Marriage migration, Europe 1945–2010s
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This essay focuses on marriage migration in Europe after 1945. Marriage migration is an administrative category. Whether people are registered as marriage migrants depends on other migration options (Kofman 2004). Migration categories are like communicating vessels: when options in one category decrease, other categories become more important. Since 1975, north-western European countries have restricted the options for labor migration. As a result the percentage of people migrating for family formation (as marriage migration is frequently labeled) increased, as did refugee migration. After 1975, Germany was more restrictive regarding marriage migration than the Netherlands, and more liberal regarding refugees. When both countries reformed their policies in the 1990s – Germany became more restrictive regarding refugees (percent wise), while the Netherlands received more marriage migrants. When both countries reformed their policies in the 1990s – Germany became more restrictive regarding refugees and the Netherlands more restrictive regarding family migration – this resulted in the swapping over of percentages.

European guest workers and women spouses

European countries restricted access of migrating spouses to the labor market, thus strongly demarcating marriage migration from labor migration. Since most guest workers had been men, most spouses were women. In 1981 the Council of Europe expressed concerns about these labor market obstacles, because they led to low levels of labor market participation among migrant women (Kofman & Meetoo 2008). These measures enforced the (false) idea that men migrate for work and women for marriage.

In the literature and in political debates the focus is on women who migrate for marriage, although also men do. “Import brides” feature prominently, and “import grooms” not. The literature emphasizes the preference of migrants (or their offspring) for an endogamous marriage, and ignores the fact that in the country of settlement there might be little enthusiasm for marrying a migrant, a member of an ethnic minority, or a Muslim. Bringing a wife from the country of origin was, until a few years ago, regarded as a choice that indicated a low level of assimilation. Marriage migration in combination with endogamy is seen both as the cause and the outcome of failed integration. Preference for so-called traditional values and the wish to marry an “unspoiled” wife, especially among Turks in north-western Europe, would explain marriage migration. In reality, the practice was partly the result of an unbalanced sex ratio within immigrant populations (with men outnumbering women). However, women also “import” husbands from their country of origin, and this cannot be explained by the sex ratio, or by ideas about virginity/purity, which relate to women, not men. One explanation is that the woman’s family stands to gain from this type of marriage migration; the family enabled a man to migrate to “fortress Europe” and this increased the family’s social standing. The women involved might also profit because they could live a more “modern” lifestyle, since they would not be living with their in-laws (who would stay in the country of origin). This would explain why better-educated women, especially, look for men in their country of origin (Lievens 1999). More recent research (González-Ferrer 2006) proved this assumption wrong: better-educated women did show a propensity for seeking a partner in their country of origin, but after marriage they often lived in extended...
households, making it unlikely that this was the situation they were trying to avoid.

**Europe as a marriage-migration destination**

In the literature on marriage migration the emphasis lies on more exotic countries of origin. Marriage migration from neighboring countries is, however, more common in all European countries. There are, however, differences between men and women. In the Netherlands, Turkish and Moroccan women marry Dutch men less frequently than Turkish and Moroccan men marry Dutch women. If Dutch women are involved in a mixed marriage, they marry different “others” than their male counterparts. Dutch men marry Asian and Eastern European women, whereas Dutch women marry Spanish and Italian men. In 2001, Belgian women married men from Italy, France, and the Netherlands. Only a small percentage of Belgian women married men from non-EU countries. Belgian men also primarily married women from EU countries, mostly Italy, the Netherlands, and Poland, but they also married women from Asia (Mahnkopf & Guličová-Grethe 2004).

Marriage migration to north-western European countries has received more attention than marriage migration to other European countries. Marriage migration in north-western Europe is regarded as a spin-off from guest worker migration, while in southern European countries there are also ties with tourism. In Athens, for instance, there is a support organization for German women who, as tourists, met and later married Greek men (Lauth Bacas 2002). In north-western European countries, such as the Netherlands, Germany, and Belgium, most attention is paid to marriage migration from Turkey and Morocco, and endogamy. In the southern European countries, such as Spain, more attention is paid to marriage migration from Eastern Europe, Russia, Latin America and Africa, and exogamy (Rodríguez-García 2006). The literature emphasizes how marriage enables people to migrate, to legalize their stay after migration, or experience upward social mobility. Children by a Thai mother and a Western (Caucasian) father – called *luuk kreung* or half children in Thailand – are portrayed favorably in the Thai media as being modern and cosmopolitan, and as successful movie actors and actresses, supermodels, pop singers, beauty queens, and celebrities (Tosakul 2010).

**Gendered character of marriage migration**

In many countries women (but not men) used to have to automatically change their nationality when they married a partner of a different nationality. The laws that deprived women of their citizenship upon marriage dated from the end of the 19th century, when nation-states took shape and nationality became more important. These laws gave migrating women easy access to their new country’s citizenship if they married a national. Migrating men did not have the same option. When a nonmigrant woman married a migrant man she acquired his nationality and thus became a foreigner in her country of birth and abode. Dutch women who married Canadian soldiers after World War II became Canadian. Since Canada did not recognize the right to divorce, they could not regain their Dutch citizenship if their marriages failed, and could not move back to the Netherlands after they had migrated to Canada with their husbands (Schrover 2010). Belgian women who married Polish liberators shortly after World War II became Polish, even if they continued to live in Belgium. Some women found a way around this rule and managed to retain their Belgian citizenship, by claiming it back after their marriage. Soviet women who had been forced laborers in Nazi Germany became Belgian if they married a Belgian man after the war. The Soviet Union however did not recognize this change in nationality and continued to see the women as Soviet subjects (Venken 2010). Most European countries have abolished the automatic loss of citizenship of women through marriage: the United Kingdom, for instance, did so in 1948, Germany in 1953, and the Netherlands in 1964 (de Hart 2006).
Guest work and marriage migration

Countries from which large numbers of guest workers originated in the past and which are now not part of the EU (such as Turkey and Morocco) tend to have large numbers of marriage migrants, because there are ties between the migrant and those whom he leaves behind, and few alternatives to this form of migration. Marriage migration is chain migration. In Belgium, for instance, Turkish immigrants come from the region of Emirdag (Timmerman et al. 2009). Thousands of European Turks spend their holidays in Emirdag. These “Avrupali” (Europeans) have luxurious houses in Emirdag, drive expensive cars, and organize extravagant weddings. Emirdag has profited from its migrants, many people have ties with migrants, and migrants travel to the region frequently. Emirdag has a culture of migration, and one of the few ways to migrate is via marriage.

Arranged marriages

Marriage migration is discussed in the literature with reference to arranged marriages, which are sometimes equated with forced marriages, especially when the women are young and come from Turkey or Morocco. There is a tendency to problematize marriage migration. In the 1970s, the literature paid attention to anomalies, such as polygamous marriages, and how to deal with these (although the number of people who were in such marriages and wanted to migrate was extremely small). In recent literature, there has been an emphasis on health risks resulting from marriages between cousins, although marriage migration need not lead to consanguineous marriages. Marriage migration is generally regarded with suspicion by authorities. Migrating men are suspected of having economic motives, rather than migrating for love, especially when they come from poor countries and marry nonmigrant women. Denmark, the Netherlands, and Germany, for instance, screen potential marriages with non-EU spouses in an attempt to find “sham” marriages, often using criteria which are disputed in court (de Hart 2006; Kontos et al. 2006).

Authorities look at the age difference between partners, their ability to communicate with each other, and how well the partners know each other. Denmark, Germany, Austria, France, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom have introduced age barriers (with minimum ages of 18 to 24), housing and income requirements, tests to be taken before migration, and dependent resident status. The last means partners cannot divorce within a waiting period (of one to four years). If they do, the dependent partner must return to his or her country of origin. The issue of dependent resident status has led to much debates and campaigns, focusing on women, although men can also gain dependent resident status. In the campaigns it was emphasized that women were maltreated and this enforced the negative image of marriage migration (Schrover 2010). In response to these campaigns Germany, the United Kingdom, and Norway, for instance, introduced so-called hardship rules, or domestic violence and abuse clauses: migrant women should not be forced to bear inhumane treatment within their marriage in order to avoid losing their legal status (Kontos et al. 2006; Tyldum & Tveit 2008; Kofman & Meetoo 2008). If a woman is in an abusive relationship, she should not be required to wait until the end of the waiting period before divorcing. In the United Kingdom, campaigns against the waiting period ran alongside official sex-discrimination against Asian men, which existed from the late 1960s until 1985, when it was stopped by the European Court of Human Rights. Men were suspected of being labor migrants and were denied entrance, when they were in an arranged marriage. The same was not true for Asian women, who were not suspected of being labor migrants. Asian men were suspected of seeking entrance to the United Kingdom through marriages of convenience. The Home Office assumed that men were actually coming for work and were abusing the arranged marriage system (Lutz 1997; Kofman 1999).

Love exiles

Last, there are people whom the literature calls love exiles: people who migrate to a country
where they can marry, while in their country of origin they cannot (Wieringa 2011). This generally refers to marriages between same-sex partners. Differences between neighboring countries can also lead to love exile. In Belgium the rules for marriage migration are much more lenient than in the Netherlands. Migrants who cannot fulfill Dutch requirements regarding age, housing, and income move to Belgium where they can marry. They take up temporary residence in Belgium and after a period of time move to the Netherlands. This is called the Belgian route.

SEE ALSO: Gender, labor, and migration; Marriage migration; Sex trafficking and migration; Sex workers and migration, Europe; Women, reproduction and migration

References and further reading