

Migrant networks as social capital: the social infrastructure of migration

WORKING PAPER



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SUMMARY

Migrant network theory is one of the most influential theories seeking to explain how migration happens and how it has been sustained over the past three decades. The theory has been applied to different forms of migration within various geographical contexts and has sparked academic debates on the role and dynamics of migrant social networks. There are some excellent reviews that discuss different perspectives on social networks, social capital and migration in relation to particular author's empirical research. Yet there is no systematic literature review that brings together the various different dimensions of migrant social networks or the debates related to migrant network theory. This working paper provides a succinct synthesis of the available knowledge on international migration through a social network lens. It is not exhaustive, but it addresses broad topics related to migrant network theory: the role of migrant networks in migration processes; the key debates around and critiques of migrant network theory; the dynamic interactions between meso level migrant networks and macro socio-economic and political structures; and the gendered dimensions of migrant networks. The paper is part of MIDEQ South-South Migration Hub's research on migration intermediaries; hence, it aims to offer an analytical basis for empirical data collection and analysis by the Hub. It also suggests potential future research directions relevant to both MIDEQ and other researchers.

1. INTRODUCTION

Migrant network theory has become one of the most widely used theories to explain how migration happens and how it is sustained over the past three decades. Massey, et.al (1993:448) defines migrant network as sets of social ties that connect migrants, former migrants, and non-migrants in origin and destination areas through bonds of kinship, friendship, and shared community origin. Migrant network theory focuses on the role of social networks in facilitating, sustaining and perpetuating migration flows (e.g. Massey et al. 1987; Massey et al. 1993; Massey et al. 1998). This approach developed from "chain migration" theory in the 1960s and 1970s (Graves and Theodore 1974; Macdonald and Leatrice 1974; Tilly 1978). It offers an alternative perspective to both structural analysis, which focused on issues such as wage differentials, push-pull factors, the expansion of capitalism and market penetration, or historical, colonial linkages between origins and destinations; and to micro-analysis of individual or household decision-making. Migrant network theory understands international migration as a social, as well as an economic process (Massey and España 1987: 737).

Early research on migrant networks focused on migration from Mexico to the USA, but an extensive body of empirical research has since developed on the impacts of migrant networks on migration within various geographical contexts, attracting the attention of both academics and policy makers. The theory has been applied to different forms of migration including labour migration, post-guest workers, family reunification, marriage migration, irregular migration, human smuggling and trafficking, circular migration and return migration (Haug 2008: 592). It has also sparked debates and critiques of the role and dynamics of migrant networks. This working paper is an overview of migrant networks based on the academic literature. It is not exhaustive, but rather is intended to focus on some key questions: what is the role of migrant networks in migration processes? What are the key critiques of migrant network theory? How do migrant networks interact with structural contexts and how might migrant networks vary based on gender?

There are some excellent reviews available discussing different perspectives on social networks, social capital and migration in relations to the empirical research (Portes 1998; Wilson 1998; Palloni et al. 2001; Collyer 2005; Krissman 2005; Schapendonk 2015). This literature review is distinct from such work as it aims to bring together a broader set of themes – not only addressing debates on the role of migrant networks, but also offering an overview of network dynamics, exploring interaction between migrant networks and macro-structures, and significantly, paying attention to gendered dimensions of migrant networks. This working paper is part of the UKRI GCRF South-South Migration, Inequality and Development Hub (MIDEQ) research on migration intermediaries. MIDEQ builds an evidence-based understanding of the relationships between migration, inequality and development based on comparative research within the context of 12 countries in the Global South. Migrant social networks are one of the key themes investigated by most of the country-teams in exploring how people migrate and who facilitates migration processes. This working paper therefore offers a broad overview of key issues and debates related to migrant networks.

Based on a review of key literature, this paper presents migrant social networks as a form of social capital, which constitutes the social infrastructure of migration, playing significant roles in various stages of transnational mobility – including both regular and irregular migration. It goes on to analyse critiques and modifications of these ideas of social capital and social networks, which led to the conception of migrant networks as complex and dynamic, changing in time and space in response to internal and external events. The review then turns to the question of power and hierarchy, exploring relations between macro power structures and migrant networks and showing how migrant networks may exclude and subordinate as well as include and assist. The paper then turns its focus specifically to the issue of gender, revealing the differentiated gendered dynamics of migrant social networks, and

illustrating how social networks have different impacts on men and women across a range of dimensions.

2. MIGRANT NETWORKS AS SOCIAL CAPITAL

Migrant network theory provides a tool to explain the actual, patterned and geographically clustered morphology of migration, typically linking particular places and regions (Massey et al. 1993; Massey et al. 1998). These patterns on the ground can often not be explained entirely through structural factors, nor can individual decision-making be fully understood without consideration of the social aspects of migration. Once migrants begin to find paths to new homes, a social infrastructure develops that enables further migration flows (Massey et al. 1987:4-5). As ties between sending and receiving societies grow, social networks come into being which play important roles in lowering the costs and risks of movement, increasing the attraction of migration for those still in the home country: a process known as cumulative causation (Massey 1990; Massey et al. 1993).

Migrant networks are conceived as a form of location-specific social capital upon which people can draw to gain access to information and resources elsewhere (Massey et al. 1993; Massey et al. 1998). Social capital has been described in a variety of ways but its use in migrant network theory has been particularly influenced by Coleman, Portes and Putnam. Although they define social capital in different ways, for all three authors, social capital exists in social relations and is rooted in norms, obligations and trust. Coleman's (1988) pioneering work defines social capital by its function as "a particular kind of resource available to an actor" to "facilitate certain actions of the actor" within the structure (1988: S98). In Coleman's view, social capital depends on mutual trust and obligations that are governed by social norms and expectations within closed networks. Putnam (1993:35) defines social capital as "features of social organisation, such as networks, norms, and trust that facilitate action and co-operation for mutual benefit". Portes (1995:12) defines social capital as "the capacity of individuals to command scarce resources [e.g. employment opportunities] by virtue of their membership in networks or broader social structures." Portes (1998) notes that the source of social capital is internalised norms, obligations, bounded solidarity, and enforceable trust within a particular group. Reciprocal ties and mutual trust within the kinship group and community constitute the basis of the social network as valuable social capital. Family ties are considered the most secure bonds within networks and have an enduring impact on migration (Fawcett 1989). Networks can also extend to close friendships and members of the same community. Members of particular communities are enmeshed in complex webs of "complementary social roles" and reciprocal obligations that are maintained by an "informal set of mutual expectations and prescribed behaviors" (Massey et al. 1987: 139). These pre-existing ties can bind migrants and non-migrants together enabling the creation of migrant networks, which facilitate the

mobility of migrants (Massey et al. 1987:139). Such networks expand with the entry of each new migrant, which results in an increase in information and resources, and a decrease in the economic, social and psychological costs of migration, which encourages further migration and ultimately leads to the emergence of international migration on a large scale (Massey et al. 1987:4-5). Massey therefore conceptualised migration as a diffusion process: once the network connections in the sending society reach a critical level, migration becomes self-perpetuating because migration itself creates the social structure to sustain the flow of migrants (Massey 1990:8).

Subsequent scholarship has added to this work with reference to Putnam's (2000) distinction between "bonding capital": strong and dense ties within specific communities; and "bridging capital": looser and weaker ties within "acquaintance networks" which can provide valuable information in diverse geographical locations. Putnam suggests that the former may be important for "getting by" but the latter are important for "getting ahead" (2000:23). Granovetter's (1973) pioneering work on "the strengths of weak ties" suggested that weak ties (acquaintances outside immediate circle of family or close friends) can be more valuable sources of new information and opportunities than strong ties. Tamar Wilson (1998) further developed this point, arguing that both strong ties and weak ties constitute important social capital for migrants. While the strong ties are key for providing aid, assistance and orientations, weak ties offer valuable information and help expand networks to encompass new geographic and work site locations. Wilson's findings undermined restrictions on network membership by noting that weak ties can sometimes be converted into strong ties, for instance, through marriage.

There is consensus in the literature on migrant networks that both bonding and bridging ties constitute important sources of instrumental value and social capital. Moreover, weak ties are especially valuable in the absence of strong ties, as confirmed in quantitative as well as qualitative studies (Massey and Aysa-Lastra 2011; Palloni et al. 2001).

Whilst later scholarship has emphasised the role of bridging capital based on weak ties, it is worth noting that although Massey and his colleagues stressed the role of strong communal ties in facilitating and sustaining migration flows (Massey et al. 1987), they did acknowledge the importance of broader social networks in the process of adaptation and integration of new migrants. For example, Massey et.al (1987: 142-47) notes that a variety of voluntary associations such as soccer clubs established by migrants in the USA play a significant role in forming and maintaining new social ties in the receiving society. The clubs offer valuable information, resources and mutual assistance, which ease adaptation to a new life. Although different voluntary association may have different purpose and functions, together, they constitute "an important dimension of migrant networks" beyond the ties of kinship (Massey et.al 1987: 147). Massey and his colleagues also recognise that

important friendships and social ties could be formed with migrants from other communities. These social ties are formed through shared experiences of working together, living together (e.g., in grower-provided farm barracks), or playing together (in cantinas, bars, dance halls, or other places of entertainment in the United States (Massey et.al 1987: 142), although they find these weaker ties difficult to measure (Collyer 2005).

In short, “social networks transcend place, location and territory, and can be considered as spatial conveyors of social capital” (Muanamoha, Maharaj and Preston-Whyte 2010:887). Such networks lower the costs of migration and can sustain the process even when the original incentives disappear or are greatly weakened (Massey et.al 1987). In the following section, I summarise key findings in the literature regarding the positive role of social networks as social capital and as the social infrastructure of migration, before turning to theoretical and empirical critiques of the concepts of social networks and social capital in the field of migration studies.

3. MIGRANT NETWORKS: THE SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE OF MIGRATION

According to Massey and Espansa (1987:736), migrant social networks, as a form of social capital, provide a social infrastructure that is capable of supporting international migration on a mass basis. Migrant networks play a key role in all aspects of migration: influencing decision-making; directing migration flows; impacting settlement and integration patterns; and generating and sustaining transnational links.

First, social networks influence migration decision making. Studies of international migration show that it involves risks and costs which are associated not only with geographic distance but also with unfamiliar social and economic structures. Migrant networks can significantly increase the likelihood that individuals will decide to migrate by reducing these risks and costs (Muanamoha, Maharaj and Preston-Whyte 2010). Migrants and non-migrants are connected through a dense network of reciprocal social relationships that transcend international borders, carrying mutual obligations of assistance and support (Massey and Espansa 1987: 734). The information and assistance provided by social networks are crucial for migration decisions as they serve to reduce perceived costs (Boyd 1989:643). Moreover, with expansion of migrant networks and decrease in migration costs, more people are encouraged to migrate (Massey et al.1998; Curran et al. 2003). Return migrants may further stimulate the development of social networks by encouraging others to migrate (Gmelch 1995; Goss and Lindquist 1995). Also, when returned migrants demonstrate higher socioeconomic status than non-migrants, migration becomes associated with prestige and the disparities in social status

become a motivation for migration which can lead to a “culture of migration” (Fawcett 1989; Massey et.al 1993; Epstein 2008). Furthermore, migrants’ narratives about destination countries can also affect individual motivations and household decisions. The development of social networks thus functions to transmit values, expectations and norms, and to transform community structures in ways that lead to increased migration (Massey et.al 1987:5; Somerville 2015:141-42). Hence, social networks are an important determinant of the choice of destination for migrants as well (Boyd 1989; Fawcett 1989; Haug 2008; De Haas 2010).

Second, migrant networks facilitate migration by providing conduits for information and for social and financial assistance (Massey et al.1987; Boyd 1989; Curran and Rivero-Fuentes 2003; Zell and Skop 2011; Côté et al. 2015; Somerville 2015). Migrant networks can provide information on employment, accommodation, transport, healthcare and local social welfare systems and offer advice on migration routes. Kinship ties often involve financial commitment to assist migration as well as emotional support within the host society (Massey et al. 1987; Boyd 1989; Wellman 1990; Dolfinti and Genicot 2010). In particular, remittances from established migrants play a key role in financing the moves of more family members. Remittances not only offers direct financial support, but also help increase investment and formation of small businesses in originating communities, which may stimulate local economic development and increase employment, creating income which, itself, may increase the capacity to emigrate (Epstein 2008). Empirical research also shows that such kinship-related networks can be particularly important in processes of irregular migration, providing undocumented migrants with information about cheap and reliable brokers, border guides and information on how to avoid apprehension, and what to do when deported (Massey et al. 1987; Massey et al. 1993). In addition, they can provide guidance on securing employment and other aspects of life as an undocumented migrant (Dolphin and Genicot 2010; Muanamoha, Maharaj and Preston-Whyte 2010). They may also help establish connections with relevant actors, both during the process of border crossing and in settlement. Hence, Engbersen, Van San, and Leerkes (2006:223) argue that social capital is ‘the most important currency for irregular migrants.

A significant point, given the crucial roles played by migrant networks in connecting prospective migrants to job opportunities and employers in destination countries, is that social networks may function as an alternative to markets, thus reducing the market-determined aspects of selectivity (e.g. age, gender, educational or occupational background) and placing a higher priority on network selectivity (Zell and Skop 2011: 472). Therefore, it has been argued that social capital is more important than human capital in influencing decision-making in migration (Zell and Skop 2011).

The expansion of networks facilitates community formation and permanent settlement of migrants (Portes 1998; Ryan 2011), including assisting irregular

migrants in regularising their status (Massey et al. 1987; Boyd 1989) or assisting asylum-seeking procedures (Crisp 1999). There have been significant studies on the role of migration networks in the formation and maintenance of ethnic enclaves: dense concentrations of immigrants including small enterprises that are owned by (self-employed) members of an ethnic community (Werbner 1987:220; Portes 1998:13). Such businesses draw labour mostly from the same ethnic group relying on kinship, friendship and ethnic ties. Community networks are an integral part of such enclaves and a major source of resources for these ethnic firms (Werbner 1987; Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993; Portes 1998; Zhao 2013; Faist 2008). Such enclaves provide various types of support, including start-up capital; information on setting up businesses, or tips about business opportunities, strategies, contacts and markets; and they can provide a consistent labour force (Werbner 1987; Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993; Portes 1998). Such ethnic enclaves therefore serve to strengthen migrant networks as they offer a secure context for arriving migrants, providing both employment and a familiar cultural environment (Massey et.al 1987: 6).

Migrant social networks also provide an important flow of resources between countries of origin and destination, which help sustain and maintain transnational networks. Through networks of interpersonal relationships, “people, goods, and information circulate to create a social continuum” between two sides (Massey et.al 1987:148). In return, this mobility of people and resources strengthens migrant networks (Muanamoha, Maharaj and Preston-Whyte 2010). In particular, the ongoing process of return migration, whether by short-term migrants regularly returning home or by settled migrants visiting their community of origin for certain periods each year, play a key role in sustaining migrant networks (Massey et.al 1987). Moreover, the informal fund transfer system or underground banking system established by migrant communities enables illegal immigrants to overcome their particular problems in settlement, whilst also helping to sustain transnational networks (Zhao 2013). Maintaining transnational ties through migrant networks between the countries of origin and destination is also considered to be a risk-reducing strategy, by making it possible for a migrant to return to their home country at any life stage (Schiller, Basch and Blanc-Szanton 1992 cited in; Somerville 2015:137).

In short, the social capital of migrant networks forms an important social infrastructure, which plays significant roles in various stages of migration. These networks provide the connecting medium, which link structural factors operating within the global political economy to the decisions and actions of particular individuals. Moreover, this medium can itself become a structural factor when it continues to facilitate migration even after the original attraction to a particular destination has ceased to be relevant (Boyd 1989:661).

4. CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES: DYNAMICS OF SOCIAL CAPITAL AND MIGRANT NETWORKS

Debates around social capital and migrant networks are ongoing, particularly in relation to the positive or negative effects of such networks and the degree of agency migrants have within them.

Portes' work identified four possible negative consequences of social capital: exclusion of outsiders, excessive claims on group members, restrictions on individual freedoms, and downward levelling norms. Research on ethnic enclaves can support Portes' arguments, showing that dense intra-ethnic networks may prevent members from integrating into mainstream society or even from accessing alternative resources (Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993; Somerville 2015) and from gaining information about wider society (Crowley and Hickman 2008; Ryan 2011). Engagement in closed networks may actually hold individuals back: not only through lack of valuable social contacts, but also through lack of encouragement and social knowledge (Klvanova 2010; Cederberg 2012; Kindler, Ratcheva and Piechowska 2015), disadvantaging individual migrants in the labour market and wider society. Ethnic-specific networks may also facilitate exploitation rather than solidarity. Well established community members may take advantage of their position to extort money from new immigrants during their migration journey (Gold 2005; Muanamoha, Maharaj and Preston-Whyte 2010; Feyissa forthcoming). For example, MIDEQ research on the Ethiopia-South Africa corridor found that established Ethiopian migrants based at the borders of South Africa sometimes networked with South Africans to 'prey' upon vulnerable new arrivals.¹ Established community members may also exploit new arrivals in employment contexts, as revealed in many studies (Boyd 1989; Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993; Menjivar 2006b; Zorlu 2009; Zell and Skop 2011; Kindler, Ratcheva and Piechowska 2015). Irregular migrants may find that established members of the same ethnic group take advantage of their unauthorised status to facilitate exploitation (Yucel 1987; Boyd 1989). Migrants may receive no support at all in destination countries (Collyer 2005). Other studies also show that migrant networks may function to disseminate false information and mislead migrants (Schapendonk and Van Moppes 2007; Somerville 2015). Somerville (2015) found that immigrants and the media often present a distorted picture: in order to raise their own status, established migrants often emphasise the positive aspects of migration while downplaying the negatives. Somerville showed that migrants do not always have to rely on dense networks: some migrants become "migrant pioneers" in their country of settlement, attempting to expand their migrant

¹ Fieldnotes from Ethiopian-South Africa corridor provided by Dereje Feyissa, 2021 October.

networks globally for subsequent generations (Somerville, 2015). Hence, she considers non-chain patterns of migration as network building movements.

Recent scholarship has also criticised the tendency within migration studies to take migrant networks for granted and not to recognize their dynamic character; the diversity within such networks, or their differential accessibility (e.g. Eve 2010; Ryan 2007, 2011; Pathirage and Collyer 2011; Schapendonk 2015). These scholars challenge the simplistic assumption that social ties constitute social capital, which fails to recognise the effort required to form and maintain relationships and mobilise resources, which can become social capital. The distinction between strong and weak ties has also been critiqued as simplistic. Ryan (2011) argues for more attention to be paid to specific relationships between actors, and to the factors that determine which migrants are able to construct, access and maintain networks in specific social locations.

This scholarship is strongly influenced by Bourdieu's concepts of social capital and social stratification, inclusion and exclusion. Bourdieu (1985:248 cited in Portes 1998) defined social capital as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition". Bourdieu distinguishes between the networks themselves and the resources that can be mobilised through such networks – to which some individuals have access and others do not. This means that processes of inclusion, exclusion and social closure are key (Cederberg 2012:61). Consequently, not all networks are valuable sources of resources and information. Moreover, given the exclusionary dimensions of social capital, it is increasingly recognised that valuable social connections do not simply exist ready for use but require effort to create (Anthias 2001; Pathirage and Collyer 2011; Ryan 2011; Cederberg 2012; Schapendonk 2015). Thirdly, differential access to networks and resources contributes to the re/production of social and economic hierarchies and inequality in network migration (Cederberg 2012:60; De Haas 2010:1590). This insight has led some scholars to explore what factors matter in accessing certain networks. This scholarship adopted Bourdieu's perspective on social positioning and argued that migrants' ability to successfully construct and maintain weak or bridging ties may depend upon their economic and cultural capital, and may require a combination of language and social skills, education and opportunities (Ryan et al. 2008; Erel 2010; Ryan 2011; Saksela-Bergholm, Toivanen and Wahlbeck 2019).

Whilst "othering" practices within mainstream society, such as racialisation and discrimination, may exclude migrant groups from some networks and related resources, and may even block their ability to mobilize their resources to gain advantages (Cederberg 2012; Erel 2010), the exclusionary dynamics within migrant networks may also lead migrants to exclude and distrust outsiders (Reimer et al. 2008 cited in Ryan 2011). This can create a negative form of bonding capital, which

may increase inner group cohesion whilst contributing to mutual stigmatisation between migrant and host communities (Klvanova 2010).

The division of migrants' relationships into bridging and bonding ties, however, has also been criticised for assuming homogeneity within bounded social groupings, ignoring intra-group differences and differential power relations based on gender, class and generation (Anthias 2007; Anthias and Cederberg 2009; Ryan 2011; Cederberg 2012). For example, established communities have often experienced upward mobility and may stigmatise newcomers, keeping them at the bottom of the social hierarchy (Dahinden 2013). Drawing on research on Israeli migrants in the USA and Britain, and returnees in Israel, Gold (2001) found that highly educated Israelis of European origins often maintain separate social networks from their less educated Middle Eastern or North African conationals. Moreover, newly arrived migrants often found it difficult to integrate with native-born co-ethnic members. Gold (2001:63) argued that such issues are rooted in groups' differing cultural, linguistic, ideological and religious outlooks.

As there are class differences within both ethnic minority and majority groups, class and ethnic processes intersect in a variety of ways (Anthias 2001). Therefore, scholars should "pay attention to how different social processes and divisions intersect to either reinforce or contradict one another" (Cederberg 2012:68, see also Anthias 2001). Moreover, positions and boundaries shift over time (Anthias 2001; Ryan et al. 2008; Raghuram, Henry and Bornat 2010; Cederberg 2012). Consequently, membership of certain groups and access to certain networks and resources cannot be assumed to be indefinite and unchanging. Boyd (1989) argued that the networks with which migrants engage both before and after arriving in their destination are continuously changing, particularly in cases where migrants experience social and geographical mobility within the host society. Following Boyd, more recent scholarship pays attention to spatial and temporal dynamism in social networks (Ryan 2011; Schapendonk 2015; Kindler and Wójcikowska-Baniak 2019). For instance, Ryan (2007) shows how networks of friends and acquaintances change through the life courses of Irish migrants in Britain and how these networks are conditioned by geographic mobility. Furthermore, a number of scholars have suggested a need to raise horizons beyond local community contexts, because migrants often build new networks in the host society, which may extend beyond any single geographical region or nation-state (e.g. Ryan 2007; Saksela-Bergholm, Toivanen and Wahlbeck 2019). The extent to which migrants rely on any particular network may depend, to a degree, on what other networks are available to them.

The changeable dynamics of migrant networks has encouraged a practice-based approach, which again draws Bourdieu's conception of the active maintenance of social capital. It emphasises the role of effort, performance and investment strategies in the construction of social networks (Ryan et al. 2008; Erel 2010; Pathirage and Collyer 2011; Schapendonk 2015; Ryan and D'Angeloba 2018; Saksela-Bergholm,

Toivanen and Wahlbeck 2019). For instance, Pathirage and Collyer (2011) show how Sri Lankan migrants in Italy engage in 'network work'. Such approaches argue that social capital is an uncertain resource and social networks requires active, involved and conscious work to derive the full benefits associated with social capital. Akcapar's (2010) ethnographic research on Iranian transient migrants in Turkey shows how different migrants apply different strategies to accumulate social capital based on gender, religion, and ethnic identity and how they actively maintain transnational networks by establishing personal relationships with transmigrants. Similarly, in the case of Ukrainian migrants in Poland, Kindler and Wójcikowska-Baniak (2019) show how migrants create and reproduce social networks in both formal and informal institutional contexts and strategically mobilise various networks to provide different forms of support, whether legal, emotional, or instrumental. Based on his research on African migrants to Europe, Schapendonk (2015) emphasizes the processual character of such strategies by talking about social networking rather than social networks. Networking is relational - it is never entirely in the hands of any individual agent, but active networking often determines migration trajectory and legal status. Hence, networking dynamics explains diverse outcomes of individual migration processes.

This relationship between networking dynamics and migration trajectories reappears in a recent shift within migrant network studies from origin-destination approaches to the lens of non-linear migration, which can include irregular migration that involves frequent changes in routes and migration strategies. The work of Wissinka, Düvell and Mazzucato (2020) on the experiences of irregular migrants in Greece and Turkey is one such example. The authors found that changes in migrants' social networks affect the way migrants react to critical events during their migration, and that migration trajectories are therefore shaped by the dynamics of social networks. They suggest that a conceptualisation of networks based on predefining the geographical locations of networks members and the strength of their relationships in an origin-destination model risks excluding influential network members in the places people transit and in other parts of the world. Hence, they propose a subject-oriented approach, which "identifies relationships based on interaction that has taken, is taking, or can potentially take place between the migrant and anyone else" (2020:284). In so doing, they redefine "social networks as the changeable collection of all people with whom migrants exchange instrumental, financial, informational or affectional support, can, or have done so" (2020:284).

While both practice-based approaches and subject-oriented approaches acknowledge the agency of migrants in social networking, agency has also been approached through the concept of "migrant capital": resources that are available to migrants during their migration process which are created by migrants as a result of migration (Saksela-Bergholm, Toivanen and Wahlbeck 2019). Migrant capital can be mobilised and potentially converted to other forms of capital which may be made

available to migrant's family members via transnational networks (Saksela-Bergholm, Toivanen and Wahlbeck 2019:166, see also Dís Skaptadóttir 2019; Saksela-Bergholm, 2019; Toivanen 2019). This scholarship also speaks to literature discussed above emphasising the social positioning of migrants in relation to boundaries and hierarchies within society. While not denying the existence of hierarchical societal structure and inequalities, the scholarship on migrant capital focuses on “how transnational migrants create, accumulate and employ diverse forms of capital” and turn them into a “source of community cohesion, economic advancement, informal social protection or professional and educational gains for members of migrant communities” (Saksela-Bergholm, Toivanen and Wahlbeck, 2019:167).

5. MIGRANT NETWORKS AND MACRO-STRUCTURAL CONTEXTS

Boyd (1989) reminds us that patterns of migration and formation of networks are embedded in structural contexts of immigration regimes and controls (Ryan 2007). In the literature, two different approaches emerge concerning relations between migrant networks and macro-structure. One group of scholars has shown that social networks are key in explaining why attempts to regulate migration through policy intervention often fail. As explained by the Massey model, the growth of migrant networks can create a self-sustaining circular process, which is difficult to control (Muanamoha, Maharaj and Preston-Whyte, 2010). However, a growing body of literature questions the explanatory power of social networks. It criticises migrant network theory for failing to conceptualise how changes in macro-conditions “impinge on internal dynamics” and affect the operation of migrant networks. They further suggest that network theorists do not pay enough attention to the connection between macro-level theories addressing “root causes” and meso-level theories on the “perpetuation of migration” (De Haas 2010: 1588, see also Massey et al. 1998; Collyer 2005; Wissinka, Düvell, Mazzucato 2020). These critics focus primarily on the roles of immigration policy and economic conditions in destination countries in affecting ways that migrant networks operate.

First, it is acknowledged that regardless of the strength of social networks in shaping and sustaining migration flows, transnational mobility is still constrained by formal legal restrictions and government migration policies (Portes 1999; Zell and Skop 2011; Castles and Miller 2009; Menjivar 2006). Immigration policies in destination countries often set up various criteria, which determine who is allowed to enter, and how many migrants are accepted. These policies affect migration channels and determine the status of migrants as regular or irregular (Boyd 1989; Zell and Skop 2011). Migrant status has a direct impact on migrants' eligibility for legitimate work and other social benefits and resources in destination countries, and further affects the degree of reliance on social networks and relations within social

networks (Menjivar 2006a; Van Der Leun and Kloosterman 2006; Muanamoha, Maharaj and Preston-Whyte 2010). Moreover, researchers observed that legal or illegal status could condition the use and development of networks and the incidence of family migration. Illegals often migrate without their wives and children and have fewer family and friendship ties than legal migrants do, as observed in the case of Mexican migrants to the USA (Massey et al. 1987; Boyd 1989). In addition, state policy in other areas (i.e. welfare system, labour market regulations etc.) may also affect strategies used by potential migrants and their decision-making regarding whether to migrate, which channels to migrate through (regular/irregular), whether to return to the country of origin, or not to migrate at all (Crawley and Hagen-Zanker 2019; Hagen-Zanker and Mallett 2020). Thus, migration policies and regulations at both origin and destination play a crucial role in shaping migration processes, outcomes and individual strategies (Zell and Skop 2011: 472).

Furthermore, the increasingly restrictive border controls in many countries have several significant consequences. First, evidence from both North America and Europe shows that immigration control policies make it harder for new migrants to join families or friends hence significantly weakening the role of social networks as facilitator (Collyer, 2005). Secondly, increasing migration restrictions force many potential migrants to choose irregular channels or human smugglers (Spener 2004; Collyer 2005; Van Der Leun and Kloosterman 2006; Zell and Skop 2011; Alpes 2017; Schapendonk 2018). Zell and Skop (2011) conducted an interesting comparative study on the networks of Brazilian migrants moving to Japan and the USA to examine how the legal framework operating in each context influences the level and composition of Brazilian migration over time. They found that Brazilian migration to Japan is through legal channels based on an “ethnic-return” guest worker program, whereas Brazilian migration to the USA is often unauthorised. Social networks play a role in both contexts, but migrants have stronger reliance on social networks in unauthorised migration to the USA. This indicates that the decision to rely on networks is often conditioned by the formal legal constraints and state policies in each country (Zell and Skop 2011). Van Der Leun and Kloosterman (2006) also show that restrictions in the Netherland force people to rely on human smugglers and their illegal status pushed them toward an underground existence, relying upon employment in the informal sector, which leaves them vulnerable to exploitation.

Thirdly, post-entry restrictions increase the reliance of new migrants on social networks and lead to various consequences, revealing the complex relationships within the social networks (Collyer, 2005; Pathirage and Collyer 2011; Schapendonk 2015). Based on research on Algerian irregular migrants in France, Mike Collyer (2005) shows that immigration restrictions increase the burden on social networks, which devalues the role of social capital and reduces individual access to social support. In particular, the treatment of Algerian immigration as a security issue in

France affects relations between new arrivals and their families and with other French citizens. While some new migrants are aware of the burden placed on their relatives and voluntarily distance themselves or find alternative sources of support, the experience of others reveals tensions between new migrants and established migrant communities as new arrivals are compelled to cut ties with compatriots and seek new destinations. Hence, Collyer argued that political factors play a key role in the selection of destination and the decision to leave, although migrant networks still constitute the main source of information. Evidence from the Netherlands also shows less willingness amongst established migrant communities to support the travel of new migrants due to immigration restrictions (Staring 2000 cited in Collyer 2011). Consequently, undocumented new migrants may face informal exclusion from established migrant communities in addition to official exclusion from the host society (Engbersen 1999 cited in Collyer 2011).

Post-entry restrictions combined with unauthorised status can not only put migrants into more vulnerable positions but also affect their network development and integration into wider society. As Muanamoha, Maharaj and Preston-Whyte (2010) show in their research, although social networks facilitate and sustain undocumented migration from Mozambique to South Africa, undocumented migrants are subject to high levels of xenophobia, exploitation and deportation in South Africa. Hence, the authors argued that social networks are ineffective against structural, socio-political forces even though they are influential in the context of common origins, ethnic affiliation, and similar migration experiences. Discriminatory practices at both institutional and local level may also become obstacles, which limit social opportunities for networking (Ryan 2011). In sum, the operation and development of networks is shaped by policies of receiving countries regarding integration and settlement. Countries that stress immigration and immigrant settlement and those that do not clearly have different impacts on migrants and their networks (Boyd 1989: 652).

Immigration restrictions not only affect network formation in destination countries but also transnational ties. Two examples illustrate this point. Ryan (2007) observed that the lack of immigration restrictions, close geographical proximity and affordable transport has benefitted Irish migrants in England, enabling them to create and maintain transnational networks long before other immigrants could do so (Ryan 2007). In contrast, Menjívar (1997; 2000; 2006a) observed that in the case of Central American migrants in the USA, strict migration controls, precarious legal status and scant material resources contribute to weakening transnational ties as most migrants are unable to engage in reciprocal exchanges when they barely have enough resources to sustain themselves.

Compared to the focus on the role of immigration policy in constraining social networks, relatively less attention has been paid to the interconnection between economic circumstances in destination countries and the functions of social

networks. Zell and Skop (2011) show that migration of ethnically Japanese Brazilians from Brazil to Japan through a guest worker program has fallen in recent years, not just because of government regulation limiting access, but also because economic recession in Japan has reduced job opportunities and made Japan a less attractive destination. However, most studies discussing the role of social networks in offering migrants job information and opportunities have been situated in a context of strong economies. Recently, a few scholars have considered to what extent local economic condition affects the needs of migrants for social networks and how, for migrant job seekers, it alters the balance between the need for strong and weak ties. Villarrubia-Mendoza (2016) examined Hispanic immigrants in two economically depressed cities in the USA, and found that for new arrivals in these contexts, access to strong ties was imperative for entry into the labour market. Weak ties, even to paid brokers, had a very limited role in such constricted markets as there were few employment opportunities and established immigrants carefully guarded employment information for the benefit of their closest family members. These findings echo observations elsewhere that network members deliberately choose not to help newcomers due to labour market competition (De Haas 2010; Wissinka, Düvell, Mazzucato 2020).

In short, “social networks are complex structures that change according to political and economic factors in the receiving community as well as the social resources immigrants have at their disposal” (Villarrubia-Mendoza 2016: 646). The macro-structure of immigration policy and economic circumstances in destination economies largely shapes the composition, operations and development of networks, and to what extent they constitute valuable social capital and resources (Boyd, 1989: 652; Zell and Skop 2011: 469).

6. GENDERING MIGRANT NETWORKS

Compared to the large body of research on migrant networks in general, insufficient attention has been paid to the interaction between migrant networks and gender in the migration process. It is assumed that networks and social capital have similarly impacts on male and female mobility (Curran and Saguy 2001). However, increasing research shows that the gendered composition of networks has different impacts on the migration of men and women: male and female migrants access and mobilise social capital and resources differently (Kanaiapuni 2000; Curran et al. 2005; Cerrutti and Gaudio 2010; Côté et al. 2015). In this section, I will summarise the key points in the literature on gendered dynamics of migrant networks. In particular, I will show how social norms and gender roles, gendered divisions of labour, gender hierarchies and power relations, and gendered government policies, come together to shape the way that migrant networks operate for men and women, and further shape patterns and outcomes of migration in different contexts.

Migrant networks influence men and women differently in terms of decision-making and probability of migration. Research shows that gendered social norms and gendered division of labour in households influence cultural expectations about migration, and gender hierarchy and inequality shape the resources available for men and women through their networks (Hagan 1998; Menjivar 2006a; Toma and Vause 2014; Côté et al. 2015). In a society in which women are expected engage in domestic work and men are expected to be breadwinners, women may face opposition to their migration while men are encouraged to migrate. Moreover, in patriarchal societies where women are subordinate to men, family networks and resources may be made available for men's, but not women's, migration (Boyd 1989; Curran and Rivero-Fuentes 2003; Toma and Vause 2014). In other societies, cultural values and differences in gender roles may favour migration of women. For instance, Filipino families expect support and care from their daughters. Given this, they encourage women's migration and rely heavily on remittances sent by migrant daughters (Boyd 1989; Curran and Rivero-Fuentes 2003). Hence, men and women may face different barriers when it comes to migration. Decision-making processes are shaped by gender-specific family sources of approval, disapproval, and assistance (Boyd 1989: 657). Moreover, women are expected to face greater risks than men do during the migration process. Trustworthy networks such as close family ties are particularly important for young women when considering migration (Mahler 1999; Curran and Rivero-Fuentes 2003; Curran et al. 2005; Toma and Vause 2014). Women also benefit more than men from being accompanied during the journey or from information about safe routes. Therefore, the impacts of social networks on the probability of migration may vary for men and women because the costs, risks and benefits of migration differ by gender (Curran and Rivero-Fuentes, 2003: 291). Even in a place dominated by migration culture, social networks have different effects on women and men's intentions to migrate. As demonstrated in the case of Moroccan emigration to Western Europe, family networks abroad tend to increase women's intention to migrate, but has less effect on men's motivation (Heering, Erf and Wissen 2004).

Secondly, men and women may rely on different networks and sources of support to migrate. In part, men and women may have different networks because their friendship and social circles are differentiated by gender, which influences the information and help available to them (Curran and Rivero-Fuentes 2003; Curran et.al 2005; Toma and Vause 2014; Muanamoha, Maharaj and Preston-Whyte 2010). Historic patterns of migration are also relevant. Because men have often been encouraged to migrate abroad, while women have been preferred to stay at home or only engage in internal migration, these historically established norms can shape the resources available by gender (Curran and Rivero-Fuentes 2003; Toma and Vause 2014). Men tend to rely on broader ties for migration, while women focus on ties with family and close friends, particularly their relationships with other women (Curran and Rivero-Fuentes, 2003; Gold 2001; Toma and Vause 2014; De Haas 2010).

Based on comparative study of the effects of migrant networks on men and women in the different contexts of Congolese and Senegalese migration to Europe, Toma and Vause (2014), found that women tend to rely on close family ties, long-established and geographically concentrated networks. Men rely on both strong and weak ties; geographical concentration does not make a difference; and recent migrants are more instrumental than established ones as they could offer the most up-to-date information. In other research, based on findings from four Latin American countries (Mexico, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, and the Dominican Republic) to the USA, the authors argued that not only do men and women rely on different kinds of networks for migration, but migrants from different countries look to different sources of social capital for assistance (Côté et.al 2015). Access to women's networks is important for female migration, while access to male networks is similarly important for men, as these networks offer gender-specific information and opportunities (Curran and Rivero-Fuentes 2003; Curran et.al 2005; Muanamoha, Maharaj and Preston-Whyte 2010). This is particularly true when labour markets are segmented by gender (Hagan 1998; Curran and Rivero-Fuentes 2003; Curran et al. 2005; Parrado and Flippen 2005; Toma and Vause 2014). For instance, domestic work is largely assigned to female migrants; hence women are more likely to possess information about such work. Sometimes employers ask migrant workers to give references for new workers. In such scenarios, gendered networks play a key role (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Hagan 1998; Menjivar 2000; Curran and Rivero-Fuentes 2003; De Haas 2010). Even if there is little gender segregation in the destination labour market for migrants, there may be distinctly "gender-segregated social spheres" among migrants, leading men and women to rely on different resources to help them overcome both social and economic barriers to migration (Curran and Rivero-Fuentes, 2003: 291). These gendered networks, however, can benefit or constrain men and women differently. As illustrated in Hagan's (1998) study of Maya migrants in the USA, men enjoy greater economic and social opportunities than do women because of the role of their networks. Maya men rely on an ethnic-based labour system to control recruitment, work schedules, and promotion whilst the gendered structure of the labour market largely constrains Maya women to work as live-in-domestic workers. Over time, Maya men extend their networks to include non-ethnic co-workers or neighbours and benefit from these weak ties, whilst for Maya women, opportunities are much limited due to their isolated working environment. Similar observations have been made by Parrado and Flippen (2005) in the case of Mexican migrants in the USA. The networks forged through employment tend to benefit men, who work predominantly in construction, manual labour and services and are able to develop varied contacts, more than women, most of whom are employed as domestic workers and have little opportunity to extend their networks.

Research also shows that ethnic enclaves play a key role in facilitating the employment of ethnic women through the existence of family businesses as well as through care arrangements for children and elderly within the enclave (Anthias 1983;

Perez 1986; Prieto 1986 cited in Boyd 1989). This research provides further evidence to show how close family ties are central to women's migration and how gendered divisions of labour are incorporated into the organisation of ethnic enclaves. Since most studies examining the positive effects of enclaves on migration and employment focus on male experience, there is a need for refining ethnic enclave research to include "female specific segmentation" (Boyd 1989: 660).

Governments also sometimes integrate gendered social norms and divisions of labour in their immigration policies, which further shapes the use of family networks in migration (Boyd 1989; Kanaiaupuni 2000; Toma and Vause 2014). In particular, gender differences and perceived economic roles – in which males are conceived of as breadwinners and females as dependent spouses, can be incorporated into immigration policy. Spousal reunification channels have greater significance for women's mobility than men's (Toma and Vause 2014). Policies may also serve to legitimise the allocation of women to lower paid jobs, hence strengthening the importance of women's recruitment to these jobs through female networks (Boyd 1989).

In destination countries, women's, especially mothers', social networking strategies may be different from those used by men. They are more likely to establish networks with local people, particularly through their children (Gold 2001; Edwards 2004; Ryan 2011). School contacts are key for migrant mothers to gain access to local communities, which can be important sources of practical and emotional support for women (Ryan 2007, 2011). Additionally, Ryan (2007) argued that the focus on familial and domestic roles often overlooks the extent to which migrant women access and develop new networks outside the household and the role played by such networks. New evidence shows that women's networking practice can play an important role in the incorporation of newcomers into communities. In his research on Israeli communities in Los Angeles and London, Gold (2001) observed that Israeli women often take care of domestic work while their husbands are involved in economic activities. Faced with poor communal environments, these women actively established their own informal networks and even formal organisations to support each other and new migrants. As these organisations became important community institutions, women played central roles in providing support for many Israelis and facilitating ties between migrants, the host Jewish communities and the state of Israel. Gold observed that women were more interested in their country of origin than were their partners and children. In other contexts, there is evidence that female kin are more likely to provide social, emotional support and physical care to both male and female relatives, helping them adapt to new and unfamiliar living environments (Wellman 1990; Ho 2006; Côté et al. 2015).

Research into gendered aspects of migration has created increasing awareness that women are not passive actors subjected to their family's control. Rather they

deploy their own strategies to access and sustain social networks (Ryan 2007) and establish instrumental ties in order to achieve personal goals (Toma and Vause 2014; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994). To date, however, this scholarship is relatively scant, hence, some scholars have called for a greater specification of the roles, dynamism and the gendered nature of networks (Boyd 1989), and for attention to be paid to how women create and mobilise social networks to overcome gendered barriers to migration (Toma and Vause 2014: 993-94).

7. CONCLUSION

Migrant network theory understands migration as a social product: “not as the sole result of individual decisions, nor as the simple consequences of structural push and pull factors, but rather as an outcome of the interactions of all these elements” (Boyd 1989: 642). This approach, as Boyd (1989: 642) noted, allows for “conceptualizing migration as a contingency: whether or not to migrate, who migrates, where to migrate and for how long migration continues, all is conditioned in historically generated social, political and economic structures of both sending and receiving societies”. These structures are channelled through social networks, which can sustain and perpetuate migration flows even when the original motivation for migration has gone. Migrant networks shape migration patterns and outcomes, ranging from no migration to emigration, return migration or the continuation of migration, and impact on individuals, households and communities (Boyd 1989: 639).

Migrant networks are understood as social capital and function as migration infrastructure, providing a range of benefits to members involved in transnational migration. However, the existing literature also reflects on the dynamic characteristics of networks and negative consequences of social capital. These studies reveal complex relations within networks, and between networks, and their interactions with external social, economic and political structures. Empirical studies highlight how the operation and development of social networks are conditioned by local and transnational structures including policies and regulations, which generate fluctuating opportunities and constraints, contributing to changing migration patterns, trajectories and outcomes. Gendered dynamics of migrant networks also reveal significant differences between men and women in terms of motivations and risks, and in terms of norms and policies governing or promoting their movement and integration (Curran and Saguy 2001). Such studies show how the growth of specific social networks, combined with historical gendered migration patterns, create different constraints and opportunities, leading to different outcomes for transnationally mobile men and women. At the same time, the literature acknowledges the agency of migrants, and call for more attention to the ways that migrants mobilise various resources and interact with networks, from access to formation, transformation and development. It is also suggested that future research

should explore the ways in which the various roles networks play differ across ethnicity, class and gender (Wissinka, Düvell, Mazzucato 2020).

A final point is that migrant network theory has been criticised for focusing only on the supply-side of migration, which obscures the role of other actors in creating demand and facilitating flows of people. These actors can include the state, employers, labour brokers, commercial agencies and lawyers. This critique has led to the development of another body of literature on migration intermediaries, including the migration industry and migration infrastructure, which emphasizes the involvement of commercialised actors. The specific roles of these actors are largely outside the scope of this paper but have been systematically reviewed in our first MIDEQ intermediary research working paper (Jones and Sha 2020) which deals with commercialised intermediaries. This paper, however, is concerned primarily with migrant networks as originally defined: as informal social networks – not commercial enterprises, whether individual or institutional. There is also a growing body of literature engaging with online social networks and their role in facilitating transnational mobility and integration. These are also beyond the scope of this paper, but it is worth mentioning that this literature highlights the importance of off-line social networks, and of a combination of both online and off-line networks in transnational migration. Future research will benefit from further exploration of this area. In sum, the importance of migrant networks remains largely undisputed, but various scholars have sought to widen and deepen understandings of the ways such networks work in various ways explained in this paper. This paper lays the analytical foundation for the MIDEQ project's future research into the role of migrant networks in migration in different contexts.

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Cover image

Group of young Indonesian volunteers in charge of garbage collection in the refugee camps. Photo by Marcel Crozet / ILO . CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

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