Together or apart? Spousal migration and reunification practices of recent refugees to Germany

Abstract:
This study examines migration and reunification processes among recent male and female refugees from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria in Germany. Specifically, we analyse different types of spousal migration practices (joint arrival versus arriving alone) and the probability of reunification with the left-behind partner after one year of geographic separation, and to what extent this is shaped by socio-economic conditions, children, family networks, and the legal situation of married men and women. Using data from the first and second wave of the IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees, collected in 2016 and 2017 in Germany, and applying logistic regression models, we disentangle the heterogeneity of refugees’ migration processes. The results show that couples with minor children are more likely to migrate together compared to childless couples or those with adult children only, and that men and women’s solo migration is associated with the presence of other family members at the destination country. The probability of reuniting with the left-behind partner after one year of separation mainly depends, again, on family networks, with differential effects for men and women. Furthermore, male first-movers’ legal status in Germany is important for a quick reunitification with their wives. Our research shows that forced migration in the here studied geographic context is a gendered process and that several characteristics of male migration do not apply to women. Furthermore, conventional explanations for economically motivated migration decisions and patterns must be adapted to the case of forced migration.

Key words: family reunification, couple migration, forced migration, refugees, Germany

1. Introduction

The number of forcibly displaced people worldwide reached its peak in 2018 with approx. 70.8 million persons, 29.4 million of whom are either international refugees or asylum seekers (UNHCR 2019). The great majority flees to neighbouring countries. Nonetheless, the on-going conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and other countries have also contributed to sharply rising numbers of people arriving in high-income countries elsewhere to claim asylum. Germany is one of the major destination countries with more than 740,000 men and women submitting their initial asylum application in 2016 (BAMF 2018). Per-
mits for family reasons have increased sharply worldwide (UNHCR 2019), but also in Germany (BMI/BAMF 2019).

Quantitative studies on refugee 1 populations in European destination countries are scarce, even more so when it comes to their family arrangements, family reunification processes, and differences between sexes. So far, studies examining refugees and their family structures focus on the life satisfaction of refugees in Germany (Gambaro et al. 2018), on the labour market and educational integration into the host society (Bürmann et al. 2018; Bähr et al. 2019; Brücker et al. 2019; OECD 2017) or on transnational activities with family members in origin or transit countries (Bakker et al. 2014). Further research deals with ICT communications and channels of contact of recently arrived refugees in Germany (Baldassar 2016; Witteborn 2015). Finally, the mental well-being, post-traumatic stress and psychological problems of refugees have been studied extensively (Schouler-Ocak/Kurmeyer 2017). 2

Research on partnership arrangements and gendered migration processes mainly focuses on economically motivated migration. Most of these quantitative studies deal with Mexican male and female migrants to the United States of America (Kanaiaupuni 2000; Cerrutti/Massey 2001; Curran/Rivero-Fuentes 2003; Cerrutti/Gaudio 2010), as one of the largest and best-established migratory systems, with the Mexican Migration Project providing valuable data on gendered migration practices. Focussing on Sub-Saharan African migration to Europe, several studies analyse family migration dynamics. Many of these publications are based on data collected within the framework of the Migrations Between Africa and Europe project (Beauchemin et al. 2015; Caarls/Mazzucato 2015, 2016; Caarls/Valk 2017; Caarls et al. 2018; Toma/Vause 2013; Kraus 2019). There are also some noteworthy qualitative studies examining female migration from Sub-Saharan Africa (Vives/Vazquez Silva 2017), gendered family migration processes in Southeast Asia (Fresnoza-Flot 2018; Parreñas 2005), as well as family migration in the regional context of Mexico and Central America (Dreby 2010; Schmalzbauer 2010; Baldassar/Merla 2014). Moreover, several studies examine partnership-related migration dynamics for the case of the 1950s–1970s Gastarbeiter (‘guest workers’) from Southern Europe and Turkey and subsequent generations, mostly in Germany, the Netherlands, and Belgium (González-Ferrer 2007; Guveli et al. 2016). Yet it remains unclear if and to what extent labour migrants’ family arrangements and spousal migration practices show similar patterns compared to those of refugees.

This study brings the literature on refugees into conversation with the literature on family and spousal migration processes by addressing the following three research questions: What are the characteristics of international refugees’ spousal migration practices regarding type, pace, and eventual reunification at destination? How are socio-economic status, children, family networks, and legal aspects related to these differential arrangements? And finally, what are the differences in the migration processes of male and female refugees? An-

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1 Throughout the article we use the terms ‘asylum seeker’, ‘refugee’ and ‘(forced) migrant’ interchangeably, all three referring to persons who arrived at a specific country of destination, and filed an asylum application. Thus, we do not account for the outcome of their asylum procedure, nor their current legal status.

2 For an overview of the state of the art of research on family life in the context of forced migration see Sauer et al. 2018.