENCE AND NETWORKING IN EXILE

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## ABSTRACT

### **Family ties, female dependence and networking in exile**

Little attention has been paid to the problems refugees and their families face while they try to reconstruct their social life and networks in exile. In this paper, refugees' migration biographies and social integration in Norway is linked to broader issue of family membership and gender roles. Drawing on qualitative data and interviews with refugees, paper show how refugees' family situation influence refugees' social integration in exile, their perspectives on mainstream society and home country, inclusive their attitudes toward repatriation. It is argued in the paper that single refugees are more exposed to feelings of loneliness and social marginality in relation to the mainstream than refugees who are in exile together with their families and children. The paper maintains that in some cases, family members may facilitate integration into Norwegian networks. Among other things, family members may appear as family networking teams who simultaneously reproduce ties along the lines of a common family affiliation and bridge across ethnic groups. As members of such a team, family members will help to expand each other's personal networks through joined networking activities. Finally, the findings also indicate that certain categories of refugee women who come to Norway through procedures for family reunion may be strongly dependant on their husbands, ending up in traditional gender roles and segregated social networks. The presented findings have potential implications for repatriation schemes and integration policies. KEY WORDS: refugees, family relations, female dependence, family reunion, social integration

## IZVLEČEK

### **Družinske vezi, odvisnost žensk in mreženje v izgnanstvu**

Težavam s katerimi se spopadajo begunci in njihove družine pri rekonstrukciji družbenega življenja in mreženja v izgnanstvu, se posveča malo pozornosti. V tem prispevku so migracijske biografije beguncev in družbena integracija na Norveškem postavljeni v kontekst družine in spolnih vlog. Na podlagi kvalitativnih podatkov in opravljenih intervjujev z begunci bo predstavljeno, kako družinska situacija beguncev vpliva na njihovo družbeno integracijo v izgnanstvu, njihove poglede na večinsko družbo in državo izvora, in na odnos do repatriacije. Ugotovljeno bo, da so samski begunci bolj izpostavljeni občutkom osamljenosti in družbeni marginalnosti v odnosu do večinske družbe kot tisti, ki so v izgnanstvu skupaj s svojimi družinami in otroki. V nekaterih primerih lahko družinski člani namreč olajšajo integracijo

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v norveška družbena omrežja. Družinske člane med drugim lahko razumemo kot pripadnike družinske skupine mreženja, ki simultano reproducirajo vezi na ravni skupne družinske pripadnosti in na ravni vzpostavljanja povezav z etničnimi skupinami. Kot člani takšne skupine, družinski člani drug drugemu pomagajo širiti osebna omrežja skozi skupne aktivnosti mreženja. Izsledki raziskave tudi pokažejo, da so nekatere kategorije begunk, ki se priselijo na Norveško na podlagi procedure ponovne združitve, močno odvisne od svojih zakonskih partnerjev in ostanejo vpete v tradicionalne vloge in segregirana družbena omrežja. Ugotovitve raziskave lahko potencialno vplivajo na sheme repatriacije in integracijsko politiko. KLJUČNE BESEDE: begunci, družinski odnosi, odvisnost žensk, združitve družine, družbena integracija

## INTRODUCTION

The social integration of refugees in Norway is the main topic of this paper. Economic, cultural and residential integration of refugees is quite a popular issue within the field immigrant and refugee studies, but interest is significantly smaller in respect to the process of social integration (Berg 2002; Korac 2003; Valenta 2008). Nevertheless, it is not difficult to see how important social support and networks are to immigrants and refugees in terms of their quality of life, sense of belonging and for opening up participation in other segments of society (Rogers and Vertovec 1995; Korac 2001; Fuglerud and Engebrihtsen 2006).

This article tries to extend the insights of previous studies which have suggested that the experience of non-belonging to the mainstream society and feelings of social isolation, marginality and rejection are unfortunately important aspects of life in exile (Duke 1999; Barnes 2001; Knudsen 2005; Grønseth 2006). The focus is on one particular dimension of the refugees' social integration process; namely, that which encompasses relationships within refugee families. The study focus on refugees' experiences, interpretations and challenges they face while they try to enter Norwegian social networks.

Refugees' social integration, linked to the dynamic interplay between family membership/dependence, external networking and their social integration experience are still largely unexplored (Boyd 1990, 1996; Fuglerud and Engebrihtsen 2006; Valenta 2008). The aim of paper is to investigate how refugees' family situation *influences their opportunities* for networking after resettlement in exile society, and provides different *context for interpretations* of their social marginalisation and integration in the mainstream society.

In what follows, it is argued that members of the nuclear family are crucial components of an refugee's social life in exile, both in terms of sociability and emotional support. As we shall see, members of family may consider the bridging with indigenous locals as an asset, promoting external networking and enabling identities of inclusion. Family members also provide important basis for an refugee's self-identification in exile and understanding of where s/he stands in relation to home country and exile society.

This article has a restricted focus. Although there are several arenas and sources of

social integration (workplace, ethnic associations, neighbourhood, parenting activities, etc.) this article focus only on relationships between adult family members, and their integration experiences. The analysis does not pretend to give a full understanding of adaptation processes for the groups in concern. It is acknowledged that social contact and informal networks are, if not a precondition of incorporation, then at least a way of facilitating cultural and economic integration. However, this paper concentrates exclusively on links between family ties and immigrants' bridging opportunities and integration into the mainstream society. Other aspects of refugee integration, both in terms of participation in work life and acculturation, and integration within their own ethnic community, lies outside the primary scope of this study.

## **PERSPECTIVES ON SOCIAL INTEGRATION OF REFUGEES AND IMMIGRANTS**

The importance of social networks has long been recognized in the field of migration studies (see among others: Gurak and Caces 1992; Zhou 1997; Krissman 2005). Immigrants and refugees' networks can be described as webs of interpersonal relations based on family membership, friendship, kinship or shared ethnic, religious and national origin (Boyd 1997; Niklasson 1997; Korac 2001; Engebrigtsen 2007). These networks can be seen as sources of social capital in exile, mediators of chain migration or as transnational networks that connect the old and new country (Portes 1995; Levitt 2001; McLellan and White 2005).

Several students of inter-ethnic relations have studied the relation between the social integration of various immigrant and refugee groups and their well-being after resettlement (Korac 2001; Berg 2002; Grønseth 2006; Valenta 2008). However, the empirical evidence is not consistent. On the one hand, migrant and refugee networks are seen as important social asset (Korac 2001, 2003). According to these interpretations, close knit ethnic networks, made of strong dense ties between in-group members, provide social support to immigrants and refugees in exile (Portes 1998; Phillip and Massey 2000; Korac 2001).

Several studies focus on 'strength of the strong ties' (Coleman 1990; Portes 1998) and social closure as important sources of social support in migrant networks (Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993; Zhou 1997; Sanders, Nee, Sernau 2002). According to these studies, close knit ethnic networks, in particular the family provide social support to immigrants and catalyze the integration of immigrants into the host society. Alternatively, it is argued that migrant and refugee may also embed certain frictions, internal divisions and factionalism (Vertovec 2000; Kelly 2003; Knudsen 2005). According to these studies, ethnic communities and networks may also represent a source of social control, female dependence and "mistrustful solidarity" (Boyd 1997; Lien 1997; Levitt 2001). This mode of interpretation suggests that reliance on strong dense intra-ethnic ties and networks tends to constrain the opportunities that members of minority groups can access (Aguilera 2002; Krissman 2005).

There are several other studies within the field of immigrant and refugee research whose findings are relevant for my study. Studies show that refugees experience socio-economic and cultural disqualification in relation to the mainstream (Barnes 2001; Mestheneos and Ioannidi 2002; Ross and Turner 2005). Refugees who have resettled in Norway are not an exception (Brox 1998; Djuve and Kavli 2000). Although most refugees in Norway receive generous official resettlement and welfare assistance (Lund 2003), studies show that experiences of non-belonging, loneliness, social marginality and misrecognition by the mainstream are part of their social life (Høgmo 1998; Knudsen 2005; Grønseth 2006). Amongst certain categories of immigrants and refugees, being excluded from mainstream informal networks and social life may lead to a general dissatisfaction with life in exile (Dorais 1991; Barnes 2001; Grønseth 2006). A potential consequence could be the adoption of an oppositional stance vis-à-vis the norms and culture of mainstream society (Lien 1997; Brox 1998; Gullestad 2006). This is especially the case for refugees and immigrants of different races, stigmatized ethnic groups and people that are seen by natives as culturally distant. These refugees and immigrants seldom have friends among indigenous locals and they seldom meet indigenous locals within the context of informal interactions and relations (Dorais 1991; Carli 1993; Berg, Svarva and Sollund 1995; Grønseth 2006).

Statistical data indicates that immigrants and refugees in Norway live in more or less ethnically segregated networks (Djuve and Hagen 1995). For instance, among immigrants interviewed in 1995, only 10 per cent of immigrants and refugees in Oslo who arrived in 1988/89 held jobs where Norwegian was spoken, or met Norwegian contacts once a month or more (Djuve and Hagen 1995). Recent studies show similar trends amongst refugees (Djuve and Kavli 2000; SSB 2006; Valenta 2008). It seems that the most realistic adaptation line for refugees and first generation non-western immigrants in Norway would appear to be different kinds of selective bridging to the mainstream, based on weak ties with indigenous locals (Valenta and Berg 2003a; Valenta 2008).

There is also substantial literature on family networks and links between international migration, social networks and family membership that are relevant for this article (Bott 1957; Boyd 1990; Niklasson 1997; Bryceson and Vuorela 2002; Engebriksen 2007). Several recent studies on family membership and integration of immigrants and refugees pay attention to the interconnections between family practices, and religious and cultural practices. In these studies are religion, culture and traditional gender roles seen as an important explanation for variation in networking within and outside family networks (Niklasson 1997; Lien 1997; Engebriksen and Fuglerud 2007). Other studies also take in consideration specific context of reception, female dependence, procedures for family reunion and marital integration, in terms of intermarriage with members of indigenous majority population (Gordon 1964; Boyd 1990, 1997; Portes and Rumbaut 2006; Kjeldstadli 2008). They explore whether in addition to families' cultural and ethnic background, refugees' networking practice may be seen in light of different migration biographies (Engebriksen 2007; Engebriksen and Fuglerud 2007). In line with aforementioned studies, this article explores what role different family relations, inclusive relationships between spouses, play for refugees' integration into the mainstream. We may distinguish between

two kinds of family networking – internal and external or bonding and bridging oriented.<sup>2</sup> We may assume that in certain cases family members may suppress each other's bridging to the mainstream. In this case family membership produces family dependence. In other cases, family members may be perceived as “family networking teams” who contribute to enlarging each other's personal networks via joint networking activities. In these cases, family membership contributes to refugees' social integration in exile society.

## **METHODS AND SAMPLE**

The arguments and findings presented in this article are based on information gathered from forty persons who come to Norway as asylum seekers and refugees from three countries: Croatia, Bosnia and Iraq. Twelve informants are from Croatia, 15 from Iraq and 13 from Bosnia. Most of them resident in Trondheim/Norway at the time of the interviews. Comparing these categories of informants I hoped to highlight differences and similarities in their networking.<sup>3</sup>

I managed to achieve variation within the data with respect to age, sex and ethnicity. The oldest informant was 65 years old, while the youngest was 17. Most informants were between 30 and 45 years old. Twenty-one are men, and nineteen are women. The informants within each ethnic category have certain distinguishing characteristics. Most of the Bosnians and Croats I interviewed came from urban areas. Among them, there are several highly-educated women and men who were active in labour force in Norway. The Iraqis I met typically came from the urban districts of Northern Iraq. However, most of them do not have a higher education. They were also less active in labour force. Furthermore, Croatian, Bosnian and Iraqi informants had different migration biographies. While most Bosnian and Croatian informants came to Norway with their families, Iraqis came as single people or through procedures for family reunion. As we shall see, these differences among my informants had a certain impact on their social integration in exile.

Informants were mobilised in strategic way where the intention was to gather data about migrants representing a variety of different types of networking, marital statuses, and family attachments. In my sample were refugees who were single, refugees married within the same ethnic group, and refugees who are/were married with Norwegians. Some

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<sup>2</sup> According to Putnam, some ties are outward looking and connect people across diverse social categories and groups, while others are, by choice or necessity, inward looking and tend to reinforce exclusive identities (Putnam 2000). Drawing from Putnam's dichotomy, we may make different assumptions and views on relation between bonding within the family and bridging across different ethnic groups.

<sup>3</sup> The refugees from the ex-Yugoslav republics and Iraq were also chosen because they represent some of the largest refugee groups in Norway. In total, it is estimated that more than 132 000 refugees and their families are currently living in Norway – about 35 % of the immigrant population. The main origin countries are Iraq (about 17 600) and Bosnia and Herzegovina (12 400). See OECD (2009: 23).

informants were more bonding oriented, while others were more engaged in bridging to the mainstream

Most (28) of my informants have lived between 8 and 12 years in Norway. The questions asked in the interviews were related to informants' social life, importance of their spouses and relatives for bridging to the mainstream, tensions between family membership and bridging endeavours, etc. Each interviewee was also asked to list people who were central in her or his social life. They were also asked questions regarding different characteristics of their personal network.

The reconstruction of social life after resettlement may be understood as a dialectic process where identities and social relations are continuously recreated, resulting in different ethno-social preferences and practices. In order to explore the integration careers of refugees—that is, how their identities, ethno-social preferences, and social networks develop over time—I followed several of them over a sustained period of years. I re-interviewed 9 informants from my MA-study two or three times in order to get insights in their social trajectories, changes in family situation, etc, over a period of six years.

### **SINGLE REFUGEES AND FAMILIES: BEING EXPOSED AND BEING SELF-SUFFICIENT**

Informants in my study had refugee backgrounds or were refugees' family members who came to Norway afterwards through procedures for family reunion. Most of my informants lived for 1-2 years in Norwegian reception centres for asylum seekers and refugees before they were granted residence permits and were able to settle in local municipalities. This period of life is generally experienced as problematic. The reception centre was primarily remembered as the place where they were exposed to various humiliations. During their stay in such places, relations between immigrants, indigenous locals and Norwegian authorities generally are full of tensions, conflicts and mistrust (Berg and Lauritsen 1999; Valenta 2008). These experiences have been firmly deposited in the memories of several of my informants. However, these informants have gradually redefined themselves from being refugees, who are temporary in exile in Norway, and more in the direction of people who permanently settled in Norway. Adopting this attitude made some of them more determined to integrate in the new society, reunite with their families and reconstruct their social life in Norway and Norwegian networks.

We may make several family related distinctions among my informants that may be linked to variations in informants' experiences, their social integration practice and meanings they attach to relationships with Norwegians. Among other things, it seems that refugees' networking practices and experiences depend on whether refugees come to Norway with families or as single people. It seems that family members fulfill many of the social needs within the framework of the family. Refugees, who operated in ethnically segregated social networks, having few friends outside the family, claimed that they did not feel socially isolated because of the spare time they spent with their family

and relatives. Conversely, informants who were single did not have this opportunity and depended more on contacts outside their home.

Few refugees in the study had developed strong multiplex friendships with Norwegians. Refugees were connected to the Norwegian networks via weak ties with Norwegians whom they seldom socialise with in their spare time. My data suggest that weak ties with indigenous locals may nourish identities of inclusion and exclusion. Refugees who had satisfying multiplex relationships within the family were more satisfied with Norwegian weak contacts. These kinds of connections with indigenous locals may give a sense of a belonging to the mainstream, but they often fail to satisfy other expectations. Therefore, families who were without expectations of fulfilling their social needs in terms of sociability with Norwegian contacts, managed to extract from these relationships, positive symbolic meanings. The following dialog with one Bosnian man illustrates that:

Researcher: 'Could you list the people who are important in your social life in Norway in one way or another?'

Informant: 'Most important people for me are of course, my family. You know, we do not have any relatives here, so we hold together. I spend most time with my kids and my wife so you can say that they are important for my spare time, too.'

Researcher: 'Who are the other people that you see a lot or spent most of your time with?'

Informant: 'As I said, I spend most of my spare time with my kids and my wife. We have contacts with other people too, but we do not spend so much time with these contacts.'

Researcher: 'Do you ever socialise with Norwegians in your spare time?'

Informant: 'We have known two Norwegian families for a quite long time, but we do not meet each other often.'

Researcher: 'How often do you socialise?'

Informant: 'We invite each other only two, three times during one year. We do not expect to meet them more often, neither.'

Researcher: 'Why? Does it mean that these contacts are not so important for you since you do not socialise with them often? Are they the people of any emotional significance?'

Informant: 'I can not say that our social life depends on these people, but they are more than acquaintances. They are important to us.'

Researcher: 'In which way?'

Informant: 'You know they are our private connection with Norwegian society' (Laughter).

Researcher: 'How do you mean', why is it important to you to have such connection?'

Informant: 'Many of us dream about repatriation. We have everything, but we feel that we are living in the wrong place, that a life is passing without purpose... I ask myself sometimes whether my children will also be strangers here. When my Norwegian neighbours or workmates take the initiative and invite me to their home on a visit, etc., I feel happy. I feel that it is possible for me and my children to live here after all.'



The informant indicates that he and his wife have reproduced relationships with Norwegians, relationships that seem to be weak tie relationship reproduced through seldom social gatherings. However, the informant does not expect more from them, other than to just nourish their need to feel accepted and respected by indigenous locals. I met several refugee families who attached these positive meanings to ties with Norwegian, ties that in terms of sociability may be characterised as weak ties. However these ties were something more than that. ‘The strength of the weak ties’ (Granovetter 1973) is not only a matter relating to working life. During the course of this study, I became more and more convinced that integration through stable weak ties with indigenous locals do matter. These friends and acquaintances in certain cases may become symbols of acceptance that help newcomers construct identities of themselves as people who are included and respected in their new social environment. However, unlike informant above, several of single refugees in the study indicated that they were not satisfied with low levels of sociability with Norwegian acquaintances. Compared with families, single refugees attached very different meaning to the weak ties with Norwegians.

Single refugees seemed to be more inclined to transform acquaintances with Norwegian neighbours, workmates, acquaintances, etc. into close-knit ties, or at least try to increase levels of sociability. If refugees do not manage to develop these weak ties, such relationships may be assigned quite different meanings, and feelings of rejection may emerge. Here, instead of nourishing a sense of a belonging and acceptance by the hosts, weak ties with indigenous locals can generate a general sense of non-belonging in the host society. Indeed, single people may find the lack of friends to be a more significant problem than refugees whose spouse and children accompanied them. Being without Norwegian or compatriot friends to socialise with, and turn to in times of crisis, makes life in Norway more difficult. The following case is about “Salih” He is thirty-three years old, refugee from Iraq, single, has no children, and no relatives in Norway.

Discussing his social life, Salih complained that he feels socially isolated and lonely. Salih attributed his loneliness to the fact that he was single. As a single person, he was alone for most of the time. At the same time, he experienced that it was difficult to enter Norwegian social networks. He socialised with some Norwegian workmates from time to time, but they are not real friends. He meant that Norwegians and Norwegian society are cold and xenophobic. According to Salih, an Iraqi married couple form his most significant contacts and he visits them at home from time to time. Salih considers this couple as his only friends in Norway. However, he has much more free time for various activities compared with this couple, who also have children. Salih knows another Iraqi man with whom he will sometimes go to pub or discothèque. Salih has also had few short relationships with Norwegian women, but he does not have contact with any of them now. He feels lonely most of the time. He thought that if he had family, he would have his family members and other families to socialise with in his spare time. Therefore, he planned to travel out of Norway in order to find an Iraqi woman with the aim of marriage.



When there is no-one from the home country in the local community to either socialise with or turn to in times of crisis, or where an refugee cannot gain proper admission into compatriot and Norwegian networks for whatever reason, it makes the situation very difficult to endure. People in this category were lonely, which is also shown in Grønseth's study on Tamil refugees in Northern Norway (Grønseth 2006). Her informants felt isolated and alienated from their social surroundings. They were highly dissatisfied with their life in Norway. Like Salih, they had negative perceptions of Norwegians and Norway and tended to blame Norwegians for their loneliness and isolation. Although Grønseth do not explicitly argue that this feeling of loneliness and marginalization in relation to the mainstream is reinforced by refugees' family situation, her data imply that single refugees are specially exposed (see also Høgmo 1998; COWI 2002).

### **FAMILY MEMBERSHIP AND PERSPECTIVES ON THE EXILE SOCIETY AND HOME COUNTRY**

Høgmo's study (Høgmo 1998) on Tamils in Northern Norway, also relates, although not developing the argument, change in refugees' family situation to their engagement in social integration into the mainstream. Høgmo shows that while they were single, Tamils socialised with indigenous locals, even they often risked humiliations while participating at social arenas dominated by ethnic Norwegians. However, when they changed their family situation due to family reunion or marrying within their ethnic group, Tamils withdrew from the social life and Norwegian networks. My material suggest that one possible interpretation is that refugees withdrew from the social life and Norwegian networks because they felt socially "self-sufficient" fulfilling their social needs within the frame of their family relationships. Such reduction in interest for networking was evident in stories of my informants, those who changed their family situation after resettlement in Norway. One informant said:

Before I could accept many things, even overlook situations that I now see were directly humiliating, everything because I wanted to get Norwegian friends, in order to feel accepted. When I established as family man I become more family-centred... I do not seek after acceptance by Norwegians and friendships in emotional sense... Now, I have my family... I find myself thinking about my Norwegian contacts primarily in pragmatic manner. You never know when you will need their help (Bosnian man).

When they married, which usually happened within their own ethnic networks, and got children and formed their private family social sphere, my informants indicated that their ambitions and eagerness in respect to networking to the mainstream somehow declined. As story of the last informant illustrates, they were less interested in investing in these relations, become more instrumental and selective in their networking, and meant that they did not reacted so emotionally when they experienced rejection by Norwegians.

The link between refugees' feeling of marginalisation in relation to the mainstream and their family situation was also evident in ambivalences that my informants expressed in respect to integration in Norway and repatriation to their home country. Several of my informants who were single people dreamed about repatriation or about migration to third countries, while they, like "Salih" also has indicted, at the same time tried to solve the problem by looking for a spouse from their home country. While these refugees lived in a state of limbo, most informants who re-established in Norway with families and children, felt permanently anchored in Norway. Among other things, they meant that exile society would give better life prospects to their children. They also missed their home country, but repatriation plans were usually seen as something that maybe will happen in future when their children have become independent, or it was acknowledged that "the big return" is nothing more than an unrealistic, nostalgic dream (Valenta and Berg 2003b).

### **FAMILY AS A NETWORKING TEAM**

So far we can conclude that refugees who are in exile with their families have less need, and time left, for networking outside the family, which may reduce their participation in community life. However, informants' stories suggest that family bounding does not necessarily reduce opportunities for bridging and participation in Norwegian community life. Informants' stories indicate that family membership may actually increase sense of belonging and accelerate social integration into the mainstream in several ways. Indeed, through bounding within the family, members of the nuclear family may contribute to each other's personal network – becoming members of a 'family networking team' (Valenta 2008). As members of such a team, family members will help to expand each other's personal networks through parenting and other joined networking activities introducing each other to their friends, work colleagues and acquaintances. When some of informants in the study were asked about how they get in touch with individuals in their personal network, the refugees answered that the contact was the husband or wife of her husband's friend, his workmate, or parents of their children's schoolmates, etc. These answers show that as someone who is a part of the nuclear family, the refugee is not as engaged in the process of reconstructing her or his social life after resettlement as a single person is. The quotation presented below is a good example of this:

Most of my Norwegian friends are ex-colleagues of my husband. We became acquainted because he introduced me to them, but now some of them are closer to me than to him... I introduced my husband to some people too. My husband socializes a lot with one Norwegian man who is our neighbour. I am a good friend of his wife's, so I introduced her husband to my husband. We girls indirectly brought the boys together (Bosnian woman).

The informant suggests that spouses may make each other's friends, and their friends'

partners, to their own friends, which is line with other studies on family networks and immigrant networks (Engabrigtsen 2007; Engabrigtsen and Fuglerud 2007). The informant's story indicate that when we analyze attempts by married refugees with families in Norway to bridge and bond, it may be useful to distinguish between the ethno-social practices of single family members and the family as a social unit that engages in bonding and bridging endeavours together. In some cases, family members have similar ethno-social practices and join in the effort to network and bridging with the mainstream. In other cases, the refugee may be indirectly involved in bridging to the mainstream without that making any efforts to bridge on her or his own. Several refugees in the sample were as individuals primarily oriented towards bonding with their compatriot friends, but whose contact with Norwegians was facilitated by their family members. These people may, in one way or another, also become part of that individual's social life. One informant said:

My husband introduced me to people he knew from the reception centre... Friends of my husband gradually become my friends too... They accepted me and introduced me to other people (Iraqi woman).

My family is well-integrated. Our children speak Norwegian fluently and have many Norwegian friends. We have Norwegian kids almost every day that in our house. We have also acquainted some of their parents (Croatian man).

As the first quotation illustrates, people who the refugee socializes with and is supported by in the present, may first have been friends of a spouse – or will at least have been mobilized by the spouse or by the person's children in one way or another. However, the family ties do not only have bridging potential, they may also be the source of an refugee's self-identification and understanding of where s/he stand in relation to the mainstream. As the last informant above said: "My family is well integrated". Due to bridging endeavours of their family members, some refugees felt well integrated in Norwegian networks and Norwegian society although they did not have any Norwegian friends. If they were single persons, and defined their situation on the basis of their personal ethnically segregated networks, they might feel that they are marginalised and rejected by the mainstream. However, being in exile with their families they did not only identified themselves with their own ethno-social practice, but also used bridging achievements of their nuclear family, their spouse and children, as basis for their self-identification.

In some cases and during certain periods of a person's life, members of the family may lack the required social abilities or access to important social arenas where being acquainted with other people might be possible. If an individual is unemployed, ill or cannot speak the language, this person's social integration and the integration of the whole family as a social unit depends on family members who have the skills and opportunity to interact and construct bridges to other people. This inability to participate in a wider social life makes such individuals much less effective in reconstructing their social life than

other, more active and better integrated, members of the nuclear family. In such cases, the other persons in the nuclear family will become the primary source of new social contacts.

### **BOSNIAN, CROATIAN AND IRAQI WOMEN: CULTURAL EXPECTATIONS AND COSTS OF BRIDGING**

As already noted, several studies pay attention to the interconnections between family practices, and religious and cultural practices (Lien 1997; Niklasson 1997). They suggest, for instance that certain categories of immigrant and refugee women are more oriented to family sphere and ethnic networks while their husbands are more engaged in connections outside the household and bridging with indigenous locals (Boyd 1997; Niklasson 1997; Lien 1997; Engabrigtsen 2007; Engabrigtsen and Fuglerud 2007). Indeed, in some cases, bounding within the family networks may reduce opportunities for bridging outside the group (Bott 1957). This tension between family ties and external relations was more emphasised among Iraqi families than among Bosnian and Croatian families. Among Bosnian and Croatian families, these tensions were primarily linked to ethno-social preferences. Bosnian and Croatian women meant that they had opportunities to develop relationships with Norwegians if they really prioritized these relationships. Those who did not have Norwegian friends, explained that interactions with members of their nuclear family fill all their spare time. The informants also reported either that they did not need close relationships with Norwegians, or that, if they did, that they did not want to build them up at the expense of relations with their compatriot friends.

In case of Iraqis, family ties could appear as directly suppressive. Iraqis in the study preferred women to remain at home in their spare time to a much greater extent. Especially Iraqi women who lived within conservative Iraqi networks who tried to be bridging oriented socio-cultural innovators risked sanctions from their own compatriots, family and relatives. However, it has to be noted that not all Iraqi women and girls conformed to their families. Some Iraqi women also socialized with Norwegians on their own terms, but while Croat and Bosnian women could engage quite openly in bridging and acculturation activities, Iraqi women had to be more circumspect and were more burdened by conflicts of loyalty. As stories presented below indicate, due to the structural contexts within which they operated, the bridging and acculturation strategies of women were ambivalent and covert, and took the form of “secondary adjustments”, “back stage performance” and careful “impression management” (Goffman 1956, 1961).

When I am at parties with my Norwegian workmates, I behave as Norwegians. I drink beer, dance with men and laugh as anybody else. However, I never do that if other Iraqis are with us. I do not want to provoke my compatriots. They may start gossiping. I do not want to embarrass my husband and my family (Iraqi women).

When it came to their teenage daughters, Iraqi parents seemed even more reluctant to allow contact with Norwegians than were parents from Croatia and Bosnia.

Many of my compatriots prefer their teenage children to socialize within the group. They are afraid that being with Norwegian youngsters will expose them to bad influences. Some children do not like how Norwegians behave, or do not want to defy their parents, so they socialize mostly with other foreigners...This concern is also found among adults. Strong adjustments to Norwegian society may provoke people. If you spend too much time with Norwegians and behave in a Norwegian way, other compatriots may start to speak badly of you. No-one wants that (Iraqi man).

Women from Bosnia and Croatia did not find that bridging with Norwegians was an especially costly or risky form of socio-cultural behaviour. In these families, men and women were equally engaged in bridging activities. Spouses functioned rather as social brokers for each other, creating joint family networking teams. Furthermore, parents supported rather than sanctioned bridging with Norwegians. For instance, I met parents from these groups who even spoke proudly about their teenage daughters and sons being Norwegian. They spoke openly about their children speaking better Norwegian than their mother tongue and socializing with Norwegian peers, having Norwegian boyfriends, etc. Indeed, when it was thought that teenage daughters and sons socialised too much with other immigrant offspring, parents sometimes even encouraged them to have more contact with their Norwegian peers. They were concerned about the possibility that their children would end up in marginalized ethnic milieus.

Several studies indicate that female family dependency may be reinforced through migration process (Niklasson 1997; Boyd 1997; Lien 1997). In what follows, it will be argued that aforementioned differences in networking patterns were reinforced by variations in refugees' migration biographies. Most Iraqi men in the sample arrived in Norway on their own. Their wives came to Norway afterwards through family reunion scheme. The men were those who normally introduced their wives to other people and to Norwegian society in general since they were the first to arrive in Norway. As a result, the women who followed them inherited their networks in Norway rather than achieving them independently. As we shall see, some of these women become strongly dependant of their husbands.

### **BOSNIAN, CROATIAN AND IRAQI WOMEN, FAMILY REUNION AND NETWORKING PRACTICES**

Several Iraqi women indicated that they were totally dependant on their husbands during the first phase of their integration process. Even after several years in Norway these women were not directly involved in bridging with Norwegians. In their eyes, the husbands still had a better knowledge of their social environment. These perceptions influenced on

their opportunities for bridging to the mainstream. They accepted or became accustomed to the idea that establishing and maintaining ties outside the family was primarily the responsibility of their husbands. It seems that features of the network that family reunited women inherited also should be taken in consideration when we analyse their ethno-social behaviour. The Iraqi women who come to Norway through family reunion procedures inherited the networks of their husbands, but these networks were in the most cases composed of ties with other Iraqis.<sup>4</sup> These networks had low potential for bridging to the Norwegian mainstream society which influenced these women's bridging opportunities. One informant who reunited with his wife through family reunion scheme said:

None of my friends used to socialize with Norwegians... My friends have the same problem as I have, but they do not see this as being a problem. When my wife came, she was introduced to my friends, but I cannot get Norwegian friends via them. She experienced the same thing (Iraqi man).

Compared with Iraqi women in the study, Bosnian and Croatian women were more engaged than Iraqi women in networking and in bridging to the mainstream. One possible interpretation is that Bosnian and Croatian women were more used to be active in work force and to participate actively in community life than Iraqi women. However, these differences may be also explained by the fact that most Bosnian and Croatian women arrived in Norway together with their husbands and children. They were together in reception centres for asylum seekers and were settled together in Norwegian municipalities where they attended various integration related programmes that authorities offer to refugees. Some of these women learned Norwegian language even faster than their husbands did. In other words, they did not have any reason to expect that their husbands primarily should be responsible for contacts with Norwegians. One Croatian informant said:

When I and my family arrived here, all of us were really eager to integrate. All of us were active at various arenas... We have established several contacts with Norwegians through our participation in work, Norwegian courses, parenting and other activities... My wife find job before me and she got first Norwegian friends at her workplace... Our children are active in different after-school activities and I meet other parents there. They were my first Norwegian acquaintances... Since we arrived in Norway, we are equally engaged in contacts with Norwegians (Croatian man).

Stories of my informants indicate that Bosnian and Croatian women and their husbands, including the Croatian man above, were jointly engaged from the start in reconstructing their family networks. Some of them had large networks, and engaged themselves in bridging to the mainstream as active networking partners who contributed to

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<sup>4</sup> Some of their husbands had contacts with Norwegians, but they cut them off when their Iraqi wives arrived (for example, their Norwegian girlfriends). As a result, their Iraqi wives inherited the ethnically homogenous networks composed of ties with other Iraqis.

enlarging each other's personal networks via joint networking activities. Findings suggest that women's background, gender roles, and ethnic composition of networks that women inherited from their husbands play important role in respect to bridging to the mainstream. So, in order to summarise, we may say that in the case of Iraqi women, who came through family reunion scheme, their migration biography reinforced already existing traditional gender roles where women are expected to be responsible for domestic sphere and men for public sphere. In the case of Bosnian and Croatian women in the study, who as already noted, arrived together with their husbands, their migration biography was compatible with their expectations about an active participation in community life.

### **NORWEGIAN PARTNERS AS ENTERING POINTS TO NORWEGIAN SOCIETY?**

Marital integration, or cross-ethnic marriage, is often used as indicator of how immigrants assimilate in primary groups of local majority population. Several studies also assume that marital integration may facilitate social integration of immigrants and refugees (Gordon 1964; Kjeldstadli 2008). Gordon (1964) for instance, links in his classical study on assimilation of immigrants in American society, marital integration to structural assimilation process. According to him, acceptance of immigrants in primary groups of indigenous locals is an important aspect of structural assimilation process.

Refugees' stories indicate that there are several entry points to Norwegian networks. Refugees may use the workplace, parenting responsibilities or neighbourhood as points of entrance (Barnes 2001; Knudsen 2005; Pedersen 2008). Refugees may also establish contact with the mainstream through their Norwegian girlfriends or boyfriends. In some cases Norwegian spouses, girlfriends and sexual partners were the most relevant entry points (or motivating factors) for refugees' contact with indigenous locals. While some informants gradually cut themselves off from their Norwegian girlfriends, others developed these relations and even married with Norwegians. I will devote last pages of this article to discuss how cross-ethnic marriage influence refugees' bridging to the mainstream, and their interpretations of where they stand in relation to exile society. As the following story shows, informants who were married or lived together with Norwegians sometimes had better start: the partners directly or indirectly influenced the refugee's personal network, the refugee's ethno-social practice and the refugee's sense of belonging.

When I come to Norway, I was placed in reception centre for asylum seekers. It was terrible time. I felt miserable. I felt that I was not welcomed here. When you live in reception centre you do not have contact with Norwegians outside the centre and think that all Norwegians hate you... However, those of us who were lucky to find Norwegian girlfriends were in much better position... I had Norwegian girlfriend who used to invite me to her apartment. She introduced me to her friends too... The relationship did not last very long time, but it was important for me, both in



emotional and social sense... This relationship gave me feeling that at least some Norwegians liked me (Iraqi man).

The refugee may also interpret the fact that s/he is married and has children with the native person as an important symbol of acceptance.

Of course I feel accepted by the hosts... I live with a Norwegian woman and have a daughter who is half-Norwegian... I do not even need to have my own Norwegian friends in order to feel accepted. It is more than enough to have my family and to socialize with my wife's relatives and friends (Iraqi man).

Stories of my informants indicate that refugees who were married or who lived together with Norwegians often had better opportunities for external integration and for bridging outside their own ethnic group. Having a husband or wife with friends and relatives allowed the refugee easier access to primary groups among the hosts. These refugees were given important sources of self-confirmation and felt a highly developed sense of belonging to the mainstream. Refugees in this category also felt permanently anchored in Norway, more than any other category of refugees in my sample. Among this category of refugees, repatriation to the home country was seldom part of their plans for the future. The fact that they had Norwegian woman and have children who are half-Norwegian did not only influenced their attachment to Norwegian society in emotional sense, but it has also placed practical restrictions in relation to their future repatriation. Unlike many other refugees I met, who were highly ambivalent in respect to their future in Norway and their repatriation plans, these refugees meant that they did not have many options, as an informant said: "The mother of my children is Norwegian and Norway is their home. In other words I am trapped here". However, it should be emphasized that we should not use marital integration as indicator of successful integration and intergroup bridging without certain reservations. Several informants have indicated that marital integration may even contribute to feelings of exclusion – as, for example, in the cases where the refugee does not feel welcomed into the personal networks of their spouses. The personal network of a spouse could even be the source of humiliation. I met refugees who were almost totally disconnected from the personal network of their Norwegian partners. In these cases, the individual mainly socialized with his compatriot contacts, while his Norwegian spouse mainly socialized with her compatriot contacts. These individuals did not have better opportunities for external networking and bridging to the mainstream than any other refugees and immigrants. It has also happened that an refugee with a Norwegian wife or husband was given the chance to socialize with friends and relatives of the spouse, but still failed to present her or himself in a way that was acceptable within the premises of the ethnic majority. In these cases, people who the refugee was compelled to socialize with, because of their relations with the Norwegian spouse, contributed to undermine her integration process. Instead of creating feelings of recognition in exile, inclusion and a sense of belonging to the mainstream, face-to-face interactions and relations with these

people contributed instead to a sense of inferiority and ethnic misrecognition.<sup>5</sup> Finally, there are also cases where interethnic marriage ended in divorce and family problems which resulted in feelings of bitterness. They sometimes caused generally negative attitudes towards Norwegian culture and bridging with indigenous locals. These refugees started looking for a spouse from their home country. They often remarried within their own group and gradually cut themselves off from contact with Norwegians.

## CONCLUSION

In this article, refugees' feeling of belonging and self-worth in exile are related to their family situation, gender roles within the family and refugees' migration biography. This article maintains that relationships within family may have different impact on refugees' social life in exile and their incorporation in the mainstream society. The aim of the article was to show how different family affiliations produce and restrict opportunities for social integration of refugees in exile. The paper also shows that refugees who are in different family situation have different interpretations of social life in exile. It seems that single refugees are more exposed to feeling of loneliness and marginalization in relation to the mainstream, and tend to blame Norwegians for their loneliness and isolation. Unlike them, refugees who are in exile with their families are less exposed to feelings of loneliness and to such negative interpretations. Refugees' family may make them less dependent of their friends and compensate for a lack of contact with people outside the home.

Stories of refugees who are in exile with their families and children indicate that members of the nuclear family may contribute to each other's personal network and generate among refugees positive interpretations of their relations to the mainstream. Nevertheless, some refugees may feel strongly family dependant. For example, certain categories of refugee women who come to Norway through procedures for family reunion may be strongly dependant on their husbands, ending up in segregated networks which promote conformity and traditional gender roles. In these cases family reunion scheme may contribute to reinforce traditional gender roles where women are supposed to be oriented to domestic sphere, while their husbands have main responsibility for contacts outside the home. It is to expect that these women may feel that they do not have anybody to turn to and to get comfort from, in the event of experiencing problems within their family.

The presented findings have potential implications for family reunification policies and integration policies. Among other things, they suggest that authorities should offer certain categories of refugees, various family and gender sensitive migration policies and integration programs aimed to catalyse refugees' social integration. Social workers who work with refugees, local municipalities and NGOs should also be more sensitive in

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<sup>5</sup> Therefore, informants who had Norwegian spouses preferred to socialize with ethnically mixed couples. They indicated that they enjoy their company better than that of 'normal' Norwegian couples. It seems that ethnically mixed couples prefer multicultural environments.

respect to refugees' family situation, female dependency and their migration biographies. For example, women who came to Norway through family reunion scheme should be prioritised when NGOs, social workers and local authorities organise "Refugee-guide" programmes, and other equivalent initiatives aimed to facilitate participation of refugees in community life and increase their integration into the mainstream (Valenta and Berg 2003a; Lund 2003).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The Refugee-guide programme is an initiative organised by the Norwegian Red Cross aimed to catalyse refugees' social integration. Refugee-guides are volunteers from local communities who are coupled with refugees on an informal basis (Lund 2003; Valenta and Berg 2003a).

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## POVZETEK

### DRUŽINSKE VEZI, ODVISNOST ŽENSK IN MREŽENJE V IZGNANSTVU

Marko Valenta

Težavam s katerimi se spopadajo begunci in njihove družine pri rekonstrukciji družbenega življenja in mreženja v izgnanstvu, se posveča malo pozornosti. V tem prispevku so migracijske biografije beguncev in družbena integracija na Norveškem postavljena v kontekst družine in spolnih vlog. Namen prispevka je preučiti, kako družinska situacija beguncev vpliva na možnosti mreženja v družbi izgnanstva in ponuditi različne kontekste za interpretacijo njihove družbene marginalizacije in integracije v večinsko družbo.

Na podlagi kvalitativnih podatkov in opravljenih intervjujev z begunci bo predstavljeno, kako družinska situacija beguncev vpliva na njihovo družbeno integracijo v izgnanstvu, njihove poglede na večinsko družbo in državo izvora, in odnos do repatriacije. Člani nuklearne družine so ključna komponenta družbenega življenja begunca v izgnanstvu, tako v smislu druženja kot nudenja emocionalne podpore. Člani družine lahko razumejo vzpostavljanje vezi z domačini kot pridobitev, spodbujanje mreženja navzven in omogočanje oblikovanja identitet za uspešno vključitev. Člani družine prav tako nudijo pomembno bazo za begunčevo samoidentifikacijo in razumevanje njegovega položaja v odnosu do države izvora in države izgnanstva.

Prav tako je v prispevku argumentirano, da so samski begunci bolj izpostavljeni občutkom osamljenosti in družbeni marginalnosti v odnosu do večinske družbe kot tisti, ki so v izgnanstvu skupaj s svojimi družinami in otroki. V nekaterih primerih družinski člani namreč omogočijo lažjo integracijo v norveška družbena omrežja. V nekaterih primerih družinski člani namreč omogočijo lažjo integracijo v norveška družbena omrežja. Družinske člane med drugim lahko razumemo kot pripadnike družinske skupine mreženja, ki simultano reproducirajo vezi na ravni skupne družinske pripadnosti in na ravni

vzpostavljanja povezav z etničnimi skupinami. Kot člani takšne skupine, družinski člani drug drugemu pomagajo širiti osebna omrežja skozi skupne aktivnosti mreženja. Izsledki raziskave tudi pokažejo, da so nekatere kategorije begunk, ki se priselijo na Norveško na podlagi procedure ponovne združitve, močno odvisne od svojih zakonskih partnerjev in ostanejo vpete v tradicionalne vloge in segregirana družbena omrežja.

Omenjeni argumenti in ugotovitve so utemeljeni s podatki, pridobljenimi od štiri-desetih posameznikov, ki so prišli na Norveško kot iskalci azila in begunci iz treh držav: Hrvaške, Bosne in Iraka. Intervjuvanci so bili strateško motivirani z namenom zbiranja podatkov o migrantih in njihovih različnih tipih mreženja, zakonskih stanovih in družinskih vezeh. Vzorec je vključeval samske begunce, begunce poročene z osebo iz iste etnične skupine in begunce, ki so/bili poročeni z norveškim državljanom. Nekateri intervjuvanci so bili orientirani bolj k ohranjanju zveze, nekateri pa so se bolj trudili navezovati stike z večinsko družbo.

Ugotovitve lahko potencialno vplivajo na sheme repatriacije in na integracijsko politiko. Med drugim se na podlagi rezultatov raziskave predlaga, da naj oblasti za določene kategorije beguncev pripravijo družinske politike in programe integracije, ki bodo pospešila njihovo družbeno integracijo. Socialni delavci, ki delajo z begunci, občine in nevladne organizacije, bi prav tako morali biti bolj pozorni na družinsko situacijo beguncev, odvisnost žensk in njihove migracijske biografije.