

“Tied” wives and “leading” husbands

(Late) repatriate couples and the negotiation about return from Germany to Western Siberia

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Introduction

Return migration is intended as cross-border movement of migrants from their host country back to their country of origin. Such return can be of different nature: it can be planned from the start or occur spontaneously, it can be voluntary or forced; it can occur in the form of short term visits as described by the concept of sustained transnational mobility of migrants (Pries 2010; Vertovec 2007; King/Christou 2011) or in the form of a permanent move, since most migrants do not have the opportunity to sustain an intensive transnational life between two or more countries (Carling/Bivand Erdal 2014).

The research on gender and return migration has primarily focused on two separate aspects: early return migration studies devoted their attention primarily to male labor migrants (Toren 1976; King 1977; Cerase 1978; Gmelch 1980), thus overlooking female returnees. Subsequent research addressed this limitation by increasingly investigating the return female labor migrants back to their families left behind (Pedraza 1991; Morokvasik 1984; Bastia 2011; Schurr/ Stolz 2011; Bujan 2015). However, as many authors have observed, the couples' perspective in the context of return migration remains poorly analyzed (Hondagneu-Sotello 1995; Girma 2017; Amcoff/Niedomysl 2015; Erlinghagen 2021). In particular, little is known about the negotiation between spouses about whether to stay abroad or to return to the home country (Pessar/Mahler 2003: 823).

This paper addresses this limitation focusing on the negotiation process within the couples that return to their home country. The case study is based on a sample of (late) repatriates¹ who returned to Russia and more specifically to Western Siberia, after some years living in Germany. The few available studies on the return of (late) repatriates indicate that their return is influenced by economic, emotional, family-related and socio-cultural factors (Schönhuth/Kaiser 2015). It is generally observed that the return is driven by the family members who feel disadvantaged in the process of integration in Germany, whereas the successful family members desire to remain in Germany (Baraulina/Kreienbrink, 2013: 296). However, these dynamics have not been explicitly analysed in the research in terms of gendered perspective. Instead, this study discovered two clear gender related tendencies, which allow to characterize the return of (late) repatriate couples as process either driven by the husbands or by both spouses.

This paper focuses on the majority of the interviewed couples (16 of 23) in the study sample, who revealed the husbands' desire to return to Russia in contrast to the desire of the wives to remain in Germany². Such men's leadership is consistent with previous international studies, which highlighted that typically, the husbands take the role of "leading" spouse, as they are the ones who often initiate the return, while the wives are characterized as "tied" spouse, as they typically prefer to stay in the host country, but return following the husbands³ (Gmelch 1983; Grasmuck/Pessar 1991; Bueno 1996; Vlase 2013). Such opposing positions of spouses on the return are often attributed

1 On arrival in Germany mostly from the states of the former Soviet Union this migrant group (approximately 1.5 million (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung 2018) usually obtains dual (German-Russian) citizenship. Consequently, the reliable statistics that provide information about their return (e.g. the amount of returnees and their destinations) and particularly about the (de)registration process in Germany and in Russia is difficult to obtain. However, according to Schmid (2009: 77) (late) repatriates were the biggest group of returning migrants from Germany back to their country of origin amounting to 13.666 between 2000 and 2006.

2 For the rest of the couples, the return desire was shared by both spouses. This article will not consider these couples; for more information see Fencica 2015, 2021.

3 Such "leading husband" and "tied wife" positions of spouses are particularly common in labor migrant families who return from well developed to poorly developed countries. Indeed the opposite scenario with the "leading wife" and "tied husband" is more seldomly discussed in the research and is mentioned in studies on returns to well developed countries of origin (Erlinghagen 2021) or regional returns (Amcoff/Niedomysl 2015).

to the contrasting perception of the migration experience, which for many economic and non-economic reasons appears generally less advantageous for men than for women⁴ (Han 2003; Pessar/Mahler 2003).

Negotiation about return among spouses is here defined, analogously to the negotiation of other groups of people, as a "form of communication" (Aranson Wilson/Akert 2008: 304), which is often characterized by conflicting interests of the spouses – in this case to stay abroad or to return to the home country – and which attempts to reach an agreement. The limited literature about the process of negotiation between spouses highlights the following aspects: Spousal disagreement about return can in some cases "freeze" (Scheib 1998) or hinder the return of the family for a short or long time (von Reichert/Cromartie/Arthun 2014). During this period, "leading returnee" husbands can be classified as "tied stayers", as they wanted to return, but had to stay because of the desire of the wife (Cooke 2013).

In particular, in the event of disagreement about return, the men are expected to be more prone to act upon their desire than the women are, based on their traditional gender role as main decision maker and breadwinner within the family (Coulter/van Ham/Feijten 2012). Such a gendered perspective is often adopted to interpret the factors that influence the decision of the "tied" wives to follow the husband to their country of origin. According to this view, the women follow their husbands based on their traditional role as wives and their role as mothers, associated with the desire to keep the family together as well as to discourage intra-family conflicts (Gmelch/Gmelch Bohn 1995; Bueno 1996: 88; Vlase 2013: 753). Consistently with this view, the migration literature has assumed that the "tied" women are the ones who are "making the sacrifice" (Amcoff/Niedomysl 2015) or who were "persuaded" by the men in the process of decision making about return (Gmelch 1983: 53). The men's intention to return is generally characterized by keeping transnational connections to the country of origin and preparing the return by investing their savings in the homeland (Carling/Peterson 2014: 27; Grasmuck/Pessar 1991: 156)

4 This paper will not concentrate on the reasons of the husbands to return, nor on the reasons of the wives to stay, among the (late) repatriates couples (for more detailed results see Fenicia 2015; 2017; 2021) and thus will not go deeper into the research on the reasons to return or stay in the literature review.

This paper aims to contribute to the research field of negotiating about return migration between “tied” wives and “leading” husbands and examines, based on a sample of (late) repatriate couples in Western Siberia, who indicated the clear tendency of the men to be the leading force in the remigration decision making, the following questions: Which factors influenced the decision of the “tied” wives to return against their desire to stay, thus favoring the desire of the husbands? Considering the rather traditional gender role orientation of (late) repatriate couples in Germany (Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend 2000: 93ff.; Boos-Nünning/Karakasoglu 2005: 100), it will be investigated whether the women in the process of negotiation are to be characterized, as is regularly suggested in previous studies, as the ones who “sacrifice” their desire to stay and who follow their husbands based on the traditional gender role of a wife? Correspondingly, were the men acting in the process of negotiation in a traditional way as main decision makers in the family, who expected the acceptance of their decisions by the women? Are there other possible explanations for the behavior of (late) repatriate spouses in the process of negotiation? To what extent the transnational practices of spouses during their stay in Germany (such as visiting the home country or preparing the return) could affect their negotiation?

Method and sample

This exploratory study on return processes of (late) repatriates was based on qualitative semi-structured interviews, conducted during two stays of four to six weeks each in 2010 and 2011. The data collection took place in the Siberian part of Russia (Altai region). The analyses presented in this paper are based on 16 cases of family return including 31 interviews conducted with both (together or separately) or with one of the spouses. In total 26 persons were interviewed (15 women and 11 men). The higher number of interviews compared to the number of interviewed persons is the result of additional in-depth interviews. The material evaluation was based on the method of qualitative content analyses (Mayring 2010) and in the selected cases on the method of in-depth interpretations (Schmidt 2013).

The "leading" husbands and the "tied" wives in the process of the negotiation about return

The starting point of negotiation between the spouses in the interviewed couples is here defined as the announcement of the return intention by the husbands, that happened at different time points: some men announced their desire to return during to Russia even before the move to Germany was completed, others manifested their desire to return shortly after they arrived in Germany, while others mentioned the possibility of return after some years of residence in Germany. Thus, the process of finding an agreement between the couples had variable duration and in some cases could last up to 20 years. Such variability indicates different conflict intensities, and that spousal disagreement, as mentioned above, could in some cases "freeze" for some time and restart again later (Scheib 1998). In this negotiation period, the "leading returnee" husbands can be characterized as "tied stayers", who wanted to return but could not due to the desire of the wives to stay in Germany. Based on the available data, little is known about the factors that delayed the husbands' decision to return, which would allow a better characterization of the men as "tied stayers". However some aspects that influenced the gaining of bargaining power on the side of the women and resulted in extending the stay of the family in Germany were mentioned by both spouses and can be summarized as follows: i) presence of school age children and their desire to stay in Germany; ii) better quality of life and education for the children in Germany; iii) encouragement from the relatives who supported the wives in their desire to stay in Germany; iv) successful experiences of the relatives in Germany, who also passed a difficult period of integration but managed to resettle, providing the perspective of successful integration in Germany over time.

The (late) repatriate men showed different willingness to accept the opposing position of the wives to remain in Germany. In this respect, three main tendencies can be distinguished:

The "egalitarian" husbands (N=3) declared that they would have not returned to Russia without the approval of their wives, and they were therefore ready to remain with their wives in Germany permanently:

Wife: "If I hadn't agreed, he wouldn't have gone [to Russia]. He waited until I accepted [the return]." (27 years old, currently housewife)

Husband: “[...] otherwise [in the case of the wife’s refusal] I would not have done it [the return].” (27 years old, farmer)

The “ready to return alone” husbands (N=6) announced after several years of unsuccessful waiting for an agreement with the wives their readiness to return to Russia without their family. In fact, four men of the sample left Germany on their own while their wives remained for some time in Germany, permanently returning to Russia later:

“It was much worse there [in Germany] than here in Russia. But my wife was always saying: “Well, let’s try to settle in, to integrate [in Germany].” And the children said the same. And I had waited and waited for a long time, for two years. Then it was over and I said to her: “I’m going back to Russia. I have no strength to stay here [in Germany] any more. If you want, stay there [in Germany] or come with me to Russia! Just tell me, what you want!” Then I went back to Russia.” (male, 55 years old, lecturer)

Two men positioned themselves as “traditional” decision makers within the family with a strong belief that their wives would have followed them sooner or later:

“I made the decision and my wife accepted it. [...] But it [the negotiation] took a long time. She [the wife] always said: “Let’s live here [in Germany] a little longer”. I would be gone in 2003 or 2004 [the family went back to Russia in 2008], if she would agree earlier. But she didn’t want to.” (male, 37 years old, mechanic)

Although the women justified their return to Russia primarily with the common gender-related motive “My husband wanted to go back”, they still differed in terms of their willingness to accept the proposed return from their husbands. Considering this, the women can be classified into three following types.

The “loyal” wives (N=4) described their perception of the husband’s initiative to return in an easy-going manner and presented different reasons, which highlighted their intrinsic motivation to agree on returning. Their reasons included: adaptation-related difficulties in Germany, in some cases similar to those of their husbands; gender-related aspects (the desire to

support the husband in the role of the main breadwinner in Russia) and family-related aspects (the desire to reunite with the family members in Russia). Based on this analysis these women behaved consistently with the "leading returnee" wives mentioned in the studies of Erlinghagen (2021) and Amcoff/Niedomysl (2015), who highlighted similar reasons to return. Also, the agreement of the "loyal" women to return can be interpreted in the context of the conflict theory (Lewin 1997: 101) as "identifying" with the husbands insofar as "the goals of the partner became to a high degree the one's own goals":

"Who was the initiator [of the return]? My husband! Without him I wouldn't have done it [return to Russia]. [...] But I supported him. [...] My husband wants to achieve here [in Russia] what he couldn't achieve in Germany, he wants to realize himself. Maybe that's our goal." (female, 26 years old, currently a housewife)

The "rebellious" wives (N=7) are characterized by their reluctant reaction to their husband's desire to return. Most of these women described how they fought with their husbands to postpone the return as long as possible. These women, unlike some of the "loyal" women, barely complained about the adaptation-related difficulties in Germany, and highlighted their strong desire to remain in Germany. Some of these women considered separating from their husbands in order to remain in Germany, but after a long process of reflection, in view of the perspective that their husbands were prepared "to return alone", they eventually decided to follow them. These women justified their return in terms of the emotional closeness to the husband and advocated following motivational aspects such as gender-related positions (the perception of the husband as the main decision-maker in the family based on traditional gender roles in Russia; the sense of responsibility of women as mothers who grant their children's wishes to live with their father and thus to return all together); emotional reasons (the feeling of uncertainty caused by potentially remaining in Germany without a husband or close relatives; sympathizing with the integration difficulties of their husband in Germany, and the associated psychological and physical consequences; the desire to continue to live with their husbands considering the perspective that the adult children in Germany would leave parents' house permanently) and family-related reasons (the disadvantage of the absence of relatives in Germany who could support the women on the way to an independent life in Germany,

if the husbands preferred to return). According to these characteristics, the return of the “rebellious” women has to be intended as a “sacrifice” of their desire to stay in Germany for the sake of the priorities of the husband and family (Lewin 1997: 101). This attitude corresponds to the common picture of “tied” wives described in previous research on migration. The following interview excerpt illustrates the position of one of the “rebellious” women:

“I didn’t want to go back [to Russia]! For eight years I tried to dissuade my husband from his decision to return, and all was in vain, although my relatives were with me; many of them said: “God bless him, should he go, stay here [in Germany]!” But I, ah, I don’t know I have a different approach to life [...] Yes, how should I say? [...] We, women, have such a mentality. It is probably anchored in our culture that everything has to be decided by the man. We simply cannot overcome or avoid this obstacle. [...] So it was scary for me to remain alone [in Germany]. And for the children. [...] The children were already at such an age that they did not want to remain [in Germany] without their father. [...] Just to point it that way, I’m back [to Russia] because my husband wanted it” (female, 29 years old, saleswoman)

The “in-between” wives (N=4) occupied the middle ground between the “loyal” and the “rebellious”, in the sense that they presented a mix of reasons of the ones expressed above. In particular, they described their position in the process of decision making as both supportive and reluctant at times⁵.

Transnational practices in the context of spousal negotiation about return

The “leading returnee” men showed the tendency to have more active transnational lives than their “tied returnee” wives during the residence period in Germany, as they visited Russia at least once per year. This transnational practice supported the men’s perspective in the process of negotiation, af-

5 More about the view of the men and women as a couple, in terms of the correspondence between the types of wives (“loyal”, “rebellious”, or “in-between”) mentioned in this section and the types of husbands (“egalitarian”, “traditional” or “ready to return alone”) mentioned in the section above, in the process of negotiation see Fenicia 2021.

fecting particularly the preparedness to return. In the context of transnationalism, such preparedness should secure the successful readjustment in the country of origin (Cassarino 2004), but it is seldom analyzed in the context of finding an agreement between spouses about returning. The results of this study show that in some cases through building or buying a house in Russia or planning self-employment, mostly as farmers or, in one case, improving his Russian language after living for more than 20 years in Germany since his early childhood, men could convince the women to the return to Russia more easily.

However, in most of the cases the women did not cooperate to the process of preparing the return mostly organized by the husbands, since they did not want to return to their Siberian villages for many reasons associated with the difficulties of their housewife role, such as milking the cows or working in the garden, social isolation, disconnection from the cultural life that they experienced in Germany (for more on the reasons women wish to stay in Germany; see Fenicia 2017, 2021).

In contrast to the men, the women during their stay in Germany can be characterized as permanent migrants who did not practice actively transnational live style in the form of visiting Russia every year, even in the cases when they had relatives in Russia, and highlighted their general satisfaction with life in Germany "as women". A long time after returning to Russia, the women in particular were still wondering whether returning was the right decision and if the family should revise this decision and migrate again to Germany, considering the difficulties of living in rural Siberia. This situation shows that the negotiation about returning does not always finish with the actual return, but can transform into a permanent "stay-in- Russia-or-go-back-to-Germany" dilemma, which remains open given the double (German-Russian) nationality of (late) repatriates. This possibility to practice transnational life style or to migrate again to Germany is considered to be an aspect that positively affected the decision of the women to agree on an undesirable return and follow their husbands to Russia, even if it was not directly addressed in the interviews in such a way. For example, one interviewed woman put it like this:

"We have German citizenship and therefore my husband and I agreed that whatever happens to us in Russia, we can always go back to Germany" (female, 55 years old, currently a housewife)

However, after returning, many men did not consider the possibility of going back to Germany and expressed in their interviews their general satisfaction with their lives in Russia. According to this, some of the interviewed women can be characterized as “tied stayers” after returning to Russia, who are “twice” constrained – first because they would like to migrate again to Germany, but stay in Russia because of the desire of the husbands, and second, because the long-distance, transnational life in order to visit close relatives and children in Germany remains for the interviewed couples barely affordable financially. From the point view of the women, the transnational practice of visiting the relatives in Germany more often could have improved their emotional satisfaction with the life in Russia⁶.

Summary and conclusion

This paper investigated the negotiations about returning between “tied” wives and “leading” husbands, and thus enriches the limited literature on this topic. The case study was represented by a sample of (late) repatriate couples, whose return to Russia was driven by the husbands, while the wives were struggled to remain in Germany.

The findings of this study show that the “tied” wives provided different motives for agreeing to return, and demonstrated different willingness to accept the return proposed by the husbands. Based on this analysis the study identified three types of “tied returnee” wives: on one side there are the “loyal wives”, who appeared to identify themselves with their partners and sympathized with their desires; on the other side there are the “rebellious wives”, who fought with their husbands to postpone the return for as long as possible, but eventually appeared to sacrifice their desire to stay in Germany for the sake of the priorities of the husband and family; then, there are the “in-between wives”, characterized by an intermediate position between these two types. By making such distinctions, this study highlights a different balance between the aspects of gender, adaptation, family and emotion, thus expanding previous work, in which such a variety of motives of the “tied returnee” women was not always recognized. In particular, it highlights that the return of the “tied” women can be interpreted not only as “making a sac-

6 For more about the readjustment of (late) repatriate couples in Siberia see Fenicia 2021.

rifice", as suggested in the main research literature, but also as "identification" with their husbands' goals.

The "leading returnee" men, during the process of negotiation, can be characterized as "tied stayers", who were waiting for an agreement with the wives about return. The results of this study do not fully clarify the aspects that influenced the readiness of the husbands to postpone their return temporarily and thus to grant the request of their wives. However, the presence of school-aged children and the role of relatives in Germany can be considered as factors that allowed the wives to extend the stay of the family in Germany. The men tended to negotiate returning with the wives in different ways such as "traditional" (consistent with previous literature), or "egalitarian", as they were ready to remain in Germany, or in some cases the men announced their readiness "to return alone". The "leading returnee" men showed the tendency to have more active transnational lives than their "tied returnee" wives during the residence period in Germany. Although based on a limited sample, this study expands on previous research about migrant's transnationalism by revealing that in some cases men's preparedness to return and the option of migrating again to Germany due to having German citizenship (as a safety factor in the potential case of failed readjustment in Russia) conditioned the women's agreement to an undesirable return. These findings pave the way to future research, which should broaden the spectrum of factors that affect the spousal decision making to return, by considering the impact of transnational activities of the migrants from a gender perspective.

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