Remarriage amongst older immigrants from Turkey

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**Introduction**

This article is about remarriages in old age amongst Turkish immigrants living in Denmark. I heard about such a remarriage from an immigrant woman, Nurten[[1]](#endnote-1), whose recently deceased father, Ali, had done so when he was in his sixties.

As a labour migrant, Ali moved from Turkey to Denmark around 1970. Expecting to return to Turkey, he left behind his wife, Safiye, and their children. Time went by, however, and in the 1980s – as was commonly the case – the family united in Denmark (Liversage and Jakobsen, 2016b).

In 1998, Safiye became very ill, and she died in 2002 at the age of 60. By then, Ali was 66 years old and found himself unhappy with living on his own. Thus, half a year after losing his wife, he went to his Turkish village, and married a local divorced and childless woman, Neti. Fifteen years Ali’s junior, Neti had been living with her birth family for years after her divorce, and she was happy to be able to leave them for a marriage in Denmark. Ali’s children, however, were taken aback by their fathers swift remarriage, and Nurten told me the following:

“When he married, I got so angry, that I didn’t speak to him for two months. But then I realized that it was really good for him to get another woman into his life” (Nurten, daughter of Ali).

As the years went by, Ali’s health slowly deteriorated and when he turned 80, he was increasingly in need of support. Neti – by then 65 years old – was in good health, and thus able to attend to him. As Nurten comments: “It was a relief, that she was there to care for him – otherwise we would have been left with much more to do”. Falling ill, Ali needed considerable care, which was shared between Neti, the Danish social and health services, and Ali’s adult children. When Ali died. Neti - possessing few Danish skills, and having limited networks in Denmark - returned to Turkey.

Investigating life in old age amongst immigrants in Denmark, I encountered stories similar to Ali and Neti’s – stories of immigrant men contracting second marriages to much younger wives. These cases inspired the present mixed methods’ study, where I combine quantitative and qualitative data to illuminate the phenomenon in greater detail. As a point of departure, I sketch some finds from the general literature on repartnering in old age.

**Literature on repartnering / remarriage in old age**

Marriage has traditionally been a strategy for survival as well as a socially accepted framework for reproduction. It is still perceived in this way in many parts of the world, including in parts of Turkey, where marriage for women may almost be a prerogative (Cindoglu, Cemrek, Toktas, & Zencirci, 2011). Linked to economic changes and to developments in the availability of contraception and abortion, however, marriage is increasingly viewed as an arena for self-realization and emotional fulfilment, rather than material and practical exchange (Giddens, 1993; Padilla, Hirsch et al. 2007). While this development is most pronounced in the global north and in can also increasingly be observed in the global south.

While Anthony Giddens may write about the “pure relationship”, however, marriage retains a material importance worldwide. Thus marriages remain primarily contracted between spouses with relatively similar social status, and remain a central way for challenging resources – material and immaterial – from generation to generation.

The both material emotional content of relationships and marriages is also visible in the – relatively limited - literature which exists on repartnering in old age (Brown, Lin, Hammersmith, & Wright, 2019). Some contributions are based on qualitative data, shedding light on the motivations of older individuals to repartner or not in old age (Kate M. Bennett, Arnott, & Soulsby, 2013; Koren, 2014). Other, predominantly quantitative studies, map patterns of repartnering, with studies having been carried out in countries such as the US, Canada and Holland, focusing on repartnering following divorce, bereavement, or both (Carr, 2004; Schimmele & Wu, 2016; Vespa, 2012; Wu, Schimmele, & Ouellet, 2014). Some studies investigate not only the prevalence of remarriage, but look also at older people who enter into unmarried cohabitation, or begin “Living Apart Together” (abbreviated as LAT; (de Jong Gierveld, 2004)).

A general find in this literature is that men repartner more often than women. Ratios vary, depending on the populations studied and the methods applied, but from a study of Canadian survey data, (Wu et al., 2014) finds that the cumulative prevalence of remarriage after widowhood is five times higher for men than for women (p.496). In Holland (de Jong Gierveld, 2004) (also using survey data) finds that older men are six times as likely as older women to begin a new partner relationship following divorce or bereavement.

Several factors contribute to explaining this consistent gender difference. First, and very importantly, the life expectancy of women exceeds the one of men by several years, resulting in a skewed sex ratio in the higher age brackets (de Jong Gierveld, 2004) (Statistics Denmark). Coupled with the fact that women often marry spouses older than themselves, the limited availability of potential spouses in itself make it more difficult for older women to repartner.

Second, traditional gender roles within relationships play an important role. Women may thus be less inclined to repartner, as it could mean relinquishing the autonomy they may experience as singles. In contrast, men may commonly be motivated to find a wife who will take on household chores and care for them (Brown et al., 2019). Such gendered expectations may also underlie the greater proclivity for older women to enter into “LAT-relationship”, rather than into a marriage, as compared to older men, as the former arrangement entails lower levels of conjugal responsibility (de Jong Gierveld, 2004; Karlsson & Borell, 2005).

Third, when it comes to widowhood, women may be more prone to ‘sanctify’ deceased spouses as compared to men. Such a sanctification may make them less prone to enter into new relationships. As the saying goes: “Women mourn, men replace.” (Carr, 2004)(p.1051). Also the fact that women, on average, have more social contacts, including close contact with adult children, can make them less prone to opt for a new marriage as compared to men (souce).

Other factors in patterns of repartering is the role of children. For example, having children still living at home reduces the likelihood of repartnering for women (de Jong Gierveld, 2004). Also concerns of the inheritance of children may affect people’s decisions not to marry again, but maybe instead enter into a LAT-relationship (Gierveld, 2002; Schimmele & Wu, 2016; Wu et al., 2014) or remain alone (Mand, 2005).

A commonly applied approach to understanding repartnering in old age is general marriage market theories. The premise of such theories is that people search for a spouse within a given area or market (Becker, 1981). Hence, much akin to success in the labour market, finding a spouse depends on the conditions of the local marriage market and the personal characteristics that determine individual’s attractiveness (bargaining power). Hence men may be more prone to (seek to) remarry, simply because they on average benefit the most from such a gendered arrangement. Related to this topic, Becker (1981) states that the gains to marriage are greatest in a context of traditional gender roles, as men and women both become more dependent on having a partner, as compared to the situation in a more equality-oriented context (in (Vespa, 2012)). Thus as marriage may include a variety of – material and immaterial – exchanges, individual considerations of its perceived costs and benefits may be central for individual decisions to remarry or not to remarry in old age.

**Repartnering amongst older immigrants from Turkey**

When it comes to repartnering patterns amongst older immigrant, the literature is scant, if existing at all. Thus, regarding the broader topic of re-marriage (in all age groups) in immigrant populations (Andersson, Obućina, & Scott, 2015) state that such research is very scarce. Hence, while some studies do indeed investigate the experiences of for example widowhood for older immigrants (e.g.) (Kate Mary Bennett, Chao, Roper, & Lowers, 2018; Mand, 2005; Ng, Ho, Tsun, & Young, 2016), I have not been able to locate any studies, which has taken repartnering patterns of older immigrants as their primary topic.

In a European context, one explanation for this dearth is the limited size of older immigrant populations. Thus, as larger-scale immigration to North-Western Europe commonly dates back to around 1970 (with labour immigrants arriving from countries such as Turkey, Pakistan and Morocco), it is only in recent years that such immigrants have entered old age in greater numbers. Turkish immigrants living in Denmark can served as a case in point: Today, there are 1100 individuals in their seventies, 2400 in their sixties and 4800 in their fifties. These figures clearly show both that the number of older individuals is limited today but also that the numbers will increase substantially in the years to come (A. Liversage & Jakobsen, 2016) [Update figures].

Life in old age may differ substantially between different immigrant groups, with some groups of immigrants in fact doing better than the host country average (e.g. Ekberg, 2015). The general picture, however, (particularly when it comes to immigrants from the global South), is that such older individuals often face considerable disadvantage, both mentally and materially (e.g. Obuchina, 2014; van der Wurff et al, 2004). Thus, in Denmark, older immigrants from Turkey face poverty rates that are many times higher than the host country average (Anika Liversage & Jakobsen, 2016).

**Methodology**

According to (Mazzucato & Schans, 2011), the most insightful studies on immigrant families integrate large-scale quantitative methods with in-depth qualitative understandings. Following their call, this paper two data sources: One is register data of the remarriage pattern of all older immigrants from Turkey living in Denmark. The other is with qualitative interviews with older immigrants as well as their kin with such experiences. The combination of these two data sources enables both an assessment of the remarriage pattern in the entire group of older immigrants from Turkey, and a qualitative discussion of the dynamics that may underlie the observed patterns.

The quantitative analysis uses longitudinal administrative register data from Statistics Denmark. These data results from all of the legal residents in Denmark (both immigrants and natives) being assigned a unique personal identifier. For any given individual, the registers contain information on issues such as year of migration, age, marriage, divorce/ bereavement, and number of children. The data also allows for assessing both the national background of spouses, and whether immigrant spouses for example came to Denmark as migrants due to the marriage, or whether these spouses were immigrants who were already living in Denmark at the time of union formation.

This type of register data thus make it possible to delimit an entire group of immigrants and establish how many in given age groups are, say, married or divorced – and to whom. In comparison to survey data, such register data also avoids the potential bias of nonresponse, and has the ability to cover an entire ethnic minority group – something which would be unrealistic to achieve in a survey. We delimit our analysis to individuals who were born in Turkey, who were 55–70 years old in the time period 2003-2011 and who also repartnered within this time period [will be expanded in a later analysis. We count on using data for the time period 2003-2018, and look at the 55-100 year age group].

The qualitative data are interviews, almost exclusively done in Turkish. The interviews stem from two research projects: “Older immigrants from Turkey” (2013-2015) and the Turkish sub-project of “AISHA – Aging immigrants and self-appointed helper arrangements” (2016-2020). In total, the two projects contain interviews with app. 60 older individuals who immigrated from Turkey to Denmark. The vast majority of these interviewees were in their late sixties and their seventies. The data also contains interviews with app. 20 younger relatives of older immigrants (carried out in Turkish or Danish). Some of these relatives told of presently having, or having recently lost an older parent (see e.g.(A. Liversage, 2017; Anika Liversage & Jakobsen, 2016; Anika Liversage & Mizrahi Mirdal, 2017).

Remarriage in old age is not a common phenomenon, and accordingly, only a limited number of interviewees told of having such experiences. For that reason, we also include one non-Turkish interviewee from a re-married couple. Made with an Arab marriage migrant, this interview stems from another part of the AISHA-project, and complements well the qualitative and quantitative material from the Turkish group.

**Finds from the register data analysis**

[NB: Very preliminary analysis – will be updated and expanded later]

In the registers, we began by delimited the number of older Turks (In the 55-70 year age group), who had a minimum of five year stay in Denmark in the time period 2003-2011. This group consists of 5095 individuals. 55 pct (2802 individuals) are male, and 45 pct (2293 individuals are female). For comparison, the gender ratio is 49 pct. male and 51 pct. female in the same age group amongst the majority Danish population. While the majority Danes thus demonstrate the proclivity of women to live longer than men (a tendency which becomes more pronounced at higher age brackets) the reverse gender pattern amongst the Turkish immigrants testifies to a migration history where men initiated the move abroad.

Within the group of 5095 immigrants from Turkey, we then look at all remarriages from the age of 55 and up, which occurred in the 2003-2011 year period. As cohabitation is generally not accepted in Turkey, certainly not among older cohorts, we look only at the occurrence of marriages, and not other types of living arrangements. While homosexual marriages are possible in Denmark, all of the marriages in the data material were heterosexual.

The total analysis shows that the [incomplete] number of remarriages is very small, making up just 65 individuals[[2]](#endnote-2).

As previously mentioned, men generally remarry much more often than women. In the Turkish immigrant sample, this gendered pattern seems particularly pronounced: Thus, of the 65 remarried individuals, 59 are men and just six are women. As there are more men than women in the reference population, data thus indicates that men are approximately seven times more likely to remarry than women. The data also shows that the majority of the remarried individuals were divorced, rather than widowed, an observation which aligns with general finds from the literature (Brown et al., 2019; Schimmele & Wu, 2016).

When it comes to the partners of the remarried individuals, we have data on 49 out of the 65. We speculate, that the lack of information on 16 spouses may be due to the transnational nature of the older immigrants’ remarriages: Transnational separation of couples may occur for a variety of reasons (Anitha, Roy, & Yalamarty, 2018; Grillo, 2011), and it is likely that the strict rules on marriage migration keeps some spouses from entering Denmark regardless of them having married legal residents living there (Liversage and Rytter, 2014).

When we look at the 49 spouses, on whom we have information, 11 have Danish majority background. The remainder have Turkish background. Of these 38 immigrant spouses, the majority (30 individuals) arrived to Denmark as marriage migrants. As the 16 spouses on whom we lack information are most likely residents of Turkey, the share of transnational marriages may thus be even more pronounced. A small share of the spouses (8 individuals) were immigrants from Turkey who already lived in Denmark before the marriage.

Regarding age differences between the remarried spouses, the men are on average older than the women. However, when it is women who remarry, they find spouses who – with a one year age difference – are only marginally older than themselves. When men remarry, however, they find substantially younger spouses: The average age difference in such couples is 13,0 years. These latter marriages thus deviates from the average pattern found in Turkish first marriages, where the age difference is only 2-4 years [find and update].

If we look at further at the remarried older men’s spouses, the age difference varies depending on whether the new wives have a majority Danish or an immigrant background. Thus the average age difference to a Danish spouse is 2,9 years, but is 14,9 years when the spouse is an immigrant[[3]](#endnote-3).

Thus, we can conclude that the older immigrants from Turkey who remarry are predominantly men, they mostly find wives in Turkey who arrive to Denmark as marriage migrants, and these wives are substantially younger than their husbands. In contrast, in the cases where older immigrant men marry Danish wives, or where older immigrant women marry any type of husband, the age differences are much smaller[[4]](#endnote-4).

The marriage between Ali and Neti outlined in the beginning of this article (where she was a marriage migrant and 15 years younger than him), was thus representative of the general pattern. In the next sections, we discuss the lived experiences of some of these marriages, based on our qualitative interview material. One such case it the couple of Mahmut and Hatice.

**A remarried couple – Mahmut and Hatice.**

Mahmut was born in Turkey 1926. When Denmark in the late 1960s and early 1970s recruited unskilled labour from abroad, he left his village and travelled to Denmark. In his early forties at the time, he was substantially older than most of his migrant male peers, but he saw an opportunity for earning money abroad and decided to try his luck. As was commonly the case, Mahmut expected to return to Turkey after a few years, and it was not until the early 1980’s that his wife (who was around Mahmut’s age) joined him in Denmark, bringing with her their three almost adult boys. The couple’s two daughters were by then married and remained in Turkey. In 1987, Mahmut’s wife – who was by then 60 years old - unexpectedly died of a heart attack. With most of his children, their spouses, and numerous grandchildren around him, Mahmut was in no way left on his own. Nevertheless, in 1993 he married again, bringing his new wife, Hatice, to Denmark.

Hatice came from the area in Turkey as Mahmut, and the match between the two came about through a distant relative. From a poor family, and with a father who had died young, Hatice had entered into her first marriage when she was 16 years old. He husband, however, turned out to be violent, and after two years of marriage the couple separated. Having had no children, Hatice subsequently lived with her widowed mother. When Mahmut proposed to Hatice, she accepted his offer immediately. At the time, Hatice was 32 years old, and Mahmut – more than twice her senior – was 66.

After arriving in Denmark, Hatice had different types of unskilled employment. She learned very little Danish, as she had no prior education from Turkey. When after some years, she became unemployed, she had to participate in different measures to increase her employability, due to Denmark’s active labour market policy (Jakobsen & Liversage, 2016). Mahmut’s income came from a disability pension before he became eligible for a (rather small) senior citizen’s pension at the age of 67.

With their age difference of 34 years, Mahmut was increasingly growing dependent on Hatice’s help. His need for daily support, however, collided with Hatice’s obligations to participate in the labour market measures. The job center therefore adviced Hatice to ask the municipality to become a ‘self-appointed helper’ to her husband.

The option of becoming a ‘self-appointed helper’ is outlined in the §94 in the Law on Social Services. ‘Self-appointed helpers’ are individuals who are hired by the municipality, to carry our specified home-help tasks for given individuals. Becoming a ‘self-appointed helper’ depends, first, on an older individuals being deemed eligible for municipal support with practical tasks (as cleaning), with personal tasks (as dressing and bathing) or both. Second, it depends on the municipality accepting to hire a given individual (often a wife, a daughter or a daughter-in-law) to do the tasks which the municipal home helpers would otherwise come to the home to perform.

Hatice succeeded in becoming employed Mahmut’s ‘self-appointed helper’. As he had been granted seven hours of home-help each week, Hatice was hired for this number of hours. Economically, her income went from being welfare support only, to being a combination of welfare support and the (small) helper salary. While this only marginally affected her income, having gained salaried work exempted her from participating in the full scale of job center activities [check up on it]. Hatice thus became able to devote most of her day to the care of her husband. As she explained:

“I help him with everything. I get up at night with him, if he needs a drink. In the morning, I help him with the socks and the clothing. I help him when he needs a bath – that can be really difficult for my back sometimes. In fact we tried to have someone from the municipality come and help with giving him a bath, but he refused their help. Only I am allowed to see him without his clothes on” (Hatice, 55).

While Hatice was paid to care for her husband seven hours a week, in reality she did so for many more hours, thus providing both paid and unpaid care in the home (Zelizer, 2010). Due to the age difference, Hatice could also expect to become widowed one day in the not too distant future. After having made sure her husband’s hearing aid was turned off, she confided that she feared what her future would bring. She had no children of her own, and was unsure of whether Mahmut’s children (some of whom were older than her), would support her. She even feared that she would not be able to remain in Denmark after Mahmut’s death. Having lived for 25 years in Denmark, her residence in the country should be secure, but with limited Danish skills, no education and little network of her own, her position in Denmark did indeed seem vulnerable.

**Marriage market theory and perceived benefits of (re)marriage**

The case of Mahmut and Hatice takes us back to Becker and marriage market theory (1981), where a general assumption is that “*persons who remarry perceive the net benefits of marriage to be greater than the benefits of remaining widowed or divorced*” (Carr, 2004)(p.X). As Becker (1981) points out, gains to marriage is greatest in a context of traditional gender roles. Certainly, 92-year-old Mahmut stated that he married Hatice because…“… *men cannot do what a woman can do. Thus I had to marry again when my wife died” -* a quote pointing to an understanding of gender roles being complementary rather than equal (Predelli, 2004; White, 2004).

The quantitative analysis shows that only small shares of the older immigrant men marry majority Danish women or immigrant women already living in Denmark. Instead the central marriage market for these older Turkish men is not their local Danish context but their country (or maybe even local region) of origin. One reason for finding spouses in this part of the transnational social field may be the greater selection of potential spouses. Another reason may have to do with gender roles, as – compared to women from Denmark – women from Turkey may adhere to more traditional gender roles. Such considerations regarding gendered norms has been shown to be important when younger Turkish immigrants in Europe marry Turkish-background spouses living in either Europe or in Turkey (Lievens, 1999; Gonzalez-Ferrer)

The register data analysis also shows, that while the age difference of marriages contracted within Denmark (to majority Danes or to immigrants living there) is small, in the transnational context, the men marry much younger women. Hence these younger women must see a “*net benefit of marriage*” to such older men.

In the case of both Neti and Hatice, their willingness to marry a much older man was most likely tied to their being divorcees in a rural Turkish setting. Divorce carries a considerable stigma in Turkey, and occurs only infrequently, particularly in rural and lesser-developed regions (Cindoglu et al., 2011). Due both to gendered norms stipulating that women should always be under the auspice of a man (Delaney, 1991), and to an economy where only low shares of women are gainfully employed in rural areas, divorcees may have few other options than to return to their birth families. No longer virgins, they may also have limited options for contracting new marriages which is otherwise their main option for bettering their futures (Anika Liversage, 2013) (Akpinar, 2003). Hence an offer of marriage – also from a much older man – may be attractive to them, as “*the net benefits”* of such a marriage is greater than the alternative in their particularly constrained life situation.

For the husbands’ marriage proposals to be viable, however, they have to be able to provide a livelihood for their new wives. Seen from a Danish perspective, neither Ali nor Mahmut were particularly well off. However, the men’s living in a Scandinavian welfare state gave their wives access to a different societal context. This was, first, a context where the wives could become gainfully employed. Second, when the women’s health or skills faltered, it was a context where the welfare state secured them an livelihood.

Thus, in a transnational marriage market, the older husbands in Denmark could offer their younger, Turkish wives a prospect of material security. They were able to do so, not so much through their own, individual income, as due to their legal residency in a welfare state society to which their wives would gain access. Such global economic inequalities centrally affect the gendered flows of marriage migrants (Constable, 2003; Williams, 2010). Another element possibly increasing the older men’s value in the marriage market were their ability to offer their wives a life in an urban setting where the women could leave behind much of the hard and filthy work of the village (Cindoglu et al., 2011).

**Marriage – a site for a variety of exchanges**

Marriage is a site for many types of exchanges which may be economical, practical, emotional , intimate and more. Naturally, life in different couples varied. We thus visited one couple – a remarried widowed man with a 19-year-younger wife – where both spouses expressed considerable affection for each other. They also told of their sadness when efforts to have children together had not been fulfilled.

In contrast, in Ali and Hatice’s, we sensed a separation between the spouses. Thus, regarding material possessions, Ali consequently talked about “my house”, “my land,”, “my car”, excluding – at least linguistically - his present wife from ownership of these possessions. On the walls in the home hung also pictures of Ali and his first, deceased wife, but no pictures of Hatice, regardless of them having lived 25 years together. This seeming precarious position added substance to Hatice’s concerns that Ali’s children might turn their backs on her, once their father died.

One central economic aspect of marriage is inheritance – an aspect which may make adult children advice older parents against marriying again (Brown, Lee, & Bulanda, 2006; Wu et al., 2014). The fact that a new wife gains entitlements to inheritance could lead to family conflicts both before and after the husband’s death. Thus in the case of Neti and recently deceased Ali (see introduction), relations between Neti and Ali’s children soured after Ali died, due to a feud over Neti inheriting a family house in the Turkish village. At the time of interview, Neti had in fact returned to live in Turkey, and all contact between herself, and what could be deemed her step-children, had ceased.

That second marriages could be a charged topic due to its links to material wealth and inheritance also became apparent when we interviewed a widowed Turkish man in his seventies. He lived in the house of his son, his daughter-in-law, and the children of this couple. A year earlier, the old man had been on holiday in Turkey. He had a strong urge to marry again, and when he met a potential spouse in his local village, he went ahead with his marriage plans. He had not informed his children, however, but his son got wind of what was going on. Taking the first plane to Turkey, the son just barely managed to impede his father’s marriage plans to a woman whom the son was convinced was only out to get his father’s money. While the action of this son may well have been a disinterested and caring gesture, another motivation could be protecting the inheritance of himself and his siblings

In some cases, “imported spouses” to older husbands seemed to get a rather short end of the stick in the exchange of the marriages they entered. As a rather extreme case (not from Turkey, but from an Arab country), we spoke with a marriage migrant woman who, at the age of 40, had married a 60-year-old divorced man living in Denmark. We met her due to her employment as a §94 ‘self-appointed helper’ for her husband. This woman’s burden of care had been considerable from the day she arrived in Denmark. Thus she told the following:

“When we got married, my husband was only blind [due to diabetes]. But then he had first one leg, and then another leg amputated…. I always took care of the household chores, and helped him. But after he lost his second leg, I began to care really a lot… It is not easy to be in the home and care for an ill person. You have the full responsibility – and it is physically hard work…. He is blind and he cannot work. So he cannot even get himself a glass of water” (Alina, 50 years old).

Alina’s willingness to move to at country far from friends and family to become a disabled man’s wife, carrying a considerable care burden, testifies to the global as well as gendered inequalities which in some cases may be implicated in such (re)marriages of older immigrant men.

**Conclusion**

This study illuminates the hitherto little-investigate topic of remarriage amongst older immigrants. It combines quantitative and qualitative data on Turkish immigrants, living in Denmark. In line with finds from the literature on remarriage in general, the register data analysis shows that in this immigrant group, men remarry many times more often than women. The gender bias among the older Turkish immigrants indeed seems even more pronounced that the gender bias when older majority individuals from western countries remarry or repartner (Brown et al., 2019; Wu et al., 2014).

The register data analysis also shows that while the spouses include both majority Danes and immigrants already living in Denmark, the prevailing pattern is men marrying marriage migrant women, who subsequently arrive from Turkey. The age difference in these transnational couple is larger than in all other types of unions, with husbands on average being 15 years older than their wives.

According to marriage market theory, both spouses must see a net benefit of entering a marriage before they do so. In the case of the transnational (re)marriages with a large age difference, the qualitative interviews indicate that one reason for the younger women entering these unions is due to their being little-educated divorcees. In Turkish society, women have few alternatives to marriage, especially if they live in rural parts of the country, and with divorce being looked upon negatively, divorcees may have few options but to return to their parental home. They may come to live here, sometimes for many years, waiting for a suitor to ask for their hand in marriage. Such women may thus have few reservations when it comes to marital offers from older (and even infirm) spouses, as such suitors nevertheless provides a route out of the stigmatized position they are in.

Thus while such transnational marriages may also be about intimacy and companionship, it seems also shaped by the classically gendered elements of exchange between female household labour and male economic provisions. The men’s economic prowess, however, is not necessarily due to their own income, as much as due to their Danish residency, which enables their wives to move to a more affluent society. In fact, after their arrival, the wives may well contribute to the family finances through unskilled employment in the Danish labour market or thorugh individual access to welfare support.

Coming to live in a Danish dual earner society, however, may also challenges these women, who have to juggle both paid and unpaid labour, hence working ‘a second shift’ (Hochchild, 1989). In Hatice’s case, this dual burden got at least partially alleviated, when the municipality hired her a few hours each week as a care worker for her husband, exempting her from labour market activities of the unemployed. In Alina’s case, her marriage entailed her caring for a blind, handicapped husband. Partially remunerated for doing so by the municipalities, her marriage entailed a very isolated life with an almost round-the clock care responsibility. For his part, Alina’s husband seemed to have gotten a relatively high standard of care through marrying a second time.

The pattern, where second wives at times provided at substantial amount of care – throughout the marriage or in its final years - was buttressed by the substantial age difference between the spouses. The pattern of remarriage in old age, which the register data analysis documents and the interviews provides insights into, may thus be seen as one specific outcome of the interplay between structures of gender and economy in transnational social space.

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1. All names are pseudonyms. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Working with such relatively low numbers of repartnered individuals is also the case in survey studies of majority populations such as (de Jong Gierveld, 2004; Wu et al., 2014). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Due to the limited size of the data material we are unable to look at the exact age difference between older men and wives, who arrived from Turkey as marriage migrants vs Turkish immigrant spouses who lived in Denmark when the marriage was contracted. Doing so will hopefully be possible once we expand the data base for the analysis, having the data updated to include the 2012-2018 year period. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. [Can we pick out the (few) cases where the husband and the wife in a re-marriage are both part of the data material? And lets us get not only the average age differences but also the variation (and compare the finds to the large age span of Hatice and Mahmut). Other “to-do” points: Look at the share of spouses where there is no info. I predict that the share will grow in the newer data, due to the increasingly strict rules on family migration.] [↑](#endnote-ref-4)