

CHAPTER

7

REALITIES OF CROSS-BORDER MARRIAGES

Rearranging Family and Gender Relations



INTRODUCTION

I first met thirty-year-old Adelina a year after her engagement to an Opoja migrant in Germany, when she was busy preparing for her German qualifying language exam. Adelina lived with her parents in one of the Opoja villages, and Adelina's exam performance, as she told me, would not only determine her visa eligibility to join her fiancé in Germany but even her suitability for the marriage alliance. In the eyes of her fiancé, it was vital to attend German language courses; in a sense, her fiancé was reiterating the official position of the immigration state, where the knowledge of basic German is a precondition for marriage migration. He thus willingly funded her German language course, which she attended in a neighbouring village along with other young women and a few men also planning to marry and/or work abroad. Adelina had mixed feelings about her marriage. Her general unease about an unpredictable future was exacerbated by the limited interactions with her fiancé, who had returned to Germany, and the prospect of having to leave her family soon and live in a foreign country where she barely knew the language. The year-long wait between her engagement and her wedding, which depended on her passing the language exam before she could finally move abroad, was emotionally challenging. Having left school more than ten years ago, learning German, she said, made her eyes and head hurt and was

making her more and more tense and anxious. Overcoming the challenge of 'relearning to learn', especially in a classroom environment, in order to become 'eligible' to embark on her marital life abroad was entirely on her shoulders (Leutloff-Grandits 2021).

Citizens from Kosovo and from other non-EU-countries who cannot benefit from the privileged migration schemes of EU countries must make do with limited migration channels, namely family reunification and here especially marriage migration. However, the increasingly restrictive family migration measures have made marriage migration considerably more difficult and also slowed it down (Moret, Andrikopoulos and Dahinden 2019). The period of separation and insecurity after couples decide on marriage migration is not only protracted but, as in Adelina's case, often also open-ended, negatively affecting interactions between spatially separated couples and leading to more stress and unease. Even after the marriage migrants have met all requirements and succeeded in entering the EU, they encounter many new challenges of internal boundaries until they reach a secure position, which can take many years (Wray 2012).

This chapter delineates to what extent marriage migration policies influence the experiences and realities of migrating spouses and their sponsors in cross-border marriages linking Opoja to the migrant destinations in Western Europe. It aims to understand the opportunities and challenges of marriage migration and to highlight some developments and turning points within these marriages. Within this frame, the chapter also explores newly evolving meanings of partnership and family relations in cross-border marriages. The underlying question is whether gender roles are reproduced or changed in such marriages, not least because of the spouses' different expectations of each other. Furthermore, the role of the wider family in the spouses' position in a translocal space is analysed (see Chapter 5; Riaño and Dahinden 2010: 33). This also makes it possible to understand the dynamic relations and what is often a balancing act between family considerations and family care on the one hand and the fulfilment of individual desires and self-care on the other.

As I argue in this chapter, cross-border marriages can have both supportive and coercive effects on one or both partners, as they unfold in 'gendered geographies of power', as Sarah J. Mahler and Patricia R. Pessar (2001) put it. Because marriage migration entails crossing great geographical distances and national borders, women and men may experience new forms of empowerment and disempowerment that are not easily discernible at the outset. This type of mobility often facilitates or even necessitates the questioning of established gender boundaries, which can lead to new forms of 'traditional' gender roles and family care but also to emancipated roles and new care relationships. Looking in depth at cross-border marriages, one can

also observe transgressions of ethnic and class boundaries, which are often ambivalently interwoven in Western countries.

To better illuminate the gendered positioning of spouses in cross-border marriages, I explore the influence of migration policies and the institutions of cross-border marriages on the family or household arrangements, which have been largely disregarded in research so far. The wider – translocally situated – family members and their changing constellations and challenges within such family and household networks are important to this analysis, also in terms of the opportunities they offer. To develop the argument, I first outline the discriminatory discourses and legal barriers that marriage migrants face, and the gendered impact of these barriers, particularly on the young people in Opoja waiting to migrate. The chapter then offers a processual perspective on cross-border marriages. Starting with the pre-migration waiting period, which includes preparations for marriage migration, the chapter outlines the actual migration process and then focuses on the couples' efforts to maintain everyday life and partnership relations within the marriage. To understand these processes, the chapter focuses on marriages in which men have migrated, before examining marriage constellations in which women have migrated abroad to join their spouses. It discusses shifts in different gendered and locational positionings during migration in order to highlight the different opportunities and constraints of cross-border marriages. I analyse the often asymmetrical perceptions and expectations of spouses in cross-border marriages (see Chapter 5) and the conditions under which they are met. The role of family and household members, both abroad and in Opoja, the impact of education and class, and the particular challenges of dissolving an unhappy marriage are discussed in more detail.

DISCRIMINATORY DISCOURSES AND LEGAL BARRIERS OF MARRIAGE MIGRATION

Within dominant discourses in the receiving societies, cross-border marriages of migrants, entailing marriage with a spouse from the so-perceived home country, are often understood as migrants' preference for 'ethnic segregation'. According to this interpretation, marriage migration would have the effect of reproducing or 'rejuvenating' migrant communities, which would postpone or block their social integration, leading to an 'ethnic closure of migrant communities' (for a critical discussion, see Beck-Gernsheim 2006: 111–12). In the 1990s, this conviction found expression in Austria in the politicized slogan '*Integration vor Neuzuzug*' (Integration before New Arrivals). It even led to the approval of a package of integration measures (*Integrationspaket*) by the Austrian government in 1997 to improve 'integration' of

migrants into the receiving society (Strasser and Tošić 2014: 130). However, the integration policy overtly focused on measuring and evaluating migrants' integration efforts. Less importance is generally given to improving the integration measures within the host society, not only in Austria but also in Germany and other Western European countries (Plamper 2019: 279–83).

With the rise of certain hegemonic culturalist discourses in Western European immigration countries in the 1990s, which gained force in the new millennium, objections to marriage migration are increasingly rooted in notions that societies are culturally homogenous entities linked to well-defined geographic spaces and imbued with distinct values on family and marriage. According to this view, cross-border marriages, especially among Muslims, are suspected of embodying 'traditional', 'patriarchal' family norms and arrangements that are at odds with the perceived 'modern' and 'emancipated' family values of Western societies. For that reason, cross-border marriages are considered fertile ground for forced marriages and domestic violence perpetrated 'in the name of tradition' (Razack 2004; Liversage and Rytter 2015; Bonjour and Block 2016: 789; see also Chapter 5). Especially women in cross-border marriages are seen 'at risk' of becoming victims of sexual and domestic violence, even if the woman is the 'sponsor' that is enabling immigration from a non-EU country on the basis of marriage (Block 2010).

Cross-border marriages are often also viewed as 'entry tickets' to Western European countries within dominant Western discourses. The suspicion of seeking access to legal rights abroad through 'marriages of convenience' ('*Zweckehen*') or 'sham marriages' ('*Scheinehen*') (see Pellander 2015: 109 for studies on Finland) legitimizes the state's claim to exert control over the development of such relationships and monitor intimate marriage spaces. Men from so-perceived 'patriarchal cultures' are especially suspected of entering into 'sham marriages' ('*Scheinehen*') and betraying their female partner by concealing their real intentions for marrying (Block 2010; Charsley and Liversage 2015; Andrikopoulos 2019).

Using such 'culturalizing' and gendered discourses about marriage migration, legal requirements for family reunion with a partner from a non-EU country have become increasingly restrictive, although they vary depending on the EU country, and differences are also made regarding countries of origin. For example, these requirements do not apply to partners from countries considered Western, such as the US (Block 2014: 7; Straßburger and Aybek 2015: 84; Gutekunst 2016: 233–34; AGF 2012). These restrictions have been put in place despite the international human rights convention guaranteeing the right to marriage and family life. Following the introduction of the Family Reunification Directive in the EU in 2003, which aimed at harmonizing the family migration policies of EU members and setting a limit for restrictive laws, the legal requirements for marriage migration in most

EU member states were tightened (Block and Bonjour 2013). This poses a challenge to marriage migration and often leads to considerable postponement of the migration or even renders it impossible.

First and foremost, the right to family reunification is not a universal right but is tightly bound to the legal and economic membership of the sponsor in society. In Germany and Austria, only citizen sponsors or holders of a residence permit may apply for family reunification. In most cases, they are required to prove 'adequate housing' and meet income requirements that would disqualify them from claiming social benefits (*ibid.*: 2013: 207; Grote 2017: 26). With this, the receiving state seeks to ensure that the applicants are financially independent and can afford the living costs of the joining family members. The implication is that marriage migrants could become an economic burden on the welfare state in the receiving society. Generally, as Block (2014: 8) writes, 'citizen sponsors must fulfil fewer conditions regarding housing, employment, and income than foreign resident spouses', thus making it more difficult for immigrants to bring over their respective spouses. However, as citizens may also include naturalized citizens – that is, persons coming from a so-perceived different cultural background – the requirements for citizens were hardened, too (Bonjour and Block 2016). Moreover, family reunification requirements also have a class dimension, impeding especially sponsors with smaller earnings from qualifying. Women in Austria and Germany, on average, earn about 20 per cent less than men (Danaj 2016), which makes it more difficult for them to meet the economic criteria to sponsor a spouse from abroad and to enter a cross-border marriage. The class dimension thus also unfolds as a gender dimension, disadvantaging women as sponsors of marriage migration.

EU countries justify age requirements for marriage migrants to prevent so-called 'forced marriages' under the assumption that more mature migrants would have a greater say in the marriage decision. In Germany, the minimum age for marriage migrants was raised to eighteen in 2007, whereas the marriageable age in Germany remains sixteen (Block and Bonjour 2013: 207; Grote 2017). In Austria and in the Netherlands, the minimum age for marriage migrants was raised to twenty-one in 2004 (Strasser and Tošić 2014: 143; Bonjour and Block 2016: 790).

Furthermore, since 2007, prospective marriage migrants seeking a German visa are required to prove their German proficiency at the beginners' level (Block and Bonjour 2013: 207; Gutekunst 2016; Grote 2017: 27–28). In Austria, this law was introduced in 2011 (Block and Bonjour 2013: 207). Language proficiency certificates must be presented at the respective consulate or the embassy for the sponsor's spouse to be allowed to enter the receiving country. To that end, this measure shifts the 'plea of integration' to the place of origin or departure, and the responsibility of integration to

the individuals seeking to join their partners, while receiving states assume no responsibilities in providing equal access to such language courses. Generally, such policies are made assuming that language requirements enhance integration chances and prevent forced marriages (Straßburger and Aybek 2015: 84; Gutekunst 2016). However, both in Austria and Germany, the language requirement no longer applies when sponsors belong to the privileged strata of economically preferred migrants. Thus, integration potential is increasingly measured based on class or the economic strength of the sponsor (Strasser and Tošić 2014: 131–33). With unequal requirements for family reunification, the receiving states support what they perceive as ‘desirable migrants’ as opposed to ‘undesirable migrants’.

THE EFFECTS OF LEGAL BARRIERS FOR MARRIAGE MIGRATION

In the cases I explored in Opoja, the stringent requirements for marriage migration proved to be a barrier, often leading to its postponement and exacerbating tensions among partners on both sides. In several cases, the details of these requirements were not known ahead of the arrangements. This finding is also supported by Strassburger and Aybek’s (2015: 95) case study of marriage migrants from Turkey to Germany. They showed that educationally and economically disadvantaged couples had little knowledge about marriage migration procedures and also lacked a solid network of acquaintances as a reliable source of information.

From the perspective of marriage migrants, the challenges in accessing correct information about the legal measures in the receiving countries also arise from the requirement that – at least in Austria and Germany – the marriage certificate must be obtained before entering the EU. This measure aims to prevent non-EU citizens who wish to marry a partner residing in the EU from entering on a visitor visa. Since it is almost impossible for young, underprivileged and unemployed Kosovars to obtain a visitor visa for one of the EU countries, most prospective marriage migrants cannot visit the country they eventually move to after marriage. As Straßburger and Aybek (2015: 91) argue, this leads to the risk of making a ‘wrong decision’ for migrating partners, who lack ‘a first-hand impression about the living circumstances of their fiancé(e)’, even if they receive insider information about marriage migration by their peers and relatives.

In Opoja, the long waiting period for the visa contrasts with the rather hurried marriage decisions partners of future cross-border marriages have to make in order to allow time for administrative procedures and to enhance the likelihood of being able to leave the country immediately after the wedding. Many register their marriage with Dragash’s municipal administration

at the time of their engagement, as an official marriage certificate forms the basis for family reunification applications. However, the processing of this application can take many months or more, partly due the lack of staff at the respective diplomatic mission (Grote 2017: 29). Many couples and their families wait to hold the lavish wedding ceremony and festivities until after the visa is granted, so that they can leave together shortly after their wedding. That is why many prospective marriage migrants from Opoja like Adelina start learning German with a local teacher soon after their engagement or even earlier to ensure that they are prepared to take the official German language examination at a German institution in Prishtina in order to fulfil all migration requirements before the wedding and thus have the wedding soon.

Western discourses legitimize the language requirements as 'educational and integrational measures' that are essential to improving the migrant's language skills once abroad. It is assumed that marriage migrants with merely a primary education can further their education (which many would not have received otherwise) by learning a new language, thereby increasing their ability to be more self-determined after moving abroad. A compulsory language test is also presented as positive in Barbara von Trottnow's (2010) documentary about prospective female Turkish marriage migrants enrolled in a German language course in a Turkish city. It showed that the young women developed a sense of camaraderie with other course participants and that language courses taken in the home country offer the possibility to have German grammar explained in their native language – a near impossibility abroad, where German lessons for language learners are often taught solely in German and by a German instructor.

What is neglected in such discourses, however, is fact that the requirement of a language certificate raises the bar for prospective marriage migrants. This has a number of consequences, as shown by various young Opoja villagers, such as Adelina, who complain about feeling stressed, which is similarly reported by prospective Turkish migrants in the film '650 Words' by Martina Priessner (2016). This in turn negatively effects their relationships with their fiancé(e)s or spouses. Marriage migrants from rural areas are also disadvantaged because of limited opportunities to learn German. The design and quality of the language course may not prepare them as well for the official examination as the courses offered in official language schools such as the Goethe institute, which can be found only in larger towns (Straßburger and Aybek 2015). The course and examination fees, for which prospective marriage migrants often rely on family support or even on their fiancé(e) or spouse, add to the difficulties. In addition, the place that offers a private language course in one Opoja village is not accessible by public transportation (Straßburger and Aybek 2015: 84).

Such limitations and burdens tend to exacerbate gender-specific dependencies. In Opoja, women learners in particular rely on their family mem-

bers to drive them to their language classes and to the final examination at the Goethe Institute in Prishtina, as most women in Opoja do not have a driver's license. If the visa is not ready immediately after the wedding ceremony, young women have to stay with their parents-in-law or other close family members of their husband, following the patrilocal tradition, even if they would have preferred to stay with their own parents. In the cases I observed, the young women who moved in with their parents-in-law did not have a clear idea of when they would be joining their husbands, and where they would be living, which intensified their insecurity. This may also lead to a change in attitude towards marriage migration. As 23-year-old Sara put it: 'Before my engagement, I wanted to live abroad, but after the engagement I had a bad feeling.'

In general, the multiple requirements for marriage migration create undue psychological pressure and insecurities, as they cannot be met in a short time. While many prospective marriage migrants initially await marriage with excitement and happiness, the sometimes year-long waiting period leads to endless doubts and worries. Sometimes the interest of one partner (or both) wanes, so the bond is put to the test even before the wedding takes place, or before partners live together. This means that in such preparatory phases, romance often takes a backseat, and the whole idea of a cross-border marriage is put to the test.

As Western European states deem 'love marriages' as acceptable, it seems contradictory that they do not accept 'love' and 'intention' as sufficient reasons for marriage migration. Instead, 'love' is considered secondary or even torpedoed within the legal framework set up to control and channel marriage migration. The fact that partners entering a cross-border marriage are forced to consider legal and technical issues often negatively affects the emotional relations between them. Whether women can meet the requirements imposed by the immigration state often depends on the educational profile of the prospective marriage migrant as well as their financial means and family support – which inevitably has gendered dimensions. For many women who attempt to marry abroad, the bar is set higher than for men, as the requirements lead to greater insecurity and dependency on their partners and in-laws – even before moving abroad.

REALITIES OF CROSS-BORDER MARRIAGES FOR MALE MIGRATING SPOUSES

For migrating spouses, the main challenges of married life after migration arise from multiple dependencies, especially in the beginning. Their right of residence is initially tied to marriage – and this dependency has intensified

in various Western European countries since the turn of the millennium and especially with the introduction of the EU Family Reunification Directive in 2003, whereupon various countries gradually tightened their legislation. In Germany, prior to 2011, marriage migrants had to be married for two years, and thereafter even three years, before they could apply for their residency rights independently. In Austria, the legal requirements are similar, while in the Netherlands, the probationary period was increased from three to five years in 2012 (Block and Bonjour 2013: 207). In addition to legal dependency, marriage migrants are often initially financially dependent on their spouses. Moreover, marriage migration often creates social and emotional dependencies as well. Individuals, cut off from their natal family and friends in the village, must adapt to a new linguistic, social and domestic environment in which the spouse and in-laws represent the first and sometimes only contacts. The knowledge gap between spouses regarding the multiple legal, financial, social and emotional issues of everyday life in the country of immigration can lead to strained marital relations.

However, the marital dynamics in cross-border marriages are also based on the gender-specific roles that spouses take up abroad. As Patricia R. Pessar and Sarah J. Mahler (2003: 818) describe, the reproduction or redefinition of prevailing gender relations depends on ‘their positioning within multiple hierarchies of power operative within and across many terrains.’ This also affects cross-border marriages between partners in Opoja and EU countries and relates to the social locations of the spouses and the household structure into which the migrating spouse enters, the support he or she receives from his or her spouse and in-laws, as well as education and class. It matters whether the young couple abroad has their own nuclear household or whether the marriage migrants live in the in-laws’ household, which gives the in-laws considerable influence over the marriage. In addition, it matters whether both partners are successful in the job market and are able to move up socially. In what follows, the different roles of spouses within cross-border marriages will be analysed from an intersectional perspective, taking into account gender, education, class and economics as well as the household types.

The Shifting Role of Relatives and Locational Gender Positionings

Carolyn: How did your son get to Austria?

Nazmija: His bride brought him over.

The above is an excerpt from an interview with Nazmija, a middle-aged woman in Opoja, who told me that her son had gone abroad via family reunification. Although marriage migration of men from Kosovo to Germany was

more than 30 per cent in 2015 (Grote 2017: 19; see also Gutekunst 2016: 232), it is still a relatively recent phenomenon that began in the new millennium as a reaction to the restrictive border regimes of Western European states. Nazmija, by saying that her son's bride 'brought him over', indirectly implied that the local marriage patterns had been turned 'upside-down', since in Opoja grooms usually bring the bride into their father's household. For men in Opoja, marriage did not habitually involve movement or relocation (see Chapter 6). The marriage migration of men thus challenges gender relations and family norms in several ways. Although male marriage migrants rarely move into the household of the bride's parents, but establish their own household with their bride, they often live at a close distance from the bride's parents, her siblings and/or other relatives, and often receive support from them in terms of finding a job or dealing with official correspondence. At the same time, the importance of their own natal family line is diminished because of geographical distance.

Lirim and his wife have lived close to his in-laws in a large town in Germany since they moved there in the late 1990s and see them quite regularly – even spending weekends together. With Lirim's own natal family living far away, visits from them are few and far between. When their son was still small, Lirim's wife took up a cleaning job and so Lirim's mother- and sister-in-law took care of the child. This brought them closer together. When I asked Lirim how he felt about the close connection with his wife's relatives while his own family was so far away, Lirim jokingly said that he had been unsuccessful in his attempts to prevent that for years. Elaborating on this, he said that for years his brother-in-law had offered him a flat next door to his own, but he had steadfastly refused it to maintain some distance from his wife's family. He added he had not been interested in living next door and maintaining 'brotherly relations' with him, as was the case for many brothers in rural Kosovo. Instead, he made his own efforts to find an affordable rental. After many years, he finally chanced upon such a flat – without the help of his brother-in-law. However, this flat was also within walking distance to his brother-in-law's apartment, and he jokingly commented that it was his fate to live so close to his wife's family. This geographic proximity, in turn, facilitated their daily visits and collaboration.

In general, migrating men do not always welcome the 'interference' of the wife's relatives, but to some extent they also rely on their support and therefore do not have much choice but to welcome them. Within such cross-border marriages, the family members in close geographic proximity are often involved in childcare, especially when both partners work or want to resume working. Next to practical support, the cooperation and close proximity of family members of the female spouse can also have social and emotional dimensions, especially for the woman. Dafina, for instance, who

grew up in Germany and married a man from her parents' home region in Kosovo, maintains close ties with her sister, who lives in the neighbourhood, and they connect on a daily basis. This degree of cooperation among sisters is rather unusual in rural Kosovo due to the patrilocal family structures, village exogamy and the geographic distance between the villages. Historically, women in Opoja rely primarily on their sisters-in-law or parents-in-law rather than on members of their own family of origin, a practice also prevalent at the time of my fieldwork in Opoja – although women visited their natal family regularly and included them in childcare tasks. When men migrate via cross-border marriages, their wives can more easily rely on their own network of relatives, who can empower her on multiple levels in the partnership and in everyday life.

Redefining Partnership and Gender Roles

Despite the support many immigrant men receive from their wives and in-laws, they often have difficulties adjusting to life in a new environment. As Charsley (2005) argues in relation to male marriage migrants from Pakistan who defy the customary patrilocality when they move to the United Kingdom to join their wives and sometimes their parents-in-law, this generates new dynamics that challenge traditional notions of partnership and masculinity. However, this often goes unnoticed in public discourses and has rarely been explored in scholarly debates and research (Lutz 2010: 1653–54; Charsley and Wray 2015: 403; Charsley and Liversage 2015).

In marriages in which the male spouse migrated for marriage, tensions can arise because the wife wields greater influence: she has deeper knowledge of the majority language, better cultural and local orientation, and, especially in the beginning, often also a higher salary. This can pose particular problems because, according to gender norms prevalent in rural Kosovo, immigrant men from Opoja may expect to assume the dominant role in the family, find a well-paid job and represent the household in public, although this often proves difficult, at least initially. Normative expectations may also leave male marriage migrants with few opportunities to voice their problems or express feelings of anxiety or despair in the translocal space of cross-border family and kinship relations – a situation Katherine Charsley (2005) similarly describes for migrating husbands from Pakistan to the United Kingdom. In what follows, I turn to a few cases that illustrate difficulties faced by men from Opoja after marriage migration and the coping strategies they employ, which in turn challenge the Western image of 'patriarchal' 'Muslim' men who seemingly only rely on strong, male-dominated family relations (Razack 2004).

Twenty-three-year-old Mendim married a woman from Opoja who had lived in Austria since she was eight years old, and he joined her there soon

thereafter. When he spoke to me about his experiences during a visit to Opoja about a year after his wedding, he confessed to me the difficulties he had had in the new environment in the beginning. The initial crisis he experienced came after the first week, when his wife returned to her job in a grocery store while he stayed at home. Finding a job then became a pressing issue for him, and he mobilized his networks of acquaintances from Opoja living in Austria to help him. He was lucky because within a few weeks a friend helped him get a job at a cleaning company about 30 km from his home. But Mendim experienced difficulties at work. He could not speak German, which limited his social contact with colleagues and made him feel insecure about the tasks he had to perform. In addition, he felt exhausted by commuting. After three months, he quit his job and registered at the employment office, through which he was able to enrol in a German language course. Soon after, he found a new job at another cleaning company in the town where he lived. Although the new job was an improvement for Mendim because of the proximity, he was unhappy that this job, where most employees were migrants like him, did not give him the opportunity to improve his German and little time to invest in continuing with a language course. He knew that this would ultimately limit his chances in the job market and make it difficult for him to advance and increase his salary; nevertheless, the most important thing for him was to have a job, even one that was poorly paid and made it difficult for him to save. Many migrants like Mendim find themselves in this limbo with no time or not the right work environment to learn the language in a way that would help them become better providers for the family, as is expected (for male marriage migrants of Turkish background in Belgium, see Timmerman (2006: 137)). For Mendim – as for many other migrants – his limited social life and lack of personal contacts posed another problem. Mendim admitted that he sometimes felt cooped up in the modern two-room apartment he inhabits with his wife on the seventh floor, with no balcony or garden, away from the rural environs of Opoja. He also missed his family and neighbours in Opoja. In other words, life abroad was not as shiny as he had expected.

A cross-border marriage is equally a challenge for the sponsoring partner, who also has to find a new role at work, in society, and with the spouse. Dafina, who grew up in Germany but whose parents are from the same region as her husband Gezim, who came to Germany in 1998, exemplifies the dual challenge. Dafina continued to work as a full-time purchase manager in a local shop after marriage, while Gezim, whose educational qualifications from Kosovo were not recognized, found work as a full-time unskilled labourer without opportunities for social advancement. Since Dafina's salary was higher, she was the main breadwinner, even after Dafina gave birth to their third child after ten years of marriage. As Gezim was still an unskilled worker, Dafina had to resume her full-time work one year after childbirth.

This also affected the family and household dynamics. She put the children into day care and asked her husband to cut back his working hours to be more involved in childcare and household responsibilities. Essentially, when she runs errands she leaves the children at home with Gezim without having to discuss the issue with him in advance or make special arrangements.

In general, most households with a marriage migrant rely on the earnings of two breadwinners to finance their nuclear family and to fulfil the expectations of family and relatives in the village. Many marriage migrants work in low-paying sectors because they either lack the education (beyond the obligatory nine years of school) or because their degrees or professional qualifications are not recognized, meaning some experience downward mobility in the labour market. As with many cross-border marriage migrants (Charsley 2005: 393; Timmerman 2006; Liversage 2012), their partners often earn a higher salary – sometimes even years after the spouse has moved abroad. This affects gender roles. While the wife is the main breadwinner in the household, male marriage migrants are substantially involved in childcare and housework, which is different from the responsibilities of most married men in Opoja.

The shift in gender roles and the power relations and agency within a partnership can, however, become a conflictive issue and affect the self-esteem of the male spouse. When I visited Dafina, she complained that she always had to show initiative and commitment in their partnership, while her husband took a passive stance. In an effort to improve Gezim's financial situation, Dafina had encouraged him to speak up to his boss and demand more money, but her husband was too intimidated to do so. Dafina planned to speak to his boss on his behalf to give him 'a push'. It was questionable, however, to what extent this would further Gezim's position with his boss, and possibly also in the marriage. In other cases, tensions between spouses intensify because the husband cannot find suitable employment or couples have difficulties defining the partnership and household roles satisfactorily. Instead of taking care of the household and children, some men spend time with other migrants in cafés and clubs, although their wives have full-time jobs.

Not all marriage migrants seek or receive support from the Opoja networks or other migrants. Katharine Charsley and Marta Bolognani (2016) found that newly arriving male marriage migrants from Pakistan to Great Britain are downgraded and stigmatized within the migrant community for being 'under the thumb' of their wives and in-laws. Largely owing to their difficult economic and legal status within the receiving country, which pushes them into a subordinate position in society as well as in their marriage, migrating husbands may be unable to fulfil their gendered role expectations. The lack of cultural capital in the receiving society, whether in the form of language skills or cultural knowledge, further exacerbates this

situation. Yet, these liminal positions 'brought about through their specific migratory experiences' (Charsley and Liversage 2015: 501) remain largely invisible – not least because male marriage migrants remain marginal both in their own communities and in society. This marginalization and silencing are also reasons why widespread culturalized assumptions about 'patriarchal' (Muslim) male immigrants from non-Western (European) countries persist among the majority population (Brubaker 2013).

Not just abroad in the receiving society but also in the home context of Opoja these new arrangements within the partnerships and households of cross-border couples remain largely invisible. This is largely the case because marriage migrants and their spouses tend to adopt customary gender roles when visiting their home region. Thus, 'returning' to the home region in the summer months often primarily entails staying with the parents and brothers of the male spouse (see Chapter 4). Women also pay a longer visit to their natal family with the children, but the husband then stays only briefly and returns soon after to his own family. Particularly within the husband's family women try to conform to Opoja's traditional gender norms and role models: they show respect and obedience to the husband's parents, do not go out in the street alone, and above all avoid any kind of behaviour that could cause gossip among the villagers. In addition, to fulfil their ceremonial role during weddings in Opoja, many bring their white wedding dress as well as the 'traditional' one, consisting of a *dimia* with the *dallama* or *jelek*, which they received at their own wedding (see Chapter 6).

There are, however, some women who behave differently, or at least express their discomfort about staying with the husband's family in Opoja and having to conform to customary gender roles. Drita, for example, admitted that she does not like dressing like a local bride with the *dallama* or *jelek*. Dafina, who grew up in Germany and had not visited the home region of her parents and her husband for two years, said she was 'the German' in her husband's family and was blamed for her children conversing in German and not speaking fluent Albanian. She felt like a stranger and was therefore not sure if she would spend the family vacation in Kosovo again.

In general, gender relations shift enormously in partnerships of male marriage migrants, leading in part to the disempowerment of men. However, it is in the translocal setting, in the migration context and in the Opoja region, that these new roles receive little attention, while traditional gender relations, which are partly only superficially maintained, continue to remain in the spotlight.

Education as a Way to Redefine Partnership Relations

In other cases, the subordinate position of immigrant husbands is only temporary, especially when it comes to university graduates or those who pur-

sue higher education abroad to improve their chances of landing a better job in the receiving country. Again, women like Drita are central to their husband's career advancement, providing mental, practical and financial support. Drita came to Germany at the age of twelve and worked hard to overcome various legal and social obstacles to complete her vocational training at a bank. Her husband Alban, who had recently graduated from the university in Prishtina and had migrated after marriage, complemented her own ambitions and hopes for social advancement when he decided to pursue higher studies in Germany, which she willingly financed. Their roles again shifted when Alban found a well-paying job after graduation. Once he became the main breadwinner, they decided to have their first child, and Drita took three years off for childcare.

In a way, Drita and Alban began to follow a rather conservative family and partnership model that can also be found in middle-class Austrian and German families. In the Federal Republic of Germany, for example, until the 1970s there was the so-called housewife marriage, in which the livelihood for a nuclear family was secured entirely or predominantly by the husband's gainful employment, and in return the wife took over the housework and family chores. In today's Germany, married women with children still take over most of the childcare, especially when the children are still small, and contribute on average less than a quarter of the household income (OECD 2017). This also means that many married women are economically dependent on their spouses.

In short, by pursuing higher education and better employment, male marriage migrants may contribute to the continuation of a family model that is still widespread in middle-class families in Austria and Germany. On the other hand, in cases where the immigrating male spouse earns only the minimum wage, women remain the primary breadwinners, even years after marriage, as in the case of Dafina, whose partner also took on a larger share of childcare. It can thus be said that the latter have a more emancipated partnership. This arrangement, however, often remains invisible, not least because these couples do not manage to move up socially. They also do not necessarily consider themselves emancipated and 'modern', because they fall victim to social pressures and marginalization in Opoja and in European Union countries.

In partnerships in which male marriage migrants manage to find a better job with good prospects, the roles in the partnership and towards other family members are not necessarily uniform. Drita still helps her husband fill out forms and takes care of the logistical details within the household. She was accustomed to translating for her parents and was already involved in all administrative tasks within the parental household. She also supports her younger sister financially to enable her to study. Women like Drita have multiple caretaking tasks and use their own finances, education, initiative

and assertiveness to support the social advancement of their nuclear family and other family members, including female ones.

Social advancement is sometimes accompanied by social boundary drawing from other migrants from Opoja and Kosovo who have remained in the lower social class. Because a so-called ethnic underclass has emerged within the German or Western labour market and society that is often subject to negative stereotypes (Esser 2001; Glick Schiller 2014), upwardly mobile migrants sometimes actively distance themselves from their compatriots. As Drita and her husband remarked to me, they rarely socialize with other migrants from Opoja, who, as they put it, have not 'moved up socially' in the context of immigration despite having immigrated long before them. However, by labelling Kosovo Albanian and translocal Opoja communities as 'backward', it creates boundaries that hinder migrants' integration and social advancement in Western European societies. What remains invisible is the fact that Kosovo Albanians occupy different social positions along gender and class that are often anything but clear-cut or traditional.

REALITIES OF CROSS-BORDER MARRIAGES FOR FEMALE MIGRATING SPOUSES

Cross-border marriages in which women from Opoja move to be with their husbands in EU countries are much more in line with customary notions of patri- or at least virilocal marriages in Opoja, and traditional gender relations are less challenged (see Chapter 1). Although prospective female marriage migrants often dream of working abroad, they do not expect to find employment right away. For the most part, they take on household and childcare tasks, thus also meeting the expectations of their husbands and in-laws. However, as mentioned, these partnership roles are not limited to Kosovar cross-border marriages or cross-border marriages in general where women migrate (Timmerman 2006: 137; Charsley et al. 2016) but can often be found in middle-class households in Germany and other Western European countries; such arrangements, however, are often ethnicized, culturalized and devalued in majority society discourses. The very small number of migrant women from Opoja who wear the headscarf (*havale*) as a sign of their Muslim identity or religiosity additionally run the risk of being stigmatized in the immigration country – as the 'oppressed Muslim women' from 'non-modern, patriarchal families' (Shooman 2011). The fact that these discourses thus create their own forms of victimization and oppression often remains unconsidered (Abu-Lughod 1990; see also Spivak 1988; Razack 2004; Strasser 2008).

In the context of cross-border marriages, women from Opoja who assume domestic responsibilities abroad do not necessarily feel disempowered because of the childcare and the emotional care they provide and the housework they perform. In return, they also receive recognition from their husbands and family members. Several Opoja men in Germany or Austria married to an Opoja woman emphasized that their well-functioning partnership is based on clearly defined, complementary roles that create mutual rather than one-sided dependencies. Nderim, who went abroad as a teenager, said that most men from Opoja would be quite lost without their wives, as the woman runs the household. He added that many wives, who are responsible for the household and raising the children, have the decision-making power at home, as husbands do not assume these vital responsibilities, and usually do not interfere in them. He went on to say that his wife always decided what their daughter could wear, and she also managed the household budget and made most spending decisions. As Werner Schiffauer (1991: 196–225) noted for Turkish migrant woman in Germany in the 1980s, women who developed an attachment to Islam in the migration context were able to claim moral authority that they could pass on to their children and that strengthened their position within the family. This was also the case with some female migrants from Opoja, who began to become more religious abroad.

At the same time, I met several male migrants married to a woman from their home region who tried to refute the Western hegemonic stereotype that views men with a migration background as ‘patriarchal’. They said they did not go out with friends during the week but returned home after work and prioritized family affairs and family commitments while on weekends they did the weekly groceries and visited relatives and friends together with their wives. Several female marriage migrants I met from Opoja also contribute significantly to the family income, especially where their husbands’ income does not cover the basic household and family expenses. They take up low-wage jobs soon after their arrival – for instance, as cleaners in private households, often with precarious work contracts – regardless of whether they arrive as labour migrants or family migrants (Morokvasic 1987). That way, they gain more power within their own nuclear family and a higher social status in Opoja, as they can support their relatives there. This in turn has implications for gender roles and perceptions across borders (see Chapter 4).

Some female marriage migrants receive considerable support from their husbands, their in-laws and extended relatives to get acquainted with the new living conditions. Being integrated into a close network of family and kinship relations can help them feel at home more easily (Straßburger 2001). Husbands and the in-laws might also encourage them to attend language courses, take up employment or pursue higher education: by offering a ride,

assuming childcare or financing their education. As Block (2014: 5) outlines, various scholars (e.g. Strik, de Hart and Nissen 2013) have shown that

family migrants integrate into host societies better than other migrants since they can make use of the established networks and support, that is, the social capital, of their sponsors. Furthermore, it has been argued that if sponsors themselves are recent migrants, being joined by their family members rather than being socially isolated is likely to enhance their capacity for integration in the host country.

Young migrant women who came via marriage often share the household with their in-laws, and sometimes that includes their unmarried sisters- and brothers-in-law, or a married brother- and sister-in-law with their respective partners and children. In such complex household constellations, the relations of wives to their in-laws and especially to the mother-in-law (among the female members) gain in importance, as women spend a significant amount of time at home and divide the housework among themselves. However, the quality of relationships between marriage migrants and their in-laws varies.

Despite the support women receive from their in-laws, their relations to them can become a burden, as some reported, owing to unending family obligations in the joint household, with barely any time or space for other things. The husband and/or in-laws sometimes also restrict their movements, employment prospects and the possibility of attending language courses, even when solicited by official bodies as a requirement for gaining citizenship rights. Under such circumstances, the realities faced by female marriage migrants from Opoja differ in part from their expectations of life abroad. Twenty-one-year-old Sara hoped to have a better life and more freedom abroad when she married a young migrant who had come to Germany some years earlier with his mother and brother through his father's sponsorship as part of family reunification. However, her mother-in-law restricted Sara's movements and did not allow her to attend a German language course or take up a job. Although Sara had a work permit and was keen to work, she was relegated to household tasks. Additionally, Sara's mother-in-law expected her to wear clothes she considered old-fashioned. Trying to find explanations for this behaviour, Sara said that her mother-in-law had never adapted to life in Austria. She barely knew German and had almost no contact with German-speaking neighbours. Having lived most of her life in Opoja, she had joined her husband, who had lived in Austria for decades, only as an elderly woman. Therefore, she showed no understanding of Sara's ambition to educate herself abroad or her desire to go out.

Mendita, an excellent student from Opoja hoping to study medicine in Germany, was also disappointed with her life abroad. Her parents-in-law did not allow her to attend university courses or even a German course. Instead, they expected her to do the housework for the numerous family members

and take care of the children of her working sisters-in-law. Since her husband spent little time at home, their relationship became strained.

As these two cases show, the difficulties in these cross-border marriages are often related to struggles and conflicts concerning different hopes, perceptions and realities of gender and partnership roles that oscillate between patriarchal and gender equalitarian norms and practices. These roles are defined by the couple, the in-laws and the wider circle of relatives and acquaintances in the translocal network. They also have an intergenerational dimension, as in-laws can have a critical influence on the roles of young female marriage migrants. Some in-laws assign a more subordinate role to marriage migrant women from Opoja than to their own daughters or daughters-in-law who were socialized in the country of immigration. Within these intergenerational family networks, therefore, gender roles are not always uniform – even within the same household, and role assignments sometimes differ along the axes of location and education.

DIVORCES IN CROSS-BORDER MARRIAGES

Whether and how unhappy marriages are dissolved and what the consequences are differ significantly, with gender and location being important distinguishing criteria. The phenomenon of male marriage migrants returning to Opoja because of a failed marriage was not talked about in Opoja, although problems between partners and with in-laws certainly occur in some of these marriages. It can thus be assumed that men from Opoja who migrated through marriage are reluctant to dissolve their marriages, especially if their right of residence is at stake. As marriage migrants in Germany and Austria must be married for at least three years in order to be granted residence rights independent from the spouse, the existing laws prevent marriage migrants from seeking a divorce.

Although the prospect of having to return to Kosovo and the parental household in Opoja after a divorce is real for both male and female marriage migrants, it is particularly difficult for women to bear. They are then largely dependent on their parents and have little say in shaping their future. Moreover, divorced women are pitied and looked down upon in the village community, and the social shame of divorce extends to the entire family. Most women are therefore reluctant to seek a divorce, even in the case of unhappy marriages.

Blerta had moved to Germany after her marriage and lived with her husband and his parents in Munich, but her husband ended the marriage after a year. She then returned to her parents' home in Opoja. The divorce was essentially a family matter, negotiated between the two families without her

direct involvement. At the same time, it became a village matter, as villagers in Opoja made many assumptions about the failure of the marriage. For some older men, it was clear that Blerta must have been the reason. The fact that the husband's family had spent at least 20,000 euros on the wedding was a sign to them of their sincere interest in the success of the marriage.

Younger women in particular, however, underscored Blerta's role as a victim but also recognized her agency. They said Blerta wanted the divorce because her mother-in-law had disliked her, and her husband had not stood up for her. Whichever version is closer to the truth, it is clear that Blerta suffered the most from the situation. The gossip in the village negatively affected her reputation as well as that of the entire family, which added to Blerta's suffering. In addition, it weighed heavily on her that her dreams for the future were destroyed. Despite the bad experiences she had had in her marriage, many villagers saw that her only option was to remarry sooner rather than later, even if Blerta was not interested in doing so. One of Blerta's friends said the following about her situation: 'As soon as they are legally divorced, she can take back her name. Then she can look for another man.' Having finished school at sixteen, her family did not support her plans to resume her education, which is what she preferred to do. Unable to do much except visit her close friends and relatives, Blerta spent a lot of time on Facebook and other social media, as the digital world provided her with the outlet she desperately needed.

Especially in the first few months after being sent home again she eagerly thought about going abroad but not through marriage. Since Blerta still had a valid visa for Germany, she weighed the option of working abroad and standing on her own two feet. She said: 'The mentality is very different abroad. But if I had the possibility to go and live abroad, I would do it, without my husband. Here people always say something bad about me, and then I feel really bad.' However, her parents did not support her plans, as they did not want to send Blerta abroad on her own, without the 'protection' of marriage or family members.

Another case is that of Florentina, a young woman from Opoja who married a migrant from Kosovo who had lived with his parents near Florentina's parents and brothers in Austria. By the time her parents brought her brothers to Austria, she was already too old for the family reunification scheme. Therefore, she had stayed with her aunt and uncle in Opoja, where she completed her vocational training. When her parents received the marriage proposal of the Kosovo migrant living near to their own place and informed Florentina, she agreed not least because this would bring her closer to her family.

After marriage, Florentina moved to Austria to live with her husband and his parents. However, married life became increasingly difficult, as she felt

confined and unwanted in the household. After a year and a half, Florentina decided to leave her husband and find shelter at her parents' place in Austria, where she received the necessary emotional, financial and hands-on family support she needed to build up a life abroad independent of her husband. Her parents engaged a lawyer to fight for her right to stay in Austria and paid for her living expenses and health insurance payments. Nevertheless, the court proceedings lasted several years, leaving Florentina uncertain about her future. This also had serious consequences for her social relations in Opoja and weakened the translocal family ties, as Florentina was unable to travel to Opoja due to the unresolved legal status, even for her brother's wedding. Ultimately, however, she prevailed, and she continued her professional training in Austria, and thanks to the support of her parents, she settled her residency rights. The fact that Florentina was able to continue living in Austria and did not have to return to Kosovo underpinned her decision to divorce.

The two quite different cases show why women who feel trapped in marriage are reluctant to leave, especially if it means losing their agency or having to return to rural Kosovo. In rural Kosovo, divorced women are dependent on the support of their family of origin and often the only option is to move into a new form of dependency by marrying another man, often divorced or widowed, who will then provide the income. Those who will be provided with the means to stay abroad can somewhat more easily take the risk of initiating divorce if it becomes necessary. In this regard, the support of family members or acquaintances who can provide physical and emotional support, help with obtaining a legal right to stay, and also provide support with completing an education and obtaining a profession that makes them less financially dependent on their husband is of central importance.

CONCLUSION

While various young women and men from Opoja see cross-border marriages as a start to a better future for themselves and their families, the difficulties in realizing their hopes represent the other side of the coin. The restrictive legal framework for marriage migration in EU receiving countries poses a barrier to marriage migrants from non-EU countries. At the same time, as this chapter shows, it also challenges established gender and family relations in different geographic locations and paves the way for non-traditional positionings.

This is especially the case in translocal marriages where the male partner migrates abroad to join his wife, contrary to the patrilocal tradition. While according to widespread gender norms migrating men are expected to become the primary breadwinners, men migrating through marriage depend

on their sponsoring wife and her family long after migration. Sometimes, 'traditional' gender relations are reversed, with women becoming the primary breadwinners and men taking on a large share of childcare. In some cases, this leads to marital conflict. In Opoja, these constellations remain largely unnoticed, not least because the couples often disguise these relations during visits to Opoja.

In some cases, such partnership models are a temporary solution, as men manage to achieve the desired level of upward mobility and assume the role of the main breadwinner for their nuclear family with the support of their wife and often also their in-laws. In this case, the partnership reverts back to the more conservative model, especially when the wife takes over most of the childcare and housework. However, this partnership model is not only a tradition in rural Kosovo but also in immigrant countries such as Germany and Austria. Upwardly mobile couples are also more likely to compare themselves with couples from the majority population. Upward mobility partly means, at the same time, that these migrants distinguish themselves from migrants from the lower classes – sometimes this includes those who came much earlier and who belong to another generation of migrants in the receiving society – who they partly view as backward and patriarchal. Migrants therefore contribute in part to the perpetuation of negative stereotypes against migrants by engaging in these discourses.

Women who migrate after marriage also face ambivalent choices. On the one hand, such marriages can generate material betterment as well as status and power. In nuclear households abroad, they often assume the main responsibility for the household and childcare and can thus gain considerable influence over their husbands and children. Gainful employment enables them to attain a new status and offers greater financial security to their nuclear family and their family members in Opoja. Emancipation in this context means not only independence and an increase in freedom or equality vis-à-vis one's partner and other family members but also a deeper integration into the family structure and a stronger role within the family. In some cases, husbands push their wives to learn the language, take up employment and pursue higher education. They see this as a gain and desire an emancipated partnership. In other cases, however, the expectations women have before migrating fail to materialize. Women are instead subjected to constraint and conflict with partners and in-laws, which they have to endure due to dependencies and a lack of alternatives.

The husband's family plays a critical role in determining the roles available to female marriage migrants. They can help her settle into the new environment, perhaps even support her career goals by providing childcare and offering a new home and emotional support. However, the husband's family can also become a source of conflict and obstruct good spousal relations.

Mothers-in-law who impose 'patriarchal' gender roles have a very strong influence on female marriage migrants when living in the same household.

The consequences of a failed cross-border marriage are manifold. While for male marriage migrants and their families of origin a divorce leads primarily to financial losses, for female marriage migrants and their families of origin it means a loss of status and honour. Moreover, future opportunities for divorced women in rural Kosovo are minimal. They often have no choice but to remarry sooner or later and become newly dependent. The fact that female marriage migrants in particular – but also men – are to some extent socially isolated in the migration context contributes to their difficult situation, not least because they rely on support to improve their position inside or outside marriage. While family members can be a source of conflict and limitation, especially for female marriage migrants, they can also play a supportive role in helping them resolve marital problems or find an alternative future. In this case, the family again functions as a safety net and a source of care. This is especially promising when these family members live in a migration context.