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## BOOK REVIEW

# Tiilikainen, Marja, Al-Sharmani, Mulki and Mustasaari, Sanna (eds.) (2020) *Wellbeing of Transnational Muslim Families. Marriage, Law and Gender*. London & New York: Routledge. 188 pp

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Book review of the book: Tiilikainen, Marja, Al-Sharmani, Mulki & Mustasaari, Sanna (eds.) (2020) *Wellbeing of Transnational Muslim Families. Marriage, Law and Gender*, London & New York: Routledge. 188 pp.

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Within the past two decades there has been a growing interest in transnational families and marriages, especially Muslim (migrant) families in Europe in the multidisciplinary field of migration research. As a result, there is a considerable amount of literature focusing on transnational dimensions of marriage and divorce, generational and gender specific aspects of family practices, as well as state governance of these family relations. Therefore, finding fresh perspectives to investigate these themes is somewhat challenging. However, the volume *Wellbeing of Transnational Muslim Families. Marriage, Law and Gender* succeeds in making a significant contribution to the existing literature by offering the conceptual lens of wellbeing—the concept that has not been much used and not systematically examined in the field of transnational migration.

By using the concept of wellbeing, the book investigates the practices, needs, aspirations, and choices of individuals and their transnational families, as well as processes through which family relations and rights are negotiated in a transnational social space. It examines how migrant families make sense and navigate different aspects of family life and multiple legal systems to sustain and contribute to their wellbeing. The book discusses what constitutes a good life and how people's wellbeing is affected and shaped by different co-existing norms, institutions, and laws.

The volume is an outcome of the multidisciplinary research project 'Transnational Muslim Marriages: Wellbeing, Law, and Gender' that took place at the Department of Social Research, University of Helsinki, Finland. All editors of the book—Marja Tiilikainen, Senior Researcher

at the Migration Institute of Finland; Mulki Al-Sharmani, Associate Professor of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies, at the Department of Cultures, University of Helsinki; and Sanna Mustasaari, postdoctoral researcher at the Faculty of Law, University of Helsinki—have been working on the research project.

The book consists of 10 chapters. Chapters 1 and 10 discuss the conceptual, contextual, and methodological choices related to the main themes of the book (e.g. wellbeing, gender, legal pluralism, and intersectionality). The rest of the chapters (2–9) are based on qualitative case studies on Muslim families, especially in Nordic countries (Finland, Sweden, and Denmark), but also in countries with longer histories of immigration (Britain, Netherlands, and Canada). There is a considerable emphasis on Somalis in the book, although some of the chapters also focus on (female) Muslim converts and Muslims having backgrounds in the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia. The volume covers issues such as registration of marriage, the legal recognition of religious Muslim marriage (*Nikāh*), divorce, polygamy, spousal roles and rights, parenting, child wellbeing, and everyday security.

Editors (Chapter 1) and Ann Phoenix (Chapter 10) raise issues in contemporary conceptualizations of wellbeing; wellbeing understood as outcomes, its somewhat problematic linkage with happiness, and quantitative research dominating the field of study. According to the editors, 'perceiving wellbeing merely as an outcome, something that people either have or have not, fails to address the role that individual and collective agency plays in creating and maintaining the manifold material and cultural elements of wellbeing' (3–4). Different local contexts in the book demonstrate the political aspects of wellbeing; how it 'can be used in political discourses in ways that exclude some individuals and render them non-deserving of wellbeing and security' (7). The editors' conceptualization of wellbeing is based on Sarah White's (2008, 2010) definitions that highlight human wellbeing as processual and dynamic. The editors suggest conceptual finetuning in which wellbeing is divided into *material*, *relational*, and *ethical* dimensions (4–5).

Almost all chapters deal with the issue of gender: how gendered patterns, practices, and discourses are present and appear in transnational migratory contexts. For example, Anika Liversage (chapter 5) notes that transnational polygamous marriages have primarily remained gender-unequal constructs that advantage men and are motivated by male aspirations. The wellbeing of husband and wives are differently impacted in polygamous unions, exposing those wives who are too vulnerable to leave unwanted marriages to experiences of significant ill-being. Several chapters demonstrate how different legal systems and legislations (e.g., family and marriage laws) can have gender-specific consequences on wellbeing (chapter 2 by Moors and Vroon-Najem, chapter 3 by Mustasaari and Vora, and chapter 6 by Sportel, de Hart, and Kulk).

Annelies Moors and Vanessa Vroon-Najem show (chapter 2) that public discussions on legal requirement to first conclude the civil marriage before religious marriage in Netherlands is in stark contrast to perspectives of (converted) Muslim women who often have solid reasons not to enter civil marriage first. According to authors, the strict regulations of Muslim marriages are justified by policy makers as protecting vulnerable women and their freedom of partner choice. Somewhat ironically, converts themselves prefer concluding an Islamic marriage prior to a civil marriage as they consider it important for their ethical and relational wellbeing. Authors point out problems of idealizing civil marriage in public debates as it 'disregards the possibility that entering rapidly into such a marriage may increase rather than decrease the risk of exploitation' of women (36).

In Chapter 6, Iris Sportel, Betty de Hart, and Friso Kulk explore how transnational Dutch Moroccan and Dutch Egyptian families navigate the multiple family law systems in case of transnational marriage, divorce, and birth of the child. The authors highlight the importance of applying a 'law-in-everyday-life approach' when investigating the wellbeing of

transnational families (108). The findings of the study question the claim of strategic behavior in which families and individuals would easily and widely exploit the multiple legal systems to maximize possibilities and get the best of the both worlds. The authors discovered that 'most people had no (long-term) strategic plan, but rather obtained information and took legal steps as they went along' (98). In addition, to strategically use the law across borders required access to economic, cultural, and social resources that were not equally available to all. Instead, there were inequalities in access to resources based on nationality and gender.

Several articles discuss issues of wellbeing related to parenting practices and the ways they are in flux in the context of migration. The vulnerabilities and challenges that parents face when raising children is explored, particularly within diasporic Somali communities in Canada, Finland, and Sweden (see chapter 4 by Al-Sharmani, chapter 7 by Haga, chapter 8 by Ismail, and chapter 9 by Tiilikainen). For instance, the high rate of single motherhood and the absence of fathers among many Somali families raises parents' concerns for the wellbeing and everyday security of children as single-parent families are likely to live in poverty and in less secure neighbourhoods.

Mulki Al-Sharmani (chapter 4) analyses the role mosques play in responding to struggles experienced by families and in enhancing family wellbeing of local Somali Muslim families in Finland. She scrutinizes the established mosque programme (in 2011) for families and its stated goals: the 'good of Muslim families', that is how to lead a pious and harmonious family life that simultaneously facilitates 'positive integration' into Finnish society. It offers conciliation for family disputes, holds seminars, and arranges workshops for parents and newlyweds. According to Al-Sharmani, the programme has applied a discourse on companionate marriage and engaged parenting that emphasizes affectionate and communicative relationship between spouses and between parents and children. Interestingly, the discourse on marriage used in the programme is typical for modern professional marriage counselling, depicting marriage as 'work' both spouses need to undertake to sustain and nurture marital harmony and happiness. Al-Sharmani noted that through its activities, the programme is emphasizing reading of Islamic law in an ethically oriented way that takes into account the lived realities of people. This has led to challenging male privilege (such as polygamy and divorce practices) even though explicit commitment to gender equality is still missing in the programme.

To conclude, this volume is a welcome addition to the growing literature of transnational families, and family practices of Muslims in particular. It offers a refreshing perspective by using the concept of wellbeing as its main conceptual lens. The concept itself is used and defined consistently in all chapters regardless of the fact that the chapters consist of independent case studies. The quality of the articles is commendably coherent, offering the reader many insights and highly interesting remarks to lived realities of transnational Muslim (migrant) families. I would recommend this volume not only to scholars of sociology and social policy (as editors themselves suggest) but also to scholars working in other fields, such as cultural studies and anthropology.

### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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