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Draft paper: Transnational practices of Salvadoran migrants in Australia: an analysis of the factors influencing the capability to care across borders

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## **Abstract**

Research on the transnational practices of migrant families has mainly focused on remittances, leaving transnational practices of care under-investigated (Gardner and Grillo 2002). However, recent research on transnational care practices demonstrates that most transnational families exchange not only financial, but also practical, personal, and emotional support (see for instance Baldassar 2007; Baldock 1999, 2000; Baldassar, Baldock and Wilding 2007; Zontini & Reynolds 2007). In this paper, I will focus on the transnational care practices of 22 Salvadoran refugees who migrated to Perth (Western Australia) in the 1980's and the 1990's under the United Nations Refugee Programme, and who care for their ageing parents who remained in their home country. These migrants were interviewed in 2007 and 2008 in the context of a research project funded by the EC 6<sup>th</sup> Framework Programme - Marie Curie Outgoing

International Fellowship that compares transnational care practices of Latin-American migrants living in Australia and Europe. In this paper, my analysis will be based on a conceptualization of transnational care as a set of capabilities that include, but are not limited to, mobility, social relations, time-allocation, education and knowledge, paid work and communication (Merla & Baldassar, forthcoming). I will focus in particular on the impact of Salvadoran refugees difficult access to, and use of, these capabilities on their capacity to fulfill their culturally defined sense of obligation to care for their ageing parents. Results will show that in the absence of institutional support to transnational care, extended transnational kinship networks play a major role in helping migrants overcome the obstacles to their participation to the care of their ageing parents.

### **Introduction: Transnational families and care**

Over the past decade a growing number of researchers have conceptualized migrants and their kin as “transnational families”. This new conceptualization acknowledges the fact that migration does not end with settlement and that migrants maintain regular contacts with their dispersed kin. Transnational families have been defined as “families that live some or most of the time separated from each other, yet hold together and create something that can be seen as a feeling of collective welfare and unity, namely ‘familyhood’, even across national borders” (Bryceson & Vuorela 2002b: 18). Research has shown that, contrary to the assumption that geographical distance negatively affects kin relationships (Morgan 1975, Joseph & Hallman 1998), transnational families exchange all the forms of care and support that are exchanged in proximate families (Baldassar et al 2007; Finch 1989; Zontini & Reynolds 2007, Al-Ali 2002, Izuhara & Shibata 2002). These not only include financial assistance, but also emotional and practical support that can be exchanged transnationally through the use of various communication technologies, and personal care and accommodation which require co-presence and can only be exchanged during visits. Goulbourne et al (2009) see the exchange of care across boundaries as a key factor for the maintenance of transnational families. Baldassar et al (2007) define transnational caregiving practices as mediated by a dialectic

encompassing the capacity of individual members to engage in caregiving and their culturally informed sense of obligation to provide care, as well as the particularistic kin relationships and negotiated family commitments that people with specific family networks share (Baldassar et al 2007). Power relations and inequalities shape transnational caregiving practices. Factors such as gender, social class or ethnicity create inequalities within and between transnational families (Bryceson & Vuorela 2002a; LeGall 2005). State policies and international regulations also play a major role in facilitating or hindering the maintenance of family solidarity across borders (Merla & Baldassar forthcoming; Al-Ali 2002; Levitt & Glick Schiller 2007). Merla and Baldassar propose a conceptualization of transnational caregiving as practices that are influenced by a set of capabilities that includes mobility, social relations, time-allocation, education and knowledge, paid work and communication (Merla & Baldassar forthcoming). The authors underline that access to, and use of, these capabilities is strongly influenced by both home and host country formal institutional and informal policies. Drawing on this conceptualization, I will focus in this paper on the impact of Salvadoran refugees difficult access to, and use of, these capabilities on their capacity to fulfill their culturally defined sense of obligation to care for their ageing parents. Results will show that in the absence of institutional support to transnational care-giving, extended transnational kinship networks play a major role in helping migrants overcome the obstacles to their participation to the care of their ageing parents.

### **Field work**

The data for this paper is drawn from an ongoing comparative research on transnational care practices of Latin American migrants living in Australia and Europe, financed by the EC 6<sup>th</sup> Framework Programme - Marie Curie Outgoing International Fellowship (MOIF-CT-2006-039076 Transnational care)<sup>1</sup>. The main aim of this research is to analyse the impact of low levels of social, economic and/or cultural capital on migrants' ability to exchange care with their elderly parents who live in their home country. The study focuses on migrants

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter reflects only the author's views. The European Community is not liable for any use that may be made of the information contained therein

who occupy a low qualified and/or low remunerated position in Australia despite coming from a mix of working class and professional backgrounds in their homeland. Data collection in Australia comprised 22 life-history interviews and participant observation with Salvadoran migrants living in Perth, Western Australia, a majority of whom arrived there under the United Nations Refugee Programme in the 1980's and the 1990's. Between 1982 and 1993, a total of 9.993 Salvadoran refugees migrated to Australia, the majority arriving between 1988 and 1992 (Santos, 2006: 80). According to the Western Australia Community Profile 2001 Census, 1,200 Salvadorans live in Western Australia, (Office of multicultural interests, 2005: 8).

The following table describes the characteristics of the 22 Salvadorans who participated to this study

Number of participants	22, of which 6 couples	
Gender	Female	13
	Male	9
Occupation in El Salvador	Professional and qualified positions	17
	Low qualified	4
	Unemployed	1 (low qualified)
Occupation in Australia at the time of the interview	Professional and qualified positions	6
	Low qualified	14
	Unemployed	2
Migration status	Refugees	19
	Others	3 (married to Australian residents)
Age at the time of the interview	31-40	5
	41-50	7
	51-60	7
	60+	3
Number of children (per family)	0 child	1
	2 children	5
	3 children	7
	More than 3 children	3

## **Familialism in El Salvador**

Martínez Franzoni (Martínez Franzoni, 2008) characterizes El Salvador as an informal-familialist welfare regime, in which families not only carry the full burden of care duties but also turn into production units and social protection networks to compensate the absence of the State and the weakness of formal labour markets. Only a small proportion of Salvadoran households (13,8%) mainly headed by professionals benefit from a weak level of social protection and can afford private services. In contrast, the majority of households (53,7%) with low and unstable income count on extended family solidarity and community networks to face social risks. The rest of the population (32,5%) manage social risks through a mix of family and market, but without the financial security of the first group or stable and extended family networks like the second group (Martínez Franzoni, 2008: 81-82). Elderly Salvadorans who cannot afford private care entirely rely on family and community solidarity not only for the provision of personal “hands on” care but also financial support, as pension benefits and free public health services are only available to a small proportion of the population. Remittances and extended family support are critical strategies to increase income and manage unpaid work.<sup>2</sup> If women assume the quasi exclusive responsibility of unpaid work in general, and care in particular (Martínez Franzoni, 2005), the idea that children should support their parents financially, practically and emotionally is widespread among the Salvadoran population, all classes and genders included (Benavides et al. 2004). There is a strong sense of duty to care for one’s ageing parents is strong, and this sense doesn’t fade with distance (Merla forthcoming).

## **The capability of Salvadoran migrants to exchange care with their elderly parents across borders**

Capabilities refer to “what real opportunities you have regarding the life you may lead” (Sen 1987: 36). They represent people’s potential functionings, or freedom to be and do what they want to be and do, and together constitute what

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<sup>2</sup> Poverty affects 43% of the Salvadoran population (Martínez Franzoni, 2008b:5) and remittances represent approximately 14% of El Salvador’s GDP.

makes a life valuable. This approach acknowledges that people differ in their capacity to transform the resources that are available to them into capabilities. Personal, social or environmental factors, such as physical and mental handicaps, economic resources, social and cultural norms, public infrastructure and formal and informal policies, mediate the possibility to achieve functionings. Examples of capabilities include being well fed, taking part in the community, relating to other people, working in the labor market, being healthy, and being able to raise children and to take care of others (Robeyns 2003: 63). In an effort to underline the links between migrants' wellbeing and care, Merla and Baldassar propose a conceptualization of transnational care-giving as practices that are influenced by a set of capabilities that includes, but is not limited to, mobility, social relations, time-allocation, education and knowledge, paid work and communication (Merla & Baldassar 2010). The following table presents a description of the set of capabilities that influence migrants' ability to exchange care with their parents living in a distant country.

<b>1.1 Capability: being able to exchange care with parents living in a distant country</b> = emotional, practical, financial, accommodation and personal <b>Influenced by:</b>	
<b>Mobility</b>	being able to travel back home when necessary, and to host parents
<b>Social relations</b>	Having access to a social network of mutual support in the host country (exchange of information about travel and communication; financial support)
<b>Time-allocation</b>	Having the capacity to have time for exchanging care (time difference, other obligations including childcare or paid work, access to leave)
<b>Education and knowledge</b>	Having the possibility to learn how to use IT, having the possibility to learn English Recognition of qualifications (paid work)
<b>Paid work</b>	Having access to a satisfying employment situation (cf costs of care) and, if unemployed, to unemployment benefits
<b>Communication</b>	Being able to communicate at a distance (cf access to communication technologies + reasonable fares) and to send items This includes physical ability to communicate (deafness, dementia,

	arthritis)
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Access to, and use of, these capabilities is strongly influenced by both home and host country formal institutional and informal policies. These include, among others, migration and employment policies, work-family balance, education and gender equality policies, airline and communication regulations and the development of communication infrastructures. The ability to travel back home and host parents is influenced by a set of policies that include, between others, migration and visa policies, leave policies and airline regulations. Employment, leave policies and gender equality policies partially shape men and women's capacity to have time for exchanging care with distant relatives. And migrants' ability to communicate at a distance largely depends on communication regulations and the development of communication infrastructures. These capabilities are also inter-related: for instance, having access to a satisfying employment position or unemployment benefits influences migrant's capacity to travel and communicate at a distance, having one's qualifications recognized influences access to paid work, while having the possibility to learn how to use IT impacts on the capacity to communicate with relatives.

**Financial limitations related to a difficult access to the capabilities of paid work and education and knowledge**

The socio-economic situation of the Salvadorans who participated to this study presents the same features as the situation of their compatriots in Australia. Salvadoran refugees who migrated to Australia during the civil war included semi-skilled and unskilled workers, as well as professionals such as engineers, agronomists, doctors, teachers and architects, but few of them were able to find a similar position in Australia. As part of the settlement scheme and until they found appropriate housing, refugees were usually accommodated in migration centres where they had access to English classes, health benefits, unemployment benefits, and other services (Santos, 2006: 82). Refugees were also offered employment search support, and some professionals were invited to upgrade their training, but both of these avenues required a good command of English. As Santos points out, for Salvadoran migrants, "the need to learn the English

language and to have their qualifications recognised in Australia proved insurmountable. Often this results in being downgraded in their employment or becoming unemployed/underemployed for long periods of time” (Santos, 2006: 83). These difficulties are also reflected in the socio-economic situation of the Salvadorans who participated in this study. 17 occupied a qualified or professional position in their home country, working as nurses, doctors, engineers, managers, etc. After several years of efforts, only 6 of them were able to get a similar position in Australia. Several factors contributed to these difficulties. Migrants with children couldn’t afford to go back to university for 1 or 2 years and live on unemployment benefits, and decided to take the first job they could find – usually a low qualified employment in the cleaning industry (for men and women) or in the caring sector (mainly for women). In some families, women postponed their return to the labour market to look after their young children and help them adapt to their new environment while their husbands took a low qualified job. This was the case of Monica, a sewer worker in El Salvador and her husband Alex who was a primary teacher in his home country. During the interview she explained that she gave up her English lessons because she couldn’t help worry about her 2 years old son she had left in a crèche where no one could speak Spanish. She also found the classes too difficult. She stayed home to look after her youngest son and Alex, who gave up his English classes after an argument with the teacher, took a casual cleaning job in a supermarket. A few years later, he found a gardener position in a school. When her youngest child reached school age, Monica got a sewing job in a private company but resigned quickly because of her poor English. Since then she’s been working casually as a cleaner.

Even those who did take English classes struggled to acquire a sufficient command of English, and this represented an obstacle to their insertion in the labour market. In spite of taking English classes at university and hiring a private English teacher together with two other families, Amparo and Roberto, who were respectively a manager and an accountant in their home country, never became fluent in English. Soon after their arrival Roberto earned money by distributing magazines in mailboxes. Amparo helped him occasionally. Later Roberto took a cleaning night job in a shopping centre while Amparo stayed at



home to care for their young children. When their youngest daughter entered primary school she trained in a hospital to become patient care assistant and has been working in this area since then.

As a result of these problems, all the migrants that were interviewed were confronted to financial difficulties that impacted on their capability to care for their parents left-behind. Confronted with limited resources to invest in transnational caring, migrants generally focused on giving their parents financial support to cover their daily expenses and/or urgent needs, and on staying in touch with them through telephone conversations, and internet conversation in a limited number of cases. As I will explain in the next section, the ability to finance travel is probably the most affected by the scarcity of resources. As Al-Ali notes, scarcity of resources in transnational migrant families involves a constant negotiation of how much to spend for one's life in the host country, how much to send back home and how much to save (Al-Ali 2002).

Before we look in more details into the characteristics of Salvadoran migrants' mobility and communication, it is important to acknowledge that the situation of families changes over time. During their first years of settlement in Australia, all the Salvadoran migrants were confronted to financial difficulties, but after several years, the financial situation of some families improved: four migrants completed university degrees and found a well-paid job; others saved enough money to buy their own houses; teenage and adult children started to contribute to the family budget. The availability of low-cost telephone cards also diminished the financial burden of transnational communication and allowed migrants to increase the frequency and/or length of telephone conversations.

### **Restricted mobility**

Frequent travels between the home and the host country is one of the main features of transnational families (Baldassar 2001). It is one of the essential ways of maintaining kin connections (Mason 2004, Zontini & Reynolds 2007) All the Salvadorans that were interviewed in this study expressed a strong desire to spend time with their parents in their home country or to invite them in Australia. Unfortunately, the frequency of visits to El Salvador is very low – some migrants have not been able to pay a single visit to their families back home. As I

said above, the prioritization of remittances and telephone conversations is the main factor that explains this situation. Migrants whose parents benefit from a pension and free health services in El Salvador have better opportunities to save money for a trip back home than those who regularly send remittances to their parents. But even when remittances are not regularly sent back home, the ability to finance travel is seriously affected by the precariousness of Salvadoran migrants economic situation, especially in the first year following their settlement in Australia.

Visits from parents are also exceptional. Australia classified Latin American countries as high-risk countries (which means that the probability that visitors will try to remain illegally in Australia is high), and El Salvador citizens require both expensive visas and health insurance which are more expensive for elderly people making it more difficult, time consuming and costly for Salvadoran elderly parents to visit. The parents' mobility is also restricted by their lack of familiarity with air travel and their subsequent fear to travel alone and transit through non-Spanish speaking airports. Health problems such as reduced capacity to walk and heart disease also make air travels more difficult. Malena, a former shop owner in El Salvador who now works as a casual carer, would like to invite her disabled mother in Australia but can't afford to finance the trip for another relative who would assist her during the journey. Travelling to Australia or El Salvador for extended periods of time also involves a negotiation of family duties and commitments: parents may be reluctant to leave their other children and grandchildren behind for several weeks, and those planning to travel alone for practical or financial reasons face the prospect of leaving their partners behind. This is one of the major obstacles to a visit from Malena's father. She saved enough money to finance her father's journey but he refuses to travel without his new wife.

Iñacio, a former anaesthesiologist who is now a part-time cleaner and pastor, hasn't seen his mother since he left El Salvador 13 years ago. He explains the reasons for not visiting in the following quote<sup>3</sup>.

Iñacio: "One of the reasons is that we all want to go [that is, Iñacio, his wife and their 6 children], but this involves too much money, a lot of money. With God's

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<sup>3</sup> All the quotes from Salvadoran migrants are translated from Spanish.

help I'd like to go there, but only for a short period of time, because I've always been close to my mum and it's already been 13 years since I last saw her, and it's hard. (...) As my wife says, we talk, we chat together, but it's not the same. (...) And many people say "yes but you send her money", but it's not the same, sending her 100 US\$ does not replace being with her when she's unwell. One time she was very ill, when she had a car accident. We didn't know what to do, I even considered travelling there, but my mother told me not to worry and that the best thing to do was to save that money and send it to cover her medical expenses. And that's what we did."

As this example shows, the decision to travel is often subject to family negotiations that include several people such as, the migrants' parents, his/her siblings, his/her partner and sometimes their children. Different aspects are weighed such as the ageing parents' current need of financial support; the availability of funds to finance the travel, including the willingness of siblings to help finance the trip; the number of persons who will benefit from the visit; the time that the candidate for travel will be able to spend away from his employment and household members, including availability of paid leave; the partner's capacity to look after himself and/or children in the absence of the traveller and the help he/she might get from other relatives, etc. For instance, Alex and Monica, who can't afford to visit El Salvador with their children agreed that they would travel in turns for four weeks, every three years. Alex accumulates his annual paid vacations and uses them to visit his family. Each made the first visit with their youngest child (as children under 2 don't have to pay a full-price ticket), and travelled alone the following times. The partner who stays in Australia looks after the children and the house. During the interview they explained they prefer to visit El Salvador rather than inviting their parents in Australia as it gives them the occasion to be reunited not only with their parents, but also with siblings and other relatives such as cousins, aunts, and nephews.

### **Communication patterns**

Not being able to travel regularly to El Salvador limits Salvadoran migrants' capacity to provide hands on care to their parents. Their main contribution,

apart from providing financial support to their kin, consists in offering them emotional and practical support at a distance, through letters and telephone and internet conversations. As Zontini & Reynolds underline, “Frequent and regular telephone conversations are an important way to keep families together, updating scattered members about what is going on in each others’ lives, providing emotional support and even directing and organising more hands on care from other family members” (Zontini & Reynolds 2007: 5). Migrants’ capacity to communicate with their parents and send them gifts largely depends on the availability and affordability of communication technologies in both the home and host countries, such as a reliable post system, telephone lines and internet connections. In this regard, the gap between Australia and El Salvador is striking. According to the “ICT at a glance” World Bank statistics<sup>4</sup>, in 2005, 14,1% of Salvadorians had access to telephone main lines, compared to 56,4% of Australians. Internet users represented 9,3% of the population in El Salvador, compared to 69,8% in Australia. And only 5,1% of the Salvadoran population had access to a personal computer compared to 68,3% of Australians. It is also interesting to note that the price basket for internet is almost similar in the two countries (22,6 US\$ per month in El Salvador and 22,8 in Australia), a figure which is particularly salient considering that 19% of the Salvadoran population live on less than 1 US\$ per day. The offer of cheap international telephone cards for calls between the two countries also differs. As a result, communication between migrants and their distant kin goes one way, from Australia to El Salvador, except in cases of extreme emergencies where parents or relatives in El Salvador may have no other choice but to make a brief telephone call to Australia. In spite of those difficulties, the vast majority of Salvadorans keep in regular contact with their parents and distant kin. Frequency of telephone contacts ranges from weekly conversations (in the vast majority of cases) to 4 calls per year. In addition, migrants also communicate with their parents on special occasions such as Christmas or Mother’s Day. The frequency of contact also increases when a problem arises in the family such as a major health issue or housing difficulties caused by natural disasters. When his father suffered from a depression, Rafael, a former chemistry student who works as a hair stylist in

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<sup>4</sup> Accessible on the world bank’s website <http://www.worldbank.org/> as at 1<sup>st</sup> September 2008

Perth, called his parents several times a week to provide them emotional support and make sure they had everything they needed.

In contrast, internet communication is very limited in this sample. This is not only due to the digital divide between El Salvador and Australia, but also to inequalities within Australian society. When they arrived in Australia, very few migrants knew how to use a computer, and none of them took IT classes in Australia. However, some families do communicate with their parents and/or distant kin via the internet, with the assistance of their Australian children. Iñacio exchanges emails and instant messages with his mother every day. He bought a computer for his children, and in turn they showed him how to use the internet. His mother is a retired secretary who used the internet at work and has a computer and internet connection at home. In El Salvador, ageing parents can also sometimes count on the help of their children or grandchildren who use the technology on their behalf and play the role of key informants. This is one of the many examples of the role that family networks play in facilitating the exchange of care between adult migrants and their parents. This will be the particular focus of the next section.

### **Transnational family networks**

Extended family networks, including the migrant's children, siblings, nieces and nephews, and sometimes aunts, uncles and cousins, play a major role in facilitating the exchange of care across borders. Family solidarity plays at different levels. In terms of communication, kin helps compensate for the lack of communication infrastructure by family members offering to put their own telephone lines, computers and internet connections at the service of transnational care-giving. They also help overcome financial difficulties linked to the prohibitive costs of telephone communication between El Salvador and Australia. A typical example is a brother living in the United States who relays information between his parents in El Salvador and his sister who lives in Australia. In emergencies, family members living in El Salvador know they can call family in the United States at a lower cost and ask them to call the migrants in Australia and inform them of the situation. Kin living in El Salvador also assist

illiterate parents in the exchange of letters, postcards and emails with their distant child.

The case of Sonia provides a good example of family communication networks. Sonia, Malena's sister, worked as a secretary and shop holder in El Salvador, before she moved to the United States where she worked during several years as a cleaner. Her mother lived with her for a while before she moved to Houston to live with another daughter. In 2002 Sonia and her mother visited Malena in Australia and Sonia fell in love with an Australian citizen. They got married and she moved to his house. During 2 years she worked in the same eggs farm as Malena, but in 2004 she stopped working to care for her husband who suffers from schizophrenia. At the time of the interview, Sonia's mother, now in a wheelchair, had moved back to San Salvador to live with her youngest daughter Carla and two teenage granddaughters. Sonia has always been very close to her mother, and proudly explained me that she knows absolutely everything that happens to her mother, thanks to her impressive communication network. She calls her on the phone every week. When she can't get in a touch with her, she calls her sister-in-law in San Salvador or a sister who lives in Houston, and they call Carla on her mobile phone to check everything's fine. Sonia's sister-in-law is her major source of information and, as the following quote shows, often acts on her behalf.

Sonia: "I talked to mummy and she wasn't feeling well, she was in terrible pain and she said that my sister had left her alone in the house, so I called my sister-in-law, look, mum's very sick, don't leave her alone (...) So my sister-in-law called my mother and asked her what was wrong. My mother said she couldn't take this anymore, she was crying, she couldn't cope with this pain and the fever (...) [So my sister-in-law's son] went to her house (...) and the next day my brother took an appointment with a specialist (...) and they drove her to the appointment (...) and my sister-in-law bought her the medicines she needed".

When she can't get in touch with her mother she also calls her nieces or friends who live nearby.

Sonia: "I call Yasmina who lives nearby, I call her and she tells me she's busy, she's with clients. So I call Nina (...). All my antennas are switched on, you know. I call my nieces, I tell one, go to my mum's house and check how she is".

Family solidarity also helps overcome difficulties related to mobility. Siblings based in the United States and enjoying a relatively good economic position help migrants finance their trip to El Salvador, especially in case of emergency. Kin may also help overcome problems generated by visa regulations restricting the parents' possibility to visit their children by inviting both the parents and the Australian sibling to meet in their house in the USA. Family members also act on behalf of their absent Australia-based kin. Because travelling from Australia to El Salvador at a short notice is very difficult, due to the cost and length of travel and unavailability of paid leave, and the migrants are rarely able to attend their parents' funerals.<sup>5</sup> They miss a ritual occasion of particular importance for the maintenance of family relations. According to Charles, Davies & Harris (2008), attendance at funerals « can cement and keep alive kin relations, even if contact between such events is sporadic and distances between kin are great (...) it provides an opportunity for reinforcing very dispersed kinship networks » (Charles et al. 2008: 183). Salvadoran migrants still ensure their virtual presence with the help of relatives who buy flowers and read messages on their behalf.

Relatives can also facilitate money transfers to ageing parents. In order to reduce transaction fees, Salvadoran migrants prefer to send their remittances via Western Union rather than through bank transfers. In many cases, one family member is in charge of collecting the money at the local agency and either bringing it to the parents or using the money to make the necessary purchases him or herself. In cases of emergency, migrant's grown up children may also participate to remittances by giving or lending money to their parents.

It is important to note that migrants can also count on networks of friends in their home and host countries that facilitate the transnational exchange of care. The Salvadoran community in Perth is split in several subgroups mainly organised around Spanish-speaking churches (Catholic and Baptist), and are mixed with Latin American migrants from all origins. Members develop friendships that can be mobilized in times of crisis to help a migrant finance an emergency trip back home, or that can facilitate the exchange of remittances and

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<sup>5</sup> Attendance at ritual occasions such as funerals is of particular importance for the maintenance of family relations. According to Charles, attendance at funerals « can cement and keep alive kin relations, even if contact between such events is sporadic and distances between kin are great (...) it provides an opportunity for reinforcing very dispersed kinship networks ». Charles et al : 183.

gifts between migrants and their kin. Malena's husband Carmelo, who used to be a manager in El Salvador and worked at the egg farm with his wife until a heart stroke left him partially disabled, regularly asks Salvadoran friends who plan to travel to their home country to visit his parents and bring them money and gifts. Carmelo also remained in close contact with friends in El Salvador. He knows that in case of emergency they will give money to his parents and wait until he can reimburse them.

### **Transnational caregiving and gender**

Researchers such as Zontini & Reynolds (2007) and Al-Ali (2002) identified gendered differences in migrants' involvement in the provision of support to their elderly parents. Zontini & Reynolds (2007) noted in their study of Caribbean and Italian migrants in the UK that female kin were more involved in providing practical support and contributing to 'kin-keeping', that is, facilitating and maintaining family ties between family members, while men were more likely to provide financial support to their kin. Al-Ali (2002) identified among Bosnian refugees in the UK and the Netherlands a propensity of wives feeling more isolated than their husbands to try to compensate by maintaining contact with distant friends and relatives. In her study, this was particularly the case for women who had been professionals in their home country but couldn't find a similar position in their host country. However, she notes that not all women feel deprived by their loss of socio-economic status, and she observes a similar tendency to invest in relations to their home country among several men who did experience the same feeling of loneliness and isolation.

Variations in the intensity and forms of involvement in transnational caring activities did appear in the Salvadoran sample, but gender didn't seem to play a significant role in this regard, except for the provision of hands on care during visits, which was more common among daughters than sons. In Australia, some men and women only engaged in sporadic exchanges with their parents, providing them financial, practical and emotional support only in times of crisis, while other men and women, like Iñacio and Sonia, were in constant communication with their mothers and provided them financial support on a monthly basis. Because of their difficult political and economic circumstances, all Salvadoran migrants (regardless of gender or social class background) expressed



a keen sense of obligation to provide financial and emotional support to their parents, especially to their mothers, with whom the majority reported sharing a special relationship. Like Finch explains, factors such as gender or the socio-economic situation do not suffice to explain the involvement of a particular person in care-giving (Finch 1989). Migrants' participation to the care of their parents is largely shaped by particularistic kin relationships and negotiated family commitments (Baldassar et al 2007).

### **Conclusion**

The capability of Salvadoran migrants to provide financial, practical, personal and emotional support to their distant parents is strongly affected by a lack of public awareness of their contribution to the well-being of their kin. Major obstacles arise from their difficult insertion in the labour market, inadequate provision of leave options, restrictive visa regulations and inequalities in the access to, and use of, communication technologies. Still, Salvadorans do invest a lot of time, energy and money in staying in touch with their ageing parents and fulfilling their filial duties in spite of the distance. Extended family networks appeared to play a major role in helping migrants overcome obstacles to transnational care-giving. Maintaining the relationship between parents and their distant children involves the participation of a network of relatives from different generations, often spreading across more than two countries. For Faist, transnational kinship groups represent a form of transnational social space where mobile and immobile persons exchange their resources and capitals within the constraints and opportunities arising, between others, from regulations imposed by nation-states (Faist 2000). Our study shows that obstacles to family solidarity that are specific to a certain institutional context can be partially circumvented via the mobilisation of family members who are located in a more favourable environment. Relatives residing in the United States and who benefit from cheaper communication both with El Salvador and Australia become the 'hub' through which information flows between kin based in their home country and Australian migrants. This study provided many more examples that contradict the assumption of the demise of the extended family and its attendant responsibilities for extended kin (Parsons 1965). Migrants' willingness to contribute to their parents' wellbeing leads them to maintain and

sustain links with relatives that may have been weaker or non-existent if they had remained in their home country. As Bryceson and Vuorela (2002b) suggest, geographical distance makes the need to keep family ties alive and renewed more pressing. The mobilisation of resources within families whose members are separated by national borders requires the active pursuit of familial blood ties, as denoted by Bryceson and Vuorela's concept of "relativising" that stresses "the sense of relativity, or being related, that occurs in transnational families" (Bryceson & Vuorela 2002: 14). Subsequent research is needed to improve our understanding of intra-familial dynamics within transnational families and of the key variables that impact on transnational care-giving and create inequalities within and between transnational families.

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