

CHAPTER

5

SEEKING A FUTURE AND FORTUNE

Partner Selection in a Translocal Space



INTRODUCTION

An officer in the municipality of Dragash claimed in March 2013 that nearly half the marriages registered in the region of Opoja at that time were cross-border marriages. In these marriages, migrants from Opoja living abroad married a partner from their home region, who then prepared for outmigration from Opoja. Not just young women in Kosovo saw cross-border marriages as a means for migration to the West (Europe and overseas) but also young men, who accounted for just under 30 per cent of migrating spouses from Kosovo to Germany in 2015 (Grote 2017: 19). Both men and women lacked other options for remaining abroad long term. In 2010, Kosovo was the third most important country of origin for family-based migration to Germany, with altogether 2,875 migrants, ranking behind Turkey (8,366 migrants) and the Russian Federation (3,646 migrants) (ibid.: 57). Considering Kosovo's small population size (less than 2 million inhabitants compared to more than 80 million in Turkey), family-based migration in Kosovo is more than ten times higher than in Turkey, indicating the great importance for family-based migration in Kosovo. In 2014, the number of family-based migrations from Kosovo to Germany even increased to 3,766 (Grote 2017: 53). In Switzerland, Belgium, the Netherlands and Great Britain, numbers of marriage migrants from Sri Lanka, Pakistan or Morocco are high, reflecting important migrant communities in these states (Straßburger

2001; Charsley 2005; Beck-Gernsheim 2006, 2007; González-Ferrer 2006; Timmerman 2006; Schmidt 2011).

More generally, cross-border marriages are increasingly common because of tightened border regimes and especially since there are hardly any migration alternatives for citizens from non-EU countries. Cross-border marriages are also fostered by globalization and capital flows, by possibilities afforded by electronic communication, and the emergence of what Arjun Appadurai (1996) calls a 'global imagination'. Simultaneously, in mainstream Western discourses, immigrant-related cross-border marriages are often culturalized and problematized as well as gendered. They are often linked to patriarchal family arrangements that may go so far as to undermine the free will of both or at least one of the marriage partners (see Strasser 2009, 2014; Leutloff-Grandits 2014c; Pellander 2015; Bonjour and Block 2016). It is assumed that especially women experience family pressure to marry a country fellow and enter into such cross-border marriages (see for a critical discussion Straßburger 2001; Razack 2004; Timmerman 2006: 125–26; Beck-Gernsheim 2007; Schrötle 2007; Schmidt 2011: 56; Gutekunst 2016); some would even be forced into such marriages.

Scholarly discussions, especially within theories of modernization, have tended to cast 'love' and 'arranged' marriages as dichotomous, especially in terms of gender and family roles, and as indicators of backwardness or progressiveness in an imaginary modernization process. Anthony Giddens (1992: 2–3, 38–41), for instance, links 'arranged marriages' to pre-modern, kin-centred societal arrangements based on economic necessity and male privilege, and 'love marriages' to highly individualized and modernized societies that offer more gender equality.

This chapter will take a differentiated and diachronic perspective that goes beyond such binaries prevalent in mainstream Western discourses influenced by modernization theory, in that it addresses the aspirations and expectations of young women and men seeking a marriage partner across borders, as well as the family's role in it, and relates it to emic discourses and imaginations of modernity and tradition. This chapter argues that cross-border marriages are not necessarily following tradition but represent a strategy to meet the demands of modern, neoliberal times in a globalized world – in a sense to create the best possible conditions for both partners involved. As this chapter shows, in the context of Kosovo, cross-border marriages are often synonymous with good prospects, for the individual partners, but, partly, also for the families involved. Furthermore, the contact between future spouses is often initiated with the help of family members, not least because young people place great trust in their family networks, especially when marrying across borders. Exploring these dimensions, this chapter undertakes an intersectional analysis of the process of partner selec-

tion within cross-border marriages, taking into account gender, geographic location and the role of the family.

The chapter builds on research that has shown that the imaginations and socioculturally influenced desires of those desiring marriage may differ based on gender and geography and may carry paradoxes (Constable 2005: 7; see also Beck-Gernsheim 2011: 60). As Andrea Lauser (2004, 2005) shows in relation to women from the Philippines who came to Germany via marriage, translocal marriages create 'marriage-scapes' across state borders based on social, economic and political relations among people whose positions depend on their level of access to power and their participation in political and societal realms (see also Massey 1991; Appadurai 1996; Constable 2005: 14). As Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (2006: 117) has put it, the geographical distance between the country of origin and the country of migration spurs such marriages. In cross-border marriages among migrants from Pakistan, young men choosing to marry a woman from Pakistan often expect to find a 'more traditional' wife, while women from Pakistan choose a spouse from abroad hoping for a 'progressive' partnership (Charsley et al. 2016: 41). However, such differences in expectations are not bound to 'co-ethnic' cross-border marriages only. Nicole Constable (2005: 3–4) has argued that men in the US want to marry a woman from Asia because they regard them as more family-oriented and more 'traditional' in their values than women in the US, whom they see as materialistic, feminist and career-focused. According to the same study, women in Asia assume American men are more modern and open to emancipated gender roles than local men.

In cross-border marriages that link Opoja villagers to migration contexts, such gendered and locational paradoxes are also in place. But, as I show, they are less clear-cut, not least because men also want to migrate for marriage (Leutloff-Grandits 2014a, 2018, 2019). Often, both partners are aware of the widespread gendered stereotypes and actively adopt strategies to avoid disappointments. Here, class, education and not least family are significant factors prospective marriage partners pay attention to in order to find the right spouse. But family also often facilitates the search for suitable spouses and creates more security for migrating partners and the family as a whole.

In the search for the right partner, the family takes on the role of intermediary and caretaker, and the marriage often meets both individual as well as family aspirations. As the strict lines between 'arranged' and 'love marriages' are becoming blurred, the varied roles of the family and the emancipatory aspirations to reach a greater potential for individualization, self-realization and freedom of choice within cross-border marriages are coming to the fore.

The first section describes the forms and meanings of spousal choice in the Opoja region in the past and in the present. It links the different types of marriage unions to family and society against the backdrop of profound soci-

etal changes that have altered the scope of marriage perspectives. Along the lines of gender, generation and geographic location as intersectional analytical categories, the next sections of the chapter describe the different motives of young people and their families for opting for a cross-border marriage.

PARTNER SELECTION IN OPOJA, PAST AND PRESENT

In order to understand today's cross-border marriages linking Opoja to migration contexts, and the logic and meaning of the family and family-based care in spouse selection, it is important to take a diachronic picture and consider the rapid changes that took place in rural Opoja after the war. By observing the gender relations and marriage norms in the villages of Opoja as well as listening to stories about engagements and weddings, I realized that partner selection has been approached in multiple ways since the war and continues to undergo deep transformations today. These changes are blurring the patriarchal marriage pattern that had been prevalent in rural Kosovo and giving more agency to prospective spouses and their aspirations.

As described by Janet Reineck (1991) and confirmed by my village informants, in the 1990s and earlier, spouses were chosen by parents without really consulting the young couple involved. Commonly, female relatives of the groom's family, who according to the pattern of village exogamy typically married into families from other villages, were asked to look for a match. Once a suitable partner had been found, the next step was for a *msit*, a matchmaker, in most cases a male relative, to approach the potential bride's family to ask for her hand in marriage. At the official betrothal ceremony held to seal the engagement, which involved only the men in both families, a white towel bearing the embroidered embellishments of the bride (locally referred to as *mahrma* or *peshqir*) was handed over as a sign of consent by the bride and her family. As Janet Reineck (1991: 65) wrote about for the 1980s, it was considered shameful (*marre*) for the young, betrothed couple to interact before the wedding. Sometimes, girls were too frightened to speak with or even look at their prospective husband before marriage, fearing for their reputation. This corresponded to the favoured qualities attributed to young marriageable Opoja women, like being morally 'pure' – for which virginity was a paramount measure – as well as being hard working and docile, in order 'to provide an extra arm for work, to ensure that there are enough women to see the needs of men, guests and aging parents, and to increase the size and strength of the family by creating an additional nuclear unit' (ibid.: 66).

At the time of my fieldwork, young and old in Opoja regarded such marriage practices as outdated when speaking to me. Several middle-aged and

older women recounted their own negative, sometimes even traumatic, experiences during this phase of their lives. One middle-aged man noted rather critically that marriage for young women previously meant that heaven would descend on earth. He added that he was glad that people in Opoja, across all generations, now view the increased freedom in choosing a partner and the opportunity to engage in a romance with the partner before and during marriage as an improvement and key to greater marital stability and happiness.

However, when I asked about the percentage of 'arranged' marriages (*martesa me msit*) and 'love' marriages (*martesa me dashni*) in Opoja, villagers and migrants typically gave me different numbers. On the process of finding a spouse in Opoja, some stressed the importance of family involvement, arguing that many young people in Opoja sought the assistance of a *msit*, a marriage broker. Others highlighted the value of individual opinions, desires and prospects of young people, pointing out that arranged marriages are rare now. I realized only later that my question derived from widespread Western discourses presupposing a strict dividing line between love and arranged marriages, and my informants had played along, positioning themselves in favour of one or the other. That categorization, however, blended out widespread hybrid forms of marriages in the translocal space that entail both romance *and* family involvement.

Rethinking this in the turn of my fieldwork, I realized that family counselling continues to play a key role in spousal selection and marriage decisions in Opoja, especially for cross-border marriages, and that many traditional elements of the engagement ritual still exist, but their meaning has changed somewhat. For example, at wedding festivities in neighbouring villages, mothers of teenage sons perform 'kin work' (Di Leonardo 1987) to learn more about suitable young women who might be a good match for their son – if he agrees to parental involvement. As in former times (Reineck 1991: 82), parental involvement also involves contacting sisters or aunts abroad who may know of the prospective young person and his/her character and family background. Yet, the final decision is in the hands of the potential partners, often after several private meetings arranged by family members in 'neutral' places, away from the eyes of the village, such as at a restaurant in a neighbouring town.

The young couple's decision to marry is then often followed by the traditional engagement ceremony in the house of the bride, which is generally attended by men from both families. However, the traditional aspects of the ceremony are complemented by some new rituals that emphasize the couple's romantic relationship. Often the young couple visits a restaurant the next day, where they have their picture taken, and then meet regularly until the wedding day. In short, family involvement is central and builds the ini-

tial basis for the relationship, but it does not preclude romance between the partners ahead of the wedding. Similar observations about the importance of romance in so-called ‘arranged marriages’ have been made by Kimberly Hart (2007) with respect to a Turkish village in the arid and mountainous Yuntdağ in Western Turkey in 2000 and 2001, by Assa Doron (2012: 429) for India, and by Alison Shaw and Katherine Charsley (2006) for Pakistan. In scientific discourse, this hybrid form of love and arranged marriage has also been called a ‘love-arranged marriage’ in order to stress that it combines independent selection with accountability to the family (Doron 2012; Hyndman-Rizk 2016).

In a growing number of marriages in Opoja, the initial contact of the partners was not arranged by family members, as the young prospective partners fell in love outside the family context. Nevertheless, some patriarchal gender norms still exist, and parents of schoolgirls in particular tend to be critical of privileging independent choice and encouraging romance because of the risk that the relationship will become public knowledge, gossip will ensue, and the girl and her family will suffer disgrace if a wedding does not take place. Based on these considerations, young people keep their relationship secret for as long as possible. Once the love relation becomes public, the young people often feel pressured to formalize their relationship, and families often resort to the tradition of involving a *msit* to facilitate an engagement contract between the two families. For example, Desa and her boyfriend had managed to keep their relationship secret for some time, with all the thrills that came with it, but she decided to disclose her relationship to her mother after Desa’s eldest male cousin found out about it and began to pressure her to give up the relationship. As expected, her parents wanted her to marry her boyfriend as soon as possible. The engagement ceremony then largely resembles those where family counselling plays a central role, to the extent that it is often difficult for those outside the immediate family circle to discern how the selection was made.

Moreover, one may wonder whether the distinction between the Western categories of ‘love’ and ‘arranged’ marriage is still helpful; my interlocutors were unclear about this. I met a young woman who insisted that her marriage was based on a family arrangement – with a *msit* – although I had heard from others that the couple had been dating long before the families got involved. Others insisted their relationship started as a love connection, although the initial encounter was arranged by the family or occurred in a family setup. Instead of differentiating between ‘love’ and ‘arranged’ marriages, which happen to represent opposite poles in the Western imagination, it is more accurate to differentiate between a ‘family framed encounter’, deriving from meetings arranged by parental friends or family gatherings, and an ‘individually framed encounter’, where spouses meet without family assistance at

diverse venues, like schools, clubs or bars (Topgüil 2015). As far as family involvement is concerned, the question is not whether the family becomes involved but how or at what point in time. The location and the framing of the initial meeting assumes greater importance than the involvement of the family per se.

The modalities of spousal search are also influenced by certain social features and gendered and educational positionings within the village and the family. Young women with merely a primary education tend to stay at home once they reach the age of sixteen and are frequently married off with the help of the family, as they have limited opportunities to meet someone on their own. The higher the level of education or the longer they attend school, the more options, and opportunities, open up to meet and interact with others of the same age, and the more likely they are to fall in love with a schoolmate that might lead to marriage. Especially young university students, who leave the village for higher education, are often expected to find a marriage partner independently. At the same time, marriages based on a family-assisted encounter are not necessarily related to education level. Some educated young men also deliberately decide to involve relatives in the partner search. Furthermore, a family-assisted marriage does not necessarily imply more traditional gender roles in the spousal relationship, as in some of these marriages husbands support their wives' ambition to take up employment.

IMAGINATIONS AND STRATEGIES OF CROSS-BORDER MARRIAGES FROM THE VILLAGE PERSPECTIVE

Individual motives that influence marriage migration are, needless to say, very complex. They are guided by individual goals and family considerations, by the prospect of love and romance, and are spurred by imaginations about life within a cross-border marriage. Furthermore, they relate to socio-economic, legal and historical frames both on the macro- and micro-level. For prospective marriage migrants from Opoja, these include the gap between economic opportunity structures in rural Kosovo and abroad, restrictions within migration regimes of Western European countries, and gender roles and family values, which, however, may differ not only between Opoja and migrants' destinations but also from family to family. Moreover, individuals follow their own logic and have their own aspirations. Instead of generalizing the perspectives and views presented here, I outline various considerations influencing marriage choices to show that individuals involved in cross-border marriages assume various positions based along gender, generational and geographic lines.

Women's Perspectives

Young women inclined to marry someone abroad often link that to their desire to create material prosperity, comfort and a better future for their children – that is, good schooling, healthcare system and state social security. That a ‘brighter future’ is a common reason for migration from a poorer country to a more prosperous one, also through marriage, is substantiated in the studies conducted by Arjun Appadurai (1996, 2004), Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (2006: 117; 2011: 62) and Christiane Timmerman (2006). In Opoja, young women sometimes also hope to achieve more individual freedom, take up employment or even pursue their education and career or financial goals – a life that is difficult to achieve in Opoja but is considered ‘modern’. Equally important is the desire to cultivate a harmonious partnership with their prospective spouse and personally contribute to the household income. The young women hoping to marry abroad see it as a reaction to the limited economic opportunities in Opoja and the prevailing patriarchal gender relations that firmly ‘cement’ the woman’s place as in the home, despite the significant strides made in Opoja in the post-war period. Based on media reports and narratives from migrants, young women learn that elsewhere it is possible to leave traditional roles and enjoy more freedom (see Chapter 1), which motivates their desire to marry a migrant. Again, this is not exclusive to women from Opoja in Kosovo but is also described as the case for women from India (Bhalla 2014) and more generally for Asian women, who prefer to marry a groom in the United States (Constable 2005).

A case in point is Besa, who stayed home after completing secondary school at eighteen as her parents could not afford university education but also did not want her to work. Although she considered herself too young for marriage, she said that marrying abroad would allow her to leave village life, which she found restrictive. Marrying a young man from a neighbouring village was out of the question for her. If she had wanted to, she said she could have had many opportunities to enter a relationship with a handsome and intelligent boy in school but had been put off by a close friend. This friend had married a schoolmate with whom she had fallen in love but found her marriage life boring and felt that marriage had ensured her life was over before it had even begun. In other words: her best friend did not have a fulfilling life even though her marriage was based on ‘love’. She was a housewife who had to obey traditional gender norms, which meant accepting that her place was in the home. Although she had excelled in school and her parents had always emphasized that they would have had financed her studies, when she married, she had no choice but to move into her husband’s house, where she spent most of her time with her in-laws. Her position was further cemented when she gave birth to her first child a year after marriage. Given her

best friend's experience, Besa was sure that this was not what she wanted for herself. She felt that marrying abroad would give her more opportunities for entering a 'modern' partnership and the life she aspired to. She counted on the support of her family in finding potential marriage partners. The referral of potential marriage candidates by a relative or acquaintance from abroad with roots in Opoja represented a safer and more promising path for her than contacting men via Facebook without family involvement.

Besa was not alone in her opinion about the potential of cross-border marriages and the importance of family as a resource in this matter. For young women who want to marry abroad, the prospect of entering a serious relationship with a 'complete stranger' also comes with risks: fake identities, empty promises about a better life abroad, or worse human trafficking and forced prostitution, all of which have been amply covered in national media in Kosovo (for women from neighbouring Albania in Great Britain, see Schwandner-Sievers (2010)). Aware of such risks, young women in Kosovo partly rely on family counselling, especially for cross-border marriages, and welcome the advice of family members who have information on the prospective grooms and their families. While social media has become a valuable resource to identify potential grooms and enter into more intimate conversations and possibly a romance, it is used in combination with family counselling (Doron 2012; Krasniqi 2017). As Kimberly Hart (2011) also points out in relation to young women in rural parts of Western Turkey, who aimed to leave the village via marriage to achieve 'modernity' – in this case especially migration into urban centres, family counselling became important for getting to know the prospective spouse. The 'traditional' practice of family counselling thus serves to find a spouse who is open to a 'modern' partnership and who can provide the aspired future.

Young women also invest time in checking out the family of the prospective groom and the household arrangements. This enables them to scope out their future role in the household, as young women are aware of the dangers of a possible mismatch. They assume that not all migrants abroad live what they call 'modern lives' and seek gender-egalitarian partnership roles but still pursue family models that can be described as conservative or patriarchal. They are partly convinced that many migrants expect a bride from Opoja to be submissive and not well educated. Shpresa, aged twenty and engaged to a man in Opoja, said: 'They take a bride because they think that she is stupid.' They thus find it necessary to discern if the groom is looking for an obedient wife or, even worse, if parents want to find a submissive wife ready to serve all household members.

Adelina, aged thirty, had got engaged to a migrant in Germany, introduced to her by a relative, and had had similar worries to those of other young women in Opoja when faced with a choice of a marriage partner

from abroad. She had turned down several marriage proposals that did not meet her expectations. She wanted to marry someone from abroad who was family-oriented but not strongly influenced by his parents, work-shy or a responsibility dodger. She wanted to learn German in order to take up a job and thus contribute to the household income, and she hoped for better educational and professional opportunities for her children. The proposal that finally met her expectations was from an Opoja migrant in his late thirties running a successful business abroad. She outlined that they would be able to establish a nuclear household because he had no relatives abroad, which meant that Adelina would not have to live with his parents or fear their influence on her. She was also happy he was not wearing earrings – which in her view was a sign of extreme Westernization – or a beard, which she associated with Islamic fundamentalism. Following a few meetings between the families organized during the migrant's home visit in Opoja, both agreed to get engaged. Her firm determination to adhere to her selection criteria allowed Adelina to develop a certain degree of agency by rejecting proposals that did not correspond to her ideas of a life abroad.

The fear that men's (and their families') aspirations might not match those of prospective brides who aspire to migrate is, however, not limited to Kosovo-Albanian co-ethnic cross-border marriages. Nicole Constable (2005: 3–4) has shown that so-called mail-order bridal agencies in the US that broker marriages between white American men and young women from the global Southeast present women as materialized objects, only a mouse-click away, waiting to fulfil the patriarchal phantasies of 'white' men – often to the distress of the women expecting more emancipated partnerships. But instead of blaming Western men for using marriage migration to establish their power over non-Western women and criticizing such agencies for presenting women as objects, public Western discourses often accuse the women from poorer countries of not marrying for love but using marriage migration to gain upward mobility. Here, female agency is seen in a negative light, as misleading towards their partners (Beck-Gernsheim 2006).

Given the objectification of women by the commercial agencies, women from Opoja have good reason to avoid them and prefer using family networks to help them find a suitable match. Of course, mistakes are still possible. But even within these scenarios, women are not necessarily victims but can develop a certain kind of agency. Valbona, for example, got engaged through family networks to a man in Austria, who she thought would support her aspirations. But after a while of communicating to him over distance, she realized that her fiancé was under parental influence and not supportive of her plans and so she chose to dissolve the engagement. Her fear of entering a marriage that would subordinate her to her in-laws and that would possibly hinder the development of an intimate partnership was central to her decision.

Still, not all young women approach a potential engagement with as much clarity and certainty as Adelina and Valbona but rather prefer to follow their parents' advice. However, in this case it may be that young women may not openly address their objections to a marriage if there is psychological, social or emotional pressure from parents and other family members to get married. The line between coercion and pressure and choice and consent remains blurred (Straßburger 2007; Riaño and Dahinden 2010: 34–36). The ability to voice objections to marriage also depends heavily on whether people have access to other alternatives and exit options. In Opoja, alternatives and exit strategies are limited for women because women (and men) are expected to marry sooner rather than later, and family influence on marriages is still relatively strong.

Men's Perspectives

Many young men also seek to marry migrants from the region to build a better future abroad. In light of the gendered expectation that men will take on the breadwinner role in the family, not to mention the high unemployment rate and low earnings potential all over the country, economic aspirations are more of a reason to marry abroad than they are for women. This means that young men with or without good educational qualifications link marriage abroad with better earning opportunities. This is also nurtured by the culture of male labour migration to Western European countries, which was widespread from the 1960s to the 1990s before such pathways were closed. As such, the lines between marriage migration and labour migration and even educational migration are far from clear-cut, although each type of migration is seen to represent a different category of migrants within immigration countries.

The economic aspirations of prospective marriage migrants, however, also differ. Christiane Timmerman (2008: 590) discusses young prospective grooms who blot out negative factors linked to migration (in this case from Turkey to Flanders), which is also the case for young men from Opoja. While some are willing to take up 'any kind of job', others hope to be able to continue their studies abroad after marriage and receive a well-paid job thereafter. To that extent, they link class expectations to migration. Twenty-eight-year-old Alban, for example, one of six siblings in a family that is well-educated and ambitious, but moderately prosperous, had finished his BA with the best grades. Yet he was convinced that the culture of clientelism and corruption in Kosovo would make it impossible for him to get a job. This propelled him to continue his education abroad. His aspiration to study abroad seemed more feasible when a relative introduced him to a young woman living abroad, which blossomed into a romance, and they soon agreed to marry.

Family considerations also play a role. Young men could be expected to establish a nuclear household with their wife after migration, as it is against the Kosovo-Albanian tradition of patrilocality to move into the household of the bride's parents. In Opoja, most young men remain in the household of their parents and unmarried siblings or of their married brothers and their families owing to financial reasons, until they can build a new house (or several of them), likely in proximity of their parents. Until then, they have to adhere to the authority of the household head. Young men regard this as problematic in part, as the life worlds of young people and their parents have diverged, especially with the use of electronic media, and they would therefore prefer to establish an independent household. For that reason, they maintain that marriage migration offers greater independence and choice to build their lives, often even with the financial support of the bride's parents.

Driton, a seventeen-year-old pupil who was in the eleventh grade at the secondary school in Dragash, is a case in point. His moderate grades and the considerable time spent on social media and computer games occasionally led to conflict with his father, who criticized him for wasting time and called him a 'Facebook junky'. If Driton was to marry a woman from a neighbouring village, he would remain in his parental household, as the house is new and large enough to accommodate another married couple. He would also likely remain financially dependent on his father. While his father had managed to obtain a secure position in public administration, Driton had no prospect of employment. For Driton, therefore, marriage migration was associated with the hope of becoming independent and – if everything went well – even supporting his family financially and committing to his parents.

The examples of Alban and Driton show that also young men associate cross-border marriages with a vision of a better future abroad. This includes starting a family and securing economic prospects to build a professional future abroad. However, there are not only self-centred reasons for wanting to marry abroad. Many young men also hope to be able to fulfil caregiving obligations expected of sons, in terms of financially supporting elderly parents (and siblings) living in Kosovo, where state social security is at a rudimentary level (see Chapter 3). Thus, cross-border marriage is associated with the hope of combining gendered notions of family care with the creation of social security for oneself and the realization of one's own personal aspirations.

Parental Perspectives

Parents who do not see good prospects for their children, especially sons, in Opoja, or more generally in Kosovo, often support marriage migration. This sometimes also comes with the realization that migration – especially of sons – can contribute to the social security of the family in Opoja, as par-

ents see their sons as traditional caretakers, especially in financial terms, and providers of old-age social security (see Chapter 4). Driton's mother Feride commented on the question of her son's possible outmigration, making it clear that she supported his plans and was already in touch with relatives abroad who could propose a suitable partner for him. Instead of worrying that the departure of her only son would mean that they as parents would remain alone in the village, Driton's mother jokingly explained that since she and her husband were still young, they looked forward to some time to themselves. She told me that her son's plan to live abroad suited her well, as she planned on visiting him abroad regularly. She imagined her daughter-in-law as a modern and self-confident woman from Opoja, embodying the ideals she had not been able to live up to in Opoja. She would even be willing to 'learn' from such a woman. With the prospect of marriage migration of young men, mothers like Feride, who in their own marriage life had to be obedient and submissive to their mothers-in-law and generally show respect and devotion to their in-laws, were ready to change their attitude towards their daughters-in-law and were prepared to open new pathways for intergenerational relations. Likely, their children's prospect of a better, more secure future abroad inspired them (see also Chapter 3). The readiness to change also indicates the wish to remain united – even if under different circumstances. As Peggy Levitt (2009: 1232) writes, 'Preserving the group and fulfilling obligations across borders require a re-scripting of ritual and responsibility and subtle shifts of power. Most families, and communities in general, want to remain cohesive.'

Daughters' intentions to marry abroad, however, are more controversial, partly because of concerns about their safety and well-being but also because the benefits of their migration are smaller for the family, as daughters are not expected to send remittances (see Chapter 4). Nevertheless, many parents seem comfortable with the prospect of their daughter's outmigration. In the patrilocal tradition, it is common for daughters to leave their parental home after marriage. Although marrying abroad involves bridging a greater geographic gap, new communication technologies and better travel options mean more ways of keeping in touch (see Chapter 1).

Many middle-aged and elderly mothers, having experienced sharing their households with their parents-in-law whilst their husbands were abroad, envision a more fulfilling married life for their daughters. Many mothers responded with a rather relaxed attitude to the question of whether their daughters could become alienated from their own natal family and culture if they moved abroad. Some argued that the lifestyles of the young women did not change considerably abroad, for migrants abroad were even more 'conservative' than Opoja villagers. Others argued that they wanted a 'modern' lifestyle for their daughters. This points to the rather diverse imagina-

tions about the life of young Opoja women after joining their respective husbands abroad, and more generally the awareness of the diversity of lifestyles abroad, and the possibility to choose someone with a suitable family background. In short, many parents are often optimistic about the prospect of their daughter seeking a better future abroad through marriage, but they also hope that this will create a new, supportive family bond across borders.

IMAGINATIONS AND STRATEGIES OF CROSS-BORDER MARRIAGES FROM THE MIGRANT'S PERSPECTIVE

Having discussed why young people in Opoja choose to marry someone abroad, I now turn to Opoja migrants in Germany, Switzerland, and Austria and their reasons for seeking a spouse from within the 'home context' of Opoja. However, it must be prefaced that not all migrants are willing to do that. Some also opt for partners residing in another region of Kosovo, and an increasing number chooses a Kosovar migrant living abroad with whom they share similar experiences of socialization. Still others opt for a non-Albanian partner – either a migrant from a different country than Kosovo or someone from the majority society. In the two latter cases, it is likely that spouses get to know each other in venues like school, clubs or bars, without the involvement of family members. Ceren Topgül (2015) shows that about four-fifths of second-generation migrants from Turkey in Switzerland, men and women alike, meet their partner in 'individually framed encounters', and we can assume the same tendency among migrants from Kosovo in Western European countries. Still, the parents remain influential, as the family matters in marriage choices. This is, however, not only a non-Western or migrant phenomenon. Also in Western societies children internalize parental expectations, and many young people seek to align their marriage choices with their family values (Ruenkaew 2003: 37). Still, in cross-border marriages, the involvement of the family seems to be especially important. How the embeddedness of migrants and their children in multiple contexts shifts the intersectional constructions of gender, class and nationality shall be discussed in the following sections.

Perspectives of Male Migrants

Male migrants who had married a woman from Opoja had not necessarily planned to marry someone from their home region but fell in love during their holidays in Opoja. Others again deliberately decided to marry a partner from their home region. Several of them conceded that their interest in their 'own culture' and in marrying a woman from Opoja had developed only at

a later stage, and that before seeking to marry and start a family with a partner from the 'home context' they had had other love relationships with non-Albanian women in the country of immigration, which had not led to marriage, owing – as they said – to various reasons. Two male migrants recounted negative encounters with their girlfriends' parents, who suspected them of marrying for papers only, or perceived their background as not 'appropriate'. Some of my interlocutors also cited problems with their own parents, who wanted them to marry an Albanian partner – with a Muslim background – and ideally from their home region. In extreme cases, they even pressured them to end a relationship that did not meet these requirements. Indeed, when migrants entered into a serious relationship with a woman abroad and started to think about marriage, the nationality and religion of the chosen partner seemed to play a role, especially for the parents' generation. Some migrants who married a partner from Opoja were also clearly beyond the average local marriage age (generally under thirty years, even for men, but on the rise in recent years).

Some male migrants who had rarely visited Opoja and had not maintained close contact with family members there sometimes started to rediscover their 'roots' and the associated moral values of family and partnership once they approached 'marriage age' or when they faced a specific challenge to their status within the receiving society. As described by Gaby Straßburger and Can Aybek (2015), a low social and economic positioning abroad might contribute to their openness to a spouse from Opoja, where their status as a migrant seems valuable (see also Beck-Gernsheim 2006: 122–23).

Some told me that marrying a woman from the majority society was not an option because they perceived the gender norms and marriage ideals in the country of immigration as too liberal and the women as too self-confident, independent and 'selfish', chasing individual fulfilment. They worried that these characteristics would lead to marital conflicts and even to divorce, while they regarded women socialized in Opoja as better behaved, morally 'purer' and more family-oriented. Among other things, they believed that Opoja women would 'preserve their virginity', and thus their purity, innocence and self-restraint, while they suspected women in the receiving society of having engaged in premarital sex and considered them 'impure' or even 'sluts'. Such contrasting views about women from the home region and those in the immigration country can also be found among Turkish migrants in Austria (Six-Hohenbalken 2009: 242), Germany (Straßburger 2001; Beck-Gernsheim 2006: 124) and Belgium (Timmerman 2006). The fact that in rural Kosovo 'virginity' is assumed, not least because of the strict social control based on patriarchal relations to which girls and young women are subjected once they enter puberty (see Chapter 1), is less critically discussed.¹ At the same time, some migrants who endorse such pa-

triarchal gender relations and associate them with rural Kosovo react with some astonishment to the ongoing and visible change in gender relations in Kosovo, including in rural areas, and in some cases reject girls in Opoja who dress as 'liberally' as the women in 'the West'.

Such dichotomized views about women in geographically distant places have also been observed by Charsley (2005) for British Pakistanis. According to this study, Pakistani migrants in Great Britain complain that a 'typical' young British Pakistani woman 'wants to go out all the time, might be loud and argumentative, 'does fashion' and might have indulged in immoral activities', while girls from the home country were 'quiet, co-operative, sheltered', which make them 'a good mother' (ibid.: 386). Similarly, migrants seeking a wife from Opoja compare Kosovo Albanian women abroad with those who live in Opoja. The locational gap of being 'here', in the receiving context, and 'there', in Opoja, seems to be much more important to them than nationality or religion in attributing specific characteristics to women. This shows that migrants also tend to assign 'culture' to a geographically bounded space – a practice that is widespread in Western European countries, but where the Western position is always seen as the superior and most advanced. Migrants thus remain within this system of categorization but partly turn it around for themselves by idealizing the patriarchal gender relations that they believe prevail 'back home'.

My interlocutors also emphasized the importance of the ability of their prospective wife to speak the Albanian language and be aware of the local traditions, so that their children would one day know 'where they are from and where they belong'. For some, competence in the Albanian language was important for interacting with family members – in the immigration context as well as during the annual visits to Opoja. This does not mean that prospective husbands are not willing to choose a wife themselves. Rather, it means that they also want to base their decision on the compatibility with and preferences of their parents, thereby showing loyalty to them and maintaining family unity (Beck-Gernsheim 2006: 120–21).

The experiences of these young migrants during their holiday visits to Opoja tended to have a positive impact on their attitude towards marrying a partner from home. Many who migrated as children or as teens were also influenced by their experiences in the early years of childhood (see Chapter 4). As the young men often visit Opoja for only a few weeks at a time, they often turn to relatives or friends to help them find a partner. Fully aware of the prevailing 'Western' discourses that portray cross-border marriages as arranged or even forced by family networks and as an expression of traditional patriarchal gender relations, Gazi, a migrant in his mid-thirties, explained to me that marriage counselling is necessary – that is, neither negative nor atavistic – because migrants like him do not have the opportunity to find the

right woman during a short vacation. They rely on family to arrange meetings with potential marriage candidates, which may happen in a café-bar in the city of Prizren or another place outside the region, away from the gaze of villagers who would analyse every interaction.

However, as said, the intention to choose a wife from the home region is by no means representative of all migrants from Kosovo. Moreover, as also observed in other migrant communities (Beck-Gernsheim 2006: 120–21; Neubauer and Dahinden 2012; Topgül 2015: 53), men may be pressured by their parents to marry a 'good match' from their home village and thus conform to parental expectations of gender, family and partnership relationships. Yet, most young men I met mentioned such pressures only indirectly, or they seemed to have balanced their own wishes and expectations with those of their parents. Anna Neubauer and Janine Dahinden (2012) also argue that men are much less likely to see themselves as victims of so-called forced marriages than women because they are more interested in presenting themselves as self-determined and capable of taking action and often also have more leeway within a relationship than women (see Chapter 7).

Men may also rebel against the pressure of their parents – although this can lead to strong tensions within the family. A case in point is twenty-five-year-old Endrit, who agreed to meet a woman his father had proposed to him during one of his visits to Opoja. Without knowing it beforehand, he was solemnly betrothed during another visit to the family of the woman, and he could not refuse, because that would have meant publicly contradicting his father and bringing shame on the family. Endrit's family left for Austria again and frequently sent costly presents to the fiancée – mainly clothes (*teshat*) in 'traditional' style and 'modern' evening dresses, as well as the customary gold jewellery, the costs of which ran up to a few thousand euros. One year after the engagement, Endrit finally built up the courage to speak to his father and dissolved the engagement from abroad, explaining he did not want a future he had not created for himself. Endrit's relationship to his father suffered a further setback as Endrit's family was forced to pay a financial compensation to the bridal family. When I met him about two years after the dissolution of the engagement, Endrit still had a fraught relationship with his father, to whom (and to all inhabitants of Opoja) he ascribed negative stereotypes about Albanians – akin to discourses he likely himself had been exposed to in the immigration county.

Marriage preferences are also related to the educational level of migrants. Some better educated migrants emphasized that they did not want to 'start from scratch' again and assist their partner with the language or with navigating the new environment – therefore, they preferred to marry someone living abroad. Others chose a woman from Opoja but deliberately tried to avoid a stereotypical patriarchal migrant marriage and stressed to me that

their own marriage was 'modern' and based on a 'love relationship'. Wanting their wife to be emancipated, some look for an educated young woman or someone seeking further education, especially language training, and usually encourage her to take up employment abroad.

In short, migrant men who marry a partner from Opoja act within the framework of certain gender perceptions, some of which are prevalent in their own migrant community and some of which relate to prevailing Western discourses about gender and family relations as perceived in migrant communities. While it is common for men who want to marry a woman from Opoja to expect these women to conform to certain patriarchal norms, this is not a motive for marriage for all of them.

Perspectives of Female Migrants

Like many young male migrants who marry a woman from Opoja, young women who are second-generation migrants or had moved from Opoja as adolescents and who decided to marry someone from the 'home region', or at least from Kosovo, cited family, language and culture as their main reasons. Again, their gendered positionings within families that followed certain patriarchal family norms were also crucial. Some spoke about parents who monitored their movements and limited their social contact, wanting them to marry a compatriot and ideally someone from their home region. Still, most young women did not always comment negatively on this form of control, arguing that what they valued was that such a union held the family together.

Thirty-five-year-old Dafina, whose father had been one of the few labour migrants to bring over his wife in the 1980s, was born in Germany. Growing up with a father who 'strictly practised Albanian culture', as she put it, she was not allowed to go out like many of her classmates. She lived in two different communal and moral settings simultaneously, making it difficult for her to fit in easily. Her parents would also not accept a non-Albanian partner. When she met her husband on one of their annual visits to relatives, they liked each other from the start, and she was able to reconcile her family's wishes with her own aspirations. He was from the same region as her parents and had come to Germany as a refugee. In contrast, her younger brother, who married a German woman, had strained relations with his parents. As his wife does not speak Albanian, he also lost ties to his 'Albanian culture', a turn that Dafina did not approve of.

Nevertheless, not all young women from Opoja living abroad are positive about or approve of (family framed) cross-border marriage. Like men, women may feel pressured or even forced to conform to their parents' marriage norms. Some agree to a marriage proposal to avoid conflict with their

parents, while others decide against family counselling, even if it means going against their parents and thus creating potential family discord.

However, marriage to a man from the country of origin does not mean that young women want to be subordinate to their future partner. Several teenage girls I spoke with had already been living abroad for several years and had consolidated their position in their own families and in the host society. They were self-confident and had gained enormous life experience by offering valuable support to their parents and younger siblings. Dafina had learned German at an early age and supported her parents while growing up because her mother had never really learned German. Because of her language skills, she always had more family responsibilities than other girls her age. She assisted her parents in administrative matters and with hospital and doctor visits. At the age of sixteen, she had also helped female relatives give birth in the delivery room by translating. Young women like Dafina who moved abroad as young children or were born there are often shaped by their supportive role in the family. This has made them family-oriented while giving them the confidence to pursue professional qualifications and possibly even a career.

When choosing to marry a man from Opoja, some migrant women seek partners who are educated or skilled enough to be willing to continue with their educational pursuits in the future. Twenty-five-year-old Drita, who followed her parents to Germany at the age of thirteen, wanted to find a husband on her own. Still, her parents did not close the door to their relatives and acquaintances who sent marriage proposals from Opoja. However, they declared that their daughter was still too young to marry and postponed the decision. When Drita first met her husband, Alban, at a family gathering in Opoja, one of the things that attracted her was that Alban had finished his studies in Prishtina and wanted to continue studying in Germany. She told me that Alban was different from the 'average' Kosovo-Albanian living in Western Europe who according to her view takes up a blue-collar job, does not integrate easily and embraces a patriarchal culture.

As Stefan Wellgraf (2011) has shown in his ethnographic research on the intersection of migration, class and masculinity in a secondary school in Berlin with a high proportion of pupils with migration background, young and socially deprived male migrants often adopt a 'macho habitus' in order to achieve a certain status in an environment in which they have little to no opportunities for social advancement. This, however, does not necessarily meet with the approval of female classmates and young women, who are expected to take a subordinate position and whose behaviour is controlled and evaluated by men. Young migrant women from Opoja, like Drita, hope for social advancement in the migration context and a more emancipated

position in marriage, and therefore do not necessarily opt for a young man in the migration context. Instead, they are interested in marrying someone from their home region with a high level of education and with higher ambitions, believing that this will also enable them to advance (Beck-Gernsheim 2006: 124–25). As John Lievens (1999: 717) writes: ‘Women may marry an imported partner in order to satisfy “modern” goals.’

Perspectives of Parents

It has already become clear that parents who live abroad with their children often have considerable influence on their children’s marriage decisions. Among my interlocutors, many who migrated in the 1990s hoped that their children would marry a partner from Opoja, or at least from Kosovo, to maintain contact with the ‘Kosovo-Albanian tradition’ and the family and kin group. Many migrant parents from Opoja also give their children the impetus to integrate family considerations into their marriage plans (Fog Olwig 2002). As Peggy Levitt (2009: 1228) writes for migrant communities in the US: ‘[A] transnational moral economy often involves putting the family first – for example, pursuing kin-based strategies for collective mobility or marrying into the right kinship network in order to accumulate social capital in the host society.’

Nevertheless, not all parents emphasized the importance of marrying a partner from their home region when asked about the marriage of their adult children. But those who did were often critical about marriages with non-Albanian partners, fearing such marriages would result in conflict sooner or later.

Parents hope that a partner from their home region will stabilize relations between parents and their children, and mothers of sons imagine that they will get on well with their daughter-in-law. Most of all, they hope for a stable and happy married life for their children, which many believe can only transpire with a partner from their home region, or at least from Kosovo. That mindset is not specific to migrants from Opoja; for example, Indian and Pakistani migrants in Great Britain (Charsley 2005), as well as migrants from Cape Verde in Europe and the US (Drotbohm 2014: 191), share these notions. As Peggy Levitt (2009: 1232) writes about migrants from the Dominican Republic in Boston:

Their logic is that, if you marry someone who shares your culture and values, your marriage is more likely to succeed because he or she has been raised like you. Since marriage is understood to be between two families as well as two individuals, the prospects of success are better if the potential partners come from the same group.

Villagers and migrants in Opoja tend to take regional differences within Kosovo seriously and are convinced that marrying a partner from another region would be less beneficial, as regions have their own customs and rules of behaviour. In Opoja's cross-border networks, therefore, translocal rather than transregional or transnational marriages are the preferred cross-border marriages.

While some parents hope their children have developed a positive relationship with their home context (see Chapter 4) and fall in love with someone while on vacation in Opoja, various interlocutors have argued in favour of family counselling, convinced that family-framed marriages are more stable, while individually framed marriages, emphasizing individual choice and affection, are insecure and prone to conflict and therefore will likely be short-lived. They argue that young people tend to be short-sighted and emotional, which renders them incapable of independently making such an important decision, which must take into account the family background and the character of the prospective spouse. Parents, on the other hand, would be more experienced and discerning in assessing the potential of a prospective spouse. In support of this, people told me stories about young couples who had once been madly in love and celebrated their wedding lavishly only to divorce soon after. Others pointed to the fact that in Western European countries, where marriages are individually framed, divorce rates are high, while in Kosovo, where family-framed marriages dominate, divorce numbers are still very low (Kosovo Agency of Statistics 2020).

Several middle-aged men whose own marriages were arranged by their families stressed that their marriages worked well and that the partners always behaved respectfully. For example, Qerim, who met his wife through a proposal brought in by a family member, is convinced that family counselling provides a better basis to make an informed choice concerning marriage. He said:

In Kosovo, marriages with counselling are the most secure. In order to find a woman for a family, and not a wife who is for nothing. In order to find a good woman – I have studied the case very well and have thought about it – it is better to stick to counselling than not get counselling. My aunt knew the sister of my wife and she knew her [my wife's] character.

Others also argue that involving parents or relatives in marriage decisions and the marriage itself means there is someone there to help with mediation in marital conflicts and that there will be support for an exit strategy for the daughter should a marriage fail. This line of thinking is also common among migrants from Lebanon in Australia (Hyndman-Rizk 2016) and in transnational Pakistani marriages (Charsley 2005: 385). Its underlying social secu-

rity logic is based on a gender model that views women as economically and socially dependent on their spouse, a widespread phenomenon in Opoja. However, it does not necessarily reflect the realities of migrant women, as many are self-confident and have salaried professions, and thus could also live independently even after a divorce. The low divorce rate in Kosovo is in part bound to the fact that many women remain economically dependent on their husbands or families and would face multiple social consequences if they chose to divorce. They are therefore more willing to compromise and endure a bad marriage, a fact that is rarely taken into account by the older generation when evaluating the stability of marriages.²

CONCLUSION

The cross-border marriages analysed in this chapter can also be considered translocal marriages, as they create a connection across borders between individuals and their families, who either still live in Opoja or have roots there. However, the notion of a happy and successful marriage follows gender, generational and locational logics that are different across borders and has led to a need to consider both individual and family concerns in decision-making.

For villagers in Opoja, translocal marriages offer an important means to cross state borders and create long-term prospects in an EU member state (or the US or Canada) for themselves and their families back home. Since the end of the war-related emigration boom from Kosovo in the 1990s, and since new immigration barriers for non-EU citizens were erected with the fall of the Iron Curtain and in the new millennium, emigration from Kosovo to the EU has been sustained mainly through marriage migration.

For migrating young men, the aim to migrate via marriage entails not only the aspiration to earn a living abroad – and thereby establish a household independent of their parents and achieve for themselves a level of material prosperity and security – but to financially support their parents in Kosovo, thus continuing the tradition of male labour migration well as the morality of gendered translocal family care. In this way, both individual and family aspirations can be reconciled. Gender and class, in particular, are addressed here as they create new – and sometimes ambivalent – subject positions. The possibilities for personal fulfilment and the hope of earning a higher salary and establishing greater financial security also make marriage migration attractive to young men with higher education, for whom migration is often linked to downward mobility in terms of societal status, as it may be difficult for them to find a job that matches their qualifications, or these are not recognized.

Young women from Opoja often hope for a more secure future and better prospects – not least through participation in the consumer world. Often, they also seek a more gender-egalitarian partnership in which they can explore employment possibilities and thus create a certain degree of material independence within the marriage.

More generally, these marriages represent better prospects for the future for the individual partners and often for the families involved, as they seem to fulfil a variety of interests and goals, some of which are complementary and some of which are contradictory. As Gaby Schmidt (2011: 58) writes, 'while for some a transnational marriage is a pathway to improvement and change, for others it is a means to maintain stability and connectedness.' For villagers in Opoja, a translocal marriage should ideally provide both – the opportunity for change and personal growth, and the opportunity to stay connected to and care for family – albeit from afar.

For young people living abroad, a cross-border marriage is often a conscious decision to stay connected to the 'Albanian culture and tradition' and to choose a partner who fits into the family framework. Gender and class positionings play a role here. Since migrants have to position themselves within the dominant discourses of the majority society, according to which cross-border marriages are suspected of being arranged, backward and patriarchal, they deal with this partly through idealizing 'traditional' gender roles and supporting family counselling. Others, however, enter into cross-border marriage to facilitate egalitarian partnership relationships that they see as modern and progressive – and thus contrary to the stereotypical reading of cross-border marriages as patriarchal. This is especially the case with migrant women who marry a man from Opoja. With this, they may adhere to family expectations, but they also hope that their choice will liberate them from the 'macho' culture sometimes found among the disadvantaged and lower-class migrant men in the destination countries, and will enable them with upward mobility.

In Opoja itself, as abroad, local marriages based on 'individually framed encounters' are becoming the new normal. But across territorial distances, marriages based on 'family-framed encounters' have taken on a new meaning and significance. While they follow the long-established cultural practice of marriage counselling, this not just a 'traditional' phenomenon but a way of providing security and predictability in the context of neoliberal developments and territorialized socio-economic inequalities. Such marriages are entered into in the hope of a better future and of creating a fulfilled and happy marriage and family life. Yet, such a marriage is also seen as a stabilizer for spatially fragmented families, as family and kinship bonds can be strengthened across distances. Rather than seeing themselves as victims of prevailing 'archaic' or 'pre-modern' social structures, prospective spouses

who rely on family networks and family support hope to create new spaces of action, romance and self-realization that simultaneously align them with broader family considerations.

NOTE

1. As observed by Scalco (2016: 329–33) for urban Turkey, social status matters, meaning that premarital sexual intercourse must be kept secret especially within the family and the kin group. It has to have taken place ‘away from home’ and may not be mentioned to a potential marriage candidate. This also impacts on the quality of relationships, sexual practises, including contraception measures, and the position of unmarried women who become pregnant. Furthermore, surgery to ‘reinstall virginity’ via hymen reconstruction in order to be ‘marriageable’ has become increasingly widespread. Similar trends were reported for urban Kosovo.