Workshop Report: Family Migration Policies and Integration

Workshop organized in the framework of the 9th Annual IMISCOE Conference, Amsterdam, 28-29 August, 2012.

Family reunification has long been closely associated to integration – even before integration became the dominant frame to describe processes of settlement and incorporation of migrants into receiving countries in the 1990s and 2000s. Granting migrants the right to family union has thus been justified as promoting the well-being of migrants and their integration into receiving societies in the 1960s and 1970s. Following a similar rationale, albeit to the opposite purpose, the right to family reunification has often been denied to certain categories of temporary labour migrants, so as to prevent their settlement and ensure their return.

After the turn of the millennium family-related migration and “the” migrant family have come to epitomize a whole conundrum of anxieties and fears about integration, multiculturalism and diversity, and as such have become a focus of both public debate and state regulation. The migrant family has been increasingly problematized as an obstacle to integration, as a site characterized by patriarchal traditions and gender relations, among other illiberal practices, all of which state policies ought to counter. This has given rise to increasing concerns about the “quality” of migrants entering European countries on family-related grounds.

Reflecting these public debates on family related migration, family migration policies in various European countries have increasingly taken up integration as an explicit policy goal and now often foresee specific integration conditions (such as language requirements) or have justified changes of other conditions such as income or housing requirements in terms of the promotion of integration of migrants.

Despite the increasing attention devoted to the nexus of family migration and integration, the relationship between the two remains poorly understood. This workshop co-organized by Saskia Bonjour (University of Leiden) and Albert Kraler (ICMPD) took place in the framework of the 9th Annual IMISCOE Conference (28-29 August 2012, Amsterdam) and aimed to bring together contributions from different disciplinary and theoretical angles to reflect on various dimensions of the interrelationship between immigration policy, family migration, and integration.

The idea for this workshop emerged in the context of the project “Family reunification: barrier or facilitator for integration” (www.familyreunification.eu), a project funded under the European Integration Fund and examining how family reunification can facilitate integration, Member States’ practices in providing access to it and challenges related to family reunification in terms of integration. In probing into these questions a major challenge has been on how to best conceptualise and research the relationship between integration, family related migration and family migration policies. The IMISCOE workshop was meant to contribute to this debate and open it to a wider group of researchers with inputs from different theoretical and disciplinary angles and perspectives.

Altogether 9 researchers presented papers. These included: Karin Borevi (Uppsala University) with a paper on “integration requirements – a motivating force or an obstacle to integration? Debating the
nexus between integration and family immigration in Sweden”, Laura Block (European University Institute, Florence), with a paper on “Regulating social membership – Explaining restriction and stratification of family migration in Europe”, Anne Staver (Institute for Social Research, Oslo) with a paper on “Family migration and stratified integration policy in Norway”, Can Aybek (Federal Institute of Population Research, Wiesbaden) with a paper on “Marriage migration from Turkey to Germany: Risks and coping strategies of transnational couples”), Rikke Wagner (London School of Economics), with a paper on ““Transnational civil dis/obedience’ in the Danish family unification dispute”, Leen Sterckx (University of Amsterdam), with a paper on “Marrying ‘in’ or ‘out’? Scrutinizing the link between integration and the partner choice of Turkish and Moroccan youths in the Netherlands”, Saara Pellander (University of Helsinki) with a paper on “A fake family today, a real family tomorrow? Temporality in regulations and discourses on family migration”. Caroline Oliver (University of Oxford), with a paper on “The impact of admissions criteria on the integration of migrants”, and Aubrey Westfall (Virginia Wesleyan College) with a paper on “Real and imaginary migrants: The politics of family migration policies before and after entry.”

The topics addressed by the 9 papers presented at the workshop ranged from the rationale and justification of family migration policies, the factors determining the restrictiveness or, conversely, openness of family migration policies and their stratified nature, the methodological and conceptual challenges involved in assessing the impact of family migration policies to the meaning of integration in the case of mixed marriages and changes in marriage practices brought about by changed admission conditions. In terms of approaches, the papers included both papers focusing on policy aspects – the making of policies, the policies themselves or their impacts as well as papers investigating perspectives and strategies of individuals involved in family reunification and confronted with a particular set of policies and/or public discourses around family reunification.

Several of the policy oriented papers highlighted the important symbolical dimensions of family migration policies, their making and implementation. This symbolical dimension involves multiple boundary drawing and processes of othering, defining and attributing membership and expressing moral understandings of rights and wrongs. Often the symbolical dimension lies at the core of such policies and based on strong assumptions about who family migrants are and what which type of migrant “needs”. But even if symbolical politics may not be the main driver of particular policies around family migration, symbolical politics is always a dimension that is present, as several of the papers vividly showed.

At the same time, several of the papers made it clear that policies not always play out in the way they are framed. Indeed, it is often inherently difficult to establish what policy makers exactly wanted to achieve with a policy, and what the impact of policies actually was, although at times there they may be very concrete and immediate impacts, notably on the individuals affected by them. Thus, several of the papers taking the perspective of individuals involved in family reunification stressed the – sometimes forced – agency and inventiveness of individuals’ vis-à-vis demanding family reunification provisions, but also vis-à-vis expectations by their families, peers and friends or the wider public (as for example articulated in public debates on family related migration) and their own wishes for future.