6 Central Asian female migrants' transnational social spaces

Straddling illegality and tradition

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Introduction

This chapter employs the concept of transnational social space to examine Central Asian female migrants' relationship with the law in the Russian Federation (or Russia), where labour migration primarily reflects (temporary) rotations. Much of the existing research on migrants' legal experiences in the Russian context tends to focus on the case of male migrants and their relationship with the Russian legal system and law. However, less attention has been paid to the social circumstances or transnational practices and thoughts relevant to understanding Central Asian female migrants' experiences within this system. This chapter contributes to 'migrant legality–illegality' (Coutin 2000; De Genova 2004; Menjívar 2006) debates through the perspective of gender. We also contribute to the migration and legal transnationalism scholarship, in which the Russian case has received increasing attention in recent years (e.g., Kubal 2016; Urinboyev 2018). However, we argue that vulnerable migrant groups such as women often do not fit into transnationalism, informality or legal culture narratives without taking into account the specificities of the female experience.

In 2001, Kivisto analysed the dominant perspectives on the study of migrant transnationalism, underlining the importance of immigrant communities for understanding the manifestations of transnationalism from below (Kivisto 2001: 561). His conclusions echoed Basch, Schiller and Blanc-Szanton (1994: 1), who examined transnational processes in which immigrants built social fields connecting their countries of residence and origin. Faist defined these as social spaces which

> not only refer to physical features, but also to larger opportunity structures, the social life and the subjective images, values and meanings that the specific and limited place represents to migrants. Space is thus different from place in that it encompasses or spans various territorial locations.
>
> (Faist 2000: 45–46)

Along a similar vein, Vertovec (2001: 578) underlined the significance of multilocal spaces as 'a complex set of conditions that affect the construction, negotiation

and reproduction of social identities. These identities play out and position individuals in the course of their everyday lives within and across each of their places of attachment or perceived belonging.'

In line with Faist's definition and Vertovec's (2001: 576) critical appraisal of a single theory of transnationalism for all migrant groups, we examine some aspects of transnational social spaces relevant to understanding the legal choices made by Central Asian migrant women in the Russian Federation. We also consider criticisms. These include those lobbed at the role of migrant agency in transnationalism research for emphasising the free decision-making role of migrants and, thus, overlooking power relations, politics and conflicts amongst different actors and at different levels in transnational mobility (Koser 2007; Pries 2008). The unevenness, instability and inequality of transnational social spaces represent topics deserving further attention (De Jong and Dannekker 2018: 493). These discussions are relevant to research on migrant legal cultures, in which agency is often underlined as an important and positive factor. Writing about legal pluralistic outlooks, Kubal (2013b) describes how its proponents view legal cultures as needing to be established and upheld by the state, as well as an integral part of the overall culture of a people. Furthermore, in his study on Central Asian migrants in Russia, Urinboyev (2020) characterises migrants' legal adaptation as a combination of skills in manoeuvring around official structures alongside an ability to construct unofficial rules within migrant communities, which facilitate living under few legal protections. Framed in this way, an informal legal culture underlines actors' rational choices and individualism, and creates a borderline legal-nihilistic outlook on formal law and state structures, possibly becoming a hindrance to self-determination and a 'fluid existence.'

Migrant communities in Russia are primarily dominated by a younger generation of male workers, resulting in overlooking the female experience. Although the literature on migrant transnationalism in the Russian context has recently expanded, the female experience continues to attract less attention. In this regard, previous studies have specifically focused on family and kinship relations across borders (Rahmonova-Schwartz 2012), social hierarchies in translocal livelihoods (Schroder and Stephan-Emmrich 2014), remittances and gender-based power relations in sending countries (Reeves 2012) and migrants' political remittances to their home countries (Ruget and Usmanalieva 2011). Urinboyev (2018) found that Uzbeks' traditional village and *mahalla*-level legal orders, such as trust, obligation, shame and neighbourliness, extend across borders through telephone-based translocal communities and exert a considerable impact on the lives of migrants in Russia. However, his work examines the experiences of male Uzbek migrants, whereas the same conclusions may not automatically apply to female migrant experiences.

Migrant illegality has been widely studied in many Western immigrant-receiving contexts. More likely, it is linked to informality and the absence of strong legal protections, which Coutin (2000) referred to as a state of legal absence in a society. Such categories and concepts as liminal legality (Menjívar 2006), legal illegality (Rigo 2010), semi-legality (Kubal 2013a), quasi-legality (Düvell 2008)

and a-legality (Lindahl 2010) are used to describe the complexities of migration legality. Scholars have even dubbed the process legal violence (Menjívar and Abrego 2012) or the legal production of illegality (De Genova 2004). Writing about the US experience, Ngai stated that illegal or undocumented immigrants are 'at once welcome and unwelcome' in the US: excluded as citizens, but 'woven into the economic fabric of the nation' as cheap and disposable labour (Ngai 2004: 2). Critical observers, such as Menjívar (2006: 1002), argue that the contemporary immigration laws of migrant-receiving countries 'create and recreate an excluded population and ensure its vulnerability and precariousness by blurring the boundaries of legality and illegality to create gray areas of incertitude'.

On a global level, these frameworks have covered both male and female experiences (see, for example, Boyd and Grieco 2003; Carling 2005; Lutz 2010; Boehm 2012). This reflects the fact that almost half of the world's migrant population consists of women.[1] However, research on legality and transnationalism focused specifically on female experiences in Russia remains fragmentary, if not entirely nonexistent. Gorina, Agadjanian and Zotova (2018) explored the effects of their legal status on migrant women's economic success in Russia. In doing so, they found a significant gap in the perception of pay equality between temporary-status and permanent-status migrants, illustrating the importance of legal status in mitigating adverse experiences within the labour market. In addition, Tyuryukanova (2011) analysed the process of the feminisation of migration flows, describing various models of female migration behaviour, along with individual and family migration strategies, including migration with children. Scrutinising the dynamics and structure of spheres of employment amongst Kyrgyz and Tajik female migrants, Poletaev (2018) shed light on their formal and informal employment practices and strategies in defending their infringed labour rights. Male and female migrants exhibited no differences in complying with laws, their vulnerability during interactions with the state or in relations with employers and landlords as well as during transnational practices (Rocheva and Varshaver 2017).

To examine the transnational social spaces of Central Asian female migrants in Russia, we ask the following questions: What are the peculiarities of female migrant experiences within the Russian legal system? Moreover, how do national traditions in the home society influence the choices of female migrants in the host society? To answer these questions, we utilise the life stories of four female migrants[2] originating from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, all residing in Moscow. These cases share the experience of childbirth in Russia and acquiring sometimes fake documents in order to prove that they are the legal guardians of their children born in Russia. We argue that Central Asian female migrants' legal culture in the Russian Federation should be understood as a part of such transnational social spaces and that they are shaped by the collective circumstances of women in their countries and communities of origin. We chose these cases on the basis that they represent theoretically relevant examples of the life experiences of the most vulnerable groups in the migrant communities and reveal important dynamics in female transnational social spaces. In addition to taking into account the absence of strong institutions and legal protections in Russia, we aim to understand how

practices and ways of thinking related to the lives of women in their countries and communities of origin affect their agency in decision-making related to family and migration law in Russia.

The research material consists of expert interviews with migration lawyers and informal discussions with labour migrants, which took place in Moscow in 2017 and 2019.[3] We selected four female case studies for closer analysis to identify what might lie behind the female experiences of legality–illegality in Russia and how perceptions of local culture and traditions in the sending societies affect migrants' coping strategies in the recipient society. In the material we collected, two case studies of migrant women, Farida and Nazira, stood out as examples of particularly troublesome cases from both the legal and human rights perspectives. At the time of data collection in 2019, it was clear that it might take at least several months, if successful, to find a legal solution. Therefore, following our fieldwork, we remained in touch with our informants' lawyers to follow up on these and other issues related to our fieldwork. The third story emerged through the Uzbek media. A migrant woman, who travelled to Russia as the 'second', unofficial wife of a migrant, was left in a difficult situation and chose to share her story in the media.[4] Because the story resulted in a discussion in an Uzbek-language group on Facebook, we followed the issue with the woman's pro bono lawyer, an informant from our fieldwork, who then facilitated our introduction to the migrant. The story of Lobar was later introduced as a separate case study.

Russian migration policy and Central Asian female migration

Russia is one of the main destinations for migrants in the world. In 2019, it stood fourth globally both as a destination (around ten million migrants) and as the country of origin for immigrants (IOM 2019: 26). Migrants from Central Asia constitute the largest portion of the migrant workforce, mostly employed in unskilled jobs. Given the varying methods and purposes of registering foreigners, Russia's responsible agencies provide a range of figures on the number of economic migrants.[5] Labour migrants' economic output is estimated as representing 10.5% of the Russian economy (Ryazantsev 2016).

Russia's immigration and citizenship legislation underwent significant transformations following the collapse of the Soviet Union (Ivahnyuk 2009; Malakhov 2014; Abashin 2017). Whilst the citizenship regimes and immigration laws changed and evolved across the entire post-Soviet space, a historically determined attachment to documents persisted. Documents were viewed not just as identity documents, but also as guarantors of authority, a mechanism for the production of political subjectivity (Reeves 2013a: 154) and a means to population control in which 'national security' was an essential component of policy developments (Heusala 2018).

Currently, Russia maintains a visa-free regime with members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS); thus, almost all migrants from Central Asia can enter Russia legally. Central Asian labour migrants must obtain several documents, however, to remain legal in Russia. These include, but are

not limited to, a migration card, a temporary residence registration and a *patent* (work permit), which necessitates health, Russian-language and Russian history/ law certificates, all acquired at a significant expense. Citizens of Kyrgyzstan, a member of the Moscow-led Eurasian Economic Union, are theoretically on equal footing in terms of labour rights with the local population. Furthermore, since 1995, Russia and Tajikistan have agreed upon dual citizenship, allowing many Tajiks to obtain Russian citizenship simultaneously.

Complex and constantly changing rules also render retaining legal permits an arduous task for migrants. Moreover, a large number of migrants are employed in the informal sector. Researchers have often critically assessed the development of Russian migration policy. For instance, Kubal (2016) argues that Russian migration policies produce insecure and legally ambiguous migration statuses through inconsistent and arbitrary law enforcement. Moreover, the less-than-complete implementation of these rules by Russian authorities discourages migrants from becoming 'legal'. Abashin (2014) states that even migrants who do not violate any law are often perceived as having done so since migrant status typically connotes illegality.

The informal document market amongst migrant workers continued to thrive in the mid-2010s, the period when our cases evolved. This market enabled migrants to adapt to the restrictive legal environment through the production of 'clean fake' Russian, Kyrgyz and Tajik passports, residency documents, various certificates and work permits (Reeves 2013b; Dave 2014). In order to become 'legal', migrants resort to various semi-legal and outright illegal practices of legalisation through middlemen (*posredniki*) (Dave 2014). In 2015 and 2016, Russian authorities introduced new rules regarding work permits for everyone, which amongst others meant that migrants needed to provide fingerprints. Whilst these and other steps limited the possibilities of forging documents, the informal document market nevertheless continues to survive and operate, albeit more cautiously and at higher prices.[6]

Complicated legalisation procedures and high fees for work permits push migrants further into the shadow economy (Heusala and Aitamurto 2017). Experiences with the Russian system of labour migration led researchers to question its unintentionality. For instance, Schenk (2018) argued that these legal ambiguities should be viewed as a key feature of migration governance since they keep the number of documented migrants low so that Russian offi-cials can deploy the population's antimigrant sentiments and generate infor-mal benefits (*kormushka*). Attention has also been paid to the characteristics of the globalised economic conditions, where the Russian shadow economy and pathologies in the migration regime are linked to questions regarding global economic competitiveness and to foreign policy goals in the Eurasian space (Heusala 2017: 1).

Since the early 2000s, labour migration from Central Asia has been primarily male dominated.[7] However, tendencies in recent years reveal a growing share of female migrants. Women constitute at least 38% of migrants from Kyrgyzstan; this figure stands at 15% to 20% amongst migrants from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan

(Rocheva and Varshaver 2017). Whilst construction sites, farms and similar areas where physical strength is required primarily employ men, female migrants can find jobs predominantly in trade (supermarkets and shops), catering (restaurants, hotels and food factories) and domestic (care) and cleaning services.

In her study on the implications of migration for Russian social policy, Linda Cook provides an account of both de jure rights and de facto access amongst migrants to social services, including healthcare access for migrant women and the rights of migrant children to schooling. She points out that reliance on informal health documentation plays a prominent role in migrants' lives (Cook 2017: 137–139; see also Kashnitsky and Demintseva 2018).

Women from Central Asia represent the most vulnerable group. They endure the worst living conditions and face major problems in terms of accessing medical services (Tyuryukanova 2011). Gorina, Agadjanian and Zotova (2018) found that female migrants from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan earn lower salaries compared with male migrants. Amongst Central Asian migrants in Russia, there are consistently more divorced and widowed women and fewer single women than men (Rocheva and Varshaver 2017). From existing research, it seems that (both male and female) migrants' sexual and reproductive behaviour is characterised by limited access to information about risks (Weine et al. 2013; Rocheva and Varshaver 2017). Kazenin et al. (2019) found no significant differences in the reproductive strategies of female migrants from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, a member state of the Eurasian Economic Union and a non-member, respectively. Agadjanian and Zotova (2011) explored sexual risks amongst Central Asian women associated with migration. In a survey conducted in 2011 amongst Kyrgyz, Tajik and Uzbek female migrants, around 19% had a partner or lived in a civil marriage (Agadjanian and Zotova 2011). We may assume that a significant number of female migrants accompany their spouses in migration.

The overwhelming majority of migrants, regardless of gender, rent so-called *koiko-mesto* (a single bed-sized space) in shared flats. Often, women and men share separate rooms in apartments. High housing prices in large cities do not allow couples to rent a separate flat. At best, a couple can rent a room of their own (in a flat) if both are working and can afford the extra expense. Children typically remain in the home countries with extended family members, unless the parents plan to stay in Russia for an extended period of time. Although this might have changed recently, only in very rare cases have parents brought their children with them (Alexandrov et al. 2012).

Whilst local Russians treat migrants from the Slavic countries of Belarus and Ukraine either neutrally or positively, individuals from the non-Slavic Muslim-majority countries of Central Asia with a poor command of the Russian language are perceived as alien and unwanted in Russian society. Periodic polls indicate consistently high rates of dislike and xenophobia against Central Asian migrants (Levada 2019). Racism specifically targeting Central Asians is rampant in today's Russia (e.g., Reeves 2013a; Round and Kuznetsova 2016; Mukomel 2013). Simultaneously, we must note that Central Asian migrants, especially female migrants, are mistreated not only by the local population but also at times by

fellow migrants (Agadjanian et al. 2017), including experiencing sexual harassment (Agadjanian and Zotova 2011). Three out of the four women we interviewed also faced abuse from other labour migrants.

Occasional cases emerge in the Russian media of Central Asian women abandoning their toddlers or authorities taking custody of children from presumably careless parents. This gives the impression to many locals that female migrants come to Russia to give birth to 'anchor babies' in order to claim welfare benefits for their children, and resulting in possible abandonment when faced with financial or other difficulties.[8] As Rocheva's (2014) study of Kyrgyz women's reproductive choices demonstrates, a child born on Russian soil is not automatically eligible for future citizenship and migrant parents cannot claim welfare benefits (so-called maternal capital, a lump sum of money provided by the Russian government to stimulate childbirth) unless one or both parents are Russian citizens. Furthermore, the difficulties migrants face in using Russian public healthcare services have led them to develop their own medical infrastructure (Kashnitsky and Demintseva 2018).

Case studies of female experiences

Our first case study documents the story of Nazira, a woman with dual Russian and Tajik citizenship. As a native of Tajikistan, she obtained Russian citizenship whilst living in Dushanbe. Early in the 2010s, Nazira moved to Russia for work. She met another labour migrant, a citizen of Uzbekistan, with whom she began living in a civil partnership and with whom she had two children who were born in Russia. In 2015, the police stopped her civil partner and fined him for 'a lack of proper documents', a typical charge the police frequently use to extort money from Central Asian migrants. This led to a court decision and his subsequent deportation from Russia. Now, left on her own, Nazira tried to obtain Russian citizenship for her children. But, to do so, she needed to have, amongst others, registration at her place of residence, which she did not possess. Although Nazira held Russian citizenship, she was using a temporary registration, which she had to extend every three months.

She received advice from her friends to return to Tajikistan, obtain Tajik foreign travel passports for her children and then with those apply for Russian citizenship. Nazira returned to Dushanbe, convinced her civil partner (who travelled to Tajikistan following Nazira's urging) to sign a statement that he was abandoning the children and received passports for her children. She obtained passports for her children using her own surname, although the children's Russian birth certificates listed the surname of their father. Back in Russia, she now had two children officially unrecognised by any birth certificates. Not only could she not claim Russian citizenship for her children, but, more importantly, she could not prove that the children actually belonged to her.

Another woman, Munira Usmonova[9], originated from Andijan, Uzbekistan. Brought up as an orphan by impoverished grandparents, she was unable to marry by the time she reached her early 20s, a situation considered shameful by many

traditional families in Central Asia. She agreed to become a 'second wife' to Umid, who was already in an official marriage with another woman with whom he had a child. Faced with financial difficulties, Umid left to work in Moscow and brought Munira there in 2013. Before the birth of her first child, Munira lost her passport. Umid persuaded her to present herself at the hospital staff using his surname, Razzakova, and later brought a fake certificate to the hospital confirming the loss of 'Munira Razzakova's' identity documents, including her passport and work permit. That document had the seal of Ryazan police department, a city 200 km away from Moscow, and a stamp from Moscow's Chertanovo district police department. Moreover, the document stated that 'Munira Razzakova' was a citizen of Morocco. As expected, the maternity ward issued a birth certificate stating not that the child was born to Munira Usmonova, a citizen of Uzbekistan, but to 'Munira Razzakova', a Moroccan citizen. Munira and Umid continued to live together, not paying much attention to recovering the document. In the meantime, their second child was born. In 2018, police stopped Umid for an ID check and discovered that he had overstayed in Russia without proper documents, leading to his deportation. At first, Umid promised that he would send money to Munira so that she could recover her documents and return to Uzbekistan. However, he later stopped corresponding with Munira, who was now in Russia without the proper means to support herself or her children.

Initially, some friends and sympathisers in a shared flat helped with the housing rental and food expenses, but gradually she was left with nothing. Because she was kicked out of several rental flats, her case gained Uzbek-language media attention. This led to heated discussions in an Uzbek segment of social media. With the Uzbek Women's Committee[10] endorsement and the Uzbek Embassy's support, Munira was able to, first, recover her own identity documents and, later, her children's documents. This took her and her pro bono lawyer visiting many organisations in Russia and several months. Ultimately, Munira was able to leave Russia with her children (with money raised via social media) in mid-March 2020, just before the pandemic-induced lockdowns began in Russia and Uzbekistan.

The third case study focuses on the story of Farida, a female migrant from Uzbekistan, who became a mother of two children at the age of 16 and was herself raised in a single-parent household by her mother. Desperate to find a job, her mother went to Russia, taking 11-year-old Farida with her. In Russia's Lipetsk city, because they were living in a shared apartment with other tenants, another migrant raped the then 12-year-old Farida when her mother was at work. The rapist was sentenced to jail, but Farida became pregnant and decided not to abort, thus giving birth to a child at the age of 13. Since Farida herself was a minor, her mother was listed as the mother of the newborn child on the Russian birth certificate. Farida's mother juggled temporary low-paid jobs and, when Farida turned 15, she decided that her daughter should marry someone who could sustain her. Because Farida was still a minor, her mother decided that a *nikah,* a religious marriage ceremony not recognised by state authorities, was sufficient in order for her and another 35-year-old migrant to live together. Farida was 16 when she gave birth to her second child. At this point, both her mother and her husband had

abandoned her. Farida now found herself in a trap: she had neither a place to live nor documents to return to Uzbekistan. First, it would be extremely difficult without her mother's presence to obtain a passport from the Embassy of Uzbekistan in Moscow. Second, even if she managed to leave, she would not be able to travel with her older child, who is legally her mother's daughter. Technically, it would be possible to obtain travel documents if Farida's mother applies for her passport and signs a power of attorney for the child to travel with Farida. But Farida does not know her mother's whereabouts.

Lobar came to Russia with her husband very soon after their marriage. Late in her pregnancy, she was working as an assistant in a grocery shop, whilst her husband worked in a car service station, both in a town outside Moscow. Determined to return the debt they had accrued to cover their wedding expenses, both took extra hours and saved as much money as possible. This worsened Lobar's health, and she gave birth during the eighth month of pregnancy. The premature baby was admitted to the intensive care unit for several weeks. Later, the hospital staff demanded that the parents pay for the child's stay in intensive care, stating that foreigners are eligible for free medical care for only five days. Lobar, who was discharged from the hospital by then, and her husband did not have the requested money. As the days passed and the hospital bill kept climbing, the parents were not allowed to see their child. The child's health improved by the fifth week, and the hospital staff were preparing documents to send her to an orphanage. Desperate for the return of their own child, Lobar and her husband sought help from friends, which led to them becoming acquainted with rights activists. It was only through a petition from the Russian Red Cross Society that the parents were able to reunite with their baby and officially register their parenthood.

Tradition in the transnational social spaces of Central Asian female migrants

Central Asian societies represent an interesting blend of modernity and religious traditions. For centuries, Islam has played an important and deciding role in the organisation of societies' lives (Khalid 2007; Louw 2007). Whilst the Russian empire, which conquered the Central Asian *khanates* in the late nineteenth century, did not interfere much in the internal structure of these states, the Soviets carried out intensive modernisation projects impacting all aspects of life. Along with economic modernisation, Soviets' atheism and women's emancipation policies deeply affected the social organisation of the Central Asian republics (Edgar 2006; Northrop 2004). However, after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, nation-building policies in each Central Asian country to some degree were accompanied by the partial reestablishment of traditional Islamic norms, influencing the social structure of society, especially the position of women (Alimova and Azimova 2000; Peshkova 2014).

Some claim that the post-Soviet period witnessed a rise in strong patriarchy, muting the voices of women alongside the re-Islamisation of Central Asian

societies (Tokhtakhodzhaeva 2008). Indeed, in some rural areas, domestic violence remains a serious issue (Haarr 2007; Childress, Panchanadeswaran and Joshi 2017). At the same time, we must note that the position of women in Central Asian societies is not homogenous and differs not only from country to country, from town to village, but also within communities. Akiner (1997) views contemporary Central Asian women as poised between two value systems of modernity and tradition, subscribing in part to both, but not entirely to either:

> Central Asian women themselves are caught between conflicting impulses: some feel the need to return to their 'authentic' roots, with a renewed emphasis on traditional domestic obligations; others, to continue along the road to greater personal independence and freedom of choice. The great majority, however, would like to retain the balance between tradition and modernity that was reached, slowly and sometimes painfully, during the Soviet period. (Akiner 1997: 263)

In other words, Central Asian societies have accommodated both the traditional and modern lifestyles of their populations, although the role of Islam has significantly grown in recent years. The level of a tradition's impact on people's lives varies territorially as well. Whilst individuals in urban locations are at ease choosing whether to strictly follow traditions, in rural areas traditions (mostly formed by Islamic norms) place intense pressure on determining an individual's behaviour.

At a community level, the *mahalla* (literally, neighbourhood) plays an important role as a unit of traditional self-governance in Tajik- and Uzbek-speaking communities across Central Asia. Whilst serving as an institution of mutual assistance and welfare, the *mahalla* also influences the attitudes of its residents through gossip as a powerful instrument of control (Urinboyev 2011; Dadabaev 2013). Therefore, people in their everyday activities attempt to refrain from actions that may yield disapproval from coresidents. In other words, in order to avoid gossip, one tries to behave in a way that is generally accepted as adhering with the rules of Islam and local traditions (which are mostly mixed and inseparable). Kane and Gorbenko (2015) also claim that it was the institution of the *mahalla* that was left intact by Soviet modernisation, which reinforced gender conservatism in post-Soviet Uzbekistan.

Hierarchies and social positions as well as gender roles in the family and community are largely defined by patriarchal and traditional values, where males are granted priority in making decisions (Cleuziou and Direnberger 2016). In a traditional family in Central Asia, men are considered the head of the family and, as such, are responsible for earning money, whilst women are viewed as homemakers and, thus, responsible for bearing children and taking care of household chores. The eldest male is delegated the authority to make most of the decisions, which become obligatory to other family members. Whilst cautious of fallacious generalisations, we must note that younger female family members in particular are expected to strictly obey the rules set by elder members. However,

this does not mean that women in Central Asia are passive followers of men's orders without any agency of their own. As Akiner (1997) puts it, women are able to negotiate a position acceptable to themselves, if not publicly, then within their families and their communities. Moreover, social disruptions associated with economic decline, high unemployment rates and population impoverishment in recent decades have altered gender roles within a significant share of families across the region. Initially, men became labour migrants, finding jobs mostly in Russia.[11] In many places across Central Asia, women—sometimes as the only breadwinner and sometimes together with a spouse—also became labour migrants.

As mentioned above, there are consistently more divorced and widowed women and fewer single women than men amongst Central Asian labour migrants in Russia (Rocheva and Varshaver 2017). Our own previous fieldwork also confirmed this tendency. Divorce in most traditional families across Central Asia is stigmatised, especially for women. A divorced woman may sometimes find herself unwelcome in her parents' home since she might bring shame to the family. This is especially true for rural areas. The need to sustain children independently, to buy one's own housing, to escape possible harassment or to simply start a new life may push divorced women to seek employment in Russia, where salaries are higher and one's marital status does not result in gossip. This also supports the notion that migration may not always derive from economic reasons alone.

According to transnationalism studies, migrants remain connected to several places—both to their sending and recipient societies—simultaneously. These connections are carried out through ideas, values and practices amongst others. Central Asian migrants more or less constantly live and work in Russia for a long time—sometimes for up to 15 years; but, they also maintain quite diverse, regular and intense relationships with their countries of origin, and the rhetoric of 'returning home' remains predominant for the overwhelming majority of Central Asians (Abashin 2016). This tells us how migrants—both male and female—carry their values and understandings of traditions. As Kubal (2013b: 68) notes, migrants respond to the legal environment of a host society in a plurality of ways, reflecting differences in values and attitudes towards law, different understandings and interpretations of it and, finally, different patterns of behaviour vis-à-vis law at the level of their respective societies. Moreover, as Mahler and Pessar put it, 'gender operates simultaneously on multiple spatial and social scales (e.g., the body, the family, the state) across transnational terrains' (2001: 445). We see this in the actions of the women in our case studies through the 'traces' of their cultural baggage, which they carried from their home societies.

For instance, it may seem odd that Farida chose to keep her child when she became pregnant following being raped. Islam importantly influences women's and men's decisions related to multiple aspects of reproductive, as well as maternal and child health, in the Uzbek context (Barrett 2009). Given that Islam prohibits abortions, it is quite possible that religious norms might have played a rather important role (whilst not ignoring the combination of other factors known only to Farida and her mother) when she decided to continue her pregnancy.

Traditional and patriarchal norms appear to have played a significant role in Munira's choices as well. In the interview to BBC, she explained that she knew Umid already had an official family. Nevertheless, she accepted becoming a 'second wife' (someone from another context might use the word 'mistress'). 'First, I was afraid; but since he was sincere and persistent [in his courtship], I agreed', she explained.[12] Several times she justified her decision 'because I had devoted myself', an expression in societies with predominant Islamic traditions used to indicate a wife's adherence to her husband's choices. Her complete reliance and dependence upon Umid's decisions crossed borders and continued in Russia as well, where both men and women are responsible for their own actions. Furthermore, it may seem strange that Munira did not care much about 'recovering the proper documents' even after the birth of her second child in Moscow. Yet, she relied on Umid and thought it would be fine because of his assurances. This may be partly due to the fact that men are primarily expected to take care of official documents in rural Central Asia.

The issue of single women living as civil partners with male migrants in Russia also deserves attention. A 2011 survey found that around 19% of Central Asian female migrants had a partner or lived in a civil marriage (Agadjanian and Zotova 2011). This number was the smallest amongst Kyrgyz women (8%), whilst Tajik (25.6%) and Uzbek (22.5%) women exhibited higher rates of civil partnerships. However, when these figures were examined for a 'second wife' status (i.e., when asked if she knew the partner had an official wife or another partner in their home country), the percentage was lower amongst Kyrgyz (5.5%), Tajik (22.5%) and especially amongst Uzbek (14.3%) women (Agadjanian and Zotova 2011). Interviews with both migrants and migration experts we conducted in 2017 and 2019 also confirmed that a certain proportion of single (divorced or unmarried) female migrants agree to live as civil partners with other male migrants. Whilst a relatively free environment in a large city (such as Moscow) allows room for individual lifestyle choices, the interviewees also insisted on economic justifications for this: male partners agree to cover some of the expenses of female migrants (e.g., rent, work permit fees and board).

Our case studies also partially confirm this idea. At least in Farida's case, her mother decided that Farida's 'marriage' formalised by a *nikah* (she could not officially marry, since she was still a minor) would relieve her of increasing expenses (renting a separate room and feeding a toddler). Whilst illegal and not widespread, having a civil partner in addition to an official marriage—or in other words, a man marrying, religiously, several women—has somehow become indicative of prosperity and success amongst a certain proportion of the male population in Central Asia. The great majority of women who accept becoming second wives were formerly married, but were either repudiated, divorced or widowed[13] (Cleuziou and Commercio 2016). It is unsurprising then that a number of female migrants in Russia, if they are not young, unmarried women or accompanying their spouses, are divorced or widowed. In this regard, accepting the role of 'second wife' may also become 'normal' for those who make such choices.

Conclusions

This chapter examined the specificities of the formation of transnational social spaces for labour migrants in Russia from the female perspective. Because most labour migrants are younger males, research has focused on their agency in male-dominated transnational social spaces, characterised by technological mobility and networks based on informality. Our case studies show that, although the reasons behind labour migration might be similar for both men and women, the consequences of migration can be drastically different for more vulnerable immigrant groups in migrant communities, particularly for women.

Our case studies demonstrate the significance of the tradition and practices of the sending countries in the formation of Central Asian female migrants' transnational social spaces and subsequent legal choices in Russia. Examining the legal culture (Kubal 2013b) that female migrants bring with them in connection with family structures and gender roles which shape their transnational social spaces in Russia help us understand how female migrants relate to their host country's laws and regulations.

Through our research, we raise the question regarding agency-focused transnationalism as an overarching perspective in the study of labour migrants in Russia. We found that transnational social spaces in our case studies did not include informed or equal choices for women. The female migrant case studies we present as representatives of vulnerable groups demonstrate limited opportunities of such migrants to endure the precarious migrant life. They were not in a position to manoeuvre around official state structures with individualistic strategies. The revolving door migration between Central Asia and Russia, a lack of social capital and financial resources, their dependent position within migrant communities and strict family traditions limit the real agency of many female migrants, which the concept of transnational social space assumes. Simultaneously, we note that migration can widen the transnational space of some female migrants who can utilise new opportunities in Russia.

Further studies should focus more on the structural and cultural circumstances of female migrant groups in relation to legal matters. Informality, which includes multiple types of actors and reasons, currently sustains a transnational social space wherein the relatively well-connected migrants—that is, typically, men—acquire rights and exercise these rights, whilst leaving other groups such as women and children in highly dependent positions. Instead of serving as an empowering source of survival for female migrants, the current transnational social space in which Central Asian migrant women live recycles the organisational pathologies of Russian authorities and the inequalities of the sending countries. Thus, the decisions female migrants take regarding legal matters in Russia often remain random, unpredictable and dependent upon informal networks.

Our examination suggests a need for further systematic investigation on the impact of the revolving door migration between Russian and Central Asia, specifically examining both the legal culture and transnationalism frameworks. In addition, more attention should be devoted to the impact of family structures and

the roles of family members in the lives of female migrants, as well as on the sending country strategies in cross-border migration regimes amongst various migrant groups.

Notes

1 Globally in 2019, 52% of international migrants were male; 48% were female (IOM 2019: 22).
2 We strictly adhered to the principles of confidentiality and anonymity in order to protect the identities of the migrants we spoke with during our fieldwork.
3 The empirical data collection was conducted under the research project 'Migration, shadow economy and parallel legal orders in Russia', by Anna-Liisa Heusala, Kaarina Aitamurto and Rustamjon Urinboyev in 2017, and Sherzod Eraliev in 2019.
4 BBC Uzbek Service, 'A migrant who became a second wife is kicked out with two children' (in Uzbek), 20 December 2019. Accessed 25 May 2020, https://www.bbc .com/uzbek/uzbekistan-50872438.
5 The Russian Ministry of Interior reported that there were 2.1 million people from Uzbekistan, 1.2 million from Tajikistan and 700,000 from Kyrgyzstan in late 2019. Selected indicators of the migration situation in the Russian Federation for January–December 2019 with a distribution by countries and regions (in Russian), 22 January 2020. Accessed 25 May 2020, https://xn--b1aew.xn--p1ai/Deljatelnost/statistics/migr acionnaya/item/19365693/.
6 When one co-author of this chapter visited Moscow in the autumn of 2019, he was approached several times by *posredniki* (middlemen) or *qog'ozchilar* (literally, papermen in Uzbek) in and around Kazansky railway station, with offers of different types of 'clean' documents.
7 According to Russian officials, one-third of migrants are employed in retail, 16% in construction, 14% in transportation and communications, 7% in the hotel industry and 8% in domestic services (such as cleaning and caring for the elderly). Sputniknews, Trudovye migranty v samoizolyatsii, 6 April 2020. Accessed 25 May 2020, https:// tj.sputniknews.ru/columnists/20200406/1031017523/trudovye-migranty-samoizolya ciya-perevody-koronavirus.html.
8 Fergananews, *Podkidyshi i tishina* (in Russian, Foundling and silence), 25 February 2020. Accessed 25 May 2020, https://fergana.ru/articles/115439/.
9 BBC Uzbek, 'A migrant who became a second wife is kicked out with two children (in Uzbek)', 20 December 2019. Accessed 25 May 2020, https://www.bbc.com/uzbek/ uzbekistan-50872438.
10 A government agency in Uzbekistan inherited from the Soviet period that dealt with women's issues until its incorporation into the newly established Ministry of *Mahalla* and Family Affairs in February 2020.

11 One of the social consequences of this migration is that many male migrants found new families and divorced their wives. One study found that, each year, 14,000 Tajik migrants established new families in Russia and abandoned their wives (Malyuchenko 2015).

12 BBC Uzbek, 'A migrant who became a second wife is kicked out with two children (in Uzbek)', 20 December 2019. Accessed 25 May 2020, https://www.bbc.com/uzbek/uzbekistan-50872438.

13 As Cleuziou and Commercio (2016) note, women agree to a second wife status 1) to acquire economic resources in economically challenging times; 2) to acquire marital status in what remains a traditional society that dismisses an 'old maid', single or divorced woman and 3) to acquire biological resources, that is, to have children.

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