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# Intersectional power dynamics and extended households: Elderly and widowed women's international migration from Armenia

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## ABSTRACT

Drawing upon interviews and fieldwork conducted in Armenia and Turkey with 25 Armenian migrant women and their non-accompanying family members, the present article examines how gendered norms intersecting with age, marital and motherhood statuses have structured the migration decision-making process as it occurs at the household level. These migrant women were mostly elderly, widowed and from extended households, where male income support to the family was either insufficient or wholly absent for a variety of reasons. Building on the Household Survival Strategies (HSS) approach, this article examines the dynamism and complex kinship norms in extended-households and how these have led some women to assume the role of migrant labourers in a patriarchal context that would ordinarily deny them mobility. While empirically this study sheds light on women's migration from an understudied geography, it also deepens our understanding of the interplay between patriarchy, intersectionality and women's agency outside of the traditional nuclear household.

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## Introduction

Armenia represents an unusual case with respect to labour migration in a global context. Every year, it is estimated that between 96000 and 120000 men migrate in search of work, while the number of women is far lower – around 5000–6000 (ILO 2009, 3–7; IOM 2014, 30). This rather skewed gender ratio is atypical for the region as women account for roughly half of labour migrants from the post-Soviet countries overall (Morokvasic 2004; Kofman 2004; Bettio, Simonazzi and Villa 2006). Male outmigration from Armenia is, in many ways, a function of the historical pattern that existed within the

former Soviet Union where it was common for men to travel in search of work between Russia and Armenia (a practice known as the *khopan*) enabling them to establish social networks and ties that persist to this day (OSCE 2006). In contrast, the deeply patriarchal structure of Armenian society has inhibited female labour migration and left women with fewer such opportunities (Ishkanian 2002a; 2002b; 2003). Even after the collapse of Soviet Armenia, which led to a succession of economic crises and the impoverishment of rural areas, the male migrant-as-breadwinner model has remained remarkably stable, with a relatively small number of women accompanying their husbands as 'secondary migrants' (Bezemer and Lerman 2004, 335; Ziemer 2010). Ironically, as this article demonstrates, the same patriarchal social norms that have served to discourage female labour migration as a whole have also served to encourage the movement of certain groups of women as independent migrant care workers to Turkey – specifically elderly and widowed women from extended households. This pattern has also been documented in Ozinan's report (2009), which highlighted the fact that 96% of the overall female migrants that she was able to identify were between the ages of 45 and 70 and were mostly widowed. Studying this unique case can actually provide us with a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between patriarchy and women's migration outside of the conventional nuclear household, as well as the role of age, motherhood norms and marital norms in shaping intra-household power dynamics.

This article builds upon the Household Survival Strategies (HSS) approach (Radcliffe 1991; Hoang 2011; Lawson 1998; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Gisbert et al. 1994) which situates migration decisions in the context of existing intra-household hierarchies. This approach has revealed that the feminization of migration is not a homogenous or gender-neutral response to economic push or pull factors. In explaining migrant-selectivity, it has rather focused upon the role of households 'in acting as filters for familial gender ideologies which impact upon the motives for migration' (Chant 1998, 12) and the relative power and autonomy of household members in migrant decision-making. The emerging consensus from this literature has been that, while men possess greater freedom of movement and exercise disproportionate authority over migration decisions, women are not 'totally powerless' and are able to effectively negotiate the social process of migration within the given constraints (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1992; Silvey 2004; Bastia 2013; Khoo, Platt and Yeoh 2017; Hoang 2011). The factors constraining women's agency have thus far mainly been studied within the context of nuclear families and the literature has therefore revolved around the question of how women are able to negotiate their 'motherhood and housewifery duties' with their husbands (Paul 2015; Bastia 2013; De Jong 2000; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1992, 1994;

Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997; Hoang and Yeoh 2011; Lam and Yeoh 2018). Given that household headship and composition are extremely diverse and dynamic in the developing world (Bongaarts 2001; Lawson 1998; Sana and Massey 2005), this constitutes a significant shortcoming in the existing HSS scholarship.

This article explores how the gendered identities of men and women have been defined in extended Armenian households and how these definitions have simultaneously enabled and disabled women's agency in the migration decision-making process. In doing so, the study also seeks to diversify our understanding of patriarchy and the gendered underpinnings of decision-making at the theoretical level. In the Armenian extended household, patriarchy is more complex and dynamic than in a traditional household based upon the 'conjugal contract' (Whitehead 1981). Complexity emerges from the presence of a larger nexus of kinship obligations interwoven with patrilocal traditions and 'inter-generational contracts' (Kabeer 2000a; 2000b; Huijsmans 2014), which contain 'simultaneous elements of dependence, interdependence and independence' (Whitehead, Hashim, and Iversen 2007, 41–2). This complexity also imparts a greater degree of dynamism to the household, meaning that decisions concerning mobility are dependent on a larger number of contingent events and decisions undertaken by an extended network of actors. According to Huijsmans (2014, 295), this has implications for our understanding of agency as 'a person may have various goals and objectives other than the realization of her immediate aspirations because such goals and objectives are shaped by a person's sense of obligations and perception of legitimate behavior which are *relational and temporal*.'

Although the women I interviewed expressed a clear preference to remain at home, the gendered dynamic within the family rendered them the sole legitimate migrants on the basis of their age, marital and motherhood statuses. These intersecting statuses have both constrained and enabled women's agency in the migration decision-making process. On the one hand, they were forced to assume financial responsibility for their extended households, which often came at the expense of their own desires. On the other hand, their gendered identity allowed them to see themselves, and, just as importantly, to be seen by the family and community as 'legitimate', despite the consensus view of migration as 'unwomanly', affording them access to familial support which would be unavailable to other women. Although these women were reluctant migrants, their self-sacrifice was itself an expression of agency in that it fulfilled their ultimate desire to sustain the traditional norms of family and femininity.

In the next section, I will provide background on the nexus of kinship norms, household composition and migration dynamics from Armenia. The

article then reviews the existing HHS scholarship as it pertains to the role of intra-household dynamics and criticizes its narrow focus on the nuclear household. I also introduce two concepts which help to capture the full richness of intra-household dynamics as observed in the Armenian context: 'households in flux' and 'extended households'.

### **Kinship norms and household composition in the Armenian context**

In Armenia, gendered norms and migration have been mutually constituted – perhaps to a greater extent than in other countries because migration has been a constant thread running through the nation's history. Platz (1995) observes that ideas about gender in Armenia are a legacy, to a large extent, of the violent upheavals experienced during the late Ottoman Empire when large segments of the Armenian population were forcibly uprooted. Family became the most important institution ensuring the cultural survival of the community, and women, in turn, were upheld as essential to the survival of the family. In the traditional Armenian model of kinship, women were 'idealized' and seen as 'sacred' – to be the hearth (*odjakh*), pillar (*syun*), or lamp/light (*jrak*) of the family (Ishkanian 2002b, 24). The economic contribution of women to the household has therefore always been viewed as secondary to their domestic duties, which include, first and foremost, the transmission of cultural values to next generation, marrying girls within the ethnic community and preserving the honour and dignity of the family. In spite of the formal commitment of Soviet Armenia to achieving gender equality, the traditional norms surrounding gender remained a powerful cultural symbol and continued to be perceived as the crucible of the nation's collective narrative and self-identity (Platz 1995). With the collapse of the Soviet state, unemployment increased in all areas, however women's unemployment has risen disproportionately, further entrenching their traditional domestic role (Ishkanian 2002a).

In Post-Soviet Armenia, the multi-generational household structure has also shaped gendered norms and migration dynamics. According to the 'Independence Generation: Youth Study' conducted in Armenia in 2016, only 28% of households were nuclear in composition, and, in rural areas, extended families were more common, with 20% of these households having more than seven members. Armenian families share many of the characteristics of what Kandiyoti (1988, 278) has termed 'classical patriarchy', whereby the senior men – often fathers – exercise authority over everyone else and sons defer to their mothers but not to their wives. The obligations, responsibilities and interactions between family members are shaped by 'intergenerational contracts', which are the shared, although possibly conflicting, understandings between family members as to what different

generations owe to each other and can expect from one another (Kabeer 2000b; Whitehead, Hashim, and Iversen 2007; Huijsmans 2014). Accordingly, children are cared for by their parents in return for their loyalty and financial support in later life. Similarly, women endure the negative aspects of patriarchy when they are young but expect obedience from their daughters and daughters-in-law when they mature. Rather than implying a fixed contract based upon rational and instrumental behavior, these contracts, according to Whitehead, Hashim and Iversen (2007, 15), are implicit, subject to negotiation and can be challenged by the parties involved. In accordance with its patrilineal structure, there are also a number of 'conjugal contracts'; for example, a new wife is obliged to move into her husband's household and remain subordinate to her mother-in-law (Kirkland 1984, 358) while the household assumes the financial responsibility of caring for her. In such households, either one or several male members typically engage in cyclical migration to support their extended family with remittances (Minasyan et al. 2007) while women of multiple generations are left behind.

All of these factors may help to explain why migration trends in Armenia have differed from those in other Post-Soviet countries, and specifically, why they have not been as responsive to the development of global care chains (Hochschild 2000). The increasing care deficits experienced in Europe, Turkey and Russia have played a crucial role in the feminization of migration from the various Post-Soviet countries, excepting Armenia (Hofmann 2017; Kaska 2005; Keough 2003). According to an ILO survey conducted in 2007, of the 200,000 Armenian migrant labourers mostly resident in Russia, only 20% were women and these were overwhelmingly wives accompanying their husbands (Kalantaryan et al. 2007). Consequently, the country has witnessed an upsurge in the phenomenon of female-led households, from 27% in 2000 to 36% in 2010, representing one of the sharpest increases among the Post-Soviet countries (World Bank Data). Many of these households are classified as 'de facto' female-headed, resulting from male outmigration rather than 'de jure', which are a consequence of widowhood or divorce (Sevoyan and Agadjanian 2010).

The phenomenon of male outmigration from Armenia and its effect on family life has been addressed by a number of Armenian scholars. Atoyán (2017) shows how the cyclical absence and presence of a migrating husband or father leads to an erosion of trust and the alienation of family bonds. This is especially true where men establish second families abroad and withdraw from their responsibilities in Armenia, but occurs equally in cases where they sever emotional ties but continue to send money or gifts. Studies on the women left behind (Menjívar and Agadjanian 2007) have found that since they are socialized to be obedient and patient, wives rarely contemplate divorce even under the worst circumstances. The ideal of feminine self-

sacrifice has even been promoted by some Armenian intellectuals as a means of coping with the social pathologies that accompany male outmigration (Ishkanian 2002b).

### **Gender identity and agency in the mobility decision-making process**

The role of the household in the migration decision-making process has been addressed variously by researchers. In the classical economic model of the household, migration decisions were viewed as a collective and unitary response on the part of household members to economic difficulties at home (Hart 1995). In later neoclassical versions of this approach, family members were thought of as actors with varying interests and preferences who struggled to maximize their own individual utility through bargaining – sometimes resulting in cooperation and sometimes in conflict (Katz 1997). In critiquing the classical model, the feminist approach to HHS has problematized issues ranging from the intra-household power dynamic, to the gendered division of labour, and the cultural construction of gendered identities within the household (Lawson 1998; Radcliffe 1991; Hart 1995). Feminist scholars have argued that migration decision-making unfolds on a hierarchical playing field in which some members of the family hold more bargaining power and exert more control over such decisions (Agarwal 1997; Lawson 1998; Chant 1998; Hoang 2011). Depending on their gendered identities and positions, it is argued, some individuals have more space to exercise agency, which is defined as ‘the ability to assess one’s options, reflect critically about them, and make choices that allow one to exert some control over one’s life’ (Hirschmann 2003, 36).

Despite their reduced leverage and bargaining power over decisions surrounding migration, evidence for the increasing assertiveness of women has emerged more recently. For example, in a study concerning the impact of motherhood on migration patterns in Bolivia, Bastia (2013) observes that ‘women exert authority against their husbands more easily’ today compared with 30 years ago, though they continue to frame their mobility as a ‘service to their children’. Similarly, in her study of Filipino domestic workers, Paul (2015) argues that, although women are able to migrate as they wish, they are compelled to present themselves as ‘caring mothers and supportive spouses’ rather than as breadwinners to buttress their legitimacy. Several studies from Asia have also found that, in order for women to secure the support of their husbands for their migration, it is necessary to enlist the aid of another female family member who can perform their domestic responsibilities (Hoang and Yeoh 2011; Hochschild 2000; Lam and Yeoh 2018; Parreñas 2001).

Recently an emphasis on intersectionality has also allowed HHS scholars to capture the fluidity of gender identities 'whereby age, sexuality and marital status are recognized as mediating factors' in migration decisions (Hunnicuttt 2009, 558; De Jong 2000; King and Vullnetari 2009). Studying migration decisions in Vietnam, for example, Hoang (2011) deploys a typology of migration decision-making patterns through which she demonstrates that a husband's migration decisions are often free from conflict because of 'the authority accorded to the male breadwinner and the gendered division of labour that is often weighted in their favour'. Women, on the other hand, were either prevented from migrating entirely or their migration decisions were fraught with conflict and heavily dependent upon hierarchies of age and marital status (also see Silvey 2000; Silvey 2004). She argues that, in having no responsibilities for the care of children or spouses, unmarried women seemed to possess greater agency compared with married women, but were nonetheless still compelled to struggle against familial anxieties concerning their sexual honour and promiscuity (Gubhaju and De Jong 2009).

While such studies shed light upon the complex role of intersectional identities within the migration decision-making process, they tend to assume a uniform and static view of the household, which is mostly male-headed and nuclear in composition (Punch 2001, 80). Chant (1998, 5) argues that this narrow focus on the nuclear household as an 'economic reproduction' unit is reductionist in that it is centred exclusively on negotiations surrounding women's reproductive duties as part of their overarching conjugal contracts. In most of these studies, 'gendered identities' are represented as static and decision-making authority is vested in the spouse. Moreover, women's agency is construed, in a rather simplistic manner, as the ability to exert their own will (to migrate) set against the limits of patriarchal authority. In order to make sense of the migration of elderly and widowed women from Armenia, it is necessary to depart from this conception of household and the affiliated notions of gender and agency in two ways.

The first conceptual move involves recognizing the dynamic nature of extended households and 'gendered identities', which are subject to change as a result of developmental events such as the aging of children and parents, the death or migration of family members or marriages into or out of the family – what Huijsmans (2014) refers to as a condition of 'flux'. In employing a 'time-track' approach, for example, Khoo, Platt and Yeoh (2017, 334) have examined how unforeseen changes in the household division of labour such as a husband's sickness or failure of some family members to fulfill their responsibilities can strengthen a woman's bargaining power in the negotiations surrounding migration. While this research has often involved longitudinal studies tracking the 'temporal dimension' of women's

agency as this changes over time in response to household events, it is still useful in the present study as a means of accounting for the summative impact of such events. Among the women I surveyed, families had been reconfigured as a result of male migration and the formation of second families, widowhood, sickness, military service and the movement of brides into the natal household, which, in most cases, expanded the scope of kinship obligations women were expected to meet and superseded their desire to remain within the household. As Huijsmans (2014) argues, the influence of gendered dynamics on mobility decisions cannot be seen as a single, one-off event especially within the context of extended households, where such decisions depend upon what other family members do and do not do in terms of their own gendered and wider kinship obligations.

The second conceptual move requires that we go beyond a focus on conjugal relations in analyzing the gendered norms and intra-household decision-making processes. Given that women often reside with daughters and daughters-in-law, the social relations of gender are also deeply generational and decisions as to who goes and who stays are taken in the context of attributes such as women's age, motherhood and marital statuses. In her study of the interaction between age and gender in the Russian extended family, Utrata (2011, 619) for example points out that grandmothers are often pressured into doing care work on behalf of their adult working daughters because of social expectations concerning young women and their participation in the labour market. Both Utrata and Huijsmans (2013) in his study of the negotiations carried on between older mothers and their migrant daughters in the context of Laos and Thailand, have observed that neo-liberal labour markets privilege younger women without children, leaving older women dependent on the income of their working daughters with little room to refuse providing child-care for their grandchildren. Consequently, Utrata (619) argues that, in the same way that gender requires accountability to 'sex category membership', 'the process of doing age requires accountability to age category (i.e. socially perceived age)', underscoring the significance of age-based subject positions. Yet, equally important are the norms surrounding sexual propriety and marital status, which, in many contexts – including Armenia – are heavily age-dependent and relevant to migrant-selectivity (Silvey 2000; Utrata 2011). These social positions are relational and have clear implications for Armenian women's perceived obligations, objectives and legitimacy in the household.

### **Methodological notes**

My research involved in-depth semi-structured interviews with 25 Armenian migrant women in Turkey and 10 of their family members in Armenia.

Participants were recruited using the snowball method, however, due to the inherent difficulties in reaching irregular migrants, my sample size was limited. Armenian women in Turkey spoke Turkish flawlessly, and, therefore, interviews were conducted in Turkish. The interviews with family members in Armenia were conducted with the help of a translator. Many of these women were from adjacent neighbourhoods in the rural part of Gyumri, which was hit hardest by the 1988 Spitak earthquake and still bears the scars of that trauma – as evidenced by the semi-permanent disaster housing, widespread poverty and the prevalence of widows and widowers. All of the women were mutually acquainted and attested to the vital importance of social networks, which both enabled them to embark upon their journey and to find work once they arrived. When questioned about their choice of Turkey as a destination, most cited the relatively easy visa regulations or proximity and denied that the historic animosities between the two countries had affected their decisions or that the country held any particular relevance for them personally. One of the limitations of my research was that, as a Turkish interviewer, many migrant women and their families may have felt reluctant to share their negative views of my home country and how these impacted their decision to migrate.

My fieldwork in Armenia and Turkey was carried out over a five-month period in 2014, during which time I became a participant observer in the communities, households and workplaces of migrant women. These women were between the ages of 45 and 70 and all were unaccompanied. Among the 25 women, 22 were unmarried widows and 3 left their sick (1) or alcoholic husbands (2) at home. All had adult children, save one, who left her two daughters (aged 15 and 17) in the care of their grandmother and all belonged to large extended families. While only five were responsible for their elderly parents, ten had one son (all married) and one daughter, seven had two daughters, two had three children and three had two sons. In order to better address the intra-household dynamics involved in the decision-making process, I interviewed the family members of ten widowed women in a focus group setting.

### **Women's non-migratory aspirations and the constraints on women's agency**

The material presented in this section addresses the process by which elderly and widowed women became migrants, utilizing the conceptual approach sketched above to understand: (i) women's reluctance to migrate and their understanding of migration as contrary to their interests; (ii) the constraints imposed on the household by the state of flux and the decisions taken by other family members; and (iii) the extension of women's familial obligations

through the marriage of sons/daughters and the expansion of households along with the increasing financial obligations this placed upon them.

Normally in Armenia, where there are sufficient male breadwinners in the household and where women are not widowed themselves, labour migration is seen as the natural province of men, and, therefore, the question of who should migrate rarely becomes problematic. However, the gendered division of labor was significantly different in the households of the women I profiled and this was often related with the state of flux in the household. Women's migration was often the consequence of a husband's death or illness, as well as male military service, which reduced the inflow of financial resources necessary to sustain the extended family. In five other cases, sons were disabled (1) or had issues with alcoholism or substance abuse (4) which prevented them from becoming migrants themselves. In six cases, women chose to migrate because male family members such as brothers or sons had failed to send remittances to the family after establishing second families in Russia. Of the 25 women who had left their husbands behind, all confided in me that migration was not their own choice, but was forced upon them due to the absence of sufficient male earning power. They were unequivocal that if they had been married or their husbands were able to work, they would not have become migrants because it would have been both unnecessary and morally unfitting. One of the respondents defined the role of men and women in a 'normal' Armenian household in the following terms:

When we look at our neighbours and other women of our age, we are jealous. They do not have to go anywhere and they can be with their grandchildren, live at home and enjoy doing their own household work. Armenian men do work worthy of them. They take on the responsibility to put themselves in danger for protecting the family. In our case, however, it is we who take dangerous journeys as if we were men.

This self-identification with domesticity was also manifest in how migrant women perceived the difficulties faced by women whose migrant husbands were away from home. Among migrant women, there was widespread agreement that those women who were left behind also suffered, but, as one respondent stated: 'at least they do not have to compromise their desire to live with family and children and they do not have to endure the loss of self-worth and respect'. For women, therefore, migration was a mark of powerlessness and necessarily entailed 'compromise' with respect to their sense of womanhood and a desirable family life.

This negative view of migration was also a function of how Armenian women defined their own interests within the context of 'inter-generational' contracts in the extended household. Armenian women did not see their migration as emancipatory and this was at least partly because patriarchy

was not seen as something to escape from, mainly due to the benefits and protection it afforded to senior women. Kandiyoti (1988) explains this dynamic in terms of a 'patriarchal bargain', conceiving of women not as pawns in the patriarchal system but rather demonstrating how they can also benefit from some of its rules and norms. From the perspective of these women, migration meant abandoning entitlements that had accrued to them by dint of their seniority, involving, for example, increased authority and control over younger women within the household. Hagop (married –hereon M for married and W for widowed-, age: 54, number of children: 2C) felt that the fruits of old age had been cruelly denied migrant women: 'This should have been the prime of our lives. As younger women, my mother and I had suffered infidelity and mistreatment. Finally, we thought it would be our time to enjoy some quiet and assistance from our girls, but instead we suffered this dark fate'. One of Hagop's sons was conscripted into the army shortly after his marriage in 2011 as part of his obligatory two years service, and the second son (also married) had moved to Yerevan for work, leaving the household bereft of income. Since Hagop's husband had a brain surgery, she became a solo breadwinner for the household. In another example, Narine (W, 57, 2C) was planning to marry her son just before her husband passed away as a result of a heart attack. Her son's marriage was delayed, after which she was forced to migrate because of debts incurred in the course of the wedding ceremony. She characterized her loss in the following terms: 'I was thinking that finally I would have some good days. My son would bring a good bride. My husband and son could have migrated seasonally and I could watch over her and she could have helped with the household work'. As Kandiyoti (1988) argues, a woman's life cycle within the patriarchally extended family is such that the deprivation and hardship that she experiences as a young bride is expected to be eventually superseded by the control and authority she will assume over her own subservient daughters-in-law. For widowed Armenian women, therefore, agency was perceived not in terms of their greater mobility but rather their ability to 'cash in' on the promised rewards of the 'inter-generational contract' and 'marital contracts' of their sons.

While women were often at the mercy of unexpected events, it is also clear from the accounts of many migrant women that their financial woes were often attributable to the irresponsible and self-indulgent behaviour of other men in their families. The patriarchal authority and entitlements afforded to men were not absent from Armenian women's households, but instead of residing with the husband, these were apportioned among a diverse set of male actors. The failure of men to care for their extended households was either the result of substance abuse or their forming second families in Russia. Such changing dynamics according to Huijsmans (2014)

can often reverse the gendered division of labour in the household and usually at the expense of women. Harutya (W, 48, 2C) had a brother who went to Russia to find work and promised to care for her and her two children who lived in the same household together with their parents. Yet, after his marriage with a Russian woman there, he stopped sending money and failed to respond to her repeated inquiries. Hurutya often invoked her father as an example of a 'real man', who, before taking ill, had travelled seasonally to work in Russia, though never forming a second family there. Tanya's (W, 64, 3C) son, on the other hand, refused to work as a migrant because he found construction work too demeaning. Tanya complained that he constantly clashed with his employers, leading the family to regret having invested in his migration journey. In another example, Armine (W, 46, 2C) was forced to migrate because her brother had abandoned his wife and two children. Armine considered this quite 'unmanly' but added 'why would he care what anybody thinks about him? I asked him to return several times, but he says he is happy. We will take him back if he changes his mind. He is a man. His faults are easily forgiven.' For Armine, as for other women, the ability to hold a male family member accountable for his misdeeds was heavily circumscribed.

As Huijsmans (2014) observes, breaking intergenerational and marriage contracts is easier for men since patriarchal norms impose more severe constraints on the ability of women to maneuver the gendered expectations in the household. Chant (2006, 207) argues that, in many households, the fact that women's identity is constructed overwhelmingly as compliant or submissive toward male authority means that women are effectively 'boxed in' in the event that men fail to carry out their own gendered obligations. According to the 'Gender Barometer Survey Armenia: A Sociological Study' conducted in 2015, both men and women in Armenia tend to agree about the importance of institutions such as the family and fatherhood/motherhood; however, this survey tells us relatively little about how men and women construct these norms and the kinds of compromises they are willing to make in order to preserve these institutions. In the negotiations surrounding migration, my findings suggest that men and women do not wield equal power in 'choosing not to comply' with these norms since the cost of reduced social status in the community is higher for women (Gates 2002).

Lastly, it is important to stress that the catalyst for women's migration was often the marriage of a son or daughter, which imposed costs both in terms of the lavish marriage rituals as well as the extended household membership. Half of the migrant women I interviewed stated that the initial impetus for their migration was debts incurred in the course of organizing marriage ceremonies and preparing dowries for their children and grandchildren. In Armenian culture, marriage ceremonies and dowry preparations play

a very significant role in a family's reputation and symbolic capital in the community (Platz 1995), demonstrating their commitment and fidelity to marriage contracts. In Menjívar's and Agadjanians' study of male migration in Armenia (2007), similar monetary investments in celebrations are noted, but, in this more conventional arrangement, women are only responsible for transforming the remittances sent by their husbands into the symbols of cultural dedication, material well-being and success. In the absence of husbands and reduced male income, the gendered division of labour becomes inverted and the self-sacrifice of women is necessary in order to preserve family prestige. As Anahit (W, 59, 2C) puts it: 'I needed to migrate because my son abducted a girl. My son and family should not bear the shame that we cannot celebrate their marriage because of not having enough money.' Gendered obligations and identities are therefore far from being static and are continuously reconfigured within the household, requiring women's self-sacrifice with respect to their desire to remain at home.

### **Hierarchies of mobility among women: the legitimacy of being widowed and elderly**

In this section, I address the construction of legitimacy with respect to migration, both on the part of migrant women themselves and in relation to other women within the extended family. Although the women I spoke with felt a great deal of ambivalence about their status as migrants, they did not contest the responsibilities that were thrust upon them, and this passive acceptance of the migration role derived mostly from their perception of themselves as the sole legitimate candidates for migration as well as their desire to protect other women from the negative consequences associated with female mobility. Migrant women often narrated their journey in very self-explanatory terms – 'who else was there to go' – but it was also the case that this attitude of resignation was deeply embedded in power asymmetries established among women of differing marital statuses, maternal cycles and age-dependent sexual norms. In this respect, migrant women also exerted a level of agency in their mobility decisions as their interests also involved maintaining the traditional roles of other women in the family by assuming the role of a migrant.

The self-legitimacy of widowed women often rested upon the understanding that their migration did not impinge upon the decision-making authority of any husband. In the patriarchal context of Armenia, deference to male authority is a central part of women's identity and an expression of cultural fidelity (Platz 1995). While this authority is represented by the father in the natal household, it is transferred to the husband when women marry. When asked about why, among the other women in their family, they ended up as

migrants, these women often observed that married women had to 'go along' with their husbands' decisions, whereas they had no such feminine obligation. Jasmin (W, 63, 3C), for example, explained that she migrated to Turkey in 1995 to pay for the medical expenses incurred by her daughter-in-law, Narine, who suffered from a debilitating illness and was forced to quit her teaching job in Armenia. At that time, Jasmin's son (Arman) was a taxi driver, but his alcoholism interfered with his work. Jasmin, after working for four years alone in Turkey, was joined by Narine and Arman, who wanted to contribute to the family budget. But, after some time, Arman found working in Turkey in the service of others too demeaning and decided to return to Armenia. Although Jasmin would have preferred that Narine remain in Turkey in order that she could assist her, she explained that her daughter-in-law also had to return home because a woman's place is next to her husband and children. Jasmin, who had lost her husband several years before, had no such commitments, and, although she would have preferred to return home herself, she chose to stay for the sake of preserving the marital ties between her son and daughter-in-law. According to Jasmin, had she not done so, leaving Narine to seek out work instead, this would have been interpreted as a clear defiance of Arman's authority, and most likely would have led to the breakup of the family.

From the perspective of the women I interviewed, young unmarried women were also ill suited to be migrants since this role would necessarily interfere with their preparations for marriage, which are seen as the foremost obligations for young women in Armenia (Ishkanian 2003). Although education is regarded as more important for girls than boys in the country (Gender Barometer Survey Armenia: A Sociological Survey 2015), this is not because it is conceived of as a means for women to attain financial autonomy. On the contrary, as one feminist NGO activist in Armenia explained in an interview, education provides girls with what is known as a 'marriage diploma', which is simply another dowry item that it is hoped will lead to better marriage prospects. Eight migrant women, who had young unmarried daughters between the ages of 15 and 23 did not even consider them as candidates for migration since this would have defeated the purpose of their own migration, which was not strictly to earn money but instead to ensure that their children could 'continue to live a good and traditional life'. In Armenia, migration is widely seen as posing a threat to the chastity of unmarried women, which, as in other contexts, is an important signifier of family honour and defines a woman's worth (Silvey 2000; Dannecker 2005; Oishi 2005). Accordingly, older women conceive of their migration as means of safeguarding the virginity of younger women within the family and thereby protecting the dignity of the family.

While research has shown that a preoccupation with chastity in the sending country often poses a significant obstacle to women's migration,

motherhood and the care of dependent children appears as an even more intractable barrier in the Armenian context. Despite the existence of this deterrent effect elsewhere, there has been a growing trend toward 'motherhood migration' throughout parts of Asia and Latin America (Pratt 2009; Lam and Yeoh 2018; Parreñas 2001). Here, notwithstanding the moral tensions and the difficulty of separation, women leave their children mainly with grandmothers to work abroad; but within the Armenian extended household, the division of labour is somewhat different in character. Here, mothers with dependent children are seen as inhabiting an entirely separate moral space from those with adult non-dependent children. Whereas in the former case, motherhood involves raising children and requires physical proximity to children, in the latter, it involves a shift from child-rearing duties to increasing the prestige of the family and servicing the needs of children and the extended household.

One of the most striking examples of this was Sogik's migration to provide for her daughter, Ankine, and granddaughters. Ankine had lost her husband more recently and her husband's family had perished in the Spitak earthquake of 1988, after which she and her children began living with her mother. Sogik was 70 years old, suffered from hearing impairment and had hardly any energy to do household work. From my perspective, it seemed more appropriate that her daughter should migrate, leaving the children under the care of their grandmother, but Sogik explained that this was impossible since her daughter's 'duty is to take care of her children'. Many migrant women shared Sogik's view that their own daughters should not undertake the migration journey if they had young children themselves. For example, when I queried Armine as to why it was her rather than her brother's wife who had migrated to Turkey, she explained that it was the wife's responsibility to look after her own children, and neighbours would fault her for bad mothering and causing the family to disintegrate in the event that she left, which would also affect the future prospects for her children. As Armine stated: 'Gossip about the mother would harm the dignity of the children.' Location in the motherhood cycle is clearly determinative when it comes to questions of mobility, marking women with adult children and grandmothers as more suitable candidates for migration. As Utrata (2011) argues, 'gender' and 'age' together form an interlocking power structure, and, in Armenia, the fact that women are accountable for age-dependent expectations surrounding motherhood has resulted in a migration pattern wherein some mothers choose to migrate in order to ensure the 'good' mothering of others.

### **Consensus and migration**

Notwithstanding the moral sanction against women's migration from Armenia, the widowed women I interviewed all received the support of their

extended family. This support was closely tied to their social position as mothers lacking dependent children in need of care or as elderly widows – traits that served to effectively de-feminize them and rendered their migration more legitimate in the eyes of family and the wider community. Inasmuch as perceptions of legitimate behaviour are relational and temporal, household fluctuations also served to broaden the basis of consensus for women's migration in some cases.

Armine recounted that when one of her former neighbours, who was a care-worker in Turkey, called to offer her a job, she spoke about it with her father, mother and aunt. Not only did none of her family members object to her leaving but she even received their active support and encouragement. During my visit to Armenia, Armine's mother explained her reasoning in the following terms: 'She is 47. If she were younger, we would not want her to go. But what can she do there as an old woman. This is what we tell to our relatives who sometimes resent us for sending our daughter to Turkey. She is widowed and she is there to collect money for her daughters and dowry. She is not doing anything wrong'. Armine's father explained to me that the recent departure of Armine's brother to Russia and his failure to send remittances also helped to shore up his support for her migration.

Although, in the majority of households, the decision to migrate was non-conflictual, five women recounted that their sons were uncomfortable with their migration initially and expressed reservations about the possibility that they might be mistreated in Turkey, particularly in light of growing numbers of Armenian women in Qatar and Saudi Arabia employed as sex workers. One woman alleviated her son's fears by telling him that 'nobody would want a 65-year old woman. Do not worry' (giggling). Therefore, intersectional hierarchies exempt women from the gender regime which normally constrains their mobility by providing a large base of family support and reducing the conflict surrounding negotiations for these women.

## Conclusion

Focusing on the inner-workings of extended households in Armenia helps us to appreciate how women's mobility is shaped by a complex and fluid set of gendered power dynamics. I approached Armenian women's migration as an empirical puzzle because of the overwhelming preponderance of male migrants from Armenia and I argued that this can only be resolved by adjusting the framework of HSS in order to account for the dynamism – i.e. households in flux – and complexity of gendered identities, obligations and roles in extended households. Such changes are needed if we hope to better understand the varying manifestations of patriarchy and how this shapes, and, in turn, is shaped by other categories such as age, marital and motherhood status.

One important contribution of this approach has been to inform the discussion surrounding women's desire to stay and the question of agency (Tacoli, 1996; Wolf, 1990; Dandler and Medeiros 1988). Typically, studies have focused on those women who wanted to move (or moved) from within traditional households and their agency was thereby conceptualized as the power to overcome the social barriers that have historically associated female mobility with 'the destruction of families, immorality and other negative social consequences' (Hofmann and Buckley 2013, 78). Staying was therefore associated with women's powerlessness or lack of agency (Kabeer 2000a; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994), however research into multi-generational households demonstrates that women often prefer to remain at home because of expectations from intergenerational/marital contracts in which daughters and daughters-in law assume the domestic responsibilities. This underscores the need to pay closer attention to the variability in women's interests and their position within the patriarchal system in order to understand their migration decisions.

The notion of households in flux also reveals the dynamic nature of the constraints and opportunities operating upon women rather than examining them in relation to a fixed and static definition of gendered identity. Migration decisions are taken in the context of events such as the expansion of the household membership through marriage and the abandonment of male wage earners, which intersect with the individual biographies of women. Gender is integral to this process, because, as the Armenian case demonstrates, men have a greater ability to withdraw from their gendered familial duties. Feminine values such as self-sacrifice and submissiveness leave women with little choice but to carry out their expanded kinship obligations and constrained their ability to pursue their gendered interests.

This study has also demonstrated that the parameters of femininity are more complex, age-dependent and relational in extended households versus the traditional nuclear model. This clearly highlights the need for more research into the interlocking dimensions of age and gender (Utrata 2011) in migration decisions both in the nuclear and extended households. Both Utrata (2011) and Huijsmans (2013) have seen grandmothers as having less opportunity to participate in labour markets because of the problem of youth privilege; accordingly, these women 'do gender-age' by caring for their daughters' children in exchange for the economic support they receive from them. In Armenia, unlike Russia and South Asia, the marriage market and the institution of motherhood pose a more formidable barrier to the migration of young women, and this translates into more pressure upon older women to move into international care markets, which seem to be less age-discriminatory in the context of Turkey. The article has also demonstrated that notions of motherhood and sexuality are also more complex than so far

argued in the literature (Parreñas 2001; Bastia 2013) and must be understood with respect to other variables such as age. Seen in this context, migrant women's self-sacrifice should also be seen as a form of agency because one of the primary motives for migrant women concerns with maintaining the social norms surrounding gender and mobility. They reinforce the primary roles for other women in the family as mothers (of dependent children) and housewives, while viewing their own migration as legitimate.

Before concluding this article, it is necessary to stress that, while women's mobility (and the way that they exerted agency) in this case was entirely compatible with patriarchal norms and structures, there is no reason to assume that this will remain so. Scholars of transnationalism have shown that women's migration, even where it is embedded in patriarchal norms initially, might alter them in time (Dannecker 2005; Hoang and Yeoh 2011; Näre and Akhtar 2014; Yeoh and Ramdas 2014). Studies of other societies in which the feminization of migration has been a long-standing pattern, have revealed that women often begin contesting their gendered identities as a result of their encounter with new norms and eventually transmit these to their country of origin. Moreover, social networks which are established to facilitate female migration can expand over time, including more and more women who are different in profile, altering the composition of migrant flows (Silvey 2004). There is a need for further research both on the Armenian context as well as in other places which are experiencing female migration as a new phenomenon in order to better comprehend the temporal effects of transnational experience on intra-household dynamics and gendered norms more broadly.

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### Notes on contributor

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