Moving relationships: Family ties of Nigerian migrants on their way to Europe

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This article deals with family dynamics in the context of Nigerian female migration to Spain. The main reason for migrating to Europe mentioned by Nigerian women is the desire to support their families back home. For those who travel to Europe overland it means being on the road for months or even several years. In this transitional stage, new and often highly provisional relationships develop, and many female migrants get pregnant. Although their (unborn) children are neither the result of relationships based on mutual consent nor planned, they nonetheless may play a crucial role to proceed with the journey. Their children represent a kind of protection due to tightened migration laws on both sides of the Strait of Gibraltar, thereby reducing the risk of being deported. Being mostly single mothers, soon after reaching Spain the young women take on the role of double breadwinners. On the one hand, they have to support their relatives in Nigeria. On the other hand, they have to provide for their children born in Morocco or Spain. By looking into their ties to children, husbands, and the family of origin, this article analyzes these new forms of family relationships that span from the country of origin to the transit country and the country of migration.

Keywords: transnational migration; family; children; Nigeria; Morocco; Spain

Introduction

You know, all of us, we live a different life from what we thought. Most of us left Nigeria as single girls. We wanted to travel, but on the road we got pregnant. We waited for years to enter this Europe and now we are all single mothers. Jessica, she need a father, my baby Success need a father. Evelyn and Faith, they should look for serious husband, maybe Spanish. For me, it is different, I still have contact with my husband. We call each other all the time. He still have not seen Success, because I gave birth the very day I entered. (Beauty, 9 August 2006, Spain).

Beauty is one of many Nigerian women who wants to realize the desire for a better life for herself and her family. The circumstances of her journey are similar to those of thousands of other female Nigerians travelling to Europe overland: while waiting in Morocco to cross over to Europe she got pregnant. On the very day of her arrival in Spain in summer 2004, she gave birth to her daughter Success. Her husband had to stay in Morocco and was deported to the Western Sahara in the aftermath of the violent attacks on sub-Saharan migrants who collectively tried to make their way over the barbwire of the Spanish exclaves of Ceuta und Melilla. Soon after the events

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in autumn 2005, he was deported to Nigeria. At the time of writing he was on the road again.

Beauty’s statement, where she draws a line from her journey to Europe to her life in Spain, in a way summarizes the content of this paper. In the first part, which is linked to the migrants’ journey to Europe, I draw attention to the significance of (unborn) children for Nigerian trans-migrants in Morocco and to the ties that emerge in the transitional space on the road. I will focus on the impact of the year-long waiting periods in Morocco on the migrants’ life in Spain as well as on the ties to family in Nigeria. The second part of the paper focuses on the extent to which the characteristics of social relations on the road and possible modifications, or even changes, can be understood within a broader context that goes beyond the individual biography of migration. Despite their regional diversity, recent approaches within the field of transnational migration studies share one striking point: the reshaping of family concepts as a result of migration implicitly seems to be taken for granted. I will, in the following, develop my argument and ask to what degree the migration process actually affects changes in the concepts of family life.

Up to now researchers have paid little attention to the family ties of sub-Saharan migrants with few exceptions (Adepoju 1997; Alber and Bochow 2006). Yet, the realities of Nigerian women living in Europe are only scantily addressed in the literature on female migration to southern Europe (Anthias and Lazaridis 1999, 2000; King et al. 2000; Freedman 2003; Checa y Olmos 2005). And while Nigerian migrants are included in publications on prostitution, trafficking, and international crime, the inspiring recent studies that discuss the autonomous migration of women and the consequences on phenomena like ‘transnational motherhood’ or ‘multilocal households’ do not take Nigerian migrants into account.

As emphasized by Richmond Tiemoko (2004), the definition of ‘family’, which is subject to changes as a result of globalized mobility, seems obvious. However, especially in the African context, the definition is much more complex than assumed at first sight. Adepoju (1997) claims that there is no such thing as a typical African family, but rather that family structures are in a ‘state of flux’. At the same time he underlines the importance of the family as a fundamental social unit, despite the various forms it may take. Erdmute Alber and Jeannett Martin (2007) take the same approach when they emphasize the significance of (changing) family ties for African societies – a phenomenon that, according to the authors, has until recently not been addressed adequately in the field of African studies. The authors point to the heterogeneous usage of the term ‘family’, which is often said in the same breath with other central concepts in social science, such as ‘household’, ‘lineage’, ‘clan’ or ‘kinship’, which are likewise often inconsistently employed. Further, Alber and Martin (2007) state that family or quasi-family forms of organisation have mostly been associated with the institution of marriage, which obscure a range of alternative forms of social ties.

Being aware of the complex of problems, but without arguing for a stable definition of the ‘family’, I will discuss three different types of family ties that play a decisive role in the (migration) biographies of young female Nigerians: ties to their own children, ties to the family of origin, and ties to husbands.
Relationships on the road

‘We wanted to travel’: motivations

The migration of women from Edo State in the South of Nigeria, where most of my interlocutors come from, is not a recent phenomenon. Eno Ikpe considers the present international and intercontinental migration of Nigerian women as an extension of the already existing forms of female autonomous migration in Nigeria (Ikpe 2005), which means that women migrate on their own and not as mere appendage of their husbands or other (male) family members. Decades of corrupt army dictatorships and the implementation of the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) in the 1980s contributed to the economic collapse of the oil-producing nation Nigeria and to a mass retrenchment of workers and freezing of positions, which lead to the impoverishment of vast parts of the population (Achebe 2004). This breakdown increased the motivation to look abroad for new possibilities to improve one’s own living conditions and those of the family.

Similar to clandestine migrants from other sub-Saharan countries, the number of Nigerians who embark on the road to Europe can only be estimated roughly. Oluwakemi Adesina claims that no survey has been carried out to ascertain the number of Bini abroad, who represent the most important and numerous group in Edo State. Still, it is commonly believed that in almost every family in Edo State’s capital Benin City one or two children, mostly females, live abroad (Adesina 2006).

I can confirm this assumption after my own stay in Benin City in autumn 2007, where mobility to other cities, states or neighbouring countries is omnipresent and where practically every family I encountered was supported by a child living in Europe or in the United States.

Because of clandestine circumstances of most of the migrants’ journeys, only vague figures are available. According to Jørgen Carling, since 2000, on average about 350 African boat migrants have been intercepted along Spanish shores every week, with a weekly death toll of four among these migrants (Carling 2007). Drawing on a variety of official and unofficial sources, Claire Escoffier refers to 65,000 sub-Saharan migrants entering the Maghreb every year in order to proceed with their journey to Europe. According to her, about 45 percent are Nigerians and about 30 percent of those are female (Escoffier 2006a). Many migrants travel without documentation and are therefore not registered by authorities, so there is no reliable data. Moreover, personal data provided by the migrants themselves has to be interpreted within the context of their clandestine life circumstances, as they generally adopt various identities to proceed with the journey. Nevertheless, the ratio of women to men among Nigerian migrants is striking in comparison to the ratio among migrants from other parts of Africa. Nearly all the women I met in the course of my research in the border zone of the Estrecho (the Strait of Gibraltar) originated from Nigeria, Africa’s most populous nation.

Field research for this study was conducted during 13 months, mainly in 2005 and 2006, in the border zone of the Strait of Gibraltar, which separates Morocco from Spain and Africa from Europe. Tarifa, the southernmost town of Spain, where the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic converge, was chosen as the starting point and basis for research. This town was, until 2003, the favourite destination of
Coming from Morocco. I regularly crossed over to Morocco, research was mainly carried out in Tangier, a seaport just some 20 kilometres away from Tarifa. Due to the proximity to the European continent, many Nigerian migrants remain for a time in Tangier, until they are able to cross from one of the beaches in northern Morocco over to Spain. On a clear day one feels as if one could practically touch the other side of the Estrecho, which took me less than an hour to reach from Tangier, while many migrants must wait up to several years. For them, the border has virtually become an ‘Iron Curtain’.

Most migrants intend to stay as invisible as possible, particularly in Morocco. By employing a ‘soft’ methodology, I tried to respect their difficult situation. ‘Are we allowed to bother people with research objectives, when they find themselves in a most difficult predicament?’ asked Henk Driessen (1996, p. 296), referring to his research with displaced persons. Today, more than ten years later, there is still no satisfactory reply. Having worked on smuggling in the same area where my research took place, Driessen (1996) claims that sometimes it is not possible to fully maintain anthropology’s ethical code that urges transparent research. To cope in Morocco and Spain, migrants are highly mobile and adopt a range of identities to proceed with their journeys. To a certain extent, the researcher herself embraced different roles, especially to make research in Morocco possible at all when faced with Moroccan authorities or Nigerian middlemen. The fact that both Nigerian migrants on either shore of the Estrecho and myself as the researcher were neither nationals of Spain nor of Morocco created a mutual understanding of an inhabited ‘third space’ and, in some situations, a sense of complicity.

The women I came across both in Morocco and Spain were roughly between 17 and 28 years old, and the majority claimed to originate from the region of Benin City. Not belonging to the poorest of the poor, who cannot afford the costs of travelling, their family background can be located, according to Western sociological terminology, in the lower middle class. All of them presented themselves as Christians, and many belonged to a Pentecostal church. Compared to their male travel companions, the women were not as well educated and many of the young women claimed to have dropped out of school after a few years of education due to high school fees and in order to care for younger siblings. The fact that mainly female Nigerians from Edo State leave the country gave rise to a range of (partially dubious) speculations, especially as Benin City has become the hub of the international sex trade (Le Meur 2005; Adesina 2006).

When talking about female migration from Edo State to Europe, it is important to distinguish at least two groups. The first group consists of women who are able to undertake their migration project autonomously. This means that they either do not depend on financial help from families or depend on interest-free loans. The second group, which is considerably larger, consists of migrants who have limited personal financial means and whose journey to Europe depends on the organization of networks spanning from Nigeria to different European countries. The sponsoring, in many cases, depends on the payment of considerable fees with high interest, and the migrant is obligated to pay back up to several tens of thousands of euros – a debt that may take years to pay off. The price for travelling to Europe is constantly increasing, as heightened surveillance makes it more and more difficult to cross European borders. The mode of sponsoring and the amount of money to be paid back influence the life circumstances and careers of the migrants in Spain.
Over the years, the organization of the journey to Europe has turned into a profitable business for various parties: for the members of the network that are mostly from the Bini group, for their collaborators on the road (nationals of Mali, Algeria and Morocco who rent houses to trans-migrants and organize their transport), as well as for the migrants’ families in Nigeria, and obviously, after having spent several years in Europe, also for the migrant herself. The sponsor, the *madam*, is normally a female Nigerian who has already been living in Europe for some years. Often, the migrant earns the money through sex work. After some years, when the migrant has paid back her debt, she is free. While some migrants continue to work in prostitution even after they have paid off their debts, some combine it with other types of work or leave the sex industry entirely. Once she possesses her own financial resources, the migrant might herself become a *madam* and sponsor the journeys of women from Nigeria to Europe. As a result, this gender-specific system of sponsoring constantly reproduces itself.

If some years ago trading activities and the love of adventure contributed to the decision of young Nigerian women to leave their country, it is these days mainly the economic plight of the family which is stated as the main motive for travelling to Europe. Still, adventure or the escape from strong family ties, though rarely stated explicitly, may continue to be underlying motivations to migrate. Susan, who at the time of her account had already been waiting for nearly five years in Morocco, talked about the obligation to support her family:

> If you are suffering, you see your mother, your father suffering, you have to make money! You have to go to Europe and survive your people. (Susan, 5 March 2006, Morocco)

Susan is one of many migrants who rely on a life in Europe in order to be able to support her parents and younger siblings, which, from the migrants’ point of view, would not be possible in Nigeria. Moreover, some of the migrants already have their own children who need be cared for, who are left behind with close relatives, in many cases with the mother or a sister.

*‘We waited for years to enter this Europe’: on the road to Europe*

Generally, Europe is imagined as a place of sweet life. But, especially when travelling overland, the European continent turns out to be a very distant place, and the daily realities on the road sharply contrast with the dream. Migrants who lack the financial means to travel to Europe by plane and cannot obtain visas spend up to several years on the road. In this period of moving forward and suffering setbacks, new relationships emerge.

Most Nigerians take the route through Mali and Algeria. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), an agreement on the free movement of goods and persons, facilitates the journey to towns like Gao in Mali or Agadez in Niger, both important junctions for sub-Saharan migrants. Those who take the path to northern Morocco have to cross the border to Algeria and the Sahara, until they try to enter Morocco near the Algerian border town of Oujda. The subsequent stay in Morocco mainly means waiting until the necessary *connection money* can be raised, and until the wind and weather conditions in the Strait of Gibraltar as well as gaps in coastguard surveillance allow the crossing to Spain.
Over the past years, the increased pressure of the European Union on the North African transit states and the steady shift of the southern border, though not visible on any map, have resulted in frequent deportations to the border zones near Algeria and from there back to Mali. The deportations that take migrants to their financial and physical limits are part of their daily reality and their narrations describe existential experiences and corporeal deprivations like thirst, hunger, and the powerlessness when faced with the death of travel companions while crossing the desert, mostly on foot. Therefore, while travelling to Europe, the trans-migrants do not simply overcome a particular distance, but a way paved by various obstacles and detours. In this liminal phase they constantly have to look for niches and hiding places (Malkki 1995, 1997). During times when police raids are more frequent, trans-migrants only leave their houses when it gets dark. The routes they choose differ from conventional ones, and they avoid certain places in order not to get caught by the Moroccan police. But at the same time, for female trans-migrants it is easier to preserve their mobility, especially for pregnant women and young mothers. I will elaborate on this further in the following section. Thus, as a consequence of the harsh circumstances, not only individual mobility but also the social relations between the migrants are subject to significant pressures.

‘... but on the road we got pregnant’. The role of (un)born children

Children play a crucial role for their mothers to proceed with the journey. Despite the difficulties of having a child as a clandestine migrant, (unborn) babies help mothers to earn a living and may safeguard them from unpleasant situations like rape or deportation. Therefore, and in spite of ambivalences, children are part of the migrants’ biography. The importance of children on the road as well as the significance of the border between Africa and Spain for the migrants are reflected in name-giving, which are often connected to the place of birth. Born on the Moroccan side of the Estrecho, babies are often given names like Hope or Destiny, pointing to the uncertain period of waiting, but also to the prospects of a better future. Children born shortly after their mother’s arrival in Spain are often named Success, Will or Progress – names which express an end to the suffering in Morocco and a positive view of the future.

The phenomenon that (unborn) children on both sides of the Strait of Gibraltar virtually function as ‘visas’ for their mothers and, in the case of Morocco, even as protectors of their mothers’ lives, is due to Moroccan and Spanish legislation. Though not always observed, Moroccan immigration law prohibits the deportation of pregnant women and minors (Law 02-03, Art. 26/7, Art. 26/8 and Art. 29/c).
Here, the conventional association of pregnancy with immobility is turned upside down as it is due to their very pregnancy that women can move about more freely. A baby in one’s belly or on one’s back not only secures the mother’s physical presence but also her survival: Babies help to make one’s living with salam aleikum, as Nigerian migrants call begging on the street, because Moroccans show themselves even more generous when giving alms to pregnant women or young mothers. Since it is nearly impossible for Nigerian trans-migrants to find work in Morocco, they have to look for alternatives to secure their livelihoods. Though children alleviate the problems of migrant’s life to some extent, many Nigerian women in Morocco still try to abort, even though abortions may have serious consequences due to overdoses and poor sanitary conditions:

You see: ‘Because, this boy that impregnate me, I don’t like him, I will take medicine to terminate this pregnancy.’ At the end of it, you see, the girl will lose her life like that. Many died on that occasion! (Ifoma, 9 June 2005, Spain)

Sometimes pregnancies are the result of forced relationships or of relationships which have not been chosen on the basis of mutual consent, as euphemistically described by Ifoma. Furthermore, the fact that it was advantageous until some years ago to come to Europe as a childless woman to work more independently influenced the decision-making process to abort even an already advanced pregnancy. In some cases an abortion does not take its expected course, and mothers recount negative abortion attempts while lovingly caring for their offspring. Here, the narratives and the actual situation do not seem to contradict each other.

One reason for frequent pregnancies is the very pragmatism that marks the recollections of the trans-migrants: women on the road often (have to) enter various relationships in order to alleviate the daily struggle for survival, as illustrated by Owens in the following. She described the make up of the group with whom she and her toddler son had to wait in a bush near Tangier before their departure for Spain:

[We are] men, women, pregnant women, that don’t even know the owner of the pregnancy, because all the ladies we are together, then no one know the owner of the pregnancy, because they told me, they slept with different people just to SURVIVE. (Owens, 24 June 2006, Spain)

The spectrum of the biological father may range from a rapist to the migrant’s patron or a travel companion, who provides her with food and housing. Susan, another trans-migrant, painted a less victimizing picture when talking about the sexual relationships of her female compatriots in Morocco:

You know why they have plenty boyfriend? It is because, maybe they want to clothe themselves, buy cloth, charge [credit for the mobile phone], pay house rent – that is the reason why they have many boyfriend. (Susan, 5 March 2006, Morocco)

Certainly, the most pressing problem for a migrant in Morocco without legal documents concerns survival. But nevertheless, Nigerian migrants attach great importance to being well dressed and to having credit for their mobile phones whenever possible.

According to Susan’s interpretation, her compatriots are not passive victims at all. According to her, it is not mere survival, but rather, the amenities that many migrants do not want to be without on the road that motivate women to make
certain choices. In Morocco, as well as later in Europe, they do not correspond to the image of the ‘poor migrant’. For many of them, the act of styling, the expensive hair-extensions or whips, sexy clothing, accessories such as showy jewellery and extravagant sunglasses, handbags, and make-up are extremely important. It is worth noting that women are not always mere victims; many migrants are accustomed to living in accordance with the principle of exchanging services or, in other words, sex for money. The step to brand other Nigerians as *ashawo*15 (‘prostitute’) is not far, and the self-presentation as victim of the circumstances is distinct from the characterisation of the ‘other’ as useless girl.

‘*I gave birth the very day I entered.*’ Crossing over to Europe: arrival

Many female Nigerians who try to reach the shores of Andalusia arrive pregnant or with a baby. The migrants’ desire to give birth on the longed-for Spanish side sometimes comes true contrary to all expectations: the difficult crossing of the *Estrecho* with its unpredictable currents and weather conditions entails significant physical and psychological stress for the passengers, most of them non-swimmers. Time and again labour is induced. Sometimes, as in the case of Rita, a Caesarean section is undertaken immediately after arrival because of the poor physical condition of the pregnant woman:

> When I came out from there [from the sea], I could not even walk. So the police there, some rescue team say ‘This girl is pregnant.’ So they took me on bed, and took me to hospital. So before I know what was happening, they open my stomach and brought out my baby. For three days I did not even know where I am, I don’t eat, I don’t know anything. I not even know whether I have a baby or not. But after three days, God say ‘This girl, you are not going to die. You will still remain ALIVE.’ After three days I woke up and they brought my baby for me. (Rita, 8 May 2006, Spain)

Once the Spanish coastguard detects a *zodiac*, the Red Cross is called, to provide first aid. They focus on pregnant women and mothers who, if necessary, are transferred to the nearest hospital. If the condition of the pregnant woman is considered critical, the doctors opt for an immediate caesarean. Rita’s description of her arrival in Spain resembles the story of a rebirth: the drastic experience of the crossing and the feeling of triumph to have fulfilled her dream after years of waiting are intimately related to the birth of her baby. Rita named her newborn Gift. Her baby represented a gift in two ways. According to Spanish Immigration Law, women may not be deported if the deportation puts the pregnancy at risk or endangers the mother’s health (*Ley de Extranjería*, Art. 57/6).16 This represents a decisive advantage over male migrants or single girls (women without husband and children), who nowadays regularly face deportation to their country of origin. Although the (future) mothers are not given papers, their remaining in the country is tolerated because of exceptional circumstances.

‘*Now we are all single mothers.*’ Life in Europe

Once in Europe most Nigerian mothers became the sole breadwinner for the child born on the road. This situation is the result of various factors. One reason lies in short-lived relationships between husbands and wives on the road. Here, it should be
noted that on the road, *husband and wife* are rarely married according to native or Christian marriage. Nevertheless, and as soon as a woman is pregnant, she refers to the father of the child as her husband. The terms *wife* and *husband* can, therefore, also be applied before having celebrated a marriage ceremony or paid dowry (Guyer 1994).

The political context makes it difficult for the couple to maintain the relationship: because of tightened immigration laws, it is more and more difficult to move between Morocco and Spain. This sometimes results in years of physical separation between *wife* and *husband*, which may prove too much for the relationship to bear. Hence, unplanned pregnancies not only result in the mother becoming the sole earner, but also to taking on the burden of being a double breadwinner. She must support two households: on the one hand, she has to take care of her child in Europe, and on the other hand she has to provide for her parents, younger siblings, and sometimes her own children back home in Nigeria. The concrete materialization of economic security becomes manifest in remittances as well as, eventually in the long run, in the construction of one’s own house in Nigeria. First, women work to improve housing conditions for their mothers and children, and later they build a house where the women can spend their retirement in Nigeria.

If I get old, I can go to my country and stay. Because why I am going? My children will stay in Europe. They will be bringing money for me, you understand? It is like that, because if I am old, I cannot work again. I will go and relax while my younger ones, my babies that I have, my grandchildren now work and send money for me. (Grace, 23 August 2005, Spain)

For the future, Grace relies on the support of her children and grandchildren – a duty that she now fulfils towards her mother according to an unwritten agreement between generations, which was the main motive for most migrants to travel to Europe.

‘They should look for a serious husband.’ Relationships with men. Expectations

While the ties to their relatives and children are maintained in spite of the physical distance, the relationships between partners are in most cases short-lived. Grace, who provided her *husband* in Morocco with stylish clothes, expensive mobile phones, Nigerian food, and money, informed me about her decision one year after her arrival on the Andalusian shore:

I am not anymore with Bright. I am tired. I have too many responsibilities, so I have to cut one off. I have my family, my baby, I have to pay back money. He is not my husband, we are not married, because he did not pay my dowry. I have a marriage certificate, but we are not married. (Grace, 14 June 2006, Spain)

The multiple financial burdens of supporting the family in Nigeria, providing for her daughter who was born in Spain, and paying back a considerable amount of money to her *madam*, made Grace decide to reduce her responsibilities. Before having taken this decision she talked about Bright as her *husband*. Now she justifies her decision by insisting that Bright is not her legitimate *husband* in accordance with Nigerian tradition that would demand he pay a dowry. While it had been extremely important for Grace to have her *husband’s* name entered in their daughter’s birth certificate and
even arranged the issuance of a marriage certificate in Nigeria to avoid Bright’s possible deportation upon his arrival in Spain, her attitude changed in the course of the months, mainly because of his demands for luxury items and the increasing rumours about his unfaithfulness:

I can’t be with a man like this. No more black men, later I want to marry white man, a man that takes care of me and my baby. (Grace, 14 June 2006, Spain)

One year later, when I met Grace in autumn of 2007, she told me about her initial doubts when she was faced with the decision to pursue her relationship with a generous Spanish man or a German, whom she loved, but who did not seem to correspond to her image of a caring man:

Every time I ask him for money, even if it is just €100, he does not look comfortable. You know, I need somebody who is assisting me and my daughter. He is very handsome, but he does not want to release money. (Grace, 8 October 2007, Spain)

For all of my interlocutors the figure of the generous breadwinner embodies the ideal of a serious husband. Rita arrived in Spain in the same zodiac as Grace. Her husband, after having been deported from Morocco to Nigeria, is on the road again. Meanwhile, Rita has entered a relationship with a Spanish man:

I go out with this Spanish man. He is very handsome. He buy me EVERYTHING, handset, bed for Gift [the name of her young son]. The only problem is, he is very fat. I call him when I want to go to Los Barrios, say ‘You drop me in Los Barrios!’ and he will come. Everyday we go to McDonald, he invite me, later give me money. He is very nice. (Rita, 8 May 2006, Spain)

This man seems to embody all the qualities of a responsible partner: he makes gifts (of money), provides for a considerable part of her and her baby’s livelihood and drives her around whenever and wherever she likes. Most times, these amenities and signs of respect let her overlook his obesity – after all, her concern is about securing a better future for her baby and for herself. Princess, who has a Nigerian boyfriend in Madrid, does not exclusively rely on her own money that she earns from prostitution:

I don’t rely on that money. I have white man, too. . . . Sometimes, he help me. If I tell him, I need MONEY, he buy me something, maybe take me to shopping. He can buy me anything he wants. (Princess, 8 September 2006, Spain)

To marry a white man would be the easiest way for Princess to obtain an official residence permit in Spain. Moreover, she regards a legalized relationship to a Spanish man as an increase in status. Nonetheless, Princess is still uncertain as to whether to accept the marriage proposal, as she does not love her Spanish man. When I asked her whether money played an important role in a relationship to a man she loves, Princess responded without hesitating:

FIRST of all! If I want to marry white man, because he need to . . . take me out of this job. Hombre! . . . I have to pay back, send money to my family – it is not easy! Life is not easy! (Princess, 8 September 2006, Spain)

Love is intimately connected to money and gifts. Romantic love is at best lived in the very popular and eagerly expected telenovelas in Spanish television, but for one’s own life clear priorities are established, and opportunities are taken whenever possible:
material support of oneself and of one’s baby, documents, respect, change of work or, as in the case of Princess, the projected move of her daughter from Nigeria to Spain. These plans can be realized faster and more easily with the support of a serious husband.

‘We live a different life from what we thought.’ Multiple responsibilities

Relationships that break off as quickly as they are established reflect the provisional character of the migrants’ daily life on their way to Europe. During this period, the migrants’ perspective is directed towards the North, towards the future. On the contrary, the past, the South, is not fully present and, while waiting in Morocco, the contact between the migrant and her Nigerian family decreases. Apart from difficult financial circumstances that make money for phone calls scarce, it is mainly the shame that one’s plans have not yet been realized that renders the contact with family impossible and unthinkable. Once they succeed in crossing one of the borders to Europe and once they have a relatively regular income, contact with family in Nigeria is re-established, because the regularly awaited transfer of remittances via Western Union from Europe to Nigeria can be secured.

The negative experiences that dominate the conversations about the long waiting period spent in Morocco continue on the other side of the Strait of Gibraltar in the form of gossip, mistrust, dependent relationships, suspected fraud, and witchcraft. Hence, some women try to distance themselves from other Nigerians and therefore, also from countrymen as potential husbands as soon as they have reached the European continent. They turn their attention to the care of their child in Spain and to the family in Nigeria. However, contested ideas about motherhood and child-rearing are evident. In Europe, the socio-political context is marked by the ideals of the nuclear family and the mother–child dyad, while Nigerians, even when living in Spain, orient themselves towards the extended family. This conception of family does not presuppose strong ties between mother and child, and the role of the social mother does not necessarily correspond with the biological mother. While working, some Nigerian mothers leave their children with other migrants or a Spanish family. Such practices may bring the mothers in conflict with Spanish authorities.

Although supporting the family back home is taken as a matter of course by most migrants, this duty is an ambivalent one. The same holds for husbands or travel companions who have entered Morocco and with whom contact is still maintained. The migrants are in a moral quandary; they have to distinguish between real and fictitious plights, which may be difficult when the family back in Nigeria alleges that several houses have burnt down or that family members purportedly are suffering from prolonged, unspecified diseases. Often, family members in Nigeria idealize Europe and imagine that it is very easy to earn lots of money quite quickly. Migrants in Europe complain about this attitude, but they do not try to correct such notions and remittances continue to be transferred to Nigeria. For most migrants a return to Nigeria lies far ahead, because, as I am often told, Nigeria is a good place to enjoy money, but if you are deprived of money, you are not considered a social being and ‘nobody will look at your face’, as one migrant put it, describing her situation before having left Nigeria (Marian, 20 May 2005, Spain). Ikpe also emphasizes the persistent pressure on Nigerian migrants to succeed. Yet, at the same time, she highlights the other side of the coin: the increase of the migrant’s status in her family.
and community due to her role as the main breadwinner, her financial means to purchase land and property, and the modifications in gender relations which accompany the change in the migrants’ socio-economic status (Ikpe 2005).

The complex issue of interpersonal relationships between migrants and non-migrants is also discussed by Carling (2008) who analyzes migrant transnationalism through the notion of ‘asymmetries’ in three spheres – moralities, information, and imagination, resource inequalities – and argues that ‘communicating means negotiating contested representations, creating as well as filling information gaps’ (Carling 2008, pp. 1462–1463). For the Nigerian women I came across, this process meant maintaining information gaps by affirming the non-migrants’ imagination of Europe as an Eldorado.

**Relationships in Nigeria with men and the family**

As already mentioned, there is a tendency in transnational migration studies to assume that concepts of ‘family’ are redefined as a result of the migration process itself. The life of Nigerian migrants on the road as well as in Spain is indeed characterized by phenomena like short-lived relationships, the role of the sole breadwinner, the central significance of money, mistrust, and pragmatic relationships. However, the question arises as to what extent the phase of travelling to Europe and the life as a migrant in Europe influence or even cause these phenomena. To consider this question I will now turn to the negotiation of relationships between women and men and to family ties in Nigeria.

‘*You can’t eat love.* In search of economic security

The predicament of the Nigerian economy makes it very difficult for many parents to support their children. Early on, children have to contribute to their own livelihood, particularly with regard to the high school fees that are, if possible, mostly covered by remittances from relatives in Europe. For young women in Nigeria the figure of the big man provides a way out of the financial dilemma, because:

Maybe their family does not have money for their school fees. They friend big men, big men help them. Big man that have a wife and children. But when he sees a little girl outside, that has no help, he can. It is like that. (Rita, 8 May 2006, Spain)

The relationship to a so-called big man or sugar daddy, a prosperous married man, usually covers more than the school fees and meets a range of requirements in the life of a young woman, who easily prioritizes when faced with the choice between love and economic security. As already mentioned, Rita has meanwhile entered a relationship with a Spanish big man. Her laconic comment illustrates her situation and the situation of other women in Nigeria:

You can’t eat love. Money comes first. In Nigeria, girls don’t go out with boys, because of no money. They go out with big men, because they don’t want to die young. (Rita, 8 May 2006, Spain)

Therefore, apart from relationships to their personal boyfriends, young women in Nigeria often maintain relationships to big men for whom the number of outside women is an indicator for their wealth and virility. Already in 1983, Carmel Dinan
pointed to the significance of valuable gifts in exchange for sexual services as part of traditional courtship. This reciprocity nowadays results in *informal polygyny* or *polycoity*, where sexual services are exchanged for the payment of rent, feeding and clothing (Dinan 1983). This exchange of services, to which money is intimately connected, is quasi-institutionalized in Nigeria.\(^{19}\) In an ideal case, the man also embodies a gain in status for the woman. Hence, the financial neglect of a wife by her husband represents significant grounds for divorce. One year before she decided to separate from her *husband* Bright in Morocco, Grace referred to this practice as follows:

> For example, you are getting married to a man and the man is not reliable, is not sincere, is not good. ... He does not take care of you. For you not to have a break, for you not to die young, you have to divorce. ... You have to move forward, because you cannot continue living that kind of life. At the end of the day you die young. (Grace, 23 August 2005, Spain)

As a possible alternative to a divorce that is described by Grace and that implies a speedy remarriage, more and more married women establish relationships with wealthy men, particularly in order to provide a better future for their children.

‘You have to fight for your children.’ Lineal and lateral ties

Just as relationships between couples in Nigeria are shaped by pragmatism and resemble the relationships established on the road, the same is true for the role of the woman as the sole breadwinner. Women in Nigeria have traditionally played an important economic role as producers and traders. Although subjected to the authority of husbands, fathers or brothers, they have enjoyed considerable economic independence and have been significantly involved in the subsistence of the family (Ikpe 2005, p. 8). This relative economic independence constitutes a necessity, because ‘[t]he desire for economic independence is high among Nigerian women given to the uncertainties of marriage’ (p. 8). Evelyn also emphasized the imperative of financial autonomy, especially for married women, because:

> [W]hen your husband marry more than one [wife], you have to fight for your children, because everybody have to fight for his own children. So because of that, women have to fight on their OWN . . . . They are fighting for their children, so they have to go to the market, sell things, get their own house, because if you get your house, your house is for you, for your child. Your husband's family or your husband's wife cannot come and drag you out. (Evelyn, 9 May 2005, Spain)

Even though nowadays polygyny is giving way to the ideal of a monogamous *Christian marriage*, this change is not improving the situation of (married) women and mothers in Nigeria, who are often faced with the challenge of providing for their children on their own. All my interlocutors assured me that they would not agree to a polygynous marriage like most of their mothers did. Still, they have to tolerate the affairs and extra-marital relationships of their *husbands*, out of which additional children are often born, because ‘[o]ur men are like this. You can’t change it’ (Evelyn, 25 August 2006, Spain). Evelyn’s claim combines resignation and the conviction that unfaithfulness is ‘in the nature of men’. Cornwall also finds this resignation of
women about the ‘very insatiability of male sexual desire’ in the frequent sentence “That’s what men are like” (Cornwall 2002, p. 966).

The phenomenon of polygyny continues under the guise of ‘outside wifeship’ or ‘private polygyny’, as denoted in the literature (Bledsoe and Pison 1994). Similar to marital relationships, these relatively stable relations have a long history in Nigeria and are the result of a negotiated process to come to terms with contradictions between Western ideals of marriage and family on the one hand and ‘traditional African practices’ on the other (Karanja 1994). Additionally, in recent years the rapidly expanding Pentecostal Churches in southern Nigeria and elsewhere, which are also growing significantly in Europe (e.g. van Dijk 2002; Marshall-Fratani 1998) have contributed to the image of a ‘good lifestyle’ based on monogamy.

Ideals, however, differ from actual daily practice – in Nigeria as well as on the road and in Europe. Jane Guyer (1994) approaches the various forms of marriage from a historical perspective in order to contextualize the increasing informality of marriages. For the Yoruba, she describes a steady gain in importance of lateral networks compared to lineal ties due to mainly economic, but also political and religious uncertainties: Nowadays, many husbands in Nigeria are no longer able to care for their wives’ well-being and their children’s education. In consequence, mothers seek additional financial support in lateral networks, which are networks beyond lineal – thus intergenerational and marriage-bond – ties. This shift from lineal to lateral ties also implies a modification of the temporary frame of relations: while lineal relationships are mostly long-lived or even life-long, lateral ties exist within a shorter time frame (Guyer 1994). Sexual relationships function as socioeconomic ties with the potential for social and political mobility, as shown by Guyer (1994) with respect to changes in Yoruba marriages and by Andrea Cornwall (2001, 2002) in her research on gender relations in the Lagos region. In her study, Cornwall traces the complex relations between love and money and analyzes the role and the power of money (both productive and transformative) in a wider context that transcends the superficial perception of a mere commodification of relationships. In sum, gift-giving, which includes money, is a central element of courtship, where love is intimately connected to (material) care.

**Conclusion**

The experiences of the women related here show that the context of migration does not seem to cause any significant changes in the conceptions of ‘family’ and relationships in general when compared to the negotiation of (changing) social ties in Nigeria. Contemporary migration studies frequently perceive migration itself as the catalyst for radical changes and propagate a new understanding of ‘family’ in the migratory context. These studies implicitly seem to build upon a notion of a stable social structure in the country of origin, while change mainly takes place abroad. However, the findings of this article indicate that the economic and social changes in the Nigerian context suggest that ‘phenomena on the road’, such as short-lived relationships, relationships for economic advantages or the role of the mother as the family’s only breadwinner, are not entirely products of the migration experience and are not uncommon in Nigeria itself, where social and spatial mobility are an everyday experience. Nonetheless, during the long way to Europe, which in theoretical terms has been considered akin to a liminal phase, but which in reality
rather resembles a constant state, certain tendencies take on more pronounced forms. Subsequently, once the migrants have entered Spain, particular modes of relatedness that are practised in Nigeria may be adopted and appropriated within the new context, such as when the figure of the Nigerian sugar daddy/big man is replaced by a Spanish man.

My findings regarding the mother’s role point in the same direction. Contrary to recent studies on transnational migration of women as the family’s main breadwinner who leave their children behind with close relatives and who are often socially stigmatized for their decision (George 2005; Parreñas 2005) Nigerian transnational mothers are not blamed for having taken this decision. This attitude may to some extent be explained by the long tradition of child-fostering in Nigeria, where this practice is quasi-institutionalized, as well as by the long-standing practices of female autonomous mobility as producers and traders. Therefore, a good and caring mother does not need to be physically present as long as she regularly provides for her child’s education and welfare by sending remittances and making phone calls – a trend confirmed by Heike Drotbohm for Cape Verdean mother–child relationships (Drotbohm 2010, this volume).

Although pursuing their migration projects, Nigerians, rather than acting according to very specific pre-planned strategies, take opportunities as they present themselves to realize their aspirations, though the women’s sphere of action is often limited. As a result, they constantly move between the two poles of oppressive structure and individual agency. On the one hand, they are often helpless in the face of gendered violence and of tight borders and, as consequence, of the year-long waiting periods. On the other hand, they know how to move and most times manage ultimately to realize their migration projects. Neither merely passive victims nor exclusively creative actors, they are both at the same time.

Notes

1. This article is based on findings from an ongoing PhD project in anthropology at the University of Bayreuth funded by the German Cusanuswerk Foundation. I would like to thank Katja Rieck and Philipp Kastner for their comments in revising the paper. A previous, German-language version of this article was published in 2007 in Afrika spectrum, 42 (2), 251–273.
2. All names in this article are pseudonyms to protect the real identity of the person. The fusion of Nigerian Pidgin and Standard English in the citations has not been changed.
3. I use italics here in order to underline the specific meaning of ‘husband’, which does not necessarily correspond to the general ‘Western’ understanding of the term.
4. I use the term ‘trans-migrant’ according to the definition set out by Claire Escoffier: it refers to ‘des personnes – hommes, femmes ou enfants – qui ont quitté leur pays (de manière volontaire ou contrainte) pour émigrer dans un pays qui ne leur accorde pas l’autorisation d’y entrer de manière légale’ (Escoffier 2006b, p. 139). As this term also contains the liminal aura of the involuntary stay in Morocco, I employ it when I want to stress this condition. In contrast to migrants from Francophone countries, Nigerian migrants do not give up their migration project or become de facto immigrants in Morocco. Therefore, for the Nigerian case, I consider the term ‘trans-migrant’ useful. Once they have reached Spain, I refer to them as ‘migrants’ as, at least at first sight, their transitional state in Morocco is over. Nigerians in Morocco refer to themselves as ‘blacks’, while in Spain they use the Spanish denomination inmigrantes (migrants).
6. One exception is the article by Garrido et al. (2005) about Nigerian migrants in the region of Almeria in southern Spain.


8. I would like to thank Eno Ikpe for providing me with her paper, which was prepared for the conference *Mobilités au féminin*, held in Tangier, Morocco, 15–19 November 2005.

9. The terms *patera* (Spanish) and *zodiac* (English) refer to a boat equipped with an outboard motor, which migrants use to cross from Morocco to Spain. Formerly they were small wooden fishing boats (*pateras*); today much faster inflatable rubber boats (*zodiaks*) are used. Nigerian migrants use the terms synonymously.

10. This term refers to the amount of money that has to be paid for crossing the Strait of Gibraltar by *zodiac*.

11. For Sub-Saharan migration to and via Morocco, see, among others, Barros et al. (2002), the journal *Maghreb Machrek* 18 (2005), which comprises five articles on Trans-Saharan migration and Escofer (2006b). For the Euro-Maghrebian space and the political relationships between the North African countries and the European Union, which sharply mark migratory living conditions, see the contributions in *L’Anne de le Maghreb* 2004 (2006).


13. The *patron* is one link in the system of sponsoring and mostly resides in Morocco. He organizes the journey to Europe and normally serves as the mediator between the female migrant and her *madam* in Europe, who sponsors the journey.

14. This observation does not apply exclusively to Nigerians, as it is very common among many West Africans to attach great importance to one’s physical appearance. Still, in Morocco, it is Nigerian trans-migrants that most ostentatiously show their preference for luxury items. On ostentatious lifestyles in northern Nigeria, see Platte (2008).

15. *Asahwo, ashewo or asewo* is a Y oruba word that has entered other languages, for example, Pidgin English, the *lingua franca* in Southern Nigeria, and *Edo*, spoken in Edo State. The term *ashawo* is not used exclusively to denote professional prostitutes, but is applied to those women who take lovers. See Cornwall (2002).


17. For a similar situation of Angolan children in Portugal, see Øien (2006), for the impact of global migration on Filipino children who are left behind by their migrating mothers, see Parreñas (2005); for a critique of the Eurocentric and also class-centric definition of motherhood, see the volume of Nakano Glenn et al. (1994) and the article by Erel (2002).

18. Dinan illustrates the connection between extra-marital relationships and status within their own peer-group for men in Accra. In times of a gradual shift in the economic power relations between women and men, the female counterpart of the *sugar mummy* has emerged, although not with the same frequency. See Dinan (1983) and Smith (2001).

19. See Barber (1995, especially pp. 215/216) for the transfer of money as a sign of respect for the Yoruba, where money represents the basis of reputation and power and therefore is constitutive for the social being.

References


AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF MIGRANT ‘ILLEGALITY’ IN SWEDEN: INCLUDED YET EXCEPTED?

SHAHRAM KHOSRAVI

Abstract: This article examines how migrant ‘illegality’ is experienced in the Swedish context. How do ‘illegal’ migrants manage work, housing, healthcare, safety and a family life in the absence of access to formal provisions? What are their survival strategies? I use direct quotations from undocumented migrants themselves to build a multifaceted picture of migrant ‘illegality’. Following Willen’s (2007) call for a ‘critical phenomenology of illegality’, I move beyond the socio-political situation of undocumented migrants to their embodied experiences of being ‘illegal’. I conclude that undocumented migrants are not excluded but are excepted; they have not been thrown out, but neither are they considered participants. Undocumented migrants are included in society without being recognised as members.

Keywords: Ethnography, Sweden, undocumented migrants, vulnerability

Introduction

In a time of the increasing regulation of human movement across borders, those possessing fewer rights of mobility are forced to use irregular ways to move (Jordan and Düvell 2002). Irregular migration is thus a consequence of tighter restrictions on legal movement. People have moved irregularly across borders since the emergence of the modern border system (see Düvell 2006). Unauthorised border crossing, however, has expanded enormously in prevalence and spatial extension in recent decades, and has become a central issue in public debate in Europe. Sweden has historically not been a major destination country for irregular migration, because of its location and its strictly regulated labour market. Yet today Sweden is marked by the constant presence of undocumented migrants (see Hammar 1999). Like regular migration, irregular migration is
Shahram Khosravi

structured and organised depending on the particular socio-political context. For example, while undocumented migration in Southern European countries mainly involves migrant workers, in Sweden most undocumented migrants are failed asylum seekers who have stayed (SOU 2004:110; KUT 2002; Malmberg 2004).

The condition of ‘illegality’ is produced not only by institutions like the police and the immigration authorities, but also by officials in education, health and housing and by private employers or landlords, who all verify migration documents. The exclusion of undocumented migrants from the Swedish welfare and administrative systems, forces people to circumvent ‘legal’ procedures to satisfy practical needs, such as work, housing, healthcare, safety and social or family life. Despite the protection of these rights under international law (see PICUM 2007; Weissbrodt 2008) this article shows that undocumented migrants are unable to access their rights in Sweden and are at increased risk of exploitation, illness, abuse, disrupted family life and ultimately premature death.

Methodology and Terminology in Researching Undocumented Migrants

Representation and terminology are part of a methodology yet also constitute an epistemological problem with ethical and political implications (Said 1989; De Genova 2002: 423). The term used to refer to undocumented migrants exposes a political stance on the issue. All actions and words concerning the legal status of the individual have political consequences (Coutin 1993: 89). Unlike Willen (2007), I reject the term ‘illegal’ for several reasons. First, its use risks supporting the discursive power of the authorities and immigration law. Second, it contributes to the reproduction of the criminalisation of migration (De Genova 2005: 2). Third, since undocumented migration to Sweden is closely linked to the asylum system, using the term would have implications for asylum seekers’ credibility (cf. Düvell 2006). Fourth, (and most importantly) my informants found the term objectionable and humiliating. Instead I use the term ‘undocumented migrants’ to refer to those who entered and/or live in the country without authorisation. I therefore place the terms ‘illegal’ and ‘illegality’ within quotation marks. This describes the impact of labelling people as ‘illegal’ rather than their actual situation as undocumented.

This study is based on consecutive ethnographic fieldwork among undocumented migrants in Stockholm between May 2004 and December 2006. From my own experience of being an undocumented migrant in several countries in the late 1980s (see Khosravi 2007), I knew that isolated or occasional interviews would be inadequate. Migrant accounts change over time due to issues of trust and security. The life of undocumented migrants is unsettled, unpredictable, and erratic due to the condition of ‘deportability’ (De Genova 2002) frequent moves, different jobs, detention and deportation (Khosravi 2009). Therefore, to gain insight into the capriciousness of migrant ‘illegality’, it was important to follow the informants over a longer period. In addition to interviews,
An Ethnography of Migrant 'Illegality' in Sweden

Participant observation of everyday activities gave me a better understanding. Allowing migrants to contextualise their accounts of the experience of everyday 'illegality' (cf. Jordan and Düvell 2002) helps us to explore abstract concepts of policy and law, and to translate them into cultural terms grounded in everyday life (see Marcus and Fischer 1986: 82). Ethnography focusing on the individual can also draw attention to the implementation of policy and law, which produces different insights from focusing narrowly on legislation and formal documents (cf. van der Leun 2003).

The Setting of the Research

My first field contact was made via a clandestine healthcare clinic for undocumented migrants organised by Médecins du Monde which opened one night a week and also offered legal services. The clinic was a social space for meeting other migrants and co-ethnics and for many it was the only place to come into contact with Swedes. It also offered a brief respite from the harshness of everyday 'illegality', a moment of homeliness.

I had no other choice than to use personal networks through the 'snowball method', i.e. being directed towards undocumented migrants by informants. Despite the initial intention not to limit the survey to any one ethnic group, due to language barriers the group came to be dominated by Iranians (see Appendix 1). For example, many Latin American migrants spoke neither Swedish nor English and I do not speak Spanish or Portuguese. I did not want to work with interpreters. Moreover, unlike failed asylum seekers who believed that going public might help their asylum-seeking process, other undocumented migrants (mainly from Central and South America) had no interest in coming into contact with researchers (for more on this group see Mattsson 2008).

Throughout the fieldwork, I worked with some 50 people. Although I met most of them regularly, I followed 33 longer and more intensively. In addition, I interviewed 10 undocumented Iranian families. I also obtained valuable information from the siblings, friends, and employers of the informants as well as from volunteers, Migration Board staff, police, and lawyers. The participants were not selected as representative, but as a specific group, whose experiences contribute to insight into the condition of 'illegality' as 'a mode of being-in-the-world' (Willen 2007).

My first informant, an Iranian-Armenian man who frequently visited the clinic, introduced me to a network of undocumented Iranian migrants and asylum seekers which was organised by the International Federation of Iranian Refugees (IFIR), an organisation affiliated with the Worker-Communist Party of Iran. I participated in their weekly meetings where the migration and asylum processes were discussed for several hours. Outside the clandestine clinic and weekly IFIR meetings, I usually met my informants in a modern shopping mall outside Stockholm, crammed with luxury boutiques and a huge
Table 1. Different categories of migration ‘illegality’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Entry</th>
<th>Stay</th>
<th>Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>‘Illegal’</td>
<td>‘Illegal’ Personally financed and organised (e.g. through a smuggler)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>‘Illegal’</td>
<td>‘Illegal’ Debt-based relationship for the purpose of exploitation with a smuggler or employer (trafficking)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>‘Legal’</td>
<td>‘Illegal’ a) Overstayers b) Rejected asylum seekers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>‘Illegal’</td>
<td>‘Legal’ Collective/individual legalisation; refugee status</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Complexities of Migrant ‘Illegality’

Undocumented migrants comprise a heterogeneous category due to differences in the migrant’s mode of entry and the nature of their stay in the destination country (see Table 1 below). ‘Illegal’ migrants generally fall into three categories: 1) overstayers who remain after their visa expires; 2) failed asylum seekers who remain after a deportation order; and 3) people whose entry and presence in the country are unknown to the authorities. Members of the last category enter the country clandestinely and do not contact the authorities to seek asylum or for any other purpose.

In category A, the migration is usually organised by a smuggler in return for payment, or facilitated by a friend or relative. Category B can be classed as human trafficking for the sex industry or other industries, including domestic...
work. ‘Illegality’ is not a static state and the boundary between ‘legality’ and ‘illegality’ is not always clear-cut. Migrants may go from a ‘legal’ position to an ‘illegal’ one (category C) or vice versa (category D). One can enter ‘illegally’ and seek asylum, which makes one legal until the application is rejected and one goes into hiding and becomes ‘illegal’ again. Of the 33 informants in my group, 24 entered Sweden ‘illegally’ and nine were overstayers. Of my informants, only four people had not previously sought asylum.

For obvious reasons, there are no reliable statistics on the number of undocumented migrants in Sweden. The figures provided by the police, authorities, and researchers are guesses or, at best, estimates. There is great demand among journalists, researchers, and, not least, politicians to know ‘how many there are’. Sovereign authority needs and demands ‘knowledge’ in the form of numbers and statistics in order to have an idea of the extent of the ‘problem’ (Appadurai 2006). Counting here is a way to exercise power, to ‘construct’ and render visible ‘illegal’ migrants as a category (Inda 2006: 63–6).

Existence under the condition of ‘illegality’ is constrained by two main factors. First, the fear of being apprehended and deported pushes undocumented migrants into a clandestine life, trying to be invisible to authorities. This spatially embodied fear leads to a constant feeling of being under surveillance, which functions as a disciplining mechanism. The construction of ‘illegality’ demands unconditional submission and my informants took great care not to do anything ‘wrong’. Undocumented migrants cannot afford to make mistakes (see Rouse 1991; De Genova 2002: 429). For example, my informants never used the underground without a ticket or leaned on cars for fear of the alarm going off. They did not object to their low wages. Ironically, the undocumented migrant exemplifies the impeccable citizen. The condition of ‘illegality’ results in such docility that, in the words of a young Bangladeshi man, one ‘does not even dare to jaywalk’. Spatially embodied fear structures were also evident in the movements of undocumented migrants in public places. In an agoraphobic style, they stayed away from crowds and public places; all my informants avoided the city centre and places of entertainment, such as amusement parks, museums, discos, bars and large shopping centres. At night they stayed indoors, unless they had to go out for work, in order to minimise the risk of apprehension. Second, excluded from the regular labour market and all social welfare institutions and the social insurance system, undocumented migrants are forced into the informal sectors of the economy and become increasingly caught up in protracted destitution and isolation.

Work

Although Stockholm is not a global city as Sassen (1998) would define it, the middle classes increasingly consume comparatively cheap services, from housecleaning and child minding, cheap car washes and dry cleaning, to free
Table 2. Types of work mentioned by 27 informants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Work</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Restaurant/café/kiosk</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleaning</td>
<td>7 (one of which was unpaid)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advertisement distribution</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-employment</td>
<td>4 (catering, hairdressing, vendor)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hairdressing salon</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

home delivery of pizza (see Mattsson 2008; Calleman 2007). The service sector is usually driven by legal migrants working in marginalised and newly established businesses. The informal and formal sectors are mutually dependent. A labour force of undocumented migrants is vital for the shadow economy, which in turn provides crucial support for the expansion of the formal sector.

My informants usually found work in their ethnic communities through personal networks. For my Iranian informants, it was relatively easy to find work thanks to a well-established ethnic economy (see Khosravi 1999) and broad local media networks (see Graham and Khosravi 2002), such as local radio stations, an annual *Iranian Yellow Pages*, and popular local websites.

Almost all of my informants worked. Only two were out of work on an ongoing basis: one had become severely disabled after an accident and the other was tied to caring for his severely sick daughter. Table 2 shows the types of work my informants have been doing while in hiding. Many held down several jobs simultaneously.

Undocumented migrants are ‘ideal’ workers. ‘Illegalisation’ is a productive way of creating and maintaining a disciplined, docile, and cheap labour force (De Genova 2002: 440). They work longer and earn lower wages than others. In this context, the hierarchy at work is determined by a conjunction of nationality, ethnicity, gender, age, and legal status; if you lack ‘papers’ you are placed at the bottom. At the same workplace and for the same (informal) work, one of my informants received EUR 2.5 per hour while a legal migrant received EUR 4.2. In Sweden the lowest monthly net wage is scarcely EUR 1430 (around EUR 1000 after tax). In other words the lowest hourly wage after tax is EUR 6.2 (*LO-Tidningen* 27 October 2006). In May 2005, 18 of the 33 informants stated their wages, which averaged to EUR 3.5 per hour, broken down as follows:

- Over EUR 4.2/hour: four (the highest being EUR 6/hour)
- EUR 4.2/hour: eight
- EUR 2–4.2/hour: two
- Under EUR 2/hour: three
- One received only room and board as a maid.
Employment opportunities are often of short duration and dismissal without notice was a constant danger. This is a common tactic for employers to keep wages down while limiting the employee’s possibilities to protest or to negotiate for better conditions.

Aref, a 36-year-old man from Iran, lived clandestinely in Sweden since spring 2001. He worked in various sectors, though mostly as a pizza cook, and described work conditions as follows:

If you open your mouth, your employer will throw you out. They say that there is an unlimited number of illegal migrants who want the job. They are right. Competition for undocumented work is hard. Russians and Afghans are prepared to work for EUR 1.5 or 2 per hour. They destroy the market even for us.

Aref’s comment, confirmed by other informants, indicates that undocumented migrants constitute an army of reserve labour (Cohen 1987: 42). One restaurant owner in central Stockholm said that when he ‘asked for one worker, 100 came’. On the difference between legal and undocumented migrants, he said, ‘An illegal migrant has a red ‘sale’ sticker on him. Fifty per cent off’.

This puts in concrete terms how undocumented migrants are reduced to commodities exchangeable for other commodities. One characteristic of slavery is that the labour of the slave is owned by the employer (see van den Anker 2004: 17–18). Aref often compared his situation with slavery:

The employers think that we should be grateful to them for giving us work. They think they are doing a humanitarian action. They only want money. They are always after beginners so that they can pay the minimum…. They promise to raise the wage once you have learned the job, but they throw you out and get someone new.

Abbas, a 26-year-old Iranian man, clandestine since February 2005, worked for a cleaning company in Stockholm owned by a woman who (paradoxically or perhaps not) also worked at the Migration Board. He described the expected pace of work and the remuneration he received:

The boss says that we should clean four rooms in an hour. We can only do two in an hour. If I have to do 20 rooms today, she calculates five hours of work but I have to work twice as long to finish. All the same, I am paid for five hours. Sometimes she lends me out to a hotel. I do the dishes in the hotel restaurant. I am never told how much she gets from the hotel for my work, but what she gives me is the same EUR 4.2 per hour.

Being ‘lent out’ is not uncommon among my informants. The employer makes money on the difference between what the second employer pays and what they pay the worker. In one instance, an employer made EUR 4.2 per hour just by
Shahram Khosravi

selling the labour of another individual. On other occasions they may use the worker’s labour for free. Jousef, a 25-year-old Iraqi man, worked in a kiosk: ‘Sometimes the employer takes me home to clean. I also work in his home when he has parties. He doesn’t pay me extra in either case’.

The undocumented migrants’ precarious position in the labour market is un/wittingly ‘sanctioned’ by the authorities. First, informal work is criminalised in Sweden, so an undocumented migrant is vulnerable to detention and deportation if she or he turns to the authorities because of abuse by the employer. Second, the criminalisation of informal work means that migrant mobility in the labour market is restricted, so opportunities to change jobs to increase earnings or leave abusive employers are limited. Third, the presence of undocumented migrants in the labour market is seen as a threat by the trade unions, which argue that undocumented migrants’ sub-market wages undermine collective agreements and are a threat to welfare. (Arbetaren 10/02).

Trade unions have cooperated with the police for a long time, in efforts to catch ‘illegal’ migrants (see Zaremba 2006, Dagens Nyheter 9 October 2003, Arbetaren 07/02 and 42/03). In March 2005, Byggnads, the Swedish Building Workers’ Union, frequently hunted down undocumented working migrants and reported them to the police. Despite an earlier criticism from the International Labour Organisation (ILO) for its collaboration with the police (Dagens Nyheter 9 December 2005), Sweden’s largest trade union federation (LO) published a report in its newspaper Alla about ‘illegal foreigners’ cleaning the Stockholm Underground, which led to their discovery and arrest by the police. In defence, Alla’s editor-in-chief argued that their strategy was to guard the collective agreement and ‘clean up [my emphasis] the workplace’ (Arbetaren 42/02).

The categorising of phenomena as ‘clean’ and ‘unclean’ is a mechanism to maintain social structure and determine what is morally acceptable and what is not (Douglas 1966).

Women felt more vulnerable in relation to their employers than men did. Sahel, a young Bangladeshi woman, was the live-in maid of a family; she cleaned and cooked for room and board, but received no salary. Sexual harassment by employers or co-workers was also frequently mentioned by my female informants. A study among undocumented Mexicans in the USA confirms that sexual abuse of women in low-income service sectors is prevalent (Luibhéid 2002: 130; see also Anderson 2000).

Furthermore, many women found it difficult to compete with men for jobs, since employers believed that ‘the work was [too] heavy for women’. The situation was worse for single mothers who had neither access to the day nursery system nor informal childcare while they worked. In the condition of ‘illegality’ motherhood as an impediment for employment becomes even more prevalent. The cruel paradox of many undocumented migrants’ work is that they clean houses, cook food, wash dishes, and take care of other children while they have no home to clean and their own children are minded by others (cf. Chavez
An Ethnography of Migrant ‘Illegality’ in Sweden

1997: 151). Luna, a Mongolian woman in her thirties, exemplified this paradox. After her degree in civil engineering at Moscow University in the 1990s, she returned to Mongolia, got married, and, within a few years, had two children. In the early 2000s, divorced and unemployed, she left her country for a long ‘illegal’ journey, first to Moscow and later on to Stockholm in search of a job. Since 2003, Luna has worked as a housecleaner and babysitter. Her mother in Mongolia takes care of her nine and 11 year old, while she cleans and takes care of Swedish children. Luna sends money and gifts to her children every month and talks to them three times a week, but worries about their health and schooling. My field notes still convey her burden of longing and anguish at being unable to care for her own children.

Many of my informants (15 people) mentioned that, despite their low wages, they regularly remitted money to their families. Some of them had been able to repay the debts incurred, usually to a human smuggler, to cover the cost of emigration (cf. Ohlson 2006: 149). My informants never missed the chance to show their pride in working hard. They frequently mentioned their desire to be able to work in the formal labour market and pay taxes. They generally believed that hard work would increase their chances of eventual legalisation. The migrants’ desire to ‘work hard’ and ‘contribute’ to a society that actually rejects any kind of responsibility for them indicates the paradoxical aspects of migrant ‘illegality’ in contemporary capitalism.

Moreover, working in the informal sector simply entrenches their marginalised status. Informal work means that undocumented migrants are generally isolated from the mainstream labour market and society. They usually work with co-ethnics and have no practice speaking Swedish, which increases their vulnerability since they have no way of knowing the actual worth of their labour (cf. Chavez 1997). Furthermore, their work experience is in the informal economy, undocumented and employers do not give them references. A main and widespread consequence is that undocumented migrants, even if they do become regularised, remain caught in the informal sector and fail to find regular ‘legal’ jobs.

Housing

Finding accommodation is a constant concern for undocumented migrants who are excluded from the governmental housing programme and lack resources and documentation to enter the regular private letting market. Accordingly, migrants are forced to sub-let housing, facing precarious conditions and short-term contracts. Short-term rental contracts allow landlords to renegotiate terms and increase rent frequently. My informants were always hunting for new places to move to, some even moving two or three times a year. In May 2005, I asked ten undocumented families about their housing situation since they had come to Sweden (see Table 3).
As in the case of work, the ethnic network is the most usual channel for finding housing. Undocumented migrants generally live in less-attractive areas with huge concentrations of migrants from the same region. Only one of all my informants lived outside an ‘immigrant area’. Ethnic networks, however, do not necessarily mean ethnic solidarity. My informants lived in over-crowded conditions and paid unreasonably high rents. Moreover, they were sometimes not allowed to use the kitchen or bathroom and two even mentioned sleeping in the workplace. An informant once took me to an overcrowded immigrant neighbourhood where mattresses on the floor were ‘rented’ to people in hiding in basement rooms without windows, water, or ventilation; it was pitch dark inside due to lack of natural light and the light turned off automatically after a few minutes. For undocumented migrants who slept at work or shared with several others having access to water and personal hygiene was a problem. Furthermore, unable to pay rent for themselves, undocumented migrants usually lodge with other marginalised groups, such as the unemployed, asylum seekers, alcoholics, and drug addicts, and sometimes even with petty criminals such as drug pushers. Marginalised even in their own ethnic communities, undocumented migrants suffer from a double burden. Undocumented migrants are not only exposed to racism from the host society but placed at the very bottom of a hierarchy of suffering based on a ‘conjugated oppression’ (Bourgois 1989; Holmes 2007) in terms of citizenship, gender, class, and legal status.

Housing condition is tightly linked to other aspects of life-quality, such as health, sense of security, and sociability. The immediate consequence of the fugitive lifestyle is the absence of a stable basis for everyday life. Since undocumented migrants cannot remain in one place for long, they are unable to structure their lives or conduct long-term planning. Sporadic and unstable

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Table 3. Frequency of moving

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time spent in Sweden (years)</th>
<th>Children (number)</th>
<th>Moving (times)</th>
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<tr>
<td>11</td>
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</table>
An Ethnography of Migrant ‘Illegality’ in Sweden

Housing situations primarily affect children, whose social connections and networks are locally formed. Frequently moving to another neighbourhood results in their isolation from other children of the same age. Lacking the right to attend school or kindergarten aggravates their social isolation. Sometimes school principals turn a blind eye to the status of undocumented children. Accordingly, every new move means negotiating with a new school principal. Some parents who fear being exposed do not allow their children to play outdoors, so the children spend all their time inside with their parents. One man told me that he did not allow his five-year-old son to run in the apartment so as not to upset the neighbours. Frequent moving also compounds the risk for people in hiding: they are always newcomers and neighbours are strangers who can call the police. ‘Home’ is commonly associated with safety whereas for undocumented migrants who live in fear of the police, home is infused with a frightening sense of penetrability, vulnerability and danger (Willen 2007: 24).

Healthcare

It is 16 May 2005. Ziba, who is 16, is driving north of Stockholm with her father in a rattling Honda her father has borrowed from his employer. In 2001, together with her father, mother, and big sister, Ziba fled Iran and applied for asylum in Sweden; they received their second rejection in 2004. The family chose to remain and to go into hiding. After several months, the mother left and returned to Iran. Ziba says that she could no longer stand life in hiding. The big sister also disappeared without a trace, to another city. Ziba’s father worked in a garage in a suburb of Stockholm. Today they are on their way to see a friend in Enköping. Halfway, Ziba’s father experiences chest pains. He has a heart condition, but his medication has run out and since he is in hiding he cannot get more. He pulls over, gets out, and lies down on the ground. Ziba starts to worry and gets out her mobile to ring for assistance. Her father stops her: ‘If they come, they will take you with them’. He dies on the E18 motorway somewhere between Stockholm and Enköping.

Sweden is one of the most restrictive countries in the EU concerning access to healthcare for undocumented migrants (Picum 2007). Undocumented migrants are entitled to access to public health services only in cases of medical emergency and only if they pay the full price. Nevertheless, undocumented migrants do not seek medical aid even in emergencies because they fear arrest. Even undocumented minors, under 18 years old, are excluded from the healthcare system – except for the children of failed asylum-seeking parents.

A survey conducted by Médecins sans Frontières (MSF) of 102 undocumented migrants in Sweden in 2005 found that over 80 per cent experienced difficulties accessing healthcare and 67 per cent were afraid of being arrested at healthcare centres (Gömda i Sverige 2005). Another hindrance is the high

105
Shahram Khosravi
cost of healthcare in Sweden. Visiting a doctor costs approximately EUR 210, childbirth costs EUR 2,300, and medication for an HIV/AIDS patient can exceed EUR 10,000 a year. Although it is available as a right in theory, fear and high cost make healthcare inaccessible. Accessibility of healthcare means that it should be non-discriminating, affordable, and that information about it is easily available (Romero-Ortuno 2004).

Testimony by medical experts indicates that these hindrances and the refusal of medical personnel to provide healthcare have resulted in death as well as devastating physical and psychological consequences for undocumented migrants in Sweden (Ascher et al. 2008). Life in hiding causes health deterioration. In the survey, 65 per cent of respondents asserted that their health had worsened while living clandestinely (Gömda i Sverige 2005). Everyday ‘illegality’ also causes enormous stress and psychological suffering, which for my informants led to sleep disorders and psychosomatic pain (see also Ohlson 2006). This particularly affects children, who risk missing out on their childhood and to whom life in hiding causes severe physical and psychological suffering (SoS-rapport 1999: 5). Furthermore, undocumented migrants often need medical treatment because of injuries incurred at their unsafe workplaces. The absurdity of the situation becomes clear in the case of one informant who, ironically, did not have access to medical services at the hospital he helped to rebuild in Stockholm.

However, in Stockholm and Gothenburg, Sweden’s two largest cities, informal healthcare has been organised by Médecins du Monde and the Red Cross. Despite the hard work of the volunteers, serious medical complications can be caused by the informal healthcare system simply because their resources (e.g. medicines and equipments) are limited.

There are two strong reasons for anxiety concerning undocumented migrants’ health. First, a common pattern among my informants was to ignore minor ailments, which might have led to more serious problems later on. Second, migrants may not receive a sufficient amount of medication from the informal healthcare system, or at least not in time. Consequently, ailments become lingering; chronic ailments and pain usually remain even after regularisation or deportation. Due to this delay in seeking and receiving help, cancer patients who could probably have been saved have died (see Ascher et al. 2008). A further reason for concern is that migrants in hiding may borrow someone’s ID number for medical help, causing medical risks for both the migrant patient and the other person (see Ohlson 2006). Furthermore, medical experts warn that the control of infectious disease is compromised; this threatens not only the migrants themselves, but the healthcare system and the wellbeing of society in general (Ascher et al. 2008).

Exclusion from the healthcare system especially affects undocumented female migrants, who comprise 60 per cent of those using the informal healthcare system (Gömda i Sverige 2005); the main health problems they suffered were
gynaecological. In case of pregnancy, the lack of pre- and postnatal care can have serious consequences for mother and child. For instance, in the case of HIV-infected pregnant women, exclusion from the healthcare system means that the risk of infecting the child after birth increases almost 15 times (Ascher et al. 2008). Undocumented women’s fertility is seen as a risk to the nation (Chock 1995: 137).

Denying undocumented migrants health care is an attempt ‘to govern the reproduction of an undesirable population’ (Inda 2007: 152). First, undocumented women are encouraged not to become pregnant. Many of my female informants told me how they were ‘advised’ by different actors, from Migration Board officers to lawyers and even NGO activists, not to have a child. Even asylum seekers were encouraged not to have children during the asylum process. In a conference in autumn 2006 in Gävle, an officer from Migration Board said: ‘As asylum seeker one shall not marry. One should not fall in love. And it becomes awkward if one is going to have a baby with another asylum seeker. It is about controlling one’s sexuality’ (Artikel 14 March 2006).

Love, sexuality, and reproduction are not anymore private/biological issues but rather belong to the public and political spheres. Women’s bodies are turned into a battlefield against immigrants. Denying them care is also a clear signal of discouraging pregnancy. The will of the authorities to control reproduction among undocumented migrants is manifested in allowing access to abortion but not to treatment of cancerous tumours (Dagens Nyheter 11 May 2008).

Second, the authorities justify excluding undocumented migrants from the healthcare system by arguing that inclusion would ‘send the wrong signal’ (Dagens Nyheter 11 May 2008) and could be a ‘pull’ factor for ‘medical tourism’ to Sweden (Ohlson 2006: 162). Another side of this rationale is that excluding this group from healthcare is a strategy to ‘push’ migrants to leave Sweden. Adding up both arguments, it is clear how denying healthcare is a strategy by the authorities to control the number of undocumented migrants and diminish their capacity to reproduce (cf. Inda 2007).

There are no indications of improvement of access to healthcare in Sweden for undocumented migrants in the near future. Conversely, in early 2008, the Swedish government presented a bill (Lagförslag 2007/08: 105) that would make this exclusionary policy into law. The bill was passed in May 2008, meaning medical personnel who help undocumented migrants have to choose between violating the law or their ethical principle that those in need of healthcare should be treated regardless of their legal status (Ascher et al. 2008). The UN Special Rapporteur Paul Hunt said the bill would ‘legislate discrimination’ and the UN criticised Sweden for adopting a policy that runs counter to their obligations under international conventions (Mission Sweden 2007). Early 2008 saw extensive protests organised by voluntary organisations and medical students demanding a more generous and humane health policy towards undocumented migrants.
Shahram Khosravi

Safety

Homa is a 13-year-old girl from the Kurdish part of Iraq who applied for asylum in Sweden with her parents and an older sister in early 1999. Evicted by Saddam Hussein in the mid-1980s, they lived in the outskirts of Tehran for thirteen years before they made it to Sweden assisted by a smuggler. Since their application was rejected a second time by the Alien Appeals Board in late 2000, they have lived in hiding in a suburb of Stockholm. They live in one room in a three-room flat, for which they pay in excess of EUR 320 per month (allowing the official tenant to live there for free). In the evenings, Homa’s mother uses one section of the room to prepare sandwiches that Homa’s father takes to cafés and stores the next day. In May 2005, Homa was brutally assaulted by a gang of girls and her new shoes were stolen near the entrance to her house. When they spotted some security personnel, both Homa and the gang fled the scene, as they all feared detection.

While citizens are identified as criminal due to their actions, undocumented migrants are seen as a criminal simply due to their undocumented existence, which renders them defenceless against the violations of others. Undocumented migrants are denied the right to security and protection from violence, which constitutes a central human right (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 3). They are left vulnerable not only to the violence of the state, but also to the violence of ordinary citizens, without being able to protect or defend themselves (Rajaram and Grundy-Warr 2004: 57; Agamben 1998). Awareness of their vulnerability and powerlessness makes their lives distressing and anxiety ridden.

Mehrdad, a middle-aged man from Iran, lived clandestinely in Sweden with his wife and two sons since 2002 after their application for asylum was rejected. His sons, both teenagers, could attend school thanks to a principal turning a blind eye to their situation. In autumn 2005, a gang discovered the boys’ ‘illegality’ and harassed the youngest one, turning into systematic bullying and assault. Unable to seek help from the school, Mehrdad experienced intense humiliation at his powerlessness to defend his child. He told me sadly how his relationship with his sons gradually changed and how he realised that his sons would never trust him again.

The vulnerability of undocumented migrants also exposes them to blackmail and sexual abuse. Bahman, an Iranian man in his late twenties, was forced to give sexual services to his landlady under the threat of being reported to the police. Another young and handsome Iranian man, Hamid, reluctantly had sex with his lawyer for one year for fear that she would otherwise diminish his chances of regularisation. Pari, an Iranian woman in her mid-thirties, hoped for regularisation through marriage; she entered a relationship with a man and would be ‘with him’ on the weekends for two years.
Undocumented migrants are also recurrently subjected to fraud and swindling by charlatans pretending to be ‘lawyers’ or immigration ‘experts’. Another security risk for failed asylum seekers comes from conditions in their countries of origin, and some have been subjected to persecution and espionage even in Sweden. Sweden actually expelled several Iranian ‘refugee spies’ who collected documents and personal information about failed Iranian asylum seekers since the early 1990s, the last one in autumn 2007 (Metro 20 December 2006; Expressen 6 March 2008; Svenska Dagbladet 25 January 2007; see also the Interpellation (2006/07:237) submitted to the Parliament on 19 January 2007).

Social and Family Life

I first met Sahel, a young Bangladeshi woman, in March 2005 at the clandestine clinic where she waited to be given some calming medication by a retired psychologist who has more clients than anyone else at the clinic. She speaks slowly, with frequent long pauses, and a fellow countrywoman translates. Together with her two children, she was smuggled into Sweden in 2002 while her husband fled to India where he is an ‘illegal’. The long period of uncertainty and the unknown fate of her husband pushed her into depression. Her condition became worse and social services placed her four and two year old with a foster family. In spring 2004, her application was rejected by the Alien Appeals Board and she went into hiding, losing touch with her children completely. They live with a Swedish family and go to a day care centre. Sahel used to phone regularly, but the children now only speak Swedish which Sahel does not understand.

A primary human right is the right to family relationships and to an ‘ordinary’ everyday life (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 16), which undocumented migrants are deprived of. In the condition of ‘illegality’, social relationship and emotions are drastically distorted. Anvar, a 30-year-old Iranian man, lived with his sister before going into hiding in September 2004. He did not dare visit her for fear of the police. He met her and her children in a café or in a park: ‘Meeting your sister in a park is not the same. It doesn’t feel natural. I want to play with her children in their house’.

While separation from family is an expected consequence of migration, irregular migration imposes enormous distances between family members who may be dispersed between several countries. As a result of the irregularity, the migration journeys differ between family members, depending on the time, route, and how the migration was arranged. While one or more may arrive safely in Sweden, some are caught in the transit country, while others may still be back in the ‘home’ country. Failed asylum-seeking families mainly become split because of the Dublin Convention and the rule of country of first asylum, which restricts the mobility of asylum seekers between EU countries. One of my informants, a middle-aged Iranian woman, lived in hiding with one
son in Sweden, while her eldest son was still in Iran and her third son lived clandestinely in Greece. They had not seen each other in seven years and, since none of them could ‘legally’ move between these countries the prospects for getting together again in the near future were poor. Caught in a state of immobility, separation from one’s parents, spouse, siblings, or children can last for years or even decades. Annual reports of the Red Cross’s health programme for undocumented migrants indicate that up to one third of their patients were caught in such transborder family situations (Årsrapport 2006, 2007). For many undocumented women and men, protracted separation from their children is a challenge for the conventional notion of motherhood. Separation of family members imposes enormous emotional distress, particularly for parents who leave their children behind. Luna, who had left her two children with her mother in Mongolia, succumbed to the psychological pressure and sank into deep depression. Similarly, Sahel’s inability to be with her children finally paralysed her psychologically and she became listless and unreachable.

The right to a family life is also impeded by the difficulty in starting a new relationship when undocumented. Anvar puts his view of ‘illegality’ this way:

In this dark life, you cannot even fall in love. How are you to get into contact with women? Not having residence permission is a personal disadvantage. Like being ugly. Nobody wants you. If you don’t have money, you don’t go shopping. If you are undocumented, you don’t look for a relationship.

Anvar’s anxiety at being ‘defective’ testifies how ‘illegality’ can become physically embodied, as it were, in the migrant and prevents relationships to form. The violence inherent in the condition of ‘illegality’ expresses itself in the internalisation of ‘human inequalities’ (see Holmes 2007). Official papers signify individuals’ rights to resources, political rights, and social rights. However, having papers is assumed to be an essential ‘quality’ of a person as well. Eva, a Swedish woman, had a relationship with one of my informants for a while; when I asked her why she quit the relationship, she said, ‘You cannot trust people without papers’.

As expressed by Eva, having or lacking papers is understood as an essential characteristic of individuals and how they are identified (cf. Bakewell 2007). Children’s reactions to the disruption of their family life and the disconnection from other social relationships are even more painful and distressing. In autumn 2006, more than 400 children of undocumented migrants were diagnosed with pervasive refusal syndrome (PRS) in Sweden who developed a refusal to talk, eat, drink, and move over periods of months or even years (see Bondegård 2006; Tamas 2009; SOU 2006: 114). These children had become completely unresponsive and had to be tube-fed, explicitly demonstrating their refusal to live in hiding. In October 2004, Bahar, the seven-year-old daughter of one
An Ethnography of Migrant ‘Illegality’ in Sweden

informant, took refuge in a fantasy of being a dog, occasionally moving, eating, and sounding like a dog. As her father told me,

Bahar talked about how dogs in Sweden had a safe life, a better life than us. The dogs are not illegal. They have home and food. . . . She talked a lot about how dogs get attention on the street, but not her.

Like the comatose bodies of the children with PRS, Bahar’s preference for being a dog rather than an ‘illegal’ human being, demonstrated how profoundly ‘illegality’ can be embodied and internalised. It also shows how disruptive the experience of ‘illegality’ is for family life.

Some Concluding Remarks

This paper has provided ethnographic glimpses into how migrant ‘illegality’ is configured in Sweden. Through narratives describing migrants’ lived experiences of ‘illegality’ in everyday life, I have explored and concretised abstract and intangible notions of law, policy, deportability, and migrant ‘illegality’. In a strong welfare state, like Sweden, where large parts of social life, such as the labour market, housing, healthcare, and education, are regulated through the state, migrant ‘illegality’ means an even harsher everyday life than in countries with weaker welfare systems. Paradoxically while undocumented migrants constitute a large share of the labour force in the informal economy in Sweden, they cannot even rent a DVD since they lack a social security number. The total absence of rights can be explained in terms of the temporality of migrant illegality. Undocumented migrants should not be ‘included’ today because they will be ‘excluded’ (deported) tomorrow (Noll 2008).

The condition of ‘illegality’ does not impose its effect merely by a simple process of excluding unwanted individuals; rather, it regulates and configures lives through ‘inclusive exclusion’ (Agamben 1998). Undocumented migrants are actively kept outside mainstream society, but are nevertheless part of society (Chavez 1997) through, for example, political and juridical processes, media coverage, academic research (such as this study), and not least the labour market (see Table 4). Undocumented migrants are situated on a ‘threshold’, excluded but at the same time included.

Undocumented migrants, thus, are not excluded but are excepted; they have not been thrown out, but neither are they considered participants. Undocumented migrants are included in society without being recognised as members. This ‘inclusive exclusion’ mechanism regulates, manages, and controls the lives of undocumented migrants. Ethnographic accounts in this article show how the private (love, safety, family life) and biological (sexuality, reproduction) life of undocumented migrants have become indistinguishable from the public policy. The dialectical principle of ‘inclusive exclusion’ makes it impossible to
Table 4. Inclusive exclusion mechanisms inherent in the condition of ‘illegality’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Excluded</th>
<th>Included</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Law</strong></td>
<td>Deprived of legal protection</td>
<td>As objects of the exercise of the law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Politics</strong></td>
<td>Not politically represented</td>
<td>As the focus of political debate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Media</strong></td>
<td>Given no voice in the public debate</td>
<td>As sensational figures in news, reports, and documentaries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Labour Market</strong></td>
<td>Outside the unemployment insurance system and trade unions</td>
<td>As cheap and docile labour in high demand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Welfare system</strong></td>
<td>Deprived of all social welfare services</td>
<td>Through paying indirect tax as consumers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

differentiate between membership and inclusion, between who is included and who is excluded, between rule and exception. Undocumented migrants, thus, are actively and formally kept outside the society in which they are already included.

Acknowledgment

I would like to thank Christien van den Anker, Henry Ascher, and two anonymous reviewers for their comments on early drafts. I thank the Centre for Refugee Studies at York University, Toronto, where I did work on this article in summer 2008.

Appendix 1. Demographic profile of the reference group

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<tbody>
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Clandestine (year)

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Artikel 14, March 2006.


114
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