Familial Tensions: Morphing Gender Relations of Power Among Tajik Migrant Workers in Russia

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Abstract

International labor migration impacts gender relations between migrant workers and their families. Social workers need a more nuanced understanding of the gendered aspects of international migration for developing ethical social work practices and research. This article discusses morphing gender relations of power within the family context. The data presented in this paper originated from conversational interviews that were conducted in Tajikistan and Russia. Using social constructivism and intersectionality as the main theoretical approaches, this paper illustrates how male–male, male–female, and female–female gender relations are constantly negotiated and renegotiated within the family in the midst of labor mobility. This distinct understanding is critical for social workers who work with migrant workers and their families both locally and globally.

Tajiks are among the millions of people globally who cross international borders to seek labor in other countries, especially in Russia. Schenk (2018) argues that Russia is the second country of destination in the world hosting approximately 16–18 million migrant workers (p. 2).

This number is chronically underestimated as many of these migrant workers are occupied in the informal economy and come from visa-free countries, like Tajikistan.

Labor migration may change social and gender norms for migrants and their families. Thus, social workers, as Ross-Sheriff (2011) argues, "need information on many gendered aspects of international migration" (p. 234). In this paper, I focus on how migrant workers adapt, reshape, and slowly change gender relations especially within the family context. This paper represents data from a larger

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doctoral dissertation exploring change in gender relations among Tajik migrant workers in Russia and back to Tajikistan.

Reeves (2013) points out that gender relations, according to the labor migration literature, are characterized by binary relations between men and women, where women are often portrayed as victims. Theoretical perspectives on gender assert the fluidity of gender and gender relations (Butler, 1993; Cohn, 1993; Connell, 1995; Paechter, 2006, 2018; Schippers, 2007). Although the reductionist male/female binary construction of gender relations limits the richness of multiple gender relations and holistic thinking (Goodkind, et al., 2021), for the context of this study, I took this epistemological stance. I took this stance because, as a Tajik person who was born and raised in Tajikistan, I am acutely aware that gender is divided into male and female in the dominant understanding of gender relations in Tajikistan (Harris, 2004; Kasymova, 2012; Reeves, 2013). Within this binary construction, however, I extend the fluidity of gender relations only to variations of the two categories. I follow others in expanding the male/female binary to include female–female and male–male gender relations of power (Connell, 1995; Paechter, 2018; Schippers 2007). Paechter (2018) argued that femininity should not be conceptualized in relation to masculinity but rather in relation to femininity itself. I draw on these studies to probe the morphing of female–female gender relations as it plays out in the relationships between mothers and daughters, mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, and sisters-in-law.

The paper first presents a summary of the post-Soviet historical background of labor migration from Tajikistan to Russia, a theoretical framework for the concept of gender utilized in the analysis, as well as an overview of the research methodology. Later, the paper presents the findings and discusses the nuances of change in gender relations, specifically male–male, male–female, and female–female gender relations.

Labor Migration From Tajikistan to Russia

The number of international migrants worldwide increases rapidly every year. In 2020, UN DESA (2020) reports that more than 281 million people are in migration, while in 2015 this number was 249 million, and in 1990, this number was 153 million (Migration Data Portal, 2019). Today, approximately one person out of every 30 in the Global South is a migrant. Out of 272 million migrants, 164 million, or approximately 60.3%, are migrant workers. Migrant workers leave their usual countries of residency to seek employment in other places (Migration Data Portal, 2019), and according to the International Labour Organization (2018), 42% of these migrant workers are women.

Russia has become one of the most famous labor destinations for thousands of Tajiks. Approximately 95% of migrant workers from Tajikistan work in the Russian Federation (OHCHR, 2019). Although labor migration from Tajikistan to Russia started during the first years of *perestroika* (major political and economic restructuring in the beginning of the 1980s) when workers, primarily men, started to temporarily migrate as contract workers *(limitchiki)* (Bahovadinova & Scarborough, 2018, p. 6), the scale of labor migration was intensified after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. While accurate figures of the actual number of migrant workers traveling from Tajikistan to Russia are not yet available, it has been suggested that approximately 800,000 or more Tajik citizens migrate to Russia for work every year (Kholmatova, 2018). According to Pettinger (2013), at least 12.5% of Tajikistan's population is in labor migration. After the Republic of Uzbekistan, Ryazantsev (2016) argues that Tajikistan provides the second-largest number of migrant workers to Russia. These migrant workers largely work in construction, landscaping, or service industries.

Although labor migrants from Tajikistan are predominantly male, some women have started leaving for migration. Approximately 18% of migrants from Tajikistan are women (Polytaev, 2015). Kasymova (2012) notes that women from northern and Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous

(GBAO) regions have a greater tendency to migrate than women from other regions of Tajikistan. During the Soviet period, women from the northern and GBAO regions participated in the work-force, education, and public life more actively than women from the southern regions. This historical context has transmitted to current realities with women from these particular regions tending to migrate more (Kasymova, 2012). On a policy level, there are no major barriers for women to migrate to Russia for work. However, on cultural and micro levels, female migrants from Tajikistan may face more challenges when deciding to migrate.

Labor migration from Tajikistan to Russia captured the attention of many scholars across the world as it became a new important reality for a country that is highly dependent on remittances. While many of these studies do not engage extensively on gender relations, because migration is per-ceived to be a "male phenomenon" (Rocheva & Varshaver, 2017, p. 88), the body of literature ana-lyzing labor migration from a gender perspective is growing (Reeves, 2011, 2013; Kasymova, 2012 (Kholmatova, 2018); Grogan, 2013; Ibañez-Tirado, 2018, 2019; Thibault, 2018; Thieme, 2008; Zotova & Cohen, 2020). I have built on this work, and in this article, I explore gradual change in gender relations through the reproduction of old gender relations and the production of new ones. I discuss morphing gender relations of power and define them as the multifaceted overall adjustments of gender power relations originated from the experiences of labor migration. I explore how labor migration destabilizes and shakes the complex structure of gender norms and settled gender relations in the families of Tajik migrant workers, and I demonstrate how gender relations could be both pro-duced and reproduced, transmitted and transformed.

Theoretical Approach

For my work, I have chosen theories that critically engage conventional notions of gender (Butler, 1993, 2001; Connell, 1995; Paechter, 2006, 2018; Schippers, 2007) and intersectional feminism (Ahmed, 2017; & nbsp;Crenshaw, 1989; Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016).

I understand gender and gender relations as fluid and relational; they can be constructed and reconstructed (Butler, 1993; Cohn, 1993; Connell, 1995; Paechter, 2006, 2018; Schippers, 2007). Connell (1995) connects gender relations with power, arguing that "gender is far more than individ-ual traits somehow connected with bodily difference… it is a powerfully effective social practice" (p. 157). For Connell, gender is a social practice, where "bodies are both agents and objects of prac-tice" (p. 159). Connell refers to this as a body-reflexive practice which does not belong to the indi-vidual but involves social relations where one's social world is formed; thus, "gender is a social practice that constantly refers to bodies and what bodies do, it is not social practice reduced to the body" (p. 159).

Butler (1993) has also extensively analyzed gender. For Butler gender is not natural, but rather performative, meaning that it is produced through the repetition of certain practices and acts. For Butler, gender is about doing, and this perspective is key in separating Butler from other feminist theorists who argue that gender is socially constructed. Butler develops further the social construc-tion of gender, claiming that gender is performed, and through this performance it constructs the gender reality. For Butler, gender relations are not settled but fluid, and they could be performed dif-ferently for various people we encounter. For example, in the context of migrant workers, gender is performed on their mothers, partners, children, colleagues, community leaders, and each individual differently. The performance of gender is not settled and static, and it is not performed the same through each encounter. On the contrary, it is fluid and always changing in one's relationships with others.

This study is also informed by Paechter (2018), who has also theorized extensively the gender relations, and femininity and masculinity in particular, argues that "femininity is usually conceptu-alized in comparison with masculinity" (p. 121) or defined in relation to masculinity. However, to

Paechter (2018), it is problematic to analyze femininity as the absence of masculinity. Hence, in this paper I discuss not only female–male gender relations, but also female–female and male–male gender relations.

Furthermore, this study is informed by intersectionality theories (Crenshaw, 1989; Hill Collins & Bilger, 2016) as a starting point to analyze interlocking systems of oppression and privilege (Ahmed, 2017, p. 5). As a feminist scholar, I come from the understanding that "there are no simple explanations for social phenomena nor are there any easy answers to complex problems" (Goodkind et al., 2021), and the intersectionality lens gives the opportunity to highlight the complexities in this study by focusing on different intersecting social identities.

The chosen theoretical approaches inform my critical analysis which attempts to understand gender relations in their peculiarities, agencies, and specificities. I illustrate that patriarchy could be experienced differently by people depending on their intersectional social identities, and within patriarchy there are opportunities for transformation.

Methodology

This is a qualitative study using narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Polkinghorne, 1995; Riessman, 2008, 2011; Spector-Mersel, 2010) as the main research method because I consider it one of the best ways to understand and represent the experiences of people (Taber, 2010). The fieldwork was conducted both in Tajikistan and in Russia. For the segment discussed in this paper, thematic analysis was used following the steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This type of analysis allowed me to provide a critical examination of how gender relations change in the everydayness of participants' lived experiences.

Narrative Interview

Narrative interview (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000) was used as the main strategy for generating rich narrative data for the specific purposes of this study. Although the narrative interview follows a flexible format, I decided to construct my interview guide as semi-structured with 18 open-ended and probing questions to motivate participants to narrate their experiences and share their stories. Narrative interviews allow for a flexible and relaxed discussion in the form of conversations in mutual and reciprocal ways that mitigate power imbalance between participants and researchers (Denzin, 2001; Jindra & Jindra, 2019; Kvale, 1996). For me, this was very important, as I wanted to shift power to the participants, although I am acutely aware that it is not fully possible to accomplish this. Furthermore, narrative interviews allow for a "spontaneous and uninterrupted account in which the participant attempts to relate reflexively to their own experience" (Szczepanik & Siebert, 2016, p. 2). During each interview, I strived to establish a space for spontaneous, open and uninterrupted stories to emerge.

Participant Invitation

The study was approved by Wilfrid Laurier University Research Ethics Board (REB). The Informed Consent document was first prepared in English to go through the REB process, and it was later translated to Russian and Tajik. I invited potential participants who were working in Russia and also those who had worked in Russia and since returned to Tajikistan.

I invited participants largely by word of mouth (snowball sampling), and I also used strategies of convenient access in Russia. At this time, I was living close to many supermarkets and had met several migrants from Tajikistan. It was convenient for me to invite some participants after meeting them at these supermarkets; however, this strategy has the potential to exclude prospective

participants who had problems with documentation or were employed in the private sector. Nevertheless, through snowball strategy, I was able to recruit a few participants who were employed in the private sector.

Participants in my study, whether invited in Tajikistan or Russia, represented several regions of Tajikistan, predominantly from the capital Dushanbe; Regions of Republican Subordination, which are close to the capital; and the south. A few participants from Dushanbe had roots in other regions of the country. As regional belonging was not part of my selection criteria, I was not able to recruit participants from other regions; however, as Kasymova (2012) notes, regional belonging could be an important factor to consider in the context of labor migration, especially among women.

Interview Procedure

For the larger study, I interviewed 21 migrant workers comprising 10 women and 11 men from Tajikistan who had lived and worked in Russia for a period of between 6 months and 10 years. I interviewed 9 participants in Russia and 12 in Tajikistan. Some participants moved between Russia and Tajikistan regularly, while a few others had traveled only once and spent a short amount of time in Russia. Most of the participants were ethnic Tajiks, and a couple of participants were Uzbek workers from Tajikistan. Most of the participants were not highly educated, with the exception of two men and one woman. The majority of male participants had high school diplomas and technical education, while the majority of female participants had high school diplomas or several years of primary schooling.

Most of the interviews were recorded with the exception of the interviews of a few participants who did not want to be recorded. For non-recorded interviews, I took written notes during the interview and also immediately following the interview when I had access to the home computer. In Russia, the interviews were conducted in locations suggested by the participants: in a food court inside a mall, in quiet areas of a big park, at their place of work, in cafeterias and restaurants, and in *Chaihanas* (tea houses) in Moscow. In Tajikistan, I conducted the interviews in Dushanbe and in the Regions of Republican Subordination (RRS) that are geographically close to Dushanbe. Finding a comfortable location for the interview was easier in Tajikistan than that in Russia. I met with participants in my apartment, in participants' houses, in cafeterias and in other areas close by. The interviews lasted between 60 and 110 min. Some of the interviews were conducted purely in Tajik or Russian while many were conducted in both Tajik and Russian. I conducted all interviews between July and September 2017.

Data Analysis

I used thematic analysis to analyze the interview data because it is suitable for qualitative studies that employ multiple epistemological and theoretical approaches (Braun and Clarke, 2006). I initiated the analysis by immersing myself in the data, listening to the interviews, and taking notes to identify some of the themes and patterns. Interview transcripts were read several times for coding purposes. While reading and rereading, I coded chunks of the material. I used descriptive and interpretive codes and highlighted some of the significant text in different colors. I coded and clustered codes into themes and subthemes and then pulled out the overarching theme. For this research, I worked in three languages (English, Russian, and Tajik), and did the initial coding in Russian. Later, when I clustered the themes and subthemes into categories, I translated parts of the transcript that were relevant to the emerging themes into English. In this paper, I focus on the fourth theme from the doctoral dissertation. This fourth theme explores the change in male–male, female–male, and female–female gender relations.

Findings

Morphing Gender Relations of Power

The overarching theme that I explore in this paper is morphing gender relations of power. I define this theme as the multifaceted overall adjustments of gender power relations originating from the experiences of labor migration. This multifaceted overall adjustment of gender power is explored through three dimensions: (1) male–male gender relations; (2) male–female gender relations; and (3) female–female gender relations. The findings demonstrate how labor migration destabilizes and shakes the complex gender norms and settled gender relations in the families and communities of Tajik migrant workers both in Tajikistan and in Russia, and how labor migration contributes to the constant tension between transformation and transmission of gender relations.

Male–Male Gender Relations

Some of the findings highlight how sending or not sending remittances has a tremendous impact on gender relations within families. However, this is not the only impact, and one of the key findings of this study suggests that most painful experiences appear to result from the emotional absence of husbands and fathers. International literature agrees that lengthy separation disrupts parent–child attachment and bond (Fellmeth et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2004). Similarly, these findings suggest that the absence of a father had a particularly painful impact on father–son relations and male–male gender relations in general. For example, Kasym, who is a first-generation migrant and a father of three sons, mentioned that his wife constantly calls and asks him to talk to their sons as they miss their father, act out, and do not listen to her [their mother]. He shared:

> I try to talk to my family every day. Thankfully, *Vaiber* [is a cross-platform voice and instant messaging software application popular across Russia and Central Asia] exists now. Very frequently my wife calls me and complains that sometimes sons do not listen to her, they miss me. Sometimes, she tells me, talk to your son, he is not listening to me. It is difficult for them without the father. I know they need me… But I have to work here, for them… But I talk to them through video calls, so at least we can see each other…

Although the means of technology and communication are well developed today and families have better opportunities to connect over a long distance, the second-generation migrants in this research did not have access to such a luxury of communication. Their fathers migrated in the 90s when they were in their mothers' wombs or when they were babies. In the 90s, the 1992–1997 civil war in Tajikistan made international calls much harder in the immediate post-Soviet period, and this challenge continued throughout the post-Soviet space. Access to calls was expensive and not possible for many migrant families. As a result, children and fathers lost emotional connection. The father–son relationship is particularly important in traditional Tajik gender relations, but this thread of transmission was broken in many families by labor migration. Even for fathers who sent remittances regularly, financial support was not enough for the sons who also needed their fathers' emotional support, nurturing, love, and care.

For example, Matin, a second-generation male migrant, dreamed that his father would live with them and raise him and his siblings. Equally, Matin appreciated his father for the sacrifices he made by living in a "foreign country" *(davlati musofir)* for all these years to support the family financially (Roche, 2017). Indeed, his father motivated Matin at the age of 17 to go to Russia to work and save for his marriage ceremony. While living with his father, however, Matin realized that they shared no emotional connection and he did not know how to relate to him. As he remembers:

> I did not even know what to talk with my father. When we were in one room, he would be silent and I would be silent as well… If I have any problems, I share with my mother, but not with father, or even now with my wife. When I was not married, and lived in Russia, I would tell about my problems to my mother who was in Tajikistan, but not to my father with whom I lived in the same apartment in Russia. (Matin)

For Matin, this absence of emotional connection and trust is difficult, although his father never failed to provide financial support. As a child, Matin would see his father only once a year and rarely talk to him over the phone, as communication was not accessible in the 1990s and beyond.

For Farid, another second-generation labor migrant, his father supported the family financially and visited them once a year. Farid shared that he did not have open, trustful connections with his father. Geographical distance and lack of access to phone communication further contributed to their distant relationship. Farid remembers:

> We rarely talked to our dad. He was too far, and my mom would buy phone cards to call him, or he would buy cards to call us. My mother was the one who was in contact with him, but we [children] spoke to him less. It was expensive to call and waste the minutes on us. We counted every minute *(laughs)*. …. If I needed anything, I asked my mother. I have good relationships with my parents, but more with my mother. I can open up myself more to her. And my father was far away for a long time…

While Matin and Farid both felt emotional disconnect from their fathers, they were supported financially, and their fathers visited them at least once a year. The situation was much harder for participants whose fathers had abandoned them. For example, Firdavs' father abandoned his family in Tajikistan and remarried in Russia. He did not support the family financially or participate in any family affairs. Firdavs' experience was one filled with internal deprivation and an acute sense of loss and grief, as he remembers:

> You know, I did not know who a father is. I did not see him when I was a child, he left when we were very young. I saw him on photos… I was dreaming about father. Do you understand me??? I wanted to hold his hand, to walk on the streets with him. I wanted to have a father… (Firdavs)

While Firdavs talked, his eyes sought empathy and understanding. His eyes were filled with grief and sadness. As Firdavs reflects, however, his father's absence is much more than an emotional experience of loss and grief; it also has a social dimension of identity, public pride, and honor:

> Having a father is also gaining a respect in the community. If you don't have a father at all, they don't… [stops and sighs heavily]. When people see you with your father, they respect you. For example, when you are holding his hand and asking him to buy you something… I never had that in my life… (Firdavs)

As Firdavs' tone of voice became very low and he stopped talking, I felt the depth of his palpable loss and deep grief. Tears welled in his eyes as he struggled to hold them back. It was a moment of silence; it was a moment of grief coming from a society that teaches boys to hide emotions and not to cry. However, that loss of connection with a father was difficult for Firdavs. His emotions transmitted to me; I could feel and observe them through his body language, his tone of voice, and his tear-filled eyes.

Reflecting on Firdavs' experience, I perceive his sense of loss and grief as being deeply embodied by social norms (Jakoby, 2012). He was living out the social norms that to have a father is to have a provider and protector through whom he gains peer and community respect. There is a difference between a father who migrates to support his family and one who migrates and abandons his family. When a labor migrant abandons his family, peer respect and community support dissolve as well. There are emotional, economic, social, and political layers to Firdavs' grief which remind

me of Foucault's notion of power (1998). In this argument, power is not only the hierarchical top-down force exercised by the government and sovereign "agency"; instead, "power is every-where" and "comes from everywhere"—in this sense power is neither an agency nor a structure; it is a relationship (p. 63) and these relationships could be manifested in visible and invisible inter-actions. Respect, as Firdavs mentioned, comes with power: the ability to make things work, have a voice and be heard, and demand and receive what he needs. Respect is power, and power is with the father in patriarchal family institutions. Firdavs aspires to that power and male identity from which he constructs his own masculinity (Connell, 1995). This includes material connections to a father who can purchase and send gifts to a son, like other migrant workers, and Firdavs can command power and community respect through such symbolic demonstration of gifts (Rocheva & Varshaver, 2017). Indeed, through our conversation in which Firdavs shared his story of many years of painful waiting, he nevertheless wore a big smile when he remembered the gift his father once sent:

> But then one day, when I was in a second grade, my father sent me and my brother two bicycles. OOOh, it was the happiest day in my life, it was my first bicycle I was dreaming of…, I was riding it in our *kishlok* [village]. I was showing it to my friends saying that my father sent it to me. I was so proud… Oh… This bicycle was a reminder that Dad did not forget about us. I dreamed that he will come back one day and stay with us forever… But I fooled myself. (Firdavs)

This gift of a bicycle was symbolic for Firdavs who longed for a father and the emotional connection; however, he was brought back to the reality of having an absent father who did not participate in his and his brother's life. When the first generation of males entered labor migration, they destabilized traditional Tajik gender relations in which men are the key decision-makers and leaders of the family (Kasymova & Billings, 2018). The traditional family structure was shaken, especially when men had to migrate and women predominantly stayed with the families.

Male–Female Gender Relations

Findings demonstrate the constant tensions in gender relations in the context of mother–son, husband–wife, and father–daughter relationships. Starting with mother–son relations, several male migrant workers shared the experiences of their mothers when their own fathers were in migration. They remembered how difficult it was for their mothers to raise them alone, playing the double roles of both the mother and the father. Here are two examples of reflections:

> It was very difficult for my mom to raise us. My father gave nothing to us, except a small piece of land where we were living. My mother was working in a bazaar selling sunflower seeds. My brother had a disability. It was even harder for her… I started to work very early at around seven maybe…. I was going to the river where I was fishing. I was selling the fish in bazaar and was giving money to my mother… I have seen the difficulties of my mother and how she was raising us… It was very hard for her… I have seen her crying many times… And my heart was aching with her… I don't want her to cry anymore… I am doing my best to prevent it… My mother is my world. Our Prophet was saying: "The Paradise is under the feet of your mother"… yes, my mother is my world. (Firdavs)

Another participant shared:

> My mother was instead of mother and father for me. She raised us all. All the time, my mother was *dar tori saramon byd* [under our heads]. We got all manners and education from our mother… I was very sick when I was young, my mom looked after me, and took good care. She took me to the doctors and was running [*davodav*] a lot due to my conditions. I am very thankful to my mother. Today I am healthy because of her and all her efforts. I don't want anyone to upset and harm my mother's heart. (Matin)

In the narratives of both Firdavs and Matin, I see the tension between the transformation and transmission of gender relations. These sons' gratitude to their mothers for suffering and raising them alone translates into tremendous love and respect and reverence for their mothers. That reverence and love grant the ultimate power to mothers. Yet this very mother-power aspires to maintain traditional gender order, and it limits the capacity to transform the overall gender relations of power through daughters-in-law.

This limitation is reinforced in husband–wife relations because mother–power and mother–son relations rarely translate into the husband–wife relations of these sons. Although sons deeply respect their mothers and transmit their male power to them, it seems that they then push their wives to fully obey and respect their mothers-in-law without offering them similar respect or reverence as women or mothers. Mother-power could be both dangerous and rewarding, depending on the relationships that develop between mothers and daughters-in-law. Right off the bat, however, the male participants seemed to impose the subordination of their wives and future wives to the mother-power of their mothers, as the following examples demonstrate:

> I said to her [his wife] that my father was in migration for so many years. I love my mother the most. Father is father…, but you need to respect my mother, and these two people in my life. If my father and mother are pleased by you, I will be pleased as well. Don't even respect me if you don't want to but respect my parents in the first place. Always respect and listen to my mother, and I will treat you always well. If we have any misunderstandings in the future, but if my parents are on your side, I will understand you too. If you want to live with me, you need to treat and respect my mother. (Matin)

Another participant, Nodir, shared a similar view:

> Mother is one of the main persons in my life, I am who I am due to the circle where I was raised in. Mother is the center of my circle. My future wife needs to respect me and the circle of people who developed me as a human being. And I am also expecting it from myself towards her. (Nodir)

Firdavs also expressed:

> I will marry the wife my mother will choose. I owe my mother a lot. She suffered a lot. How can I disobey or betray her now? My father already betrayed her. I cannot allow myself to do the same. I want her to be happy. If she is happy, and I will be happy as well. My expectation from my future wife is to respect and treat my mother well, always… (Firdavs)

Mothers have the ultimate decision-making power over their sons, including selecting and grooming wives for their sons. These participants said they knew their mothers would not bless any relationship with ethnic Russian girls so they did not enter into any relationships while in Russia. When I asked Firdavs if he liked anyone while working in Russia, he laughed and said that he could not even imagine that. He said that he did not see that as an option at all because he followed his mother's sacred advice. Responding to the same question, Nodir also shared that he will follow his mother's advice, but he needs to like the girl too. Matin said that his mother did not want him to bring any wife/bride to Tajikistan from Russia and his obedience was unconditional, as he said: "My mom used to tell me to 'study well, finish school, and I will find a good wife for you by myself. I have hopes, expectations and dreams on you'… I fully rely on and trust my mother."

These three young participants did not only submit their male power to their mothers and expect their wives to obey their mothers unconditionally, but they also insisted that their wives copy their mothers even in their style of dressing. For example, Firdavs described his future wife's clothing, saying that it "should cover her hands and head as my mother does." Similarly, Matin told his wife: "At home, you can choose how to wear clothing, you can choose not to wear the *rumol*

[head covering], but when you step out from home, you need to dress the same way as my mother [in terms of head covering and dress]." In this example, we see that traditional gender relations are generally reinforced and not transformed. The notable point here is that mother-power is expanded, thereby transforming the male–female gender relations. However, even if mother-power is transformed, it can negatively affect younger daughters-in-law and potentially the sons.

The relationships between father and daughter or female–male gender relations look different. Specifically, a male figure has a strong influence over his female relatives. For example, daughters' decisions around migration are primarily influenced by the male figures in the family. Daughters seek permission from their fathers about whether to migrate or not. For example, Ruhshona, while contemplating migration to Russia, asked permission from her father. She was very uncertain if he would allow her to migrate, because femininity scripts in Central Asia dictate that women should "stay put" and wait for their husbands or other male relatives to return from migration (Reeves, 2011; Kasymova, 2012). Ruhshona internalized these gender scripts and was uncertain about her father's decision; however, she still decided to explore the opportunity to migrate to Russia. She remembers:

> I asked my father and he said, "If you want to, you can go." I was surprised; I thought he will not allow me. I had not thought that he would give me permission, so I asked again: "Will you allow me to go?" My father said if I wanted to go, I could go.

As we can see from this example, although Ruhshona wanted to migrate, she was uncertain if her father would allow her to do so, especially because she was a young, single woman. She was pleasantly surprised that her father agreed and supported her decision to migrate. However, this decision was highly conditional on the fact that she would not be alone in Russia, but would live with other male family members. Ruhshona had several brothers who were migrant workers in Russia. Initially, her opportunity to migrate for labor was highly dependent on her brothers helping her to find a job and promising their father to "care" for her. As Ruhshona had brothers in Russia, she was able to negotiate her departure with her father, and together with her brothers facilitate her first experience of migration even though traditional gender scripts dictate women to stay. Ruhshona remembers: "He [father] did not worry about me, because my brothers were there, and they could take care of me [*nigoh kardan*] while I was in Russia."

In Zamira's example, her decision to migrate was primarily supported by a male family member too, namely her brother who helped her find a job and accommodation while in Russia. Similar to Ruhshona, Zamira was able to facilitate her migration to Russia because her brother was already working there as a migrant worker.

A number of female participants mentioned in their interviews the concept of "taking care of me" or *manro nigoh kardan*, meaning that their male family members, as brothers, cousins, or uncles, serve as "symbolic" care providers or guardians while their female relatives are also in migration. Male family members were expected to "take care" of their female relatives who are in migration by helping them to find a job, offering advice and suggestions about legal requirements, and helping them to find accommodation. In addition, it seems that male relatives perform the role of "protector" for their young female family members.

Protection was implied primarily from men. For example, Ruhshona shared a story of how her single/divorced female colleagues from Tajikistan had to engage in intimate relationships with men in Russia, otherwise they could lose their job. Ruhshona remembers:

> I was very scared when she told me this, but I told myself that my situation was different. Thankfully, I had male protection, which she did not have. I had my uncle, my brothers and my cousins. Maybe that is why no one approached me. They were afraid of my male relatives.

Bodies of female migrant workers are more sexually targeted and prone to gender-based violence (Ross-Sheriff, 2011). Because female labor migrants from Tajikistan could be vulnerable to sexual violence, some male relatives oppose their migration to Russia. This view largely comes from traditional gender order when men in the family believe they must protect their female relatives from other men who can sexually "seduce" them. Hence, labor migration contributed to increasing the caregiving obligations of men who must perform not only as breadwinners to support their family members who remain in Tajikistan, but also as "carers" for their extended female family members who decide to travel to Russia.

Furthermore, as we can see from these examples, although young, single women's decision-making around migration is impacted by their male relatives, who have a certain power over their female relatives, equally, within the patriarchy, women still find effective avenues to facilitate their labor migration and establish access to work in Russia. What is important to note is that within the patriarchal structures, women are finding ways to transform their lives within the structures of domination by simultaneously conforming to certain assigned gender scripts.

Female–Female Gender Relations

While mother-power seems to be pervasive as discussed in the last two subthemes, it is not evenly distributed among all mothers. Not all mothers wield mother-power, as motherhood intersects differently with gender, age, marital status, access to remittances, relationships with husbands and sons-in-law, and social positions within families and communities. In mother–daughter relationships, daughters, particularly young girls, seem to be the most marginalized by traditional gender norms. It seems some mothers value sons more than daughters because daughters are eventually married away (Kasymova & Billings, 2018) to work for their husbands' mothers elsewhere in other communities while sons bring home *kelin* [daughters-in-law] who work for them while exhibiting obedience and respect.

For example, Matin, a participant who is an older son with four younger sisters, remembers how his mother encouraged and supported him to get an education and how she had big expectations and dreams for him. His sisters were not equally encouraged to get an education, and they married at the age of 18—which is the legal marriageable age in the country. Other participants also shared similar stories about how they, their daughters, or their sisters were married right after or even before completing high school. Many mothers hope that their daughter will be a good *kelin* and fulfill the dreams of her husband and his family (Harris, 2004), a vision many participants in this study also shared.

Although girls are generally marginalized in this way, I find that mothers have less power and influence over their daughters than they do over their sons. Findings from my study suggest that daughters tend to be freer from their mother-power depending on their age and marital status. Older daughters who are widowed or divorced have more power than younger daughters who were not married. For example, Samira is a divorcee who decided to leave for Russia as a labor migrant. However, her mother did not want her to leave, as she was afraid of gossip and rumors. Samira said:

> My mother was telling me not to go. "What will neighbors say? What will people say? You are alone… you are a divorced woman. They are going to spread rumors about you that you are dating different men there. Find a job here as a nanny or in the store." (Samira)

Against her mother's wishes, Samira migrated to Russia for work. She did not have a father, as he was deceased. This situation could have been different for Samira, if her father was alive. Even after Samira left, her mother urged her to return because of gossip and continuous rumors among the neighbors who suspected that she was having intimate relationships with other men in Russia.

Her mother's pressure was strong enough to compel Samira to return temporarily, but this pressure was not strong enough to keep Samira home, as she returned to Russia after a while.

Kamilla, a widow with several children, shared a similar experience. Kamilla left for Russia to earn a living for her children. Her mother supported her migration decision in the beginning because a male relative helped her to find a job and "look after her," but later, she was against Kamilla's migration and urged Kamilla to stay by telling her: "your children need *ocha* [a mother], not me *bibi* [a grandmother]." Kamilla's mother did not want her daughter to migrate again, but Kamilla still decided to leave even when there was no male relative "looking after her" during migration.

Findings demonstrate that mother-power may not be as effective in preventing daughters' migration. However, it is still a strong power that older women wield over younger women within familial relationships (Harris, 2004; Roche, 2017). For example, female–female gender relations between a *kelin* [daughter-in-law] and her mother-in-law and sister-in-law are rife with tensions through which the *kelin* is marginalized. As discussed previously, mothers expect their sons to marry a woman of whom they approve, because traditionally, a wife is not just a partner for their son but also a *kelin* who is expected to respect and serve everyone in the house. Often, the mother-in-law selects her future *kelin*. For example, Hairi, a female participant who returned from labor migration in Russia due to health issues, told me that she was looking for a wife for her son who was working in Russia. When I asked her to describe how she imagined the best *kelin* for her son, she was very clear about her expectations from her future *kelin*: "*Hushtomana hurmat kadan darkor*" [It is necessary to respect the mother-in-law]. In addition, because Hairi had health challenges, she was looking for a *kelin* who would look after her and her younger children while her older son works in Russia and sends remittances. Her son is the only breadwinner of the family, replacing her husband who left the family for labor and married another woman in Russia. Hairi was looking for an obedient support person, a *kelin* who will serve the whole family while her son works in Russia.

Nafisa, a female participant who was in labor migration in Russia with her husband but had to return to Tajikistan due to health issues, shared her sadness of being a *kelin* while living with extended family. Upon her return, she had to live with her husband's extended family. She never saw the remittances her husband sent home, as the money was transferred to her mother-in-law and sister-in-law. Nafisa could not even purchase clothing and school uniforms for her children because her sister-in-law did that for her. Nafisa remembers her sister-in-law saying:

> Bazaar is not a good place for a woman whose husband is in migration… and she [Nafisa] needs to stay home and look after the children; *bo sari luch munkin gashtan nest* [not to show off herself to the public with an 'exposed head', with no headcover, meaning to be without a husband].

Bo sari luch munkin gashtan nest, the expression that was told to Nafisa by her female relatives, means that she should not leave the house alone while her husband is in migration. As Nafisa shared, her mother-in-law and sister-in-law felt they were Nafisa's guardians while her husband was in migration; thus, they restricted her freedom of movement and choices. Nafisa's story demonstrates another layer in the complexity of women's power within familial gender relations, as other studies argue (Harris, 2004; Roche, 2017). Here it is not only older women, but also younger women who wield power over a *kelin* as gender intersects with Nafisa's *kelin* status, her age, and whether her husband was around. This limits her ability to mother the children, her access to remittance, and her ability to choose how to spend it, thus marginalizing her within the female–female relationships within her family. Nafisa, who together with her children lived with her parents-in-law and her sister-in-law, was in the lowest hierarchy of power in the family.

However, Nafisa's marginalization changed when she became older, and her older son left for migration and was able to earn money for his wedding. He transmitted his gender power to his mother by insisting that his new wife, mother, and sisters should live separately from the larger extended family. Her son was able to transform the housing situation for the whole family. With this change, Nafisa now has access to the authority, full respect, and reverence that mother-power affords her. However, how she will treat her new *kelin* is still unknown. Now, possible marginalization of *kelin* is in the hands of Nafisa, who as a *kelin* has previously experienced marginalization herself. Now, Nafisa's daughters are also sisters-in-law, and how they will treat *kelin* is unknown too. For individual women, their gender relations are transformed as they move through the circles of age, bearing sons, finding *kelins*, and leaving patrilocal family arrangements. In these complicated, systemic, and deeply cultural ways, female–female gender relations change while simultaneously remaining the same.

Discussion

This paper highlights how the complex gender relations of power in male–male, male–female, and female–female relationships within the family context shift as a result of labor migration. While studies in international migration do not largely focus in detail on these relationships, especially male–male and female–female relationships, this paper attempts to shed light on the morphing gender relations of power in the context of labor migration.

First, the findings of this study suggest that labor migration destabilizes traditional Tajik male–male relations, particularly father–son relations. The sons who are second-generation migrants felt lack of emotional connections with their fathers. This is true both in families where fathers were in migration for many years and supported the family, and in families where fathers left permanently and did not provide support. According to traditional gender norms, Tajik men are constructed as the breadwinners (Olimova, 2010; UNICEF, 2011; Kasymova & Billings, 2018), and they were the first to engage in labor migration. While some men sent back remittances to their families faithfully, others abandoned their families and married other women in Russia (IOM, 2009). Research also shows that although some men do start new families or establish relationships with a "guest wife" in Russia, they continue to financially support their families in Tajikistan (Kalandarov, 2012). The findings from this study demonstrate that labor migration contributed to the separation of families when fathers abandoned their families, or even when fathers lived in Russia for decades and continued to support their families financially. This study observes that although financial support is unarguably a significant factor in maintaining the well-being of the migrant's family, it is not the only factor. Second-generation migrant workers, when reflecting on their lived experiences, indicated the emotional "hole" and disconnect from their fathers, regardless of whether or not financial support was provided. International literature agrees that lengthy separation disrupts parent–child attachment and bond (Fellmeth et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2004). This theme was prevalent in the interviews of young Tajik male migrant workers, who indicated the disruptions in father–son attachment and bond. The findings of this study also indicate that the emotional "hole" and grief due to lack of connection with the father was intensified by labor migration. This emotional grief generated by the symbolic loss of the father was acute when the migrants were young boys. Besides the emotional grief, the absence of a father has a significant social dimension. The presence of a father brings public pride and honor. Boys see their fathers as symbols of protection and acceptance in society. Boys feel the grief of their father's absence. Because social structures value men more than women, how labor migration impacts the experiences of children who share the social identity of a child of an "absent" father, and how "absenteeism" of a father, both physical and symbolic, is manifested in the lived experiences of children, should be better understood.

Furthermore, fatherhood and father–son relationships should be understood more critically in the context of Tajikistan. Tajik families in general (nuclear and multigenerational) are more patriarchal with male family members considered the key decision-makers (Kasymova & Billings, 2018). Fatherhood in patriarchal societies such as Tajikistan might be explained by the structural–functional theory (Parsons, 1991), "where the father is described as the instrumental leader and head of the family, whereas the mother is described as having emotional and expressive functions" (Johansson & Andreasson, 2017, p. 21). As a result, children learn about gender roles within their families. In patriarchal families, usually, the boy is supposed to be identified with the father and is expected to develop certain rational capacities and knowledge, while the girl is close to the mother, thus developing emotional and nurturing capacities. In the case of Tajikistan, when fathers left for migration, boys did not have an opportunity to connect and identify with the father. Yet in patriarchal families, the fathers could be symbolically present but simultaneously absent from qualitative engagement with their children (Freeman, 2008). This is the paradox of patriarchy, where the father, while being the leader and head of the family, is simultaneously constrained from being the center of the family (Lewis & O'Brien, 1987). With labor migration, this symbolical and physical absence was intensified.

The findings from second-generation migrant workers challenge the notion of an "absent" father. The male participants yearned for an emotional connection with their father. While the stories of migrant workers reproduced the same symbolic notion of a father as the head of the household and confirmed their need for social recognition and the power the father figure may bring, equally, the same young migrant workers destabilized the male–male or father–son gender relations and produced new ones. Specifically, they did not want to have an "absent" father as a symbolic head of the household. Rather, they were looking for a father who expresses love, care, connection, and emotions. By indicating the emotional "hole" and expressing the grief in their narratives, the migrant workers destabilized the rigid male–male or father–son gender relations that are constructed within the patriarchal structure.

Second, looking at female–male gender relations, specifically through the manifestation of mother–son relations, it was clear that male participants, who are second-generation migrants, grant the ultimate power to their mothers. Mother–son relationships are characterized by mother-power that enables mothers to make important decisions for their families, including finding wives for their sons and arranging marriages. There is a tremendous power vested in mothers in Tajik society in general. Harris (2004), Grogan (2013), and Roche (2017) also highlight mother-power in Tajik society and in Central Asia in general. In this research, the mother-power was also presented clearly especially among younger male second-generation migrant workers. Through this study, it was revealed that participants' mothers are put on a pedestal for being the ultimate symbols of reproducing hegemonic femininity, or hyperfemininity as Paechter (2018) indicates, despite living their lives as long-suffering single mothers who played both male and female roles in their families. Through the experiences of migration, gender relations were transformed and produced new forms of femininity (Paechter, 2006; Schippers, 2007).

For the second-generation migrant workers I met through this research, mother-power was absolute. Male participants' reverence, respect, obedience and love toward their mothers were unconditional. They submit their own powers to their mothers as they subordinate themselves to mother-power (Roche, 2017). This study demonstrates that mother-power is practiced in the absolute form in families where young men were raised by de-jure or de-facto single mothers because of the heavy sacrifices made by the long-suffering women. Mother-power is widespread in patrilocal families where men readily followed their mothers' wills and the marriages these mothers arranged for them (Thibault, 2018). The participants did not question an arranged marriage because it was the norm for them. In the dominant Tajik culture, marriage is not a matter between just the marital partners; rather, it is a collective familial and societal matter. This makes arranged marriage widespread

in Tajikistan (Harris, 2004; Thibault, 2018). In the process of migration, the practice of arranged marriage is not only reproduced but also reinforced when families ensure that their children marry the partners chosen and "approved" by kin. Arranged marriage is a cultural tradition, although it is often mistakenly constructed as a Muslim practice. Many families insist on arranged marriage as a manifestation of religious practice as religion plays a significant role in Tajikistan in the construction of gender roles, and Muslim identity for Tajiks has equal importance to traditions and customs (Acar & Gunes-Ayata, 2000).

Analyzing the experiences of father–daughter, or brother–sister relationships, it is clear that young, single women's decisions around migration are highly dependent on the availability of protection (or care) from their male relatives. Yet, although, traditional gender relations are reinforced during labor migration as women conform to the decisions of their male relatives around migration, these same relations are also transformed as women have the ability to negotiate their decision to migrate within the patriarchal gender power relationships. Gender relations are reproduced within the system that requires women to conform to traditional gender scripts, yet they are also transformed, because within this system of conformity, women are able to change the traditional gender scripts. The findings from this study indicate that young, single women who want to migrate to labor in Russia conform to the decisions of their male relatives who symbolically serve as family guardians who are required to care for them while in migration. Yet these same women decide to migrate shaking off the traditional gender relations that require women to stay "put" and wait for men who are in migration (Reeves, 2011). It seems this male approval is the most powerful when women migrate for the first time. With increased self-confidence and belief in their ability to work in a foreign country, women can facilitate the migration processes more independently. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that this situation may look different depending on age and marital status. In addition, the ability to facilitate migration decisions could also be conditioned based on a woman's previous "successful" experiences of migration. However, success may look different depending on one's gender. These nuances could be better understood with further research.

Thirdly, from examining female–female gender relations through manifestation of mother–daughter relations and in the relations between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law as well as between sisters-in-law, the findings demonstrate that mothers of female participants do not hold as much power over their migrating daughters as they do over their migrating sons, especially sons whose fathers were also migrants and were continuously absent. Mothers, like fathers, were supportive of their daughter's decision to migrate if a relative-male figure helped with the migration journey and looked after their female relative. When these connections were not present, mothers were reluctant to agree with their daughter's decision to migrate. Either way, it seems that in the stories I collected, mother-power is more effective on younger sons, who are second-generation migrants, than on daughters.

Previous studies demonstrate that young *kelins* (daughters-in-law) are positioned on the lowest rungs in the hierarchy of female–female gender relations and they suffer abuse and exploitation at the hands of their mothers-in-law and sisters-in-law (Hegland, 2010). As studies show (Grogan, 2013), while access to remittances is a major factor in empowering women, in patrilocal families, it is older women with remitting sons who have access to remittances and the decision-making authority associated with that access. *Kelins* are marginalized, as they do not have access to the empowering remittances of their husbands (Grogan, 2013). This study demonstrates that changes in these gender relations happen when the *kelins* grow older and raise sons of their own who will bring home *kelins* of their own and they too become mothers-in-law with mother-power and full authority to control younger *kelins*. And the cycle continues not only by reproducing old gender relations but also by producing new ones (Butler, 1993).

Mother–son relationships are equally significant both emotionally and socially. Sons, who live with their mothers for many years because of their fathers' long-term migration, tend to respect,

obey, and transmit their power to their mothers. As a result, mothers are endowed with mother-power, which could be both dangerous and rewarding. It could be rewarding, as some women whose older sons migrated to Russia obtained more power and acceptance in the community and family. The ability to wield power is generated not only from having the son in migration, but also from the mother's specific age. Roche (2014) highlights the importance of age in Tajik society. Affirming this, I found that older women tend to have more power than younger women. This is one of the ways in which mother-power can be dangerous for younger women, especially daughters-in-law, as many sons expect their wives to fully obey and listen to their mothers. Exalted mother–son gender relations can be detrimental to husband–wife relationships. However, not all mothers wield power equally, as mother-power intersects differently with age, marital status, access to remittances, and relations with husband and sons-in-law. Understanding these inter-sectional identities in the context of labor migration is important for social work researchers and practitioners.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings in this study are instrumental in highlighting the nuances of change in gender relations in the context of labor mobility. Gender-segregated roles are transmitted from family to family and from person to person, but during this transmission process, they also transform and produce other gender relations. The analysis also highlights the significance of intersectionality as key to understanding shifts in gender relations that interconnect with age, marital status, and motherhood experiences, including mothering a son versus mothering a daughter, kinship structure, and access to male relatives who are migrant workers. This nuanced understanding of change in gender relations is critical for social workers whose core ethical principles include promoting and ensuring social justice and challenging discrimination and oppression (IFSW, 2018) through research, advocacy, and ethical practice.

While reflecting on social work practice in Tajikistan, different types of support related to the disruption of normative gender relations due to migration, adaptation to new gender roles, separated families, communication, and connection with communities should be established. This type of support should be specifically designed for different genders, ages, marital status, family and kinship structures, and regions because members of these social groups have different needs. However, these programs should be designed not to purely emphasize the needs and vulnerabilities of people but to equally recognize their strengths.

Some male second-generation migrant workers in this study felt emotional holes in relation to the absence of their fathers who were in migration. Programs focused on strengthening attachment between children and their migrant parents (including fathers) should be developed both for children and their parents. It is important to develop programs based on human relatedness, which is key for human development and adaptation. From my personal observations as an insider–outsider, and from my previous professional experience in social work development in Tajikistan, I notice that numerous social service programs in Tajikistan lack the concept of parent–child relationships (especially father–child) in relation to migrant families. I believe that social programs focused on developing healthy attachment, bond and attunement between both parents, and family social work in general are important to further support migrant families and the overall community in Tajikistan. Through this study, participants indicated the emotional pain that developed as a result of lengthy parental migration. This is a generational pattern that exists in Tajikistan as a result of labor migration. This lack of emotional connection that developed is worth paying attention to in future social work program development.

Implications of my findings for social work practice extend beyond Tajikistan and Russia because the challenges of changing gender relations and family disruptions due to migration are a global

phenomenon. Migrants experience these challenges in major immigration countries. Understanding the nuances of gender relations is important for social work professionals working with diverse populations while not imposing their values and judgments on people. As people are deeply influenced by their cultures, religions, and ways of living, social work professionals must work with people through their worldviews while exercising anti-oppressive practices (Anand & Das, 2019).

Furthermore, it is important to dismantle the global narratives about women from the Global South as weak and victimized. In this study, I attempted to demonstrate both strengths and marginalization, and how people within patriarchal structures are able to both transform and transmit gender power relations. Hence, the findings of this study are equally important for social work practitioners working with migrant workers both globally and locally.

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