

ABDUCTING CHILDREN ABROAD
– GENDER, POWER, AND TRANSNATIONAL MOBILITY
IN IMMIGRANT FAMILY CONFLICTS

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ABSTRACT

Utilizing life-story interviews of immigrant women, whose children were abducted by abusive (ex)husbands, the article unpacks a three-part patterns of transnational mobility: first, husbands apply strategies of coercive control to dominate wives in Denmark; second, wives draw on Scandinavian ‘woman-friendly’ state support to challenge men and seek divorce; and third, men try to regain control through abducting children to the Middle East, seeking to blackmail mothers into leaving Denmark and re-submitting themselves to male control. While some wives accede to husband’s demands, others skillfully manage to ‘re-abduct’ children back to Denmark, thereby belying the trope of the victimized immigrant woman.

INTRODUCTION

Child abductions generally occur within a context of family conflict, abuse and divorce. This article uses cases of international child abductions in immigrant couples, initiated by fathers, to explore the gendered interplay between nation states and individuals in a context of severe family conflict and abuse. More generally, such child abductions can take place both within and across nation-state boundaries and can be initiated by either mothers or fathers (Douzenis 2014; Lowenstein 2002; Newiss 2017). Unsurprisingly, the international variant of child abductions occurs more often when one or both parents are foreign nationals (Johnston, Roseby, and Kuehnle 2009; Lowenstein 2002). Furthermore, the literature shows that parents, usually fathers, often abduct children in attempts to wield power over a spouse who is trying to leave an abusive relationship. When mothers abduct children, it more often occurs in attempts to protect them from the other parent’s perceived abuse (Johnston, Roseby, and Kuehnle, 2009, p.341).

The article conceptualises immigrants’ lives as unfolding in transnational social fields where norms, practices and structures of both countries of origin and destination hold importance (Levitt and Schiller 2004; Mazzucato and Schans 2011; Tiilikainen, A-Sharmani and Mustasaari, 2020). The analysis thus investigates how men and women may initiate movement across the transnational social field in order to affect configurations of gendered geographies of power (Mahler and Pessar, 2001). In so doing they aim at shaping outcomes of family conflict to desired ends. Drawing on a larger body of interviews with ethnic minority women who had experienced abuse, divorce or both, I base my analysis on five in-depth

interviews with mothers whose children were all abducted from Denmark and taken to other countries by their fathers.

ABUSE, DIVORCE AND CHILD ABDUCTIONS IN IMMIGRANT FAMILIES

Immigrant family conflicts can entail different patterns of cross-border movements. One pattern is that parents send children – often teenagers – back to the country of origin to ‘correct’ perceived behavioural problems. The issues at stake may be delinquency in boys and sexual attitudes in girls (Johnsdotter 2015; Liden, Bredal, and Reisel 2014; Tiilikainen 2011). Another pattern is ‘transnational abandonment’, when one spouse ‘dumps’ the other spouse in the country of origin. In the vast majority of such cases, it is the husbands who ‘dump’ their wives – and sometimes also their children (Anitha, Roy, and Yalamarty 2018; Danneskiold-Samsøe, Mørck, and Sørensen 2011). Nevertheless wives may also strategically seek to affect geographical separation when transnational marriages fail (Liversage 2013).

To regulate the ways in which divorcing parents can move children abroad to circumvent legal decisions made in the children’s home countries, a number of countries have signed the Hague Convention of 1980. The purpose of this convention is ‘to secure the prompt return of children wrongfully removed to or retained in one Contracting State’ and ‘to ensure that rights of custody and of access under the law of one Contracting State are effectively respected in the other Contracting States’ (Schnitzer-Reese 2004, p.4). Important to this study is that some countries – including all Muslim-majority countries in the Middle East – have not ratified this convention (for legal studies of child abduction to non-Hague Convention countries, see, for example de Hart 2015; Van Rossum 2010; Schnitzer-Reese 2004; Yassari, Möller, and Gallala-Arndt 2017).

When judging by the numbers in official Danish statistics, abductions to non-Hague Convention countries appear rare. Thus in Denmark in the years 2015-2019, the authorities registered only between 7 and 16 yearly abductions of children to non-Hague Convention countries (<https://boernebortfoerelse.dk/statistik/>, accessed 12.03.2020). When such abductions occur, however, they greatly challenge both the children and the abandoned spouses. Furthermore, as some abductions may not come to the attention of the authorities, their real number may be higher than the statistics indicate.

GENDER DYNAMICS, FAMILY CONFLICTS AND TRANSNATIONAL SPACES

How gender relations are reproduced or changed after migration has been the topic of considerable research (see, e.g. Donato et al. 2006; Guruge et al. 2010; Kleist 2010). While there tends to be a ‘utopic hope that transnationalism may offer opportunities for realigning and equalising gender relations’ (Pratt and Yeoh 2003, p.161), gender asymmetries often remain – and may even be strengthened – in a post-migratory context.

A case in point is a survey study examining relationship power in Mexican couples (Parrado, Flippen, and McQuiston 2005). Comparing couples who remained in Mexico with couples who migrated to the United States, the study finds that women may lose relationship power after migration, and that while 10% of the non-migrant women said that ‘my partner tells me who I can spend time with’, the same answer was given by 19% of women in the migrant couples (ibid, p. 359). The authors conclude that ‘... women’s attempts to exert control over their lives and bodies, which their families in Mexico may have viewed as benign, can be seen as an unacceptable challenge to threatened values in the United States’, due to the marginalised social position in which many Mexican migrants find themselves (Parrado et al. 2005, p. 367). A similar dynamic may be involved in migratory processes elsewhere. Overall, research indicates that the effect of international migration on gender relations is mixed and uneven, and may simultaneously include both gains and losses (Ferree 2010; Mahler and Pessar 2006). While migration may thus entail new opportunities, it may also lead to challenging experiences of uncertainty and marginalisation (Lewig, Arney, and Salveron 2010; Chuang and Tamis-LeMonda 2009).

As to family conflict, studies show that rates of divorce may increase in immigrant groups with time spent in the host country (Qureshi 2016). Underlying reasons may both include stress-induced conflicts in the immigrant families and the easier access to family dissolution that the new state contexts may afford women (Darvishpour 1999).

When immigrant families from, for example, the Middle East come to live in a Nordic country such as Denmark, they face considerable contrasts in terms of gender relations. They move from a social space where men and women are conceptualised as being complementary to one another, to a social space where men and women – at least in larger measure – are considered equal (Predelli 2004). The new context may challenge men’s role in their families, due to their often losing much of the authority formerly derived from their being breadwinners. Challenges may emanate both from men’s difficulties in finding satisfying employment, and from wives’ abilities to find work, gain financial support from the welfare state, or both (Strier and Roer-Strier 2010; Pels and De Haan 2007). In this new

context some men may find themselves ending up divorced and destitute (Charsley and Liversage 2015).

Both women's access to individualised state support and the perceived risks of women leaving their husbands may trigger defensive mechanisms in men (Parrado et al. 2005). In attempts to retain their family authority, some men may, for example deliberately isolate their wives from both social relationships and opportunities to learn the host country language after arrival (Erez, Adelman, and Gregory 2009; Rees and Pease 2007). Husbands may also be controlling and abusive towards their wives. While a central way for wives to end such abuse is to leave their husbands, doing so may be difficult for immigrant women.

One obstacle such women face is social pressure not to divorce, a pressure tied to the gendered norms against family dissolution in their Middle Eastern countries of origin (Akpinar, 2003). Other obstacles may be social isolation, lack of access to legal residency permits, and fear of how divorce may affect their children. These obstacles may lead some immigrant women to remain in abusive relationships for extended periods (Ahmad et al. 2009; Das 2009), thereby fueling the stereotype of the passivity of abused immigrant women (Kapur, 2002).

Some immigrant women nevertheless choose divorce, a choice supported by their access to state institution resources in their country of residence (Guru 2009; Ottosen and Liversage 2015). In a small minority of such cases, husbands respond by seeking to recoup relationship power through abducting the children. As the analysis will show, such abductions may constitute a strategy for preventing their wives or ex-wives from being empowered by state support.

CONCEPTUAL APPROACH

In this article, I investigate child abductions not as single events but as events embedded in gradually unfolding processes of family conflict (Enander 2008; Hayes 2013). Expecting that the different – and often conflicting – actions of mothers and fathers will be part of these processual chains, my analysis thus answers Cavanagh's call for better investigating 'how women's responses are influenced by men's response' (Cavanagh, 2003, p 233) in situations of family conflict and abuse.

Conceptually, the study draws inspiration from Mahler and Pessar's model of 'gendered geographies of power' (Mahler and Pessar 2001). They argue that interrelated hierarchies of power on interlocking geographical scales mean that power may simultaneously play out both on the intimate scale of the body and on the macro scale of the nation state.

According to Mahler and Pessar's model, individuals' class embedding in the economic geography of the labour market or their state embedding in terms of individual residency rights may thus affect the power they can wield in the intimate relations of their family (Ferree 2010, Del Real 2018).

Individual embedding in different hierarchies of power may either enable or constrain individuals' scope for exerting agency, whether over their own lives or over the lives of others. Given that power relations are central in immigrants' abilities to shape their own lives in desired ways (Pratt and Yeoh 2003), the present analysis specifically examines how gendered power relations in couples intersect with the power of the nation state.

DATA AND METHOD

This article draws on the life story interviews of five immigrant women in Denmark. The background is that I recently headed two projects on ethnic minority women's experiences of abuse, divorce or both. For the two projects, we made interviews with 75 such women. The two projects were 'Ethnic minority women and violence in intimate relations', funded by the Victims' Foundation (2016-2019) and 'Ethnic minority women and divorce, with specific focus on Islamic practices', funded by the Danish Ministry of Immigration and Integration (2019-2020). Both projects apply a biographical interview approach, in which the interviewers ask the informants to tell their life story, with particular attention to family life and family conflict. The similar methodological approach facilitated the ability to read across the whole body of interviews, and subsequently conduct an in-depth analysis of a relatively uncommon social phenomenon.

In both projects, the women were recruited in a variety of ways, for example through community projects, personal networks and snowballing. They – or their families – originated from a range of countries outside the global north, were of various ages and were either immigrants or children of immigrants. As their Danish language skills varied, some interviews were carried out by interviewers proficient in languages such as Turkish and Arabic. All participating women gave their informed consent regarding participation. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Interviews conducted in mother tongue languages were translated into Danish or English for the analysis. The five interviews underlying the present analysis were carried out in Arabic by two different interviewers, who subsequently provided translations of the interviews.

The five selected women, as well as their husbands, share a number of characteristics: They all came from Iraq, Lebanon or Syria – countries that have not signed

the Hague Convention to prevent child abductions. The women as well as their husbands all grew up in the Middle East, and entered Denmark at the age of 15 or later. They arrived as refugees or (in the case of three of the women) due to family unification with refugee husband, who had gained asylum in Denmark. Regarding the five women, their educational backgrounds spanned from very little education to a tertiary degree from the country of origin and they all self-identified as Muslims. Most were married young (three at ages 16-18, two in the first half of their twenties). All but one of the marriages were arranged with women having known their spouses only superficially, or not at all, before the wedding. Except for one couple, which had some years of married life in their country of origin before coming to Denmark, the others experienced married life only in Denmark. The women were between 41 and 52 years old when interviewed. To preserve anonymity, the women have been given pseudonyms, and I do not mention e.g. specific ages, educations, or which Middle Eastern countries were involved in the individual women's stories.

CONDUCTING THE ANALYSIS

The analysis was first of all inspired by the five women having experienced children being abducted abroad. The topic gained further importance by several other interviewees telling of having feared child abductions, of having been threatened with it, and/or of knowing women whose children had been abducted abroad by their fathers. In addition, a sixth woman told of having had her child abducted. As the child's father had been apprehended by the police before he could make it out of Denmark, however, this woman's story is not included in the analysis.

Analytically, I draw on the work of French sociologist Daniel Bertaux, and his call to use life stories to investigate individuals' situated courses of action in given contexts (Bertaux 1997; 2003). In this approach, the analysis attends simultaneously to the 'told story', and to the 'lived life', told about (Wengraf, Bornat and Chamberlayne, 2000). As the interviews were long, complex, and often jumped back and forth in time, an important analytical tool was a graphical rendition of the interwoven time-space trajectories of each of the women, their children and their (ex)husbands (Liversage 2009). This graphical rendition became an important aid in comparing and contrasting the narratives of various turning points and embodied border-crossings, bringing to the fore the importance of mobility across state borders in the highly charged, gendered conflicts.

In the next five sections, I draw on the life stories of these five women to investigate the interplay between gender, power, and the nation state, focusing particularly on

the events involved in fathers abducting their children and taking them out of Denmark. I use elements of the women's narratives to argue that the abductions are contingent on the ways in which relations between individuals and the state are gendered in particular ways across transnational social space.

GENDER RELATIONS, FAMILY LIFE AND TRANSNATIONAL MOBILITY

Both the five women and their five husbands were born and raised in the Middle East. They thus originated from national contexts where loyalty is more tied to the (extended) family than is the case in Denmark, with its more state-based and individualised system of loyalty (Engebrigtsen 2004). The geographical move also entailed a move from a bread-winner/homemaker society to a dual-earner society, with higher expectations of gender equality (Predelli 2004). The women all tell how, during their first few years in Denmark, their family life was structured in highly gendered ways. The women reported having almost full responsibility for household work, while the men assumed the role of household head, making the majority of decisions and expecting their wives to obey them. In addition, the five men exerted their dominance through varying degrees of abuse.

Indeed, all five women appeared to have been exposed to coercive control – ‘a form of ruthless dominance with little room for negotiation and compromise’ (Sharp-Jeffs, Kelly and Klein 2018, p.164). Coercive control entails ‘structural forms of deprivation, exploitation and command that compel obedience indirectly by monopolising vital resources, dictating preferred choices, micro-regulating a partner's behaviour, limiting her options, and depriving her of support needed to exercise independent judgement’ (Stark 2007, p. 229). As Dalal and Samira, respectively, said about their family lives:

All our problems centered on things being ‘my fault’: a wife should obey her husband, be patient and so on. So if we had an argument, he felt that a woman should just shut up when her husband told her so.

He would decide what I could and could not do. He would set a time about how long I could stay out. If I was seeing a girlfriend, he would look at his watch and say: ‘You must be back in one-and-a-half hour’. If he allowed me to go out at all.

Similar to Samira's mobility outside the home being tightly controlled, Faten said: *'I couldn't leave the house. I wasn't allowed to have girlfriends. The only place I was allowed to go was to the doctor – and come right home again'*. Other studies also show that husbands may seek to retain control over immigrant wives through diminishing their wives' access to the host society (Erez, Adelman and Gregory 2009; Rees and Pease 2007).

As to the household budget, Danish state institutions channel economic support to individuals, rather than, for example to heads of households. Hence, the receipt of public financial support could potentially empower immigrant wives. For the five women, such support could arrive either in the form of monthly income support or through the quarterly child allowance, directed into the mothers' (not fathers') bank accounts. However, with their dominance in the relationship, husbands could make wives turn over their income to them, thereby keeping the men in economic control. As Wafa described it:

He would take my welfare support – all of it. He would also take the child allowance and then just give me 100 kroner [14 euro]. In that way, he could be sure that no matter what – if he hit me, if we fought, whatever – that I could not go anywhere. It was a way for him to control me.

This high level of male dominance cannot be considered merely a continuation of practices from the country of origin. Indeed, such male demands often puzzled their wives, such as Hanan, the only woman who could compare family life in Denmark with family life in her country of origin. The couple had lived together in the Middle East until war broke out, making Hanan's husband flee alone to Denmark. When the couple subsequently discussed whether he should bring Hanan to Denmark or not, he told her that she first had to accept a number of conditions. In the Middle East, Hanan had been an independent and employed woman. However, her husband said the following about how their life would be if she were to move to Denmark:

'I will have the bank cards that we receive. Many women have problems with the bank cards. So I will have both our cards. And I will decide how we are to spend the money. And you are not allowed to go out or do anything without my permission'. And I was like: 'Why all of this?' He said it was because he does not trust me. He does not trust that I will not leave him.

Preventing their wives from forging new social networks, learning Danish or having access to their own income bolstered the husbands' abilities to reconstruct family life in Denmark with themselves as the heads of households who could wield control over spouses. The migration experience in these cases thus appeared to result in strengthening, rather than weakening, male dominance and traditional gender roles (Parrado et al. 2005).

Given state awareness of such gendered dynamics, Danish legislation changed in 1999, in a way that made husbands less able to keep their immigrant wives away from, for example Danish language tuition. When Danish law made participation in Danish language courses a condition for receiving welfare support, the municipality mandated that Wafa take such classes. Her husband, however, circumvented this demand by ...

... telling them that I no longer should have social benefits: He was opening a small shop, and would take care of me financially. And then no one could force him to let me go to school and learn the language.

Therefore, although the state could seek to affect intra-household dynamics through placing demands on the receipt of economic support, immigrant men still had the relationship power to unilaterally decide that the family could survive without this support.

GROWING CONFLICTS AND WOMEN CHALLENGING MEN

Over time, all five women gradually started resisting their husbands' dominance. These processes were linked both to the women growing older and more mature, and to the families living in Denmark, where women had better options for achieving self-determination. The men's control and repressive behaviors, all aimed at preventing their wives from obtaining resources, also appeared to push the women towards divorce. Using the cases of Samira and Faten as examples, I first show how male repression in married life could feed their wives' desire for change. Second, I demonstrate how some men responded to their wives challenging them by trying to move the gendered struggle across transnational social space – to a geographical realm that gave women less state support.

The first case is Samira. After the birth of her third child, the municipality demanded that she start language classes in order to receive social support. Learning Danish, and subsequently becoming a trainee in a workplace, she '*...learned a lot and developed mentally*', as Samira put it. At home, however...

... my husband didn't accept the way I changed, with me saying I no longer wanted to do everything at home. I told him: 'You work outside the home, but I do that too, now, so I want us to collaborate, and I want you to help with the kids'. But he rejected that.... I started saying 'no', if there was something I didn't want – and I had not done that before. That was the hardest thing for him to accept. We had a quarrel, and he beat me, and then I thought: 'This is enough. I am 30 years old, and I am still being beaten, and I am supposed to be afraid of him. If I don't say 'stop' now, it will continue forever.

Samira decided that she either wanted her husband to change or wanted to end the marriage. She therefore made certain decisions:

I did not call the police or press charges. And I did not file a report to the social authorities. No, I just went quietly to the municipality and asked for divorce papers. [When she showed the papers to him, Samira's husband...] ...tore up the papers, and I told him: 'That is okay. I will just get a new set of papers tomorrow'. He said: 'Are you serious? Do you really think that we should divorce?' I said: 'Yes. I am totally serious. I have come to a point where I cannot live with you. Either I go against you, and you turn violent. Or I shut up and obey you. I obeyed you before, but I won't anymore'.

The Danish divorce papers were tangible proof that Samira was able to divorce her husband. They also both knew that she could survive financially afterwards, either through working or through having access to social support. Hence, they both knew that the husband's tearing up the papers was an inconsequential act.

From a much more disenfranchised position, Faten also became empowered by the state and openly challenged her husband. As he was very abusive and controlling, Faten had never before challenged him in any way. The municipality, however, had grown concerned over the welfare of their children, and the husband had begun fearing that the social authorities might remove their sons and daughters – a fear also experienced by other immigrant families (Odden, Ryndyk and Ådna 2015). Whether the fear was warranted or not, Faten's husband said that he wanted the entire family to move back to the Middle East. According to Faten, the following events then occurred:

[My husband] could talk of nothing else but going back. But I didn't want to go – and I wasn't giving in. When he returned from work he would argue, hit me, and talk about moving. He would drag me to the bedroom, close the windows, draw the curtains, and beat me up. After it had gone on for weeks, I could take no more. I don't know how I got the strength to do it – my body was yellow and blue, and I could hardly stand – but I ran to a neighboring pizzeria.... I screamed: 'Call the police', and started crying.

Faten's husband was thus unable to have his way in the marital disagreement on the family future, despite his use of considerable physical force. Instead, his actions made Faten seek outside help for the first time, bringing police officers into the home to interrogate both spouses. Although the police did nothing more than admonish the husband not to beat his wife again, the encounter never the less considerably altered the power dynamics between the two spouses. As Faten continues:

The next day [my husband and I] argued again, and he wanted to hit me, and I told him: 'Do it if you dare', because now I had the police to protect me. I felt huge relief knowing that the police had promised to imprison him if he was violent again. So I was no longer afraid in the same way. And he also withdrew and said: 'Do you think I am stupid? I am not going to hit you'.

In both cases, the family dynamics thus changed when the wives became more assertive, and began standing up to their husbands. Furthermore, by having sought support from the Danish authorities (collecting divorce papers or calling the police), the women demonstrated that they had backing from public institutions. Once they had this backing, their husbands could no longer coerce them in the same way.

Similarly, the three other women also challenged male dominance: Hanan and Dalal – through long and arduous processes – got as far as divorcing their husbands, and both moved to places where they could live on their own with their children. Wafa's empowerment came from fleeing her abusive husband and staying in a woman's shelter. Although she subsequently returned to him, her contact with the authorities had nonetheless affected the power dynamics in her marriage: they now both knew that she could summon public Danish support.

MALE STRATEGY – DECEPTIONS AND ABDUCTIONS

At this point in the family trajectories, the men either faced the threat of impending family dissolution or had wives who had already left them. Immigrant husbands may consider family dissolution as posing a severe challenge to their status and well-being, for at least three reasons. First, masculinity in general is intertwined with ‘claiming privilege [and] eliciting deference’ (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009, p. 281), which female divorce may challenge. Second, the strong norms against divorce in the families’ home countries can strongly motivate the men to seek to keep families together. Third, immigrant men – such as these husbands – often hold marginalised positions in the host country, including more commonly being un- or underemployed. The inability to be ‘real men’ through work, career, or fulfilling the bread-winner role can thus make men place even more importance on being the heads of households.

In Denmark, there was seemingly little the men could do to regain dominance within the relationship. However, their being embedded in transnational social fields opened a possibility for action: they could use their children as pawns to make their wives leave Denmark and return to the social space of the Middle East, where the state gives husbands greater control over their wives.

To achieve this end, the husbands had to apply deceptive tactics, as their wives could obstruct their plans if they learned of them while the families were still on Danish soil. All five men deceived their wives in different ways. In Faten’s case, the deception occurred right after the couple had been in contact with the police:

[My husband] began talking to me nicely and kindly. He told me that he regretted what he had done. He also thought I deserved to go out a bit to clear my mind and do something for myself that made me happy. He sent my [13-year-old] son with me that day – as I didn’t even know how to use public transport.... While I was out, he packed the children’s stuff and took the other kids with him to [home country]. When I came home and saw [what had happened], I fainted.

Along very similar lines, Samira’s husband told her the following after she had shown him the divorce papers:

‘How about you go to [nearby country] for a week [where Samira’s brother lived] to get a bit away from it all and calm down? That will give you time to think, so you don’t decide something in anger. And I promise that no matter what you decide, I’ll support it’. I remember thinking: ‘Wow, it seems like he is trying to listen to me’.

However, two days after Samira arrived at her brother’s, her husband called to inform her that he had left Denmark and taken the couple’s children to the Middle East.

As Dalal and Hanan were both divorced, their ex-husbands’ deception involved using scheduled child visitations to take their children out of Denmark. For Wafa, after she returned home from the women’s shelter, her husband promised to mend his ways and try to make their marriage a better one. As a sign of his change of heart, he proposed that they take a family holiday to their country of origin. Although Wafa was wary of doing so, her husband was able to convince her of his good intentions. Wafa thus willingly travelled abroad together with the children. As she found out that she was not allowed to return to Denmark with her children, the gendered dynamics and elements of deception are very similar to those in the rest of the cases. Indeed, Wafa and her children ended up becoming transnationally abandoned, and unable to return to Denmark for years (Anitha, Roy, and Yalamarty 2018).

MEN MAKING DEMANDS OF THEIR (EX)WIVES

Having separated the children from their mothers, and having arrived in the Middle East, the men could speak from a position of power. This spatial change enabled them to pose demands which the women were told to fulfill if they wanted to be with their children again. Samira said that, during her visit abroad, her brother received the following message from her husband:

‘I have taken my children, and I want them to get an Islamic and Arabic upbringing. And your sister will not listen to me anymore. She has changed. So if she wants to see her children again and have her home back, she shall go back to Denmark, cancel her Danish residency permit, close down everything she has in Denmark, buy a one-way ticket to [country], and come down here to live with her children. These are my demands’.

This statement shows that the abduction is a direct response to Samira's 'having changed' and no longer 'listening to' (i.e. obeying) her husband. The purpose of the abduction is to end Samira's divorce plans, thereby also ensuring that the couple's children would not grow up in a household headed by a divorced woman. In the other four cases, the fathers made similar demands. Wafa's 'holiday' to the Middle East changed dramatically after just one week:

[My husband] turned 180 degrees – it was like he became a totally other person. He had met with his four brothers and told them I had run away with the children [to the women's shelter]. That I would do it again, and that I had ratted on him to the municipality and could take the children so he would never see them again. The brothers agreed with him that of course I should stay in [home country]. After that meeting, he told me that I could only return to Denmark without my children. My children were small, so I could not do that. Then he told me that I had to travel with him to Denmark and relinquish my residency permit. He wanted to make sure that I could not return to Denmark again – that I would not cheat on him, the way he had cheated on me.

As these statements demonstrate, the men are well aware that, to ensure their dominance over the family, they must prevent their wives or ex-wives from returning to Denmark. Hence, they tell their wives that they must give up their Danish residency permit as one of the conditions for being with their children.

DIFFERENT REACTIONS TO MALE DEMANDS

Despite considerable similarities in the five cases until the point of the abductions, the family trajectories then developed in very different ways. These differences can also be linked to different family members' mobility across transnational social spaces. A central point is that it was the fathers' ability to take their children to the Middle East that enabled them to demand female submission. Hanan, however, was able to block her ex-husband's mobility *en route* through harnessing European state power: When she learned that her ex-husband had abducted their children during a weekend visit and had taken them out of Denmark by car, she immediately contacted the Danish authorities. Through legal collaboration, this swift response prevented the ex-husband from leaving the EU. In her ability to curtail her ex-husband's plans, Hanan's relatively favorable class position was important: She had obtained tertiary

education in her country of origin and had both the cultural and the linguistic skills to summon institutional support.

Two weeks later, Hanan's ex-husband called from Greece, where he found himself stuck. Although in a precarious position, he was nevertheless able to make Hanan agree to both retracting her legal complaint against him and paying him a specified sum of money, in return for his bringing the children back to Denmark. Although the husband also demanded that Hanan stop the divorce process and return to him, he was in no position to counter her refusal to do so. Hence, two weeks later, Hanan's children returned to their mother in Denmark.

However, if the men arrived in the Middle East with the children – as the remaining four men did – they were in a much better position to make their wives accede to their demands. Thus Wafa agreed to give up her residency permit and live with the children in the Middle East. Indeed, she did so for two years: *'We lived in a village, and there was absolutely nothing.... During that time, I didn't step out of the front door'*. Thus Wafa no longer posed any challenge to her husband in terms of breaking up the family. Although the husband had returned to live in Denmark and thus lived apart from his wife and children, the separation had occurred on his initiative, not hers. He could thus consider himself – and be considered – a powerful head of the household, not a disenfranchised immigrant man whose wife had left him.

Similarly, Faten tried to fulfill her husband's demands by going to the Middle East to be with her children. After a quarrel, however, her husband took the children away from her and denied her access to them, leaving her no other option than to return to Denmark. There she suffered great hardships for two years, living in a woman's shelter, and having no contact with her children.

Wafa's and Faten's husbands successfully used transnational social space to navigate family conflict: when the two women challenged their husbands' dominance, they either (like Wafa) ended up 'dumped' with the children in the country of origin (Anitha et al. 2018), or (like Faten) lived a destitute life alone. In both cases, when the children returned to Denmark, the reasons were (for Wafa) the children's health problems and (for Faten) her husband's being apprehended by the Danish authorities when he tried to have his Danish passport renewed. Hence, the women themselves were not the ones capable of orchestrating their children's return to Denmark.

WOMEN 'RE-ABDUCTING' CHILDREN TO DENMARK

However, some women successfully fought back. When their (ex)husbands told Samira and Dalal that they had to move to the Middle East if they wanted to see their children again, they both refused. Left with no contact with their children, these two women began lengthy struggles to have their children returned. One challenge they faced entailed the ways in which state institutions in the Middle East disadvantage women. As Dalal, who had obtained a secular Danish divorce before the husband abducted their children, explained:

I did not have a Muslim divorce, so I could not travel down there to see my children. Because if I did so, I am quite sure I would have been apprehended in the airport, and maybe put in jail, because my husband had filed a case against me.

While women in Denmark could draw on state institutions to enforce more equal power relations within the marriage, men in the Middle East could use state institutions and religious practices to enforce a male-dominated gender hierarchy.

With children abducted to non-Hague Convention countries, the Danish authorities were of little help. Left to their own devices, Samira and Dalal therefore opted for re-abducting their children. Doing so called for the women to use various forms of deception. Samira, for example travelled to the Middle East and tricked her husband in the following way:

He had the children, and he felt very confident that I could do nothing. As the children were only in his passport, he knew I could not take them anywhere without his permission. I contacted him and begged him to let me see them. I could do that, on condition that I gave him my passport. There was no way I could give it to him, because then my plan would be ruined. So I told him that my passport had been taken [into an administrative office to be stamped]. I told him: 'As soon as I get it back, I will give it to you'. And he believed me.... The next day, he came with the children, and granted me 3-4 hours with them.... I had paid some people a lot of money to do the smuggling, and I called them, affirming that today is the day. They came in a big military car which could enter [the neighboring country] without being stopped.

Once over the border, Samira obtained emergency passports for the children at the Danish embassy, enabling her to return her children safely to Denmark.

Dalal was unable to go to the country where her children was staying. However, through the help of a friendly shop owner, the children secretly managed to achieve regular telephone contact with their mother. These conversations allowed Dalal and her children to plan the re-abduction. On an agreed day, hired smugglers apprehended Dalal's children, taking them to a neighboring country where Dalal was waiting to fly them back to Denmark. Upon their safe return, Dalal made the children telephone their father, to tell him that they were safe. His response was the following: *'Who are you? I have no children. My children died Friday'*.

As these re-abductions were very expensive, they were possible only because both Samira and Dalal were employed, and could work overtime in their Danish jobs to amass enough money to pay for the re-abduction expenses. Hence more advantageous class positions aided them in achieving their goals. Also important were the two women's being embedded in supportive relationships with family and friends in their countries of origin, relationships crucial for the two women's abilities to orchestrate the return of their children to Denmark without the fathers' knowledge.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This article is a study of immigrant family conflicts in which children were abducted to a non-Hague Convention country, a topic that hitherto has attracted limited research attention. Drawn from broader interview material on family conflict, abuse and divorce, it uses female narratives to yield insights into the – often contested – restructuring of gender relations in a post-migratory context. It also demonstrates how embedding in transnational space may make available a particular strategy in spousal power struggles over the futures of families.

Albeit ending in different ways, the five cases examined in this article were all shaped along a similar trajectory, one in which power relationships between spouses changed in specific ways. The first phase involves men dominating family life and reinforcing male dominance in the household, partly by applying strategies of coercive control (Stark, 2007). Some men's need to demonstrate such dominance may be linked to the upheavals of migration, which may undermine the immigrant men's position in the public sphere (Lewig, Arney and Salveron 2010; Chuang and Tamis-LeMonda 2009).

In the second phase, the women gradually become empowered through living in a country where state structures are much more supportive of women than in their countries of origin. Thus the women in part gain power vis-à-vis men by living in a country where access to legal and economic support enables women to unilaterally end bad marriages. (Darvishpour, 1999; Ottosen and Liversage 2015). Hence, women *de facto* have the power to remove men from their positions as household heads, as well as to lessen men's control over, and contact with, their children.

In the third phase, women begin directly challenging their husbands' positions of power, moving towards – or initiating – divorce. This change in their behaviour triggers the fourth phase, in which men feel severely challenged by their loss of relationship power. The men's response – the fifth phase – is to attempt to shift the power balance back to former male dominance through taking the children back to the parents' country of origin. Doing so necessitates their use of deception as long as the children remain within the space of the Danish state.

When successful, such a geospatial action turns the tables and puts the men back in power. Thus these cases constitute poignant examples of how power is not an innate characteristic of individuals but rather relational, drawing its efficacy from embedding in multilayered gendered geographies of power (Mahler and Pessar, 2001). Hence, any change in such embedding – for example brought about through strategic embodied mobility across national borders – can engender shifts in gendered power balances and result in the trajectories of family conflicts shifting course.

These strategic maneuverings used children as pawns: when men took their children out of Denmark, they could use the possibility of the mother's future contact with her children as blackmail, demanding that their wives give up divorce plans and return to being docile. Hence, the men's motivation clearly appears to be returning the family to the male-dominated power hierarchy that was in place at the start of the family life.

To achieve this change, the men needed more embodied mobility: with masculinity intertwined with 'claiming privilege [and] eliciting deference' (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009, p. 281), men's privilege to remain household heads could best be consolidated in the Middle East. Hence the husbands demanded that their wives relocate there. If the wives did so, they could no longer draw on support from the Danish state – the state context centrally implicated in the change in family power structures in the first place. Demonstrating how 'women's responses are influenced by men's responses' (Cavanagh,

2003), women at this point in the family conflict are given the choice between acceding to their husbands' demands or being left without any contact with their children.

The five abductions ended in different ways, with one cut short due to the effective collaboration of European states. However, once the children are taken to the Middle East, the women can either move there as subordinates or end up suffering the pain of living apart from their children. A last option for the women is to fight back, bringing their abducted children back to Denmark themselves.

With children being abducted to non-Hague Convention Countries, success in the endeavor of returning the children to Denmark cannot rely on (Danish) state support. Rather, success depends on women's embedding in other geographies of power than state-related ones. Hence access to economic, social and cultural capital (through working and making money, through having supportive networks in the Middle East, and through being able to negotiate very challenging situations) becomes central. As Mahler and Pessar argue, agency is... 'affected not only by extra-personal factors but also by quintessentially individual characteristics such as initiative' (2001, p.447). Two of the women – Samira and Dalal – negotiated major obstacles to successfully return their children to Denmark. As demonstrations of courage and cunning in the face of adversity, their narratives clearly show how abused immigrant women may be strong, independently acting individuals, rather than solely the victims of patriarchal oppression.

Furthermore, the broader context of these family conflicts reveals the upheavals in gender relations that migration may bring about (Parrado et al, 2005). Most likely, the marked contrast between the patriarchal Middle East and the 'woman-friendly' Nordic country of Denmark (Hernes, 1987) fuels the processes of both female change and male resistance (Pratt and Yeoh 2003; Donato et al. 2006). In line with Mahler and Pessar's concept of gendered geographies of power (2001), migration may thus bring about both gains and losses for men and women. While the unilateral ability to end abusive marriages can be seen as a female gain, the women's experiences of isolation and abuse might be partially attributed to a migration context in which some men feel disenfranchised and under pressure.

Certainly, the separation from their children that all the women experienced during the abductions is uniquely tied to the migratory context and the very different state structures at the two ends of the transnational social field. With state contexts centrally enabling or constraining men's and women's options for exerting agency in various ways, effecting mobility for oneself and for others may constitute a central means by which immigrants seek to shape their lives, including in the context of severe family conflict.

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