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Shaping gender inequalities: critical moments and critical places

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# Shaping gender inequalities: critical moments and critical places

Shaping  
gender  
inequalities

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – There is much scientific interest in the connection between the emergence of gender-based inequalities and key biographical transition points of couples in long-term relationships. Little empirical research is available comparing the evolution of a couple's respective professional careers over space and time. The purpose of this paper is to contribute to filling this gap by addressing the following questions: what are the critical biographical moments when gender (in)equalities within a relationship begin to arise and consolidate? Which biographical decisions precede and follow such critical moments? How does decision making at critical moments impact the opportunities of both relationship partners in gaining equal access to paid employment?

**Design/methodology/approach** – These questions are addressed from the perspectives of intersectionality and economic citizenship. Biographical interviewing is used to collect the personal and professional narratives of Swiss-, bi-national and migrant couples. The case study of a Swiss-Norwegian couple illustrates typical processes by which many skilled migrant women end up absently or precariously employed.

**Findings** – Analysis reveals that the Scandinavian woman's migration to Switzerland is a primary and critical moment for emerging inequality, which is then reinforced by relocation (to a small town characterized by conservative gender values) and the subsequent births of their children. It is concluded that factors of traditional gender roles, ethnicity and age intersect to create a hierarchical situation which affords the male Swiss partner more weight in terms of decision making and career advancement.

**Practical implications** – The paper's findings are highly relevant to the formulation of policies regarding gender inequalities and the implementation of preventive programmes within this context.

**Originality/value** – Little empirical research is available comparing the evolution of a couple's respective professional careers over space and time. The originality of this paper is to fill this research gap; to include migration as a critical moment for gender inequalities; to use an intersectional and geographical perspective that have been given scant attention in the literature; to use the original concept of economic citizenship; and to examine the case of a bi-national couple, which has so far not been examined by the literature on couple relationships.

**Keywords** Life course research, Gender inequality, Employment inequality, High-skilled migration, Intersectionality of gender and ethnicity, Occupational trajectories

**Paper type** Research paper



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## Introduction

An analysis of gender equality achievements in Switzerland shows that while legislative and educational progress has been made in recent decades, equal access to paid employment for men and women remains elusive (Bühler, 2011). Causes of persistent inequality can be recognized under both institutional and biographic conditions. The latter are increasingly receiving attention by researchers who emphasize that gender-based employment inequalities often occur (or are reinforced or reproduced) at key transition points during professional life: choosing a career, marriage, first pregnancy, divorce or retirement (Krüger and Levy, 2001), which can result in “a loss or gain of privilege, influence or power, and a changed identity and sense of self, as well as changed behaviour” (Glaser and Strauss, 1971, p. 2). Scholars have shown that life courses in Switzerland are sex-typed (Levy and Widmer, 2013). Unfortunately, there is still insufficient empirical knowledge about the relationship between key biographical passages and the emergence of gender-based employment inequalities. Furthermore, our knowledge of the role of critical periods – such as migration – is still limited (Liversage, 2009; Riaño, 2011a). Finally, an analytical perspective on how employment inequalities are shaped by decision making within relationships has only rarely been used. Scholars have shown that living as a couple may affect the professional outcomes of both women and men (Levy and Ernst, 2002; Bathmann *et al.*, 2013). Therefore, empirical studies are required to comparatively examine how the professional careers of both partners evolve over space and time, which decision-making processes underlie these evolutions and the influence of gender-related values and structural conditions on these processes.

This paper aims to contribute to filling these research gaps through empirical examination of the following questions: what are the critical biographical moments when gender (in)equalities within a relationship begin to arise and consolidate? Which biographical decisions precede and follow such critical moments? How does decision making at critical moments impact the opportunities of both relationship participants in gaining equal access to paid employment? These questions will be answered from the following three perspectives.

First, an intersectional perspective (Nash, 2008) examining how the intersection of different social categories (gender, ethnicity, age, etc.) shape the social position of women and men, and how this position impacts their ability to negotiate with their partners. This is important because biographical courses have often been analysed from the perspective of “doing gender” but less emphasis has been placed on the intersection of gender and ethnicity (Riaño, 2011a). Ethnicity refers to the processes of social classification and collective representation (drawing on imagined criteria of cultural similarities and differences) that construct social boundaries between “us” and the “others” (Barth, 1969). In the Swiss context, ethnic boundaries have often been constructed that differentiate between “Swiss” and “foreigners” (Riaño and Wastl-Walter, 2006). Migrants often find themselves perceived as the “other”, a status often coupled with a loss of power and a changed identity and sense of self. Social and cultural capital is often devalued by migrant status, inducing social and employment inequalities (Bauder, 2003; Riaño, 2011a). This paper will thus examine the relationship between migration and gender equality in the home.

Second, a social geographical perspective examining critical moments in connection with critical places. Individual biographies are interpreted here as movements in social space(s) over specific periods of time. Social space is conceptualized as having the three dimensions of materiality, social practices and symbolic frameworks. Time-space configurations can both enable or constrain individual actions and purposes

(Dyck, 1990). This paper will examine specific characteristics of critical places, such as geographical location, availability of childcare facilities and spatial mobility infrastructure, labour markets, and gender culture in order to understand how their interaction with critical biographical transitions shape gender inequalities.

Third, a perspective of economic citizenship. The questions posed above raise the issue of how to define and assess inequality. Based on our previous work (Riaño, 2011a) we use the concept of economic citizenship, where equality is defined as having access to equal opportunities for (both male and female) migrants and non-migrants to education and employment that is commensurate with their professional qualifications, and that offers potentially long-term professional opportunities.

Using a comparative perspective, this paper examines how the professional careers of a bi-national couple evolve over space and time. The paper is structured in five parts. The first section presents the rationale for selecting the case study and the methodological approach. The second examines the professional development of both members of the bi-national couple over space and time, and the nature of their biographical decision making. The third part inquires into the critical moments and places that shaped their gender inequalities. The fourth part interrogates how gender, ethnicity and age combined to create hierarchical situations within the couple, leading to unequal powers of decision making. The last section reflects on the significance of this paper's findings for policies related to gender equality.

### **Case study and methodology**

The case study presented in this paper is part of a larger research project examining how gender and ethnicity intersect to generate employment inequalities in Switzerland. It combines statistical analysis of survey data with qualitative and exploratory case analysis. The selection of relevant case studies for the qualitative study followed the principle of maximum variation sampling, or choosing individuals that represent a wide range of variation in dimensions of research interest, such as origin, age, family status, education and geographical location. The qualitative study sample comprises 85 migrants (from EU and non-EU countries) and non-migrant women and men, with and without children, who are (or were) in a couple relationship, are over 40 years of age (i.e. with life courses long enough to permit meaningful biographical analysis of professional careers), have completed vocational or tertiary education, and live in central and peripheral German-speaking Cantons. Research partners were found through personal contacts, leaflet advertising, the "snowball" principle and collaboration with professional associations.

Biographical interviewing, which describes key biographical turning-point moments (Denzin, 1989), was the main method of data collection. Interviews were conducted with both partners, who were separately interviewed to allow them to express their ideas freely. Three types of relationships were examined: Swiss couples (two native Swiss nationals); bi-national couples (one foreign-born individual and one native Swiss national); migrant couples (both foreign-born individuals). Biographical interviews were analysed using the qualitative content analysis method, an interpretative approach that condenses data and identifies key themes, patterns and meanings through inductive coding procedures. Following an iterative process, a subset of interviews were analysed in order to gain initial insights and to develop a preliminary coding system. The latter is further enriched through subsequent analysis of further interviews. Interview coding used MAXQDA software, allowing individual and comparative analysis of a large set of interviews. Finally, a typology of employment situations was produced, as well as a set of explanatory

theses on how, when and where employment inequalities between the studied groups emerged. The analysis was validated through MINGA workshops (Riaño, 2011a), a participatory method developed during earlier research to examine research results with interview partners.

Our analysis of the 2010 Swiss Labour Force Survey shows that skilled migrant women are the most disadvantaged group in the Swiss labour market, with the lowest employment rates, lowest average income levels and employment level that is not commensurate with their qualifications. Our qualitative and exploratory study reveals three typical types of employment situations for skilled migrant and non-migrant women and men with children: no paid work; paid work below skill level and/or temporary; and paid work commensurate with skill level and potentially long term. The first two, which can be characterized as absent employment and precarious employment, are typical of most interviewed migrant women with children. How can these inequalities be explained? The scope of this paper is too limited for such an ambitious purpose; therefore, we will focus on the case study of a Scandinavian/Swiss bi-national couple, which is of particular interest for two reasons. First, it illustrates some typical processes by which many skilled migrant women end up absently or precariously employed. Second, it allows an examination of how the relative bargaining power of partners with different national origins shaped the couple's decision-making processes regarding the division of paid and unpaid work. This issue has not yet been addressed by the emerging research on decision making within relationships (Bathmann *et al.*, 2013).

### **The evolution of professional careers over space and time within a relationship**

Based on their narratives, this section summarizes the professional biographies of Mr Heinz Dürig, a Swiss forestry scientist, and Ms Elin Andersen, a Scandinavian agronomist, and describes their decision making over the years[1].

Biography: Heinz Dürig:

Mr Dürig was born in 1960. He grew up on a farm in a predominantly rural and German-speaking Canton of Central Switzerland. He was the youngest child of the family. He was aware at an early age that his older siblings would inherit the farm and that he would have to find an alternative way of earning an income. Being the youngest also meant that he was free to choose a different profession to that of his parents – a “nearly ideal” start in life, he says. His mother often reminded him of the importance of education. He says he knew that having his own business was the way to earn more money and thus achieve his ambition to have a better standard of living than his parents. After finishing high school he attended university to study forestry science, which he completed in 1986.

After finishing his studies he could not find employment and thus decided to set up his own company, which he says was a usual practice at the time for many forestry scientists. During that time he was discussing with his future wife (a Scandinavian agronomist that he had earlier met in Scandinavia) whether he should move to her country, or whether she should come to Switzerland. He says that he did not want to give up his company in Switzerland and was also afraid that if he left he would lose his professional networks, making it impossible for him to return. Besides, he thought it more common for women to follow their husbands. He thus decided to stay in Switzerland.

After two years of leading his company he realized that it did not have a promising future. It was located in his canton of origin, where most forests are in the hands of farmers who do not have the financial capacity to pay private companies for counselling services. He heard that a company where a colleague had been working for the past seven years was up for takeover. The company

was situated in one of the founding cantons of the Swiss Confederation (a mainly agricultural Canton of 35,000 inhabitants, characterized by conservative gender values and models), where he knew that a large part of the territory was covered in public forests, which made it easier for him to obtain consulting contracts. Besides, he knew that the new company already had a well-established network of clients. He did not hesitate in deciding to join his colleague in the company takeover. He also decided to move to the Canton's capital city (a small town of approximately 8,300 people at the time), so as to be as close as possible to his future clients.

When his wife came to Switzerland in 1989 they moved soon after to live in the new location. He says that he always wanted to have a large family and that he wished to have children as soon as possible. He also says that he was set on becoming a house owner. He therefore decided to work full-time so as to generate enough income to pay for the debts incurred by building a house. He recalls that he was able to obtain a good income in the new company, owing to the many contracts that he and his partner obtained, and that he continued with the same activity for the following 17 years.

After that period, in 2006, he decided to move to a new job, working for the Canton's government. He earns less in the new position but he says he is satisfied because he carries out a wider variety of activities than before and has more influence and free time.

He summarizes his professional biography with the following words: "[...] a very simple story, really [...]".

#### Biography: Elin Andersen:

Ms Andersen was born in 1962. She grew up on a farm in Scandinavia. She says that as a young woman she did not want to become a full-time homemaker like her mother, who had no other option. After finishing high school she concluded an apprenticeship in gardening. After working as a trained gardener she realized that such a profession would not satisfy her long term and therefore started agronomy studies at university.

She recounts that during the first year of her studies she met her current Swiss husband, who was visiting her country. She decided in the following year to come to Switzerland for a 12-month internship at a tree nursery, where she learnt standard German. After a year she returned to her country and was able to complete her agronomy studies in 1989. At that point she and her Swiss partner were confronted with the decision of where to live in order to stay together. She recalls that she thought it would be easier for her to move to Switzerland, rather than the other way around, because her partner did not speak the language of her country and also because he had already finished his studies and was earning an income, whereas she was not. Besides, although she was certain that she could find a job in her country she was confident that she could also do so in Switzerland due to her good education and knowledge of German. Moreover, she remembers that as she was used to living in a country where most mothers work full time and where there is sufficient external childcare, she did not ask herself how she would reconcile family and professional life in the new country. She thus decided to migrate to Switzerland in 1989.

Many events followed that year: she married, became pregnant, her husband took over a new firm, she and her husband moved to live in a new location (the small town described above in the rather conservative Canton of Central Switzerland), and they started building a family house. Her first child was born in 1990 and she became responsible for childcare. Her husband was entirely committed to his new firm as he claimed he needed to generate sufficient income to pay for house building, childcare facilities were absent in the new location, and no family networks were available to help with childcare. Also, she says it was common in the new place for mothers to stay at home looking after their children and thus she felt pressured to adapt to the local culture. She also applied for jobs but found that local people were preferred – even though they were less qualified than her – because they could write German at the level of a native speaker (which she could not) and were also familiar with the local context.

Disappointed by her first experiences, and blocked from applying for jobs due to her lack of spatial mobility and time flexibility that resulted from her childcare responsibilities, she decided to devote herself to home-making activities.

She carried on with home-making for the next ten years; her second child arrived in 1992. During those years she constantly asked herself, “What could I do professionally?” She followed several strategies: she obtained the “Small German Diploma”, studied at a business school, concluded a course as a tutor for organic farming, and supported her husband’s firm with book-keeping. Finally, in 2000 she was able to obtain her first paid job through temporary assignments. Later she consulted a job counsellor, who advised her to look for employment caring for the disabled. She thus applied for a care-assistant position helping disabled individuals in an institution near her town of residence. The job’s working hours were compatible with her childcare responsibilities. Her origin and language skills did not seem to pose an obstacle, however, she felt insufficiently challenged from a professional point of view. She thus started university studies in social pedagogy with the hope of eventually obtaining a position as a group leader or tutor.

She summarizes her professional biography with the following words: “[...] I had to start again from the beginning [...]”.

These biographies reveal two highly educated and motivated individuals with very unequal professional outcomes. Mr Dürig’s professional development seems straightforward: he planned what he wanted to do and was able to realize it quickly. He achieved economic citizenship just three years after completing his studies. At the time of the interview (in 2012, 26 years after graduation), his labour market participation was still characterized by successful economic citizenship. He was satisfied with his career, as well as with having realized his wish to have a family. On the contrary, Ms Andersen’s professional development is characterized by struggle. She gained paid employment only 11 years after completing her studies, and it was not commensurate with her educational qualifications. At the time of the interview (also 26 years after graduation), she had yet to achieve economic citizenship or realize her professional aims, as her employment remained well below her skill level.

What kinds of negotiations took place between partners regarding the distribution of work? Negotiation is not a theme that emerges from the interviews. Mr Dürig had a clear plan of his familial and professional goals; this was supported by his local gender culture. In contrast, Ms Andersen’s narrative shows that the local gender culture did not support her professional ideals. Her response is to struggle, not with her husband but with the system – a response characteristic of many other women interviewed – seeming to show that for many individuals in Switzerland, reconciling familial and professional life is seen as a woman’s task. Gender roles are therefore not necessarily questioned and/or negotiated. Such awareness inevitably leads to women finding it more difficult than their partners to gain similar or poorer employment. This is particularly challenging for migrant women who lack a family network to help with childcare.

By migrating to Switzerland Ms Andersen entered into a traditional family model and faced professional dequalification, a situation contrary to her ideals. This is a notable finding, as the international migration of women has often been interpreted in public discourse as a step towards emancipation. The supposition behind such interpretations often imagines an oppressed woman leaving a patriarchal society (Riaño, 2011b). Ms Andersen’s case, however, shows a highly educated European woman, married to a Swiss national, leaving a country with a progressive gender culture. Her migration to Switzerland resulted in gender inequality and a loss of economic autonomy that she believes she would not have experienced in Scandinavia.

Ms Andersen's situation is not unique. Our qualitative study shows that most interviewed migrant women in bi-national marriages face similar difficulties. Many of them are divorced, which suggests a strain on bi-national relationships. Furthermore, a bi-national marriage does not always seem advantageous for migrant women, as they face similar inequalities experienced by their counterparts in relationships where both partners are migrants. This finding is important because bi-national marriages are often interpreted in public discourse as an opportunity for migrant women to gain gender equality. Following our previous findings (Riaño, 2011b), we propose to interpret bi-national couples as a particular case of asymmetric power relationships between women and men.

### **Critical moments and critical places shaping inequalities**

The former section showed that although Mr Dürig and Ms Andersen started with the same assets of educational qualification and individual motivation, over time gender inequalities arose regarding their careers. What are the critical biographical moments when inequalities within a relationship begin to arise and consolidate? An analysis of their biographies shows four critical moments:

- (1) Ms Andersen's migration to Switzerland;
- (2) the couple's relocation within Switzerland;
- (3) the birth of their first child; and
- (4) the birth of their second child.

Inequality within the relationship begins when Ms Andersen migrates to Switzerland. Whereas her social and cultural capital (education, language skills, local knowledge) devalues in the Swiss context, Mr Dürig's capitals remain intact, generating asymmetrical power. However, the couple remains confident that Ms Andersen will find a job in her field. The second and third critical moments – moving to a small town characterized by conservative gender values and lacking structures to encourage gender and ethnic equality, followed by the birth of their first child – further consolidate their gender inequalities. Ms Andersen is confronted with a gender model that considers women homemakers and men breadwinners. Public childcare facilities are not available. She is constrained by a lack of flexibility in time and spatial mobility, preventing her from applying for jobs. She feels forced to choose between her family and her career. Her husband, however, does not have to make such a choice. Furthermore, prospective employers in their new location are not open to employing foreigners. As her husband describes, “We thought at the beginning that it would be possible for her to get a job as an agronomist. [The Canton we moved to] was, however, a ‘rocky ground’ [...] [it was] almost impossible for a non-native person [...]”. The birth of the second child was the fourth critical moment that reinforced gender inequality by constraining her to childcare for an even longer period.

From the above statements follow two important conclusions. First, critical moments are deeply intertwined with critical places. Two critical locations (places) shape gender disparities in the labour market participation of Mr Dürig and Ms Andersen: the first location is the country of Switzerland, and the second is the Swiss town where they relocated to shortly after Ms Andersen's arrival in Switzerland. Pfau-Effinger (1998) uses the term “gender culture” to explain the differences between nation-states with respect to prevailing ideals and values about “normal” gendered



dions of labour, family life, accepted dependencies and gender-based power relations. She argues that these constitute a gendered cultural system, influencing how women and men are differently integrated into the home and in the workforce. Pfau-Effinger characterizes Switzerland as a conservative gender-policy welfare state, as the task of caring for children and elders is still largely seen as the family's responsibility, despite a limited broadening of public childcare services in recent years. Simultaneously Bühler and Meier Kruker (2002) have shown that more than one gender culture exists in Switzerland and thus residential location makes a significant difference for women's labour market participation. French and Italian-speaking parts of Switzerland offer better access to day care and amenable school schedules, which allows both parents to combine professional careers and family life. This corresponds to a comparatively lower degree of gender inequality. By relocating to a conservative gender culture, away from larger cities, Mr Dürig and Ms Andersen consolidated their initial inequalities.

A second important conclusion is that, contrary to previous research (e.g. Baxter *et al.*, 2008), parenthood is not necessarily the critical moment at which gender inequalities emerge. Migration of women from a country or area with a high level of gender equality to one with a more unequal system can be the turning point in inequality. In such cases, parenthood will only further reinforce inequality between partners.

### **The role of gender, ethnicity and age in gender inequality**

The biographical decisions made by the couple were professionally advantageous for Mr Dürig and disadvantageous for Ms Andersen. How does a person like Ms Andersen – highly educated and originating from a country with a progressive gender culture – end up in such a situation? Intersectionality offers a valuable approach to this question. Factors of traditional gender roles, ethnicity and age interacted to create a hierarchy within the relationship that endowed Mr Dürig with more weight in decision making when choosing which country the couple would migrate to and, ultimately, how to distribute work between the partners:

Mr Dürig: At the beginning we discussed that I could go abroad [...] But I already had a job and an income and I thought that I would like to try in Switzerland first [...] I also thought, when I emigrate I don't have a network in Switzerland anymore [...] And I also thought it the tendency is for the woman to go to the man, rather than the man go to the woman [...] (sighs).

Ms Andersen: I thought it would be easier for me than for him [...] Because he already had a job, was earning money, and I didn't have a job yet.

Ms Andersen's foreign origin and Mr Dürig's native Swiss status meant that he was more likely to earn a higher income. This reinforced the power hierarchy between members of the couple, as she was at a disadvantage in negotiating the location where they intended to settle and also how to distribute work between the partners. The latter was further reinforced by Mr Dürig's firm intention to build a house:

Mr Dürig: [...] What was probably special (in our case) was building a house [...] I had my heart set on the idea of owning a house.

Ms Andersen: [...] The financial aspects [...] Because we finished building this house in 1993. It was clear that we needed to earn money and there was always the argument that he didn't want to or he couldn't work less. Also there was the argument that the self-employed have less possibility to reduce your workload, because you have to take the contracts when they come [...] My own assessment was also that I would have less chance than him to find a job." [...]

“Yes, I was responsible for housekeeping and childcare because he worked a lot and had to build his firm [...].

Furthermore, Mr Dürig’s conservative ideas about gender roles — combined with Ms Andersen’s uncertainties of how to behave as a foreigner in the new gender culture — shaped her role as a homemaker:

Mr Dürig: The idea that I had in my head about family was certainly the classical model [...] That meant having children as soon as possible, and to also have a big family [...].

Ms Andersen: As a young woman you are a little influenced by the ideas of others regarding what is normal [...] And I am not from here [...] And I didn’t want to look for paid employment at all costs because people here would not have understood me.

Also my husband’s attitude [...] Yes, he meant that external child-care is for those who really need it [...] that means single parents, or families where both have to work because of their [precarious] financial situation.

On her first experiences applying for a job: [My origin] probably played a role because a woman who was much less well qualified than me got the job [...] But she is from here and she also had practical experience.

Yes, the longer I waited the worse it became. The whole situation was difficult because I couldn’t look for external child-care before I had a job and I didn’t have the confidence to look for a job before I knew that it was feasible because of my family responsibilities.

On her current job: “At the [home for handicapped individuals] where I applied for a job, I knew that it was not so far away, and the working hours were also a decisive factor [...].

This section finishes with the bi-national couple reflecting on their past choices, and what they might do differently today. The statements below suggest that they are both critical of their decisions, and would have rather ensured that Ms Andersen could have also realized her professional ambitions:

Ms Andersen: [The distribution of care work and paid employment] was not satisfactory for me. As a young woman I imagined living in a different family model.

[...] In my country, absolutely no problem, social services and day care were so widely available already in the 1970s, that both [members of the couple] can work [...] In Switzerland when the children arrive the mother stays home [...] And ten years pass until the woman says ‘Yes, I would like to restart my professional career’.

On childcare: I was almost too much around the children. They could have also developed well in a crèche [...] Generations of Scandinavians grew up in child-care centres [...] They were there every day, and everything works in those countries, and one cannot say that children became disturbed people (laughs).

Today, I would certainly start immediately with courses to improve my German [...] That is very important [...] And also, I would be much more conscious about what to do regarding my professional perspectives, and I should have started much earlier with occupational retraining or continuing education [...] Also, I would have looked differently at the issue of external childcare.

Mr Dürig: I was very optimistic [...] I thought [my wife getting a job], no problem [...] I didn’t realize [...] I thought everything would be much easier and straightforward.

On having children: The child came too quickly [...] We would probably do that differently today. Because otherwise the freedom [for my wife] to carry out further studies and everything

else is gone [...] I think that if we had fostered her language [knowledge] and further education things would have turned out differently [...].

And I should have probably worked less [...] maybe I just didn't want to (laughs) [...] Yes, it would have been possible [...].

On building a house: That was something that was not absolutely necessary in that phase of life when one, that is my wife, has children, has to orient herself professionally again, carry out further education [...] Because then comes the financial burden and that didn't fit with what [...] was going on [...] Without a financial burden one can keep more doors open.

To conclude, the choices of these partners at key biographical transition points are bound to the constraints and opportunities set by the specific gender culture where they live (cf Krüger and Levy, 2001; Duncan and Smith, 2002). International migration to Switzerland first created a set of power asymmetries between them, and they did not foresee the need to implement specific strategies in order to alleviate this situation. Subsequently, the gender model they constructed – combined with scarce childcare infrastructure, the financial burden of building a house and the ethnicity-based labour market difficulties that Ms Andersen faced – further reinforced their inequalities. This raises the question of whether bi-national couples are intrinsically unequal. An exceptional case in our interviews involves a female Spanish mathematician who married a Swiss environmental scientist, yet achieved economic citizenship. This was due in great part to their relationship strategies, as well as her professional advantages as a mathematician. The couple postponed having children so that the migrant spouse could strengthen her German. Furthermore, her husband helped her find a job by providing social contacts. The couple placed their children in external childcare and the husband reduced his workload, facilitating her professional advancement. She also arrived in Switzerland at an older age than Ms Andersen and was thus less susceptible to pressure from the local gender culture. Finally, the scarcity of mathematicians (and, in particular, female mathematicians) in Switzerland created a unique context of employment opportunity.

### Final reflections

This paper reveals critical moments and places where professional inequalities within a bi-national relationship began to emerge and consolidate. The case study suggested that combined factors of gender, ethnicity and age created hierarchical powers of decision making favouring the Swiss male partner, who thereby achieved economic citizenship (paid, potentially long-term employment commensurate with his professional qualifications) whereas his foreign spouse did not.

The following recommendations are proposed in order to prevent reproducing such gender inequalities. First, adequate measures are required to prevent gender inequality from emerging during critical biographical and professional transitions, particularly international migration. Furthermore, members of bi-national relationships are often not aware of the difficulties that the foreign partner will face when attempting to gain access to the labour market. Therefore, counselling programmes alerting bi-national couples to such challenges – as well as mentoring activities that support the professional integration of foreign partners – need to be made available. Programmes should thus target couples rather than individuals, as is currently the case. Supporting bi-national couples is also statistically significant as over a third of married couples in Switzerland are constituted by one Swiss national and one foreigner (Rausa, 2014).

Second, this paper suggests that geography matters. Whether biographical moments such as parenthood turn out to be critical depends to a large extent on location.

Conservative gender cultures, limited childcare facilities, lack of counselling services for foreigners and limited mobility to access large labour markets will create less favourable conditions for couples balancing family and professional lives. Gender inequalities will be an inevitable result; thus, location is crucial to enabling or hindering equality between the couple. Regional planning authorities also play a key role in fostering gender equality by redressing regional disparities in terms of access to childcare facilities and mobility infrastructure.

Finally, this paper's findings suggest that gender equality needs to be addressed from an intersectional perspective, using an approach that takes into account the interplay of several factors – such as gender, ethnicity and age – in order to devise adequate policies. The issue of gender inequality needs to be included not only in the agenda of the Federal Office for Gender Equality, but also in those of the Federal Office for Migration and the Federal Office for Spatial Development. A greater cooperation between these three institutions would provide significant potential for addressing gender inequality in Switzerland.

### Note

1. The original names and geographical locations have been changed to ensure anonymity.

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