

Geographies of Lebanese Families:
Problems with Transnationalism

An Arab Families Working Group Brief

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By

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In the past two decades, a new lexicon for studying families living across and between the



borders of states emerged, with “transnational families” becoming a dominant concept. A recent study by Suad Joseph for the Arab Families Working Group (AFWG) challenges three of the key assumptions in academic literature on transnational families: 1) the assumptions of familial coherence in the natal country and the related notion that nuclear families are fractured by their

detritorialization; 2) the assumption of coherent nationalism and the derivative notion of women as more identified with nation than men; 3) the undergirding of transnationalism with binaries, bifocalities, and dualities. Joseph uses a case study of five closely related and connected families in the Christian village in the Metn region of Lebanon, to suggest that the experiences of these families and of the women in the families offer productive clarifications,

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useful to understanding the complexities of transnational familial landscapes. Joseph argues that the experiences of these families offer new insights into the relationship between nation and family, nation and women, globalization and family, and gendering the meaning of deterritorialization.

Joseph's case study found: (1) contrary to the scholarship, that transnationalism, rather than fracturing nuclearity, facilitated it, in part driven by the women's desire for nuclearity. (2) The sense of "nation" was amorphous at best and that the women identified with or longed for Lebanon as a nation less than the men did. (3) Challenging bifocality, these families occupied multiple national sites, with women often being more socially, culturally, and psychodynamically mobile.

Fracturing or Facilitating Nuclearity:

The literature at times glosses over or does not problematize the complexities of families in their natal countries. Much of the earlier literature on transnational families implies coherent family units, often presumed to be nuclear, in their homes of origin. Scholars theorizing transnational families often presume that the nuclear family is what "fractures," thus neglecting the variability in what counts as family in the natal countries. Closer inspection of transnational families reveals grandparents raising children, children left with aunts or uncles, multiple generations living together, multiple marriages and divorces, or reproduction outside of marriage in the natal countries.

The Lebanese families Joseph worked with differed from the families described in many studies of transnational families on several levels. First, they could not be described as nuclear while they were in Lebanon. Most lived in extended households with several generations of

family in the same building or the same apartment or house. This was not just a case of physical proximity. They shared financial resources, helped care for each other's children, often ate together in different combinations, and were intimately involved in each other's lives, several generations removed vertically and horizontally. The issue for the families in this study is the invention of their nuclearity, not the breaking up of the nuclear family. For them, the "family" conceived of as husband, wife, and children was created in the transnational migrant experience.

The imagination of nuclearity appears to have been part of the drive motivating migration, especially for some of the women. One of the women studied, while adoring her family, repeatedly mentioned the peacefulness of having her own home, away from her extended family, was a large factor in her never wanting to return to Lebanon. She said that, living in her own household in Quebec, she could maintain her own order; her own rhythms; she did not have to explain everything she did to everyone; and she could build and nurture her children and her relations with her husband through her own vision of family (7,000 miles away from her extended family).

For these women, nuclearity was an achievement. Whether they thought of it as "having their own home," or being away from "prying eyes and ears," or having "quiet" or the capacity for their own "order," they longed for, pressed for, and won a space for themselves and their husbands and children. Nuclearity was facilitated, not fractured, by transnational migration.

Nation and Gendered Nationalism:

Transnational families emerge, when some of their core members cross the boundaries of the nation or the nation-state to live in other nation-states, while other members of the family "remain" back "home" in the country of origin. This focus on the nation or nation-state produces

a misleading methodological nationalism, a false assumption that families are always nested within nation states or that nation-states are the natural homes/boundaries within which families emerge, are shaped, and must be understood.

The assumption that deterritorialization unsettles the family/nation relationship in a dysfunctionalizing manner also appears to be less salient with respect to the families Joseph studied. The territorial optic through which families are viewed in the literature relies on a political geography that situates family, as a social institution, within nation-states as political bodies. For the families in this study, the nation or nation-state is a less productive frame of analysis than are local geographies and perhaps other transregional geographies.

Among the families studied, it was predominately the women who wanted to migrate. They did not necessarily reject Lebanon (though, to varying degrees, some did), nor did they necessarily claim the new nation as their national identity. In some sense, they imagined non-national futures. They saw for themselves, somewhat more than their husbands did, the opportunities of transnationalism. And they seemed to pine less for what was “lost” in uprooting, deterritorializing, and re-nationalizing.

Counter to the argument linking women to nation, among these Lebanese families (as perhaps in many immigrant families from other countries as well), it was predominately the women who argued, lobbied, and pressed to migrate and to dis-connect from the nation.

Bilocality and Bifocality:

The nationalist geo-history of family implicit in the literature on transnational families generates an assumption of binaries, of bifocalities. Much of the literature assumes families divided between a national culture of origin and the new national culture of migration—with the

presumption being that the separation is oppositional, troubled, problematical. The bifocal binary presumed in much of the literature represents families as being caught between or negotiating between two distinct cultures. Bifocality presumes a coherency of culture in the natal society the migrants have left and sets up a “clash” of cultures in the receiving society. It also presumes that the migrating person or family has only that natal culture as their origin story

Among the Lebanese families studied by Joseph, bifocality does not capture the complexity of their geographies. Most Lebanese have histories of migration either internally within Lebanon, regionally in the Arab world, or to non-Arab countries. They themselves have migrated, or they have family members or kin only one or two steps removed who have migrated. Narrations of migration have been part of family stories for a least a century and a half of modern Lebanese history. Almost every family in Lebanon has immediate relatives abroad. Almost every family in Lebanon can trace a genealogy of migration back for a century or more. Neither bifocality, nor interculturalism, nor multiculturalism, nor hybridity captures the cultural fluidity that maps Lebanese social life. Lebanese have absorbed so many cultural streams into their social rivers that it is difficult if not impossible to fish out of the ocean of Lebanese cultural life what is American, French, Brazilian, Australian, Mexican, Egyptian, Syrian, Palestinian, or anything else.

Conclusion:

The vocabulary of transnational families offers important conceptual “handles” for studying families on the move, including the Lebanese families studies by Joseph. It is productive to take note of the ways in which these Lebanese families, particularly the women, do not fit easily within the mold of the literature on “transnational families.” Joseph’s case study suggests that it

may be useful to think of these Lebanese in terms of familial networks that figure themselves as “families.” The boundaries of what they think of as family shift easily, yet it remains family to each of them. They are deeply committed to the idea of family, but their idea of family changes and shifts without compromising their sense of commitment to the idea.

The experience of the Lebanese families highlighted in Joseph’s study indicates that new conceptual tools are needed to address families that come from extended families and move as nuclear families. In particular, the study sheds light on the agency of the women who envision non-national futures, imagine the possibilities of migration, and willingly leave what they know in pursuit of space, autonomy, order, calm, and opportunities for themselves and their families.