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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version  
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Amelina, A., & Bause, N. (2020). Forced migrant families' assemblages of care and social protection between solidarity and inequality. *JFR - Journal of Family Research*, 32(3), 415-434. <https://doi.org/10.20377/jfr-375>

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## Forced migrant families' assemblages of care and social protection between solidarity and inequality

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### Abstract

The article analyses various forms of care and social protection that forced-migrant transnational families exchange despite their individual members living in different countries. It presents outcomes of a small-scale empirical study of the family practices of mobile individuals from Syria and Afghanistan who arrived in Germany during and after the “long summer of 2015”. Building on social protection research and transnational care studies, the article introduces the concept of care and protection assemblages, which highlights the heterogeneity, processuality and multi-scalar quality of migrant families' efforts to improve well-being. It includes an empirical analysis that illustrates key elements of the proposed concept and shows the significance of cross-border circulation of remittances, the selectivity in the cross-border circulation of emotions and limitations on the cross-border circulation of hands-on and practical care. These findings are framed by an analysis of solidarity organizations at the meso-level and (multiscalar) securitized asylum policies at the macro-level in the German context. The proposed conceptual framework takes into consideration migrant families' simultaneity of solidarity and inequality experiences by locating the examination of family-making at the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels of analysis.

**Key words:** transnational families, care and protection assemblages, Syria, Afghanistan, Germany, forced migration



## 1. Introduction

Experiences of risk and vulnerability are essential aspects of current forced migrations that affect unaccompanied minors, women who must give birth in refugee camps, and family members who are forced to take different routes to reach safety in another country (Grotti et al. 2018). These—highly gendered—risks and vulnerabilities are not limited to individual experiences alone, but are part and parcel of family projects and family histories. The aim of this article is to identify conditions under which the transnational families of forced migrants who arrived in Europe during the “long summer of 2015” become subjects of (cross-border) solidarity despite their desperate experiences of exclusion. Specifically, we discuss how family members who are living in different countries organize their cross-border family lives and care practices despite the distance, securitized mobility constraints, and institutional barriers to family reunification. More generally, we ask how, in the context of forced migration, their experiences of solidarity (in terms of support and inclusion) and inequality (in terms of limited access to valued resources and exclusion) can be analyzed within the same conceptual framework.

To address these and similar questions, this article focuses on mobile individuals<sup>1</sup> from Syria and Afghanistan who came to Germany in 2015,<sup>2</sup> as well as on their distant transnational families. We analyze their and their distant migrant families’ access to and use of informal care and social protection arrangements (remittances, hands-on and practical care, emotional support, information exchange), their use of semiformal resources (protections provided by NGOs and migrant organizations), and their access to formal (social) rights, both during and after the process of forced migration. As part of our qualitative study, we examined the processes of family-making, care, and social protection among forced migrants who arrived in Brandenburg, a state in northeastern Germany where about 33,000 movers from various categories of international protection lived in 2018. This state has been prominent in the German media owing to recent populist right-wing shifts associated with the political party Alternative for Germany (AfD), violent neo-Nazi groups, and racist resentment among some of its citizens toward newcomers; at the same time, the media has neglected to report on the antiracist actions and evidence of widespread solidarity with the refugees in that region (Lippelt & Schäfer 2019).

Because our ongoing study is also exploratory, it builds on several biographical interviews with forced movers, many of whom are engaged in the self-supportive initiatives under way in selected cities in the state of Brandenburg.<sup>3</sup> In order to consider the heterogeneity of legal status, we conducted interviews with two recognized refugees from Syria; two individuals under subsidiary protection, also from Syria; one interviewee

1 Expressions such as “mobile individuals” and “movers” are used in this article to avoid a “migrantization” (Dahinden 2016) of our research outcomes. However, the categories of “migrant” and “migration” are still used, because avoiding them entirely is a stylistic challenge.

2 According to the Federal Statistical Office (2019), 551,830 Syrian and 213,935 Afghan citizens, who seek international protection, have been living in Germany in 2018.

3 Although this article examines forced movers’ transnational strategies of family-making, for pragmatic reasons we conducted interviews with individual movers, because we were unable to reach their families in Afghanistan and Syria. Our interview guidelines included questions regarding forced migrants’ strategies of family-making across borders and the linkages to their distant significant others.

from Afghanistan who is subject to a deportation ban; and two individuals from Afghanistan with temporary residence permits.<sup>4</sup> Five of these interviewees were male and two were female, aged between 20 and 40. In addition, we made a number of ethnographic observations regarding migrant support initiatives in the cities of that region (between January 2017 and April 2019) and interviewed seven regional German experts who were responsible for providing support to forced movers.

Our main objective is to introduce and elaborate on the concept of care and protection assemblages by paying particular attention to assemblages' *heterogeneity and processual dynamics* and to the *simultaneity of solidarity and inequality* they interlink. The proposed concept not only allows us to incorporate the most recent findings from studies both of *social protection and migration* (Boccagni 2017; Faist et al. 2015) and of *care and transnational families* (Baldassar & Merla 2014; Merla & Kilkey 2014), but also opens up gender-sensitive perspectives for analyzing the mutual shaping of informal, semiformal, and formal care and protection arrangements in contexts of forced migration.

Through the conceptual lens of assemblage theory, a sophisticated analysis could be undertaken to determine how distant migrant families (in which at least one family member is located across a border) organize access to various forms of care and social protection (informal, semiformal, formal) and how this influences their well-being, which encompasses the two intertwined elements of *social membership* (rights, obligations, privileges) and *affective dimension* (emotional support, well-being). The focus on forced migrants' transnational families is paradigmatic for the study of the simultaneity of their transnational solidarity and inequality experiences, because it allows us to explore the interplay of (1) multiple layers of care and social protection (formal, semiformal, informal); (2) multiple sociospatial scales of migration, asylum, and social protection governance (e.g., national, supranational); and (3) the organization of mobile individuals' transnational family lives as they seek international protection. What makes the current negotiations around cross-border family-making so distinctive is the inherent dialectic between the *humanitarian obligations* of European states that are embedded in the cross-border rhetoric of international refugee protection (Boswell & Geddes 2011) and the simultaneous *securitization of migration and asylum governance* (Holmes & Castaneda 2016).

## 2. State of the art: Comparing care and social protection approaches to migrant vulnerabilities

How can the research on family-making in the context of forced migration benefit from studies of transnational social protection and of transnational care relations?

The first body of research to be mentioned here—studies of *(transnational) migration and social protection*—conventionally defines social protection as a range of resources that are provided to reduce certain life risks (unemployment, childcare, eldercare, health risks) in waged (labor market) and nonwaged (kinship, family) fields of social life (Sabates-

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4 See footnote 11 for an explanation of these different legal categories.

Wheeler & Feldman). Although this field of research views the formal settings of both the sending and the receiving states as essential for channeling migrants' access to rights and resources, an analysis of informal protection arrangements as noncodified collective strategies for helping others to deal with social risks is the main focus of this body of research (Bilecen & Barglowski 2015; Boccagni 2017). Moreover, recent studies of migration and social protection have made an extensive use of a transnational lens (Faist et al. 2015; Levitt et al. 2017). In this reading, "care" (e.g., child care, eldercare, medical care) is approached *in a narrow sense* as the gendered provision of hands-on and practical care (both face-to-face or distant) and *as one among other types* of migrants' transnational strategies of informal social protection (e.g., remittances, information exchange, emotional support) (Bilecen & Barglowski 2015). This first body of literature privileges analysis of different forms of formal and informal membership (in terms of rights, obligations, and privileges). From this angle, solidarity can be interpreted as inclusion in the various forms of membership, whereas inequality is analyzed either as stratified membership and/or as exclusion from a membership (Faist et al. 2015). Thus, membership is not constrained by the boundaries of nation states (e.g., Della Porta 2018), but is linked to different sociogeographic scales and entities—that is, sending and/or receiving countries, cross-border communities, associations, and networks.

The second body of research, which focuses on waged and nonwaged *care in the context of (transnational) migration*, has grown immensely during the past few decades (Amelina & Lutz 2019). As with the first body of research on social protection, this literature shares an interest in migrants' transnational family relations (Baldassar, Baldock & Wilding 2007; Hondagnau-Sotelo & Avila 1997) and in the transnational circulation of care resources (Baldassar & Merla 2014; Kilkey & Merla 2014). Owing to its origins in feminist research (Hochschild 2000), the care literature differs from the social protection literature insofar as it considers more explicitly the gendered structuration of (transnational) migrants' care obligations and the emotional/affective dimension of care arrangements (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez 2010). In contrast to the transnational social protection literature, this reading privileges a more encompassing perspective on "care," meaning that the various types of cross-border support strategies (e.g., remittances, information exchange, emotional support) are approached as different forms of transnational care, in addition to hands-on and practical care (Baldassar & Merla 2014). Moreover, some authors from this second body of research emphasize the *affective (emotional) dimension of (waged and nonwaged) gendered care relations* (Amelina 2017). According to this reading, solidarity can be approached with the main focus on emotional support and affective inclusion, whereas inequality can be analyzed as limited access to emotional support and as affective exclusion. In sum, this body of literature studies both solidarity and inequality in the ways of "doing" migrant families either by analyzing the inter- and intragenerational solidarity across borders (Baldassar & Merla 2014) or by focusing on the affective dimension as the core principle of care relations (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez 2010).

Notwithstanding the abovementioned differences between these two bodies of research, both the literature on social protection and that on care relations can be used in a complementary fashion to better understand the routines of "doing family" and their embeddedness in protection and care arrangements in the context of forced migration.

Shared characteristics of the two areas of research are (i) their interest in (*processual* negotiations around) migrant families' risk reduction strategies, (ii) the *complexity and heterogeneity* of care and protection relations, and (iii) a *transnational* perspective that considers the significance of the sending and receiving countries' institutional settings. Moreover, the complementary synthesis of both literatures allows us a more thorough understanding of (iv) the *interconnectedness between membership and affect* in analyses of solidarity with and inequality experiences of forced migrant cross-border families. Here, we argue that the concept of *care and protection assemblage(s)* (Amelina 2017) can offer a bridge for the systematic analysis of (forced) migrant families' care and protection arrangements—that is, an approach that recognizes the importance both of various forms of membership (in terms of rights, obligations, and privileges) conventionally associated with social protection *and* of the affective dimension (in terms of emotional support and well-being) associated with care relations. In the next section, we will illuminate why assemblage theory is so appealing for the conceptual synthesis of these two research stances.

### 3. Assembling care and social protection in the context of forced movement: A transnational and multiscalar field of inquiry

The main benefit of the assemblage heuristic for the analysis of forced migrants' routines of “doing family” across borders (under the circumstances of restricted family reunification) is its emphasis on the simultaneity of transnational solidarity and inequalities (both in terms of membership and affect) that forced migrants' families experience. Assemblage theory has its origins in the poststructuralist philosophical tradition (Deleuze & Guattari 1987). Assemblages can be understood as highly flexible and temporary configurations of heterogeneous elements that are relationally linked to one another (e.g., discursive utterances, institutions, sets of social practices, bodies, material artifacts). They are “an arrangement or layout of heterogeneous elements” that “constructs or lays out a set of relations between self-subsisting fragments” (Nail 2017: 22–23).

Having been used extensively in the social and cultural sciences during the last two decades, the concept of assemblages has been subject to different readings in research on globalization (e.g. Sassen 2008), in science and technology studies (Latour 2005), and in analyses of gender relations (Puar 2007). Recently, the language of assemblage theory has been adopted for analyses of transnationality, social protection, and care relations (Faist et al. 2015) and is now used in the context of social theory-building (Amelina 2017). The proposed reading of assemblage theory is specifically sensitive to micro-routines of “doing family” across borders (and their embeddedness in interpersonal networks) and to the meso level of organizational activities, but it also considers the respective institutional regulations on the macro level.<sup>5</sup> According to this reading, cross-border assemblages of care and social protection, as applied to forced migrants' families, can be regarded as

5 While for stylistic reasons we use the expression “assemblage theory” in singular, various different assemblage-configurations can be identified in the empirical research (for methodological details, see Nail 2017).

societal configurations that temporarily bring together and relationally link multiple heterogeneous elements (see Table 1).

*Table 1:* Central elements of care and social protection assemblages in the context of forced migration

• Contextual level	• Elements	• Scales <sup>6</sup>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Micro:</b></li> <li>• <b>Families, (kinship) networks providing informal social protection</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organization of care and social protection in households: Hands-on and practical care (= the narrow understanding of care), emotional support, exchange of information, and remittances</li> <li>• Gendered intrafamilial hierarchies</li> <li>• Narratives of care, protection, transnationality, and family &amp; affect</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transnational: sending and receiving settings</li> <li>• National</li> <li>• Local/urban</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Meso:</b></li> <li>• <b>Organizations providing semiformal care and protection</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Formal organizations such as schools, universities, hospitals, business companies, etc.</li> <li>• NGOs</li> <li>• Migrant organizations and associations (&amp; related dynamics of inclusion/exclusion)</li> <li>• Narratives of humanitarianization, flight, and deservingness &amp; affect</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Global</li> <li>• Supranational</li> <li>• Transnational: sending and receiving settings</li> <li>• National</li> <li>• Local/urban</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Macro:</b></li> <li>• <b>Institutional settings providing formal care and protection</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gendered migration and asylum regimes</li> <li>• Gendered welfare regimes</li> <li>• Gendered labor markets (&amp; related dynamics of inclusion/exclusion)</li> <li>• Dominant discourses of humanitarianization, securitization, economization, care and welfare deservingness &amp; affect</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Global</li> <li>• Supranational</li> <li>• Transnational: sending and receiving settings</li> <li>• National</li> <li>• Local/urban</li> </ul>

*Source:* Authors' research.

One of the key advantages of the assemblage heuristic is that it allows a flexible contextualization of the nexus between practices of migration, cross-border linkages, care, and social protection. The concept of assemblage considers not only the *processuality* of the organization of family life in the context of (forced) migration (and the related enforced immobility of some family members), the *heterogeneity* of the elements included, and the

<sup>6</sup> Because there is no natural correspondence between spatial scales and analytical levels, analysis of care and protection relations on each of the analytical levels (macro, meso, micro) can potentially focus on various spatial scales and the interplay between them.

cross-border quality of forced migrants' families, but also the gendered *solidarity and inequality relations* (in terms of both membership and affect) that span borders. In the following, we will briefly introduce the key added values of this concept.

The first is that the concept approaches forms and practices of family relations (at a distance) as being linked to quite *dissimilar elements* (see Table 1). Consequently, the analysis of forced migrants' multiple *and less formal obligations of care and protection* among family members and kinship networks (e.g., emotional support, hands-on and practical care, remittances) not only recognizes the significance of the sites in the sending and receiving countries, but also pays attention to other layers of care and social protection, such as *semiformal protection arrangements* (e.g., social support networks, support from NGOs and migrant organizations) and *formal care and social protection arrangements* (e.g., gendered migration and asylum regimes, formal protection schemes, legal rules of access to the labor market). The proposed reading seeks to overcome the current research focus on either the formal or the informal forms of care and protection by treating formal, semiformal, and informal as elements of the respective assemblages.

The second added value of the assemblage heuristic is its emphasis on *temporality and processuality* (Nail 2017). Cross-border assemblages can be seen as temporary, continuously changing societal formations. Analyses of forced migrants' family-making benefit from this emphasis on processuality, since it suggests that (forced) migrant families' care and protection practices are analyzed by focusing on the micro *daily (cross-border) routines of family-making* and their constant transformations (Amelina & Lutz 2019). By combining the "doing family" approach and the transnational perspective (Nedelcu & Wyss 2016), we can study forced migrants' transnational families as continuously changing intergenerational and gendered responsibility relationships in which at least one family member is living in another state and which are maintained across geographical distances. Moreover, this processual perspective allows us to investigate the gendered and often asymmetric cross-border circulation of informal protection and care resources as a substantial basis for "doing transnational family": Four specific types of family-related informal repertoires are relevant for processual analysis of transnational families: *circulation of financial remittances*, *circulation of hands-on and practical care* (being understood here in a narrow sense as distant and/or face-to-face eldercare, childcare, care for relatives, and similar types of caregiving), *provision of emotional support* and *circulation of information* among distant family members (Bilecen & Barglowski 2015). This processual research perspective also concerns changing actors' *narratives of care and protection* that include ideal images of family, problematization of transnationality, and affective forms of knowledge. Besides the analysis of the micro-routines, the emphasis on processuality also allows us to approach both semiformal (meso) and formal (macro) layers of care and social protection (see Table 1) as constantly changing societal configurations.

The third added value of the assemblage approach—its focus on cross-border spatiality—makes it possible to consider the transnational and multiscalar quality of care and protection in the context of (forced) migration. Researchers in the areas both care (Baldassar & Merla 2014) and (informal) social protection (Faist et al. 2015) share the assumption that cross-border obligations of movers and stayers contribute to the formation/continuation of family relations. The circulation of care and protection



resources functions as a “transmission device” (co-generated by the technologies of co-presence and transportation) that connects the contexts of “immigration” and “emigration” (with their specific gendered regimes of migration, asylum, social protection, etc.). This transnational perspective must be complemented by a multiscalar lens (Amelina 2017; Kilkey & Merla 2014) that invites us to pay attention to the significance and mutual shaping of various sociospatial scales (local, national, transnational, and global). The advantage of the multiscalar approach is its sensitivity toward multiple space constructions at various levels of analysis (macro, meso, micro, see Table 1).

The fourth added value of the proposed approach is its focus on the interplay between cross-border solidarity and inequality relations (e.g., Drotbohm & Hasselberg 2018), since it opens up new avenues for the analysis of the complexity of solidarity (in terms of access to membership and affective inclusion) and inequality (in terms of nonaccess/stratified membership and affective exclusion) in the cross-border realm. Thinking of membership (conventionally associated with social protection) and an affective dimension (conventionally associated with care relations) as components of the same relational setting acknowledges the complexity of inequalities that confront forced migrants’ families, meaning that cross-border families simultaneously experience various forms of solidarity and inequality in the micro, meso, and macro realms. In light of the complexity of care and protection resources (their heterogeneity, processuality, and multiple spatial scales), we propose to identify the patterns of interplay between solidarity and inequality on the basis of concrete empirical research as elaborated below.

This task is the subject of the following sections, in which we present the results of our small-scale explorative study, which is based on biographical interviews with forced movers ( $n = 7$ ) and experts involved in refugee support initiatives ( $n = 7$ ), as well as a number of ethnographic observations in different cities of Brandenburg (for details, see the introductory part of the article). Our interpretation process was guided by the open and selective coding procedures (Strauss & Corbin 1997). In the first step, we will introduce the changing micropractices of interviewees from Syria and Afghanistan who “do family” across borders. Second, we illustrate the embeddedness of family routines in the meso-level care and social protection strategies of various organizations and support initiatives, and, third, we frame these family routines by macro-level institutional regulations. In sum, we approach these three layers as components of a historically specific cross-border assemblage.

#### **4. Micro-routines of “doing family” across borders: High significance of remittances, low significance of hands-on and practical care, and mixed patterns for emotional support**

The study’s most significant outcome was that the inequality experiences of the forced migrants’ families manifest themselves in the form of limitations to the co-presence of movers and their distant family members. These affective inequality experiences are due to the constraints on international mobility and family reunification imposed by the

mechanism of legal status (as will be detailed in the section on institutional regulations below). At the same time, even under conditions of enforced immobility, the interviewees affectively aspired to achieve cross-border intrafamilial solidarity, because some forms of cross-border linkages are maintained by means of digital technologies.

All the forced movers we interviewed shared the perception that their family relations changed in the context of their flight. With the interviewees being located in Germany and their family members remaining in Afghanistan, Syria, or another country, the spatial separation was negatively characterized as a “lack” or “loss.” Although the possibility of co-presence with their family members was constrained for the majority of our interviewees, family unity was reproduced through transnational routines that were linked to the interviewees’ memories of family life in the sending countries. Such transnational contact with one’s family, in addition to the more general importance of family per se in one’s life, has been explained by the interviewees’ affective needs. Karim, an interviewee in his mid-thirties from Afghanistan, said that family members were like the fingers on his hand, each one distinct yet sharing the pain if one finger hurts. In this regard, our interviewees defined “family” as a coherent unit, which builds on the dichotomist difference between men and women and is guided by patriarchal relations and therefore consists of married men and women, children, and grandparents who live together and support one another if problems arise. Against this ideal heteronormative family image, the limitations to familial co-presence were highly problematized; but, at the same time, the transnational way of “doing family” was described as a “natural necessity.” In their accounts of the transnationalization of family relations, care, and protection, the interviewees noted that (i) transnational *remittances* were highly significant, that (ii) the transnational *circulation of hands-on and practical care* was highly constrained, and that the cross-border *circulation of emotions and information* showed a mixed pattern.

With regard to remittances, which we understand here as linked to family-related affective solidarity, all the interviewees mentioned *various forms of transnational financial support*, both given and received, between themselves and their distant family members. Most shared the view that sending money to one’s family abroad was the more prevalent situation. According to Karim, asking for money from his parents would cause them to worry about him. In many cases, the expectation to send money back home was considered an “obligation” and a “burden.” The interviewees also mentioned regular exchanges of money with their distant siblings, which was thought to be “doing family” at a distance in that it allowed those involved to uphold their reciprocal relations of support. Also of interest was the finding that informal financial support occasionally circulated between the interviewees and their local or translocal relatives or with local friends with whom they shared profound mutual trust.

In contrast, *transnational care relations* (understood here in a narrow sense as hands-on and practical care) were interpreted among interviewees as being restricted. Owing to the narrative of familial co-presence as the main premise for “appropriate” family relations, the interviewees highlighted administrative constraints related to legal status that prevent international movement as a major barrier to face-to-face care for distant

relatives.<sup>7</sup> Only one interviewee, Yari from Afghanistan, who is somewhere between 20 and 40 years old, told us that he felt obliged to visit and care for his old and sick parents (who meanwhile reside in Iran) and that he was able to do so because of his legal residence permit. Huda from Syria, another interviewee, who is in her early twenties, also told about her concerns and her wish to care for her distant parents abroad, but she stressed that she had an obligation to care for her brother, who is also living in Germany. Her situation is an example of the gendered work distribution within distant families, whereby in the context of flight the sister must assume the mother's role in taking care of her brother. Nevertheless, informal care is occasionally exchanged with local or translocal relatives in Germany and, more frequently, with local friends, which compensates for the restricted care relations. For example, when one of our interviewees was beaten up by a neo-Nazi, he did not tell his distant family; instead, his German girlfriend took care of him, while he in turn took care of one of his friends who was ill and feeling lonely.

Finally, the transnational *circulation of emotional support and information* was characterized as being quite selective (including both solidarity and inequality experiences), with the interviewees describing variations in its quality depending on specific family members. For example, several of the male interviewees would speak with their distant siblings but not with their distant parents about the need for emotional support. This differentiation is conceivable as emotional relations with the distant family members in Afghanistan and Syria are indicated as ambivalent: on the one hand, the interviewees described the familial relations as essential for their emotional well-being but, on the other hand, most of the interviewees stated that they would try not to talk to their family abroad about their (emotional) problems in Germany.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, a specific type of selectivity was evident with respect to the cross-border exchange of information—that is, the interviewees seemed to avoid distressing information concerning the security situation in their home countries. Exchanges of information varied depending on which family member was involved (e.g., communication with siblings seemed to be more open than it was with parents). Beyond this, such forms of support were also exchanged with local relatives or, more often, with local friends, co-ethnic networks, and support initiatives. For example, one interviewee described his uncle, who lives in a city nearby, as “being like a father” to him.<sup>9</sup>

As one of the layers of the respective care and protection assemblage, nonformalized family routines of the interviewees can be approached as being *provisional, heterogeneous and organized at various spatial scales* following interviewees' spatial mobility to Germany. Clearly, forced migrants' families experience multiple constraints when trying to maintain their family lives across borders. On this micro level we can see that inequalities relate to constraints on maintaining family-related affectivity: family members on both sides of the

7 In other words, despite mentioning some distant forms of care circulation (e.g., sending medicine), the interviewees perceived the co-presence (through short-term travel) as an essential condition for mutual support and well-being.

8 This pattern seems to be gendered, in that the women we interviewed would not hesitate to share their emotional burdens with distant relatives.

9 Local access to information seemed to be of great importance to our interviewees: relevant information about co-ethnic networks, NGOs, laws, and job opportunities or societal participation in Germany were exchanged mostly within personal networks, because the distant family members lacked such knowledge.

border seem to anticipate problems in the lives of other family members abroad, but, owing to the narrative of co-presence, they feel that they cannot solve such problems from a distance. In other words, cross-border remittances and local friendships seem not to fully compensate for the losses resulting from the perceived limitations on familial co-presence, because cross-border circulation of care (in its narrow understanding) is perceived by the interviewees as limited and emotional support as quite selective.

## 5. Solidarity in the context of semiformal care and protection at the meso level: The compensatory efforts of support initiatives and organizations

In light of the above analysis of family routines, semiformal care and social protection provided on the meso level by various networks, initiatives, NGOs, and migrant self-organizations (e.g., Karakayali & Kleist 2015) seem to reproduce solidarity-related efforts that compensate for the perceived lack of familial co-presence, care, and support in the context of forced migration. They seem to fulfil a compensatory function of solidarity aimed at mitigating the inequality experiences described in the previous section.

Both the interviewed forced movers and the experts engaged in the field of “refugee support” highlighted a range of relevant organizational actors that offer the services of social workers, doctors, psychologists, and lawyers in the areas of semiformal care and protection, including the city’s refugee consultants, refugee-led networks and associations, the church (*Diakonie*, Malteser International), NGOs (e.g., Amnesty International, Workers’ Welfare Association [AWO], voluntary agencies of the Parity Welfare Association [*Der Paritätische*]), and universities. These organizational actors, some of whom emerged in Germany after the “long summer of 2015” (Schiffauer et al. 2017), were mentioned as groups that address migrants’ problems, such as their lack of German language skills or of familiarity with conventional social, political, and economic *membership* and, thus, enabling access to the labor market, education, or political participation. In addition, these actors provide *affective support* (reproduced, for instance, by the mutual emotional support of members within migrant organizations or hometown associations or by local neighborhood forms of support) to forced movers who have emotional problems, encounter racism, or have trouble communicating with German citizens, as will be discussed below.

Both interviewed movers and experts framed semiformal care and social protection as both a transnational process and a local phenomenon in Germany. The transnational relations were articulated as appropriate organizational support for the reunification of distant family members and the prevention of deportation; in this regard, the interviewed experts referred to cooperation with organizations from other European countries. One such expert, who is active in a refugee-related network, talked about his role as a social worker. In addition to working with a refugee couple who live in Germany but got separated from their son who is now living in Sweden after their applications for asylum

to Germany and Sweden were rejected, this expert complained about the restrictive laws that prohibit family reunification and about deportations due to the Dublin law.<sup>10</sup>

Forced movers may be both members and clients of such organizations. Many of these organizations work on the local level, focusing on the respective city or region (e.g., the state of Brandenburg). For many of our interviewees, semiformal support became a necessity only after their spatial mobility to Germany; before their flight, it was not considered important for family relations and family strategies (with the exception of the role of the Red Crescent). Semiformal care and protection was discussed in particular with respect to its strategies for dealing with the racism that many movers encounter, but also in terms of the *heterogeneous* forms of (family-related) support.

Although these organizations and support initiatives do not generally get involved in personal *financial transactions*, some offer help in writing proposals for funding events, while others consider sending donations to help sick relatives in Syria and Afghanistan. *Care work* (in the narrow sense) is carried out in part, for example, by providing support for ill migrants or by volunteering with refugee children at a kindergarten. *Emotional support* is also provided to refugees who are grieving or require a therapist. However, most importantly, the interviewees highlighted the *significance of the information exchange* within the organizational framework, noting its importance for accessing the various forms of membership. Such activities may include translating official documents or conversations with doctors or hospitals and dealing with the foreign office, social welfare offices, asylum procedures, school-related matters, and so on. Moreover, some organizations offer workshops that provide information about access to membership, including the judicial, education, and employment systems in Germany, while others offer consultations to refugees who have problems with the asylum procedure, housing, or certificates. Furthermore, opportunities are provided for learning the German language (e.g., reading clubs, speaking cafés), where forced movers can communicate with German citizens as well. Semiformal support for forced movers on this local scale might prove to be compensatory in the absence of familial co-presence and in the face of the constraints on the transnational ways of “doing family” elaborated above.

Remarkably, the interviewed experts emphasized the fact that the forced movers both receive *and* give semiformal care and social protection on the local level in Germany. Most of the movers we interviewed were involved in some type of semiformal organization relevant to their needs or resources (e.g., knowledge, legal status). They stated that they wished not only to receive but also to offer semiformal social protection in Germany, highlighting their own agency: participating voluntarily in organizations by helping other movers is seen as “an opportunity to be active” (Karim) and also „to help oneself” (Abdul, a man in his twenties from Syria).

Summing up, we approach the heterogeneous organizational support provided to and by (forced) migrants as a component of the cross-border care and protection assemblage that spans the sending and receiving countries, as well as additional countries, where

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10 Dublin law comprises criteria and procedures to determine which EU member state is responsible for asylum claims from third-country nationals (i.e. non-European Economic Area nationals) or stateless individuals seeking international protection (EU 2013). It states that the member state that has admitted an asylum seeker’s entry is also responsible for reviewing that asylum seeker’s applications for asylum (Visa for Family Reunification 2019).

family members are located. The above findings indicate various forms of solidarity (on the meso level) that are not limited to membership-related efforts to provide relevant information and networks (e.g., enabling access to the labor market, education, or political participation), but which also have an affective dimension. Although the organizations and initiatives studied maintain certain idealized images of migrant deservingness (Fleischmann & Steinhilper 2017), many organizational routines can be regarded as providing solidarity aimed at compensating for the inequality experiences of movers (and their family members) in their daily lives (on the micro level). The following section will complement our analysis by showing how macro-institutional conditions in the form of securitization of asylum law channel inequality experiences of cross-border families.

## 6. Macro-constraints on “doing family” at a distance: Securitization, heteronormativity, and the inequality effects of institutional regulations

The concrete experiences of (forced) movers and their family members are embedded in the complex regulations on (1) international and domestic mobility, (2) gendered family reunification rules, and the (3) nexus between legal status and the formal system of social protection (Holmes & Castaneda 2016). In the main, these formal regulations contribute to inequality in terms of exclusion from or stratified forms of (political and social) membership. In addition, these regulations frame the affectivity-related inequality experiences of our interviewed forced movers, who perform their routines of “doing” family across borders.

First, due the securitization of the German asylum law since 2015, institutional regulations have been channeling international and domestic mobility opportunities according to categories of legal status.<sup>11</sup> On the one hand, the mobility of asylum seekers is severely restricted; for example, owing to a residential obligation (*Residenzpflicht*) (Refugees’ Council of Lower Saxony 2019a), they are not allowed to travel within and outside Germany during the asylum procedure. On the other hand, recognized refugees and individuals under subsidiary protection (who should have comparatively more freedom to move) also face residence constraints in Germany: after the end of the recognition procedure, they have to maintain permanent residence for three years in a place or city decided on by the local authorities (*Wohnsitzauflage*) (Refugees’ Council of Lower Saxony 2019b, 2019c). Although these two legal categories—recognized refugees and individuals under subsidiary protection—are officially allowed to move to another EU country, this is considered to be difficult to achieve, because their residence permit is only valid for Germany (Refugees’ Council of Lower Saxony 2019b, 2019c). Obviously, these

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11 According to German asylum policies, “refugees” are defined as individuals who have been successfully recognized in accordance with the Geneva Refugee Convention after completing their asylum application. “Asylum seekers” have not been registered by the Federal Office, but intend to apply for asylum, whereas “asylum applicants” are individuals who applied for asylum, but whose case has not yet been decided on. Individuals under “subsidiary protection” are defined as affected “by serious harm in their respective country of origin”.

regulations have negative consequences for the interviewees' maintenance of familial co-presence across national borders, as it was illuminated in the section on micro-routines.

Second, for the movers who arrive in Germany, "doing family" at a distance is framed by the legal (heteronormative) regulations regarding family reunification, which became subject to change after 2015. As outlined earlier, many of the interviewed forced movers and experts criticized the legislation on family reunification, which makes the application process overly complex and involves long waiting periods. Moreover, in the case of a positive decision, family members have to apply for their visas themselves in the respective sending countries. Additionally, family reunification rules became subject to change with the introduction of the Second Asylum Package in 2016 (Federal Government 2016) and with new family reunification legislation in 2018 (BAMF 2018). These legal regulations generate a differentiation according to legal status, leading to stratified forms of membership—that is, while reunification is generally allowed for "recognized refugees," it is not allowed for "asylum seekers." In addition, there is a conflict between the supranational EU-level Dublin III Regulation and Germany's asylum law, in that the former also allows for family reunification for asylum seekers (Pro Asyl 2017; Visa for Family Reunification 2017, 2019). Furthermore, recognized refugees are entitled to privileged (but heteronormatively coined) family reunification, which means they do not have to prove that they can sustain the alignment on their own or that they have enough living space, which is not the case for movers with "subsidiary protection status" (Commissioner of the Federal Government for Migration, Refugees and Integration 2019). The latter point has been the main focus of the Second Asylum Package of 2016, mentioned above, against the background of racialized and sexist media debates concerning the fear that family members of the subsidiary protected would follow them to Germany in large numbers (Holmes & Castaneda 2016). Without going into more detail, the Second Asylum Package of 2016 prohibited family reunions in Germany for two years for movers with subsidiary protection status who obtained their residence permits after March 2016, when this law took effect (Federal Government 2016).<sup>12</sup> Another reform, effective since August 1, 2018, allowed family reunification for individuals with subsidiary protection status (though only for 1,000 family members per month, for humanitarian reasons), and it enabled family reunions in cases of "specific hardship." As has become obvious, these gendered asylum and protection regulations channel the affective dimension of family relations in the daily realm by constraining opportunities of co-presence and by stratifying forced movers' opportunities to maintain cross-border family relations. As could be seen particularly from our previous analysis of daily family routines, these regulations limit familial co-presence and the transnational circulation of care practices and are related to the selective exchange of emotional support.

Third, the increased securitization of family reunification laws goes hand in hand with stratified membership in terms of access to social protection and other rights. According to our interviewees, both experts and movers, systems of formal social protection (under conditions such as war and related economic problems) did not exist in

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12 At the same time, it was said that reunification with their families would be made easier for "refugees" in the future by bringing them directly to Europe from refugee camps in Turkey, Jordan, or Lebanon (Federal Government 2016).

the sending countries. Consequently, the various welfare resources made available by the German state that provide such protection (e.g. health insurance, housing, financial support according to the *Asylbewerberleistungsgesetz* or *Sozialhilfe*) were generally considered to be supportive during and after the asylum procedure. Nevertheless, both the experts and the movers we interviewed criticized the same formal social protection for its stratifying and inequality-generating treatment of forced movers depending on their legal status. In contrast to the movers from Syria, many of those from Afghanistan were said to face restrictions owing to lack of permanent residence status. It was for this reason—along with experiences of racial harassment—that the interviewees from Afghanistan felt insecure even though they described Germany as a “secure country.” This differential and stratifying treatment can be traced to distinctive laws (i.e., the *Asylbewerberleistungsgesetz* for asylum seekers, and the *Sozialgesetzbuch* for recognized refugees and people with subsidiary protection status) that are relevant to the respective legal status categories in order to visit a doctor, find a job, or improve one’s German language skills, for example. This stratified membership seems to influence the way the interviewees would “do family” across borders through their daily routines. Those forced movers (recognized refugees in contrast to asylum seekers and those under subsidiary protection) who have better access to formal social protection seem to have a more positive experience of “doing family” transnationally. They highlighted better access to specific protection areas (health, housing, financial support, education), which could then be converted into resources to be circulated across borders (e.g., in the form of remittances).

In conclusion, as one of the layers of the respective care and protection assemblage, the above institutional conditions generate inequality effects for forced movers in two interrelated ways. For those members who are located in Germany, membership in larger societal domains and access to rights (e.g., mobility rights, family reunification, formal social protection) becomes highly stratified. At the same time, the previously mentioned institutional conditions (in particular, the limitations on family reunification and mobility rights) also constrain the *cross-border ways of “doing family” in the daily lives*. Such constraints are experienced in the form of limitations on familial co-presence and the channeling of resources that can be circulated across borders (limits in circulation of hands-on and practical care resources in contrast to the possibility of circulation of remittances and of [some] emotions). Most importantly, legal status functions here as a key medium regulating and channeling multidimensional inequality effects.

## 7. Conclusion

As a temporary configuration, the presented cross-border assemblage of care and social protection spans Germany, Syria, Afghanistan, and a number of additional countries where family members are dispersed. The concept of cross-border assemblage proposed here has multiple added values. First, its emphasis on heterogeneity allows us to think of social protection *and* of care as elements of the same relational nexus. Thus, both membership (as the essential pattern of social protection) and affective dimension (as the central premise of care relations) can be analyzed as interdependent and mutually shaping



one another. Second, by focusing on processuality, it becomes possible to indicate changing strategies of family-making on the micro level of daily routines: our analysis reveals that cross-border circulation of resources is mainly framed by nostalgic memories of co-presence. Third, by approaching assemblages as multiscale entities, we were able to assess the significance of national and supranational regulations *and* their impact on transnational family-making. Most importantly, although our analysis assigned epistemic privilege to the micro and meso levels of care and social protection, it would be impossible to reconstruct the nexus between multiple facets of solidarity and inequality without paying attention to certain securitized and heteronormative principles implied in the institutional opportunities on the macro level.

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## Information in German

### Deutscher Titel

Familien der Geflüchteten zwischen Solidaritäts- und Ungleichheitserfahrungen: Zur Analyse eines transnationalen Ensembles von (Für-)Sorge und sozialen Sicherung

### Zusammenfassung

Der Aufsatz analysiert verschiedene Formen der (Für-)Sorge (engl. care) und sozialen Sicherung, die transnational organisierte Familien von Geflüchteten über die Staatsgrenzen hinweg austauschen. Er stellt Ergebnisse einer explorativen Studie zum transnationalen Familienleben derjenigen Geflüchteten vor, die aus Afghanistan und Syrien während des „langen Sommers der Migration“ nach Deutschland eingewandert sind. Der Aufsatz entwickelt das Konzept des transnationalen Ensembles (engl. assemblage), das sowohl die grenzüberschreitenden Fürsorge-Verhältnisse, als auch verschiedene Formen der sozialen Sicherung in der Analyse des migrantischen Familienlebens mitberücksichtigt. Das Ensemble-Konzept hebt die Heterogenität, Prozessualität und multiskalare Qualität der transnationalen Familienstrategien der Geflüchteten hervor. Zentrale Aspekte des vorgeschlagenen Konzepts werden durch die biographischen Interviews mit Geflüchteten sowie durch Experten/-inneninterviews illustriert. So zeigt die Analyse der Mikro-Praktiken von ‚doing family‘ die Relevanz grenzüberschreitender Zirkulation von Geldüberweisungen, die Selektivität von transnational ausgetauschten Emotionen sowie die Einschränkung in der transnationalen Zirkulation von Fürsorge. Diese Befunde für die Mikroebene des Familienlebens werden durch die Analyse solidarischer Unterstützungsinitiativen auf der Mesoebene und der (multiskalaren) versicherheitslichten Asylpolitik auf der Makroebene für den deutschen Kontext ergänzt. Auf diese Weise kann der vorgeschlagene konzeptionelle Rahmen die gleichzeitige Erfahrung von Solidarität und Ungleichheit durch transnationale Familien analytisch berücksichtigen.

**Schlagwörter:** Transnationale Familien, Fürsorge/care, soziale Sicherung, Syrien, Afghanistan, Deutschland, Flucht

JFR – Journal of Family Research, 2020, vol. 32, no. 3, pp. 415–434.

doi: 10.20377/jfr-375

Submitted: May 15, 2019

Accepted: January 22, 2020

Published online: March 23, 2020



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