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Bilgili, Ö.; Leung, M.W.H.; Malinen, K.

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New Perspectives on Migrant Transnationalism in the Pandemic Era

Özge Bilgili , Maggi W. H. Leung  and Kia Malinen

INTRODUCTION: MIGRANT TRANSNATIONALISM AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Thirty years ago, in 1993, *Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments and Deterritorialized Nation-States* was published by Linda Basch, Nina Glick Schiller and Cristina Szanton Blanc. This pioneering book established the changing nature and intensification

Ö. Bilgili (✉)

Utrecht University, European Research Centre on Migration and Ethnic Relations,
Utrecht, The Netherlands

e-mail: o.bilgili@uu.nl

M. W. H. Leung

University of Amsterdam, Department of Geography, Planning and International
Development Studies, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

e-mail: w.h.m.leung@uva.nl

K. Malinen

Utrecht University, Research Master's Programme Migration, Ethnic Relations
and Multiculturalism, Utrecht, The Netherlands

of migrant transnationalism. Cited more than 3000 times in academic publications, Basch et al. (1993, p. 7) define migrant transnationalism as “the process by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement”. Their reflections, along with many others, including Alejandro Portes (1999, 2001, 2003), Steven Vertovec (1999), Thomas Faist (2000a, 2000b) and Peggy Levitt (1999, 2001) challenged long-standing perspectives on international migration and integration processes of migrants in a globally connected way. Since the 1990s, due to advances in digital communication alongside fast and cheaper travel, interconnectedness between individuals and communities that transcends international borders has changed our way of thinking about international migration and related societal challenges.

Migrant transnationalism research is inherently linked with interdisciplinary research that encompasses sociological, (social) psychological, economic, political, historical and (human) geography perspectives. Migrant transnationalism research touches upon societal questions and challenges, ranging from social (in)equalities, social cohesion and diversity to economic and political developments. Throughout decades of research in the field, the questions of temporality and change are present both implicitly and explicitly (Griffiths et al., 2013). The time dimension within migrant transnationalism is not only about the life course perspective and changes over time in the individual lives of migrants themselves but encompasses larger overarching trends and changes as well as crisis situations and disruptions.

Within the debates on the role of time and change in migrant transnationalism research, the Covid-19 pandemic provides an extremely enriching perspective and fresh discussions on our understandings of transnationalism in international migration. Assuming a before–during–after perspective, in this chapter, our aim is to present, discuss and assess changes that may materialize in different dimensions of migrant transnationalism because of the pandemic. To do this, we go beyond looking at migrant flows in their own significance or financial remittances and take into account identity- and belonging-related issues as well. Our approach to migrant transnationalism takes into account not just peoples’ homes as well as the local and city-level but also spans across regions and nation-state borders, traversing different distances. This approach goes beyond the home–host country perspective, taking into account the relevance of ‘third-places’. We also pay attention to a multitude of actors involved in

transnationalism, going beyond migrants themselves to also include non-migrants and community organizations, diasporas and country governments at the national levels.

In line with the points made above, in this chapter our objective is to provide potential answers to, and reflections on, the following questions that both help us push forward research, conceptual discussions and theoretical discussions on migrant transnationalism, but also help to understand and be prepared for the post-pandemic era that will continue to be shaped and influenced by migrant transnationalism and international migration.

- How do crises disrupt, change and transform the economic and social transnational engagements of migrants?
- How do transnational identifications affect migrants' positionalities vis-à-vis the various societies they are embedded in? How do these, in turn, affect their actions, sentiments, sense of belonging, aspirations, plans and decisions?

In the remainder of this chapter, to answer the above questions, we first define further different dimensions of, and points of view on, transnationalism and international migration. We present and compare observations from the past, during and post-pandemic periods. In the first stage, we primarily focus on financial remittances as an essential aspect of transnational engagement. In the second stage, we move forward toward identity- and belonging-related issues, also incorporating discussions on prejudice, stigmatization and Covid-19-racism based on available empirical evidence. Consequently, we aim (1) to discuss how the Covid-19 pandemic is one among many global events that shape migration and integration trajectories; and (2) to show what the differential effects of global events on transnational engagements and belonging are.

INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION AND MIGRANT TRANSNATIONALISM

Despite the increasingly complex and, at times, more restrictive channels for certain types of migration, migrant mobility reached unprecedented levels since the new millennium (Faist, 2006, 2013). While it is true that the registered international migration flows indicate that the share of the

total world population that is a migrant remains at the comparable level of 3% across decades—the 2020 figure is calculated at 3.6% (Massey, 2023, in this volume)—there are more and more invisible movements that are not registered and observed. The circularity of movement, (temporary) return migration flows, irregular mobilities as well as increased tourism present in today’s connected world should not be underestimated. Moreover, major bilateral movements between regions have diversified to the extent that, more than ever before, more individuals from many different parts of the world emigrate to more diverse destinations (de Haas et al., 2019). Within this context, the transnational lens accommodates the new realities of migrants’ lives and their interconnectedness across national borders through a wide range of economic, social, cultural and political relationships (Bilgili, 2014).

The transnational mobilities and engagements of migrants are reflected in decades of multidisciplinary research that touches upon different dimensions of ties between migrants and non-migrants across contexts (see Table 3.1). The transnational ways of being (Levitt, 2010), referring to

Table 3.1 Types, categories and dimensions of transnationalism

<i>Types</i>	<i>Category</i>	<i>Dimensions</i>
<i>Transnational ways of being</i> Behavioural aspects including different forms of engagement and involvement	Social transnationalism	Virtual connections online Telephone conversations Social media usage Return mobilities
	Economic transnationalism	Sending/receiving financial remittances Sending/receiving goods Making investments in the home country
	Political transnationalism	Extraterritorial voting Engagement in diaspora organizations/hometown associations
<i>Transnational ways of belonging</i> Emotional aspect including feelings of identification and attachment	Transnational identification	Homeland attachment and feelings of belonging Identification with home country Feelings of nostalgia and wish to return

Note: adapted by authors from Al-Ali et al. (2001) and Levitt (2010)

migrants' involvement in activities oriented towards their homeland, encompass different arenas of life. One can generally distinguish between social, economic, civic/political and cultural practices. These connections are highly influential in the lives of migrants themselves, but also their communities and countries of origin. Take as an example, the migrant remittances, which are migrant earnings that are sent back home in the form of either cash or goods to support families and communities. Since the 1990s, these are growing rapidly, making them one of the largest sources of foreign income for many developing countries. Remittances to developing countries were USD 20 billion in 1998, reaching USD 334 billion in 2010 (Ratha, 2013). In 2021, officially recorded remittances to low- and middle-income countries were around USD 589 billion (World Bank, 2021). Thus, remittances remain more than threefold above official development assistance in many parts of the world.

'Transnational ways of belonging' refer more specifically to migrants' multiple modes of identification and corresponding feelings of attachment through history, memory or nostalgia (Levitt & Schiller, 2004). In the context of 2022, where identity politics, normative discussions on international migration and integration processes and social cohesion and multiculturalism, are primarily defined by cultural diversity, aspects of transnational ways of belonging should not be ignored. Ethnicity- and national identity-related discussions, as well as racism, Islamophobia, prejudices and structural discrimination that are observed in all areas of life in migrant-receiving country contexts (including in the form of labour market discrimination as outlined in Ahmed et al., 2023), make critical reflections on migrants' ideas of belonging, feelings of attachment and identification necessary.

Migrants' economic and social transnational engagements as well as societal tensions due to identity issues are particularly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. On the one hand, financial remittances fluctuated, responding to the structural constraints posed by the pandemic. On the other hand, as Covid-19 spread, stigmatization, prejudice and discrimination made their mark in many parts of the world, focusing on ethnic minorities. These negative experiences raise questions about feelings of belonging, identity and positionality vis-à-vis the multiple contexts in which migrants are embedded. Therefore, in this chapter, we refer both to transnational ways of being and belonging in an attempt to discuss the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic.

ECONOMIC TRANSNATIONALISM IN TIMES OF CRISES

Financial Remittances during the Covid-19 Pandemic

In the economic domain, we mainly refer to financial remittances, in-kind remittances, investments in the home country (e.g. house, business, land), purchase of government bonds, purchase of entry to government programmes, or charitable donations made either directly to the country of origin or in a community organization in the residence country (Al-Ali et al., 2001; Guarnizo et al., 2003). When the Covid-19 pandemic hit, there was much debate about the resilience of the remittance flows. Economists mostly predicted that remittances to low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) would decline. Ratha et al. (2020) predicted as steep as a 7% decline in remittances to LMICs in 2020 and for them to continue to decline in 2021 by another 7.5%. They predicted the amount of remittances to fall to USD 508 billion in 2020 and then to USD 470 billion in 2021. This prediction addressed the total amount of remittances to LMICs, with Europe and Central Asia being affected the most, with a predicted decline of 16% in 2020 and 7% in 2021 (Ratha et al., 2020).

What reasons were given to explain why the Covid-19 pandemic would hamper remittances? Experts expected a decline in remittance flows because of the increased health risks that migrants faced that, in turn, would affect their ability to work and send remittances (Ratha et al., 2020; Bahar, 2021). Additionally, due to global issues, like oil prices crashing and the high economic insecurity, migrants were perceived as an especially vulnerable group when it came to unemployment and the adverse effects it could have had on their personal economic situation (Abel & Gietel-Basten, 2020; Bisong et al., 2020; Ratha et al., 2020; Bahar, 2021). This was already found to be the case during earlier economic crises like the 2009 global financial crisis (Ratha, 2020). Moreover, some argue that, as a result of these economic and health insecurities, if they had had the chance, a large number of migrants could have potentially considered returning back to their origin country, which, in turn, would have decreased the flow of remittances (Bisong et al., 2020; Ratha et al., 2020; Bahar, 2021). Finally, given the unique context of the Covid-19 pandemic, lockdown environments could have potentially disrupted migrants' access to banks and money transferring services (Kpodar et al., 2021). Even though predictions for the flow of remittances were grim for these reasons, the situation at the end of 2020 was much better than expected.

After an initial plummeting of the overall number of remittances in April and May of 2020, when the pandemic first started, a gradual revival of the remittance flows was observed (World Bank, 2020, 2021; Kpodar et al., 2021; Bahar, 2021). At the end of 2020, remittance flows to LMICs were estimated to be USD 540 billion, leaving them only 1.6% below the level of 2019, which was USD 548 billion (Bahar, 2021; World Bank, 2021).

Even if the total remittance flows saw only a small decline, at closer inspection it could be seen that different regions fared in different ways. The following regions experienced a growth in remittances: Latin America and the Caribbean (6.5% up to USD 103 billion), South Asia (5.2% up to USD 147 billion) and MENA (2.3% to USD 56 billion) (World Bank, 2021). Other regions experienced a decline in remittances, including East Asia and the Pacific (-7.9% down to USD 136 billion), Europe and Central Asia (-9.7% down to USD 56 billion) and Sub-Saharan Africa (-12.5% down to USD 42 billion) (World Bank, 2021). These general patterns of decline, although not exactly correct in size, were in line with the predictions of Ratha et al. (2020) in the sense that the regions that were expected to experience the largest decline in 2020 also ended up being the only regions that experienced a decline. What should be noted is that the decline in Sub-Saharan Africa, however, is a bit misleading: the decline is mostly attributable to the decline in remittances to Nigeria, which accounts for approximately 40% of all the remittances to the region. Other countries in the region did not experience such stark declines; some even experienced an increase (World Bank, 2021).

It is also important to note that, to a certain extent, the decline in cash transfers was underestimated. Namely, some experts argue that since the Covid-19 pandemic restricted cross-border mobility, some remittances that would have usually been sent via informal routes were actually sent via formal routes (Ratha et al., 2020, p. 12; Kpodar et al., 2021; World Bank, 2021). This is in line with findings from earlier pandemics that restricted cross-border mobility, like the 2014 Ebola epidemic in West Africa (Bisong et al., 2020). In addition to this discussion, however, it also remains an open question as to what has happened to in-kind remittances that are expected to have dropped significantly in line with the restrictions on international travel.

After 2020, experts compared the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on remittance flows to other health pandemics and economic crises. In general, it could be seen that the 1.6% decline in 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic was smaller than the 4.8% decrease in remittance flows in 2009

due to the global financial crisis (Ratha, 2020; Kpodar et al., 2021; World Bank, 2021). In regions like Europe and Central Asia, where the decline in remittances was at the higher end, the 2009 crisis resulted in a steeper decline of 11% compared to the 9.7% decline caused by Covid-19 (World Bank, 2021).

*Understanding the Resilience of Migrant Remittances:
From Migrant Agency to Responsive Policies*

The less than feared negative effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on economic remittances poses the question of why and how migrants still managed to send money back home. Although there are many reasons why a global pandemic can hamper remittance sending, research also identifies many reasons why the global remittance flows were not as affected as initially expected. Here two major factors come to the fore: responsiveness of country governments to facilitate the continuation of financial remittances and migrants' agency in coping with crisis situations. The combination of these two factors created a strong buffer, allowing financial remittances to flow through the already existing corridors even at times of global crises.

For example, some countries, like Pakistan, adopted policies that incentivized remittance sending during the Covid-19 pandemic. The government decided that “withholding tax [will be] exempted from 1 July 2020, on cash withdrawals or on the issuance of banking instruments/transfers from a domestic bank account” (World Bank, 2020). Similar tax exemptions for remittances were also introduced in countries like Bangladesh and Sri Lanka (EMN, 2020; Takenaka et al., 2020). Other countries, like the United States, adopted national fiscal stimulus programmes to boost their own economy, which then also positively impacted the migrants' abilities to send remittances (Kpodar et al., 2021; World Bank, 2021). Surveying the evidence, IFAD and the World Bank (2021) notes that governments in various countries, like Ethiopia and Jordan, started offering incentives to increase digital transfers of remittances in an attempt to ensure that remittances that would usually be sent through informal channels would still be sent despite border closures. In Albania, a digital and financial literacy programme was started to increase the awareness and knowledge of both remittance senders and receivers of how remittances could be sent through digital channels. In other countries, like Mexico, Nigeria, Switzerland and the UK, among others, remittances were declared

to be an essential financial service and, as such, lockdown regulations no longer restricted the local operations of remittance providers.

Another set of reasons why remittances did not decrease as much as expected during the Covid-19 pandemic relates to the migrants themselves and their actions. Many authors discuss how migrants, during times of uncertainty in the country of origin, are motivated to support their families even more (Bisong et al., 2020; Bahar, 2021; Kpodar et al., 2021). Kpodar et al. (2021) find in their quantitative study that when the Covid-19 infection rates in the country of origin went up, the number of remittances increased directly thereafter. Bisong et al. (2020) also discuss how, during the 2014 Ebola epidemic in West Africa, the flows of remittances from migrants and diaspora members increased. These showcase how migrants aim to support their families more when the situation in their country of origin is uncertain. These responses were even stronger when the Covid-19 pandemic was combined with other local disasters. For instance, some findings show that an unrelated catastrophe in the country of origin, like the 2020 flooding in Bangladesh, caused increased remittance sending (World Bank, 2020).

Migrants' agency in coping with crises is also reflected in other strategies and reflected in other types of migrant behaviour. For example, Bahar (2021) discusses how migrants are able to afford to send more money during times of economic uncertainty and even unemployment. The main reason for this is that they tap into their savings. In a similar vein, Bisong et al. (2020) observe a comparable trend during previous crises amongst migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa. However, these behaviours should be considered with caution as the savings of migrants can be limited, and the sustainability of such strategies/actions is open to question. Additionally, the migrant resilience and adaptability is brought up by Bahar (2021), who argues that, where possible, many migrants also switched industries to work in essential services in order to be able to continue to support their families back home. Once again, Bisong et al. (2020) suggest a similar trend of switching industries during the 2009 financial crisis among Sub-Saharan migrants. Despite these preliminary suggestions, which are important for understanding the ways in which migrants cope with economic crises, further cross-national investigation is needed to clarify under what conditions, and for whom, these strategies are plausible and viable in the long term.

Fluctuations in Economic Remittances Impact the Poorest the Most

Despite the more positive outcomes at the end of 2020 with regards to financial remittances, there were still groups that were especially negatively affected by fluctuations in remittance flows. In general, impoverished households in lower income countries, who rely heavily on remittances as a part of their household income, are found to be the most affected (Bisong et al., 2020; Gupta et al., 2020; Caruso et al., 2021; Murakami et al., 2021). These trends are found in Latin America: Caruso et al. (2021) find that the most affected household are low-income households and that the more they rely on remittances throughout the year or at a specific period in the year, the more vulnerable they are to increased poverty due to remittance fluctuations. Gupta et al. (2020) find in rural India that impoverished households experienced a heavy drop in household expenditures in the first month of the pandemic when remittance flows decreased. This resulted in the families decreasing their non-consumption item buying to almost zero and largely cutting down on their food consumption and diversity of food consumption.

Families who were drastically affected by the fluctuations in remittance inflows were not completely deprived from solutions. Murakami et al. (2021) find that, in the Philippines, families made up for losses in remittances through non-agricultural income and other domestic income. Gupta et al. (2020) also highlight that, at the start of the first Covid-19 lockdown, families with the greatest financial challenges received some food aid from the Indian government. Gupta and colleagues also find that families in rural India coped with the reduced remittance flows through increased in-kind borrowing. Yet it cannot be forgotten that such strategies may also put families in more vulnerable situations and risk increasing their long-term debts. These findings from different regions of the world demonstrate that already impoverished households that are highly reliant on remittances may continue to suffer even if the overall trend in remittance flows was not as negative as initially expected. Therefore, it is vital to go beyond the general trends and identify which segments of the population are most likely to be affected by the fluctuations in remittances both in the short and long term. According to Murakami et al. (2021), a first step to start identifying especially vulnerable groups can be done by examining the geographical distribution and composition of a country's immigrant diaspora. Understanding from which areas in the country immigrants are from, where they have migrated to and what types of employment they

have can be an important indicator of how remittance flows might be impacted and who within the population may be affected the most. Murakami and colleagues argue that, at the national level, a more heterogeneous emigrant population in terms of country of destination and employment in different sectors and industries can fare better, thus being more resilient to shocks and sustain remittances flows to the origin countries.

Transnational Entrepreneurs, their Challenges and Coping Mechanisms

In this subsection, we give attention to transnational entrepreneurs, a group of immigrants who were expected to be uniquely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic and yet had their own strategies to manage the impacts of the pandemic. Transnational entrepreneurs are immigrants who own their own businesses, which operate in transnational contexts and between different institutional settings (Harima, 2022). Although this group was severely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, due to their special nature, they also possessed abilities to uniquely adapt to the new situation. Through his 23 in-depth interviews with transnational migrant entrepreneurs residing predominantly in Germany, with some residing in other European countries, South-East Asia, South America and North America, Harima (2022) examines how transnational entrepreneurs were impacted by the pandemic. He finds that the pandemic created challenges for the entrepreneurs. First, they were especially vulnerable to the pandemic because of the deglobalization reflected in border closures and limitations to individual mobility. Cross-border activities and travelling were considered to play a central role in the participants' business activities and not being able to travel affected how they created value with their businesses. Second, because they operate between multiple institutional contexts and markets, they had to deal with unexpected changes in both origin and residence country contexts, navigating the impact that these changes had on their business activities. Third, the sectors that transnational entrepreneurs tend to be embedded in—tourism, international trade and manufacturing—were all heavily affected by the pandemic and the ensuing lockdowns.

Despite finding that transnational entrepreneurs were heavily impacted by the pandemic, Harima (2022) also finds that they were able to cope and adapt to the situation in creative ways. First, transnational

entrepreneurs utilized their embeddedness in multiple countries and utilized the best parts of each institutional setting they were working in to navigate having a business during the Covid-19 pandemic. For example, some participants explained that they were able to shift the production of their product from their country of origin to the country of residence when the borders closed. This way they could continue developing their business despite the border closures. Second, they adapted their business models and started creating value by meeting new demands that rose from the pandemic. For example, one entrepreneur was able to adapt their food box business by adding a cultural component to it, thus fulfilling the need for having cultural experiences during lockdowns when travel was not possible. Additionally, they started digitalizing their existing services and products. For instance, an entrepreneur organizing internships in Germany for employees of Japanese firms introduced a new virtual internship experience after the pandemic started. Lastly, the participants, who had previously heavily relied on travel in order to communicate with their teams and customers in person, now started relying more heavily on digital forms of communication, for instance video conferences. Once entrepreneurs started using more digital forms of communication, they were actually able to start utilizing an even wider transnational network and activate social capital within those networks to not only keep their businesses running but also to collect money or resources to send to their countries of origin.

SOCIAL TRANSNATIONALISM DURING THE PANDEMIC ERA

Within the sociocultural domain, as important channels, we often refer to social relationships maintained through visits to friends and family in the origin country, or contact through telephone, letters, e-mails, links with homeland or diaspora organizations, and attendance at social gatherings with the ethnic community in the host country. In addition, individuals' participation in cultural events (e.g. concerts, theatre and exhibitions) about their country of origin or their consumption of media, art and other cultural products can be included as part of practices in the sociocultural domain. All these activities are observable actions, meaning that they are quantifiable and measurable in a systematic way. The Covid-19 pandemic generated a context in which these social contacts with families and friends in the home countries became even more important in the lives of migrants and their families. Particularly in a context where return visits became

almost impossible in most parts of the world, social contacts maintained through internet, phone calls and social media occupied a significant part of social lives.

It is well established that it is not only ‘money’ that is circulated by migrants, but a significant aspect of their social and cultural connections with their home countries also entails the circulation of ideas, practices, skills and social capital. More than 20 years ago, Peggy Levitt (1999) introduced the idea of social remittances, drawing attention to the relevance of sociocultural transnationalism. Through sociocultural transnationalism, over time both migrants themselves and their societies of origin are influenced (Khagram & Levitt, 2008; Faist, 2013). When it was introduced at the turn of the century, it was argued that social remittances may alter people’s behaviour and transform notions about gender relations, democracy and so forth (Levitt, 1999; Levitt & Lamba-Nieves, 2011). In similar ways to how economic remittances responded to the pandemic as a global crisis, one can expect that the bilateral flow of social remittances used in the broader sense may have also been affected by the pandemic, both in terms of their content (e.g. stronger shift towards health related topics) and the channels through which they were shared.

As we propose in this chapter, crisis situations create new opportunities to observe and reflect on how transnational engagements respond to, and are shaped by, critical events. In fact, some researchers coined the term ‘pandemic transnationalism’ to refer to the “circulation of ideas and practices in times of pandemic which encompasses an exchange of informal practices that affects not only the lives of migrants and their families in their home country, but their close circle of friends and neighbours as well” (Galstyan & Galstyan, 2021, p. 2). During the pandemic, many migrants who were in communication with their social contacts in other places found themselves in new types of conversations. These (transnational) social networks provided migrants with diverse and, at times, contradictory information and advice (e.g. usage of masks; cf. Rogstad, 2023, this volume). This access to multiple sources of information may have created its own challenges and tensions, since migrants were exposed to the differences in opinions, views, caring practices and ways of dealing with the pandemic. This is also partially due to the differences between countries, as some developed their own strategies and preventative measures in the face of the pandemic.

Moreover, at times, the protective systems migrants found themselves in were significantly different from those of their families, friends and acquaintances. These differences triggered conversations around sharing

experiences and views on the pandemic. Within the context of the pandemic, new issues, especially in relation to health care and hygiene, were at the forefront of discussions. For example, the work of Galstyan and Galstyan (2021), which focuses on the case of Armenian transnational families located in Russia, the Czech Republic and Belarus, highlights that these topics were central in discussions and negotiations between families in terms of what is acceptable social behaviour. In short, migrants had to negotiate varied cultural perspectives (of origin countries, where they live and other places to which they are connected) while interpreting decisions and recommendations provided by their local government. In this regard, the pandemic brought to the fore some of the pre-existing tensions that migrants face on a daily basis when negotiating their norms and values as well as when making choices on how to behave and relate to the expectations in their country of residence, but this time through topics related to health, hygiene and contagious diseases.

Finally, we find it relevant to reflect on the interactions between social (pandemic) and economic transnationalism, pointing out the symbolic and emotive meaning of remittances and goods for both senders and receivers (Mazzucato, 2011; Le Dé et al., 2016). The emotional relevance of in-kind remittances and their power to enhance reciprocal relationships became strongly evident within the pandemic time. In various contexts, migrants sent protective equipment, such as masks, gloves and sanitizers, to their families and friends (Leung & Hao, 2021). In line with the concept of reverse remittances (Mazzucato, 2011), this is not just from migrants to their families but also the other way around. In areas and regions where access to masks was rather difficult at the beginning of the pandemic, migrants also received these products from their social networks. In fact, at times these material transfers were also facilitated, if not initiated, by country governments. For example, in the Netherlands, when access to masks was very limited, the Chinese government sent so-called health bags to their diaspora. In particular, international Chinese students received these packages as a symbolic reflection of delivering support. When these types of transfer of goods take place on a personal level, they also indicate a certain level of responsibility, connection and affinity to other members of the families who are going through this global crisis 'together' (Leung & Hao, 2021).

TRANSNATIONAL BELONGING AND INCLUSIVITY

The Consequences of Discrimination and Stigmatization

In this chapter, we also pay particular attention to how transnational belonging of migrants is affected given the discrimination and stigmatization induced by the Covid-19 pandemic. We are interested in understanding how migrants identify themselves; how they are identified by others during the Covid-19 pandemic; and how these, in turn, affect migrants' actions, sentiments, sense of belonging, aspirations, plans and decisions (where to be, what to do, with/for whom etc.). Throughout history, outbreaks of infectious diseases are key contexts within which discriminatory behaviours emerged in various ways. After its first outbreak, in the Chinese city of Wuhan, at the end of 2019, Covid-19 spread across the globe. Consequently, stigmatization, prejudice and discrimination followed in its trail. Immediately, reports on physical or verbal assault on people of Chinese/East and South-East Asian appearance were abundant, even in many 'multicultural societies' in Europe (cf. Osanami Törngren et al., 2023, in this volume). Racially motivated attacks in both physical and digital spaces were reported. In the Netherlands, Lex Gaarhuis and his song *Voorkomen is beter dan Chinezen* ("to prevent is better than Chinese", a word play with the saying "to prevent is better than to heal"), while causing major national uproar, is just one example of how racism once again revealed itself in the heart of Europe. Many speak of the 'Corona-racism pandemic', denoting the rise of racialized acts and narratives since the advent of Covid-19.

Li et al. (2021) observe the reaction of people of Asian—particularly Chinese—background in multiple contexts in relation to discrimination against their co-nationals. Their interdisciplinary work, which brought together media and cultural psychology, illustrates that the exposure to media intensified collective anger. Even when communities are transnationally located, they share and identify with negative emotions collectively. In the face of xenophobic threats, especially when the migrant communities already felt cultural distance from the host society, these emotions were stronger. Put differently, the negative atmosphere during the Covid-19 pandemic was a tipping point for those who were already feeling social exclusion and distance, thus exacerbating the existing, and yet rather invisible, feelings of frustration and dissatisfaction. In a similar vein, the work of Wang et al. (2021) on Chinese students in France

illustrates the intensified experiences of racism. In many instances, researchers observe that these negative experiences were also coupled with lack of identification and changes of future plans to settle long term. Wang et al. (2021, p. 737), for example, argue that “contrary to the republican universalism promised, the descendants of Chinese migrants encounter difficulties concerning their full access and unsuspected belonging to the French Nation because of their physical appearance”.

People who are confronted with acts of racism are not only victims. Their own experiences, in combination with increasing media coverage of the topic, increased their awareness of the issue and also led to them taking action against it. Street protests and demonstrations took place in major cities across North American and Europe. In our own research in the Netherlands, engaged Chinese and Asians organized and took part in two demonstrations, claiming citizenship in a way, on Museumplein, a square located close to the centre of Amsterdam. At these events, hundreds of people, including non-Chinese and non-Asians, protested against anti-Asian racism that had been ignored in public discourse (Leung et al., [forthcoming](#)). Beyond taking a stand in physical urban spaces, affected Chinese people were also active in resistance in digital spaces. In fact, as an elementary part of our contemporary society, (social) media, chat forums, blogs, YouTube and other digital channels are now vibrant spaces where racialization and other social conflicts are being played out and resisted. Migrants do not only intensify their connections among each other because of racism, the lockdowns and restrictions in social contacts also prevented them, especially newcomers, from embedding in their new environment. Facing isolation, many migrants turned to their local co-ethnic and transnational diaspora networks for support. Our study of Chinese students reveals the strong sense of Chineseness, collective identity and solidarity among many (Leung & Hao, 2021).

The Role of Residence and Origin Country States

In this final section, we underline the role of the residence and origin country states in shaping migrants’ experiences. Social policy strategies and efforts implemented by local governments and other relevant organizations in reaching out to migrant groups differed significantly across places where migrants reside. Efforts to reach out to migrants and to create systems that support migrants during the Covid-19 pandemic took different forms. For example, in Germany, the government started a

digital campaign, translated into multiple languages, in order to specifically reach out to migrants and provide them with information about Covid-19 (OECD, 2020). Other countries, like Ireland, automatically extended migrants' work permits during the pandemic and made it possible for anyone who lost their job due to Covid-19 to qualify for unemployment benefits (OECD, 2020). These strategies can be influential in making migrants feel like they also belong. Without them, migrants and refugees may feel socially excluded, lack trust in society and will not comply with local Covid-19 regulations. There are several studies looking into the role of trust in government and authorities (Briscese et al., 2020; Nivette et al., 2021), both in Switzerland and Italy, showing the relevance of these factors in (non-)compliance with Covid-19 rules. However, more research is needed in order to understand to what extent these factors are relevant for migrant populations, not only in shaping their compliant behaviours but also daily life experiences.

There is already some evidence regarding the important role of the local and national authorities' policy approaches in shaping migrant experiences. For example, in the Dutch context, van den Muijsenbergh et al. (2022) show that, in particular, undocumented migrant workers felt very vulnerable and excluded from Covid-19 measures due to structural barriers. They find, in a small qualitative study, that their participants wanted to comply with Covid-19 regulations, actively sought information about Covid-19 and wanted to take part in testing. However, structural barriers in the Netherlands prevented them from complying properly with preventive measures. At the beginning of the pandemic, they had very limited access to tests and even when there was a possibility to test without a *burgerservicenummer* (BSN—Citizen Service Number), they lacked information about testing facilities due to language barriers. Additionally, they faced major challenges with employment, access to food and housing insecurity because they were excluded from formal support systems organized by the state. In other words, the ways in which the Covid-19 pandemic was handled by officials had important consequences for how migrants and refugees responded to the measures. Negative experiences may, in turn, aggravate social isolation and foster reflections on (transnational) belonging.

As migrants are embedded in transnational spaces, they are also connected to, and affected by, their homeland state. In our research, we document the role of the transnational Chinese state in the pandemic. It evolved from a needy motherland seeking support from its diaspora when

the pandemic began in Wuhan to a benevolent state offering care to its daughters and sons abroad as well as to the wider world within a matter of a few months. These ‘care circuits’, taking the forms of repatriation, donations, supplies of care packages and dissemination of public health information, deepen the emotional and material bonds between many Chinese overseas and the Chinese state. Many research participants expressed to us their strong sense of Chinese identity as a result of the pandemic (Leung & Hao, 2021). Similar caring acts were also carried out by other states with large diaspora, like the Philippines and Turkey. In future research, it is of great significance to further understand the interactions between these experiences, transnational belonging and other related outcomes for migrants and societies at large in times of crises.

In conclusion, with its multi-faceted effects on migrant lives, the Covid-19 pandemic provided new perspectives and reflections on transnational engagements and belonging. Overall, it would not be wrong to say that the pandemic put migrants in more vulnerable situations compared to the rest of the population in various ways (e.g. employment opportunities). In this regard, the pandemic significantly affected the everyday lives of migrants. However, the points made in this chapter highlight that it was not only their daily lives, but also the social and economic connections with their families and friends in different contexts, that were affected. The maintenance and, at times, even the intensification of transnational relationships illustrate that, in times of crises, migrants and their social networks need and rely on each other for their individual and collective resilience (Walsh, 2020). In this regard, we find it important to reflect on migrant transnationalism not only through a vulnerability lens, but also considering the conditions under which migrants remain resilient, utilizing and activating their diverse (transnational) resources. By presenting both origin and destination country policies during the pandemic, we also illustrate the essential role they play in shaping migrant (transnational) experiences.

Moreover, the studies we discuss highlight how the Covid-19 pandemic raised questions of belonging and identification via the detrimental roles of discrimination and racism. Our own intersectional research conducted in the Netherlands also proves that viral outbreaks still have an overwhelming effect on society at large and that racism, in its many appearances, might be less visible as it was in the centuries before, but is, unfortunately, still a very powerful force in all of our social and political realities. In this regard, indeed, the Covid-19 pandemic is a tipping point, bringing to the

fore some of the existing challenges that migrants have. Yet, it remains to be seen if the effects of the pandemic on migrant transnationalism will remain in the long term. We think that this is a question that needs to be answered by studies across different migrant groups and contexts, taking into account the many different dimensions of migrant transnationalism.

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