MIGRATING TO AND FROM ATLANTIC CANADA: THE ROLE OF MIDDLE EASTERN TRANSNATIONAL FAMILIES AND ETHNIC NETWORKS

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Transnational connections, social capital and networks, and family considerations which are found to be central in migrants' lives and decisions in relation to migration and settlement may not be sufficient for migrant retention when some key expectations are not met. Our qualitative research investigated the migration trajectories and histories of Middle Eastern migrants in Atlantic Canada and Ontario. Our findings revealed that transnational family and ethnic networks provided support to migrants in their initial move to Atlantic Canada. On the other hand, the same connections proved equally instrumental and important when migrants, disappointed with Atlantic Canadian political economy of labour, decided to move to Ontario.

Les liens transnationaux, le capital social et les réseaux, ainsi que les considérations familiales, qui sont au cœur de la vie et des décisions des migrants en matière de migration et d'établissement, peuvent ne pas suffire à retenir les migrants lorsque certaines attentes clés ne sont pas satisfaites. Notre recherche qualitative a examiné les trajectoires migratoires et les histoires des migrants du Moyen-Orient au Canada atlantique et en Ontario. Nos résultats ont révélé que les réseaux transnationaux de familles et d'ethnies apportaient un soutien aux migrants lors de leur premier déménagement au Canada atlantique. Par ailleurs, les mêmes liens se sont révélés tout aussi utiles et importants lorsque les migrants, déçus par l'économie politique du travail du Canada atlantique, ont décidé de s'installer en Ontario.

Literature on transnationalism has been steadily growing since its first conceptualization by Schiller, Basch, and Blanc in 1992 by way of calling scholars and policy makers to accept the realities of migrants who simultaneously invest and engage in social, symbolic, economic, and political connections across borders. There is growing evidence that members of families retain their sense of collectivity and kinship in spite of being spread across multiple nations by way of sustaining reciprocal obligations, love and trust, even within unequal power contexts (Tastsoglou and Dobrowolsky 2017). Relatedly, family considerations typically play a key role in migration decision making and home-making of migrants across all immigration streams. Furthermore, new research has begun to focus on family, social capital and networks, because the three are found to lead to better mental health among immigrants and elicit improved success in both the retention and settlement of immigrants as well as their longer term economic outcomes.

The broader social and geo-political context of our analysis is not only situated in relation to an increasingly globalized world and transnational communities but also in relation to the neo-liberal migration policy frameworks, such as marketization of immigration that privilege economic categories of immigrants (entrepreneurs as opposed to family classes); securitization of migration with increased security measures that cast suspicion on categories of immigrants particularly from the Middle East; and successive wars and regional instability as a result in various countries in that region. At the same time, the regional context in Atlantic Canada is one of long-standing and well-established ethnic and religious communities of Middle-Eastern origins (Tastsoglou and Petrinioti 2017), which are expanding with more contemporary migration of diverse kinds from that region.

Through a collection of 47 qualitative in-depth interviews, during 2012, from major urban centres in the four provinces of Atlantic Canada and Ontario we examined family and ethnic networks and how they affect the migration experiences of Middle-Eastern newcomers to and from Atlantic Canada. For this purpose, we ensured that the Ontario residents were immigrants who had lived in Atlantic Canada prior to moving to Ontario. Participants included 31 women and 16 men who had been in Canada ranging from 4 months to 45 years, and had come under different admission categories (refugees, dependent spouses, landed immigrants, students). Among the participants, 38 possessed at least one university or college degree and most who came from Kuwait, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt were Palestinians and Egyptians who had lived and worked in various Gulf countries before immigrating to Canada because of lack of access to citizenship and restrictions on their children's school attendance there.

Participants provided a range of reasons, typically "push factors," for leaving their countries of origin. Some of these included education and better future for themselves and their children, oppressive regimes or conflict in home countries. Of greater interest however are the "pull factors" to Atlantic Canada. While they referred to Atlantic Canada's good reputation as a safe place to raise a family, as well as the reputation of its universities, a job offer or the Provincial Nominee Program system facilitating immigration, key reasons included the presence in Atlantic Canada of extended family members, co-ethnic friends or colleagues, and especially for the older generations, the Lebanese "village connections." While few respondents received direct financial help, in many cases, the familial and ethnic networks provided initial shelter, transportation, orientation/guidance to the new environment, childcare, introduction to friends, sharing of experiences, and sometimes even jobs. This assistance was sometimes in addition to mainstream institutional support. Some families had ongoing "astronaut" arrangements, with wife and children in Atlantic Canada being supported by a husband/father still working in the Middle East. In the case of students, several had been fully supported by their families overseas. It should be noted here that while family and ethnic networks were supportive in terms of concrete services to newly arrived kin and co-ethnics, they were not behind the legal sponsorship arrangements and were not interested in sponsoring family members or co-ethnics.

Another interesting finding of this study is the role of familial and ethnic networks in facilitating exit from Atlantic Canada for their immigrant kin/co-ethnics who were disappointed with the employment opportunities in Atlantic Canada. It was these very family and ethnic/transnational networks that helped the would-be "leavers" to move to Toronto or Ottawa by providing contacts, job opportunities or temporary shelter in the respective cities. The "friendly" Atlantic Canadian communities, even the presence of extended family and ethnic networks or "village connections," the reputation of universities etc. were not sufficient reasons by themselves for many Middle Eastern immigrants to permanently settle in Atlantic Canada. These second-time migrants in Ontario spoke openly about their disappointment with Atlantic Canada with respect to their job expectations, tiny ethnic communities, small towns and limited diversity. They were lured by better career prospects for themselves, more opportunities for their children and cosmopolitanism of large Canadian cities west of Atlantic Canada. However, they also recognized that their move west was facilitated by extended family contacts and co-ethnic networks both in Atlantic Canada and Ontario.

FAMILY AND ETHNIC NETWORKS: NOT A PANACEA FOR ATLANTIC CANADIAN POPULATION, MIGRATION AND SETTLEMENT ISSUES

The political and pragmatic commitment to countering neo-liberalism in the area of immigration by strengthening family immigration should not overlook the fact that transnational families are as astute in making decisions on where

to settle and how best to mobilize networks as native-born ones. Important as the transnational family and ethnic networks maybe in immigration and settlement, the findings of this study point to the direction of the political economy of labour and development in Atlantic Canada as representing the major factor in the retention of immigrants. More intersectional and quantitative research is needed, paying attention to immigration category, age, gender, education, and period of immigration, as well as their combined action, for more broadly generalizable conclusions.

REFERENCES

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