Kinship generations in the context of succession and motherhood

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ABSTRACT

How does displacement shape mothering practices? How does one relate with one's female relatives, particularly mothers and sisters, if they are left behind? How does one acquire particular forms of knowledge when transgenerational modes of connections are interrupted? What does it feel like when a daughter succeeds a father in a leadership position? How does one, as a woman, become a leader in a region where this role is conventionally assigned to men? How do these situations and positions generate new ways of relating to and understanding the world? These are some of the leading questions this article seeks to address while proposing the concept of *kinship generations* as a way to make sense of the mutual constitution of gender, relatedness, and generation. Specifically, it argues that *kinship generations* allow to explore not only what constitutes generations within shifting fields of gendered forms of relatedness but also how generations contribute to the making and remaking of kinship in unpredictable ways.

Keywords
kinship; generation; Bangladesh-northeast India Borderlands; Syrian displacement

How does displacement shape mothering practices? How does one relate with one's female relatives, particularly mothers and sisters, if they are left behind? How does one acquire particular forms of knowledge when transgenerational modes of connections are interrupted? What does it feel like when a daughter succeeds a father in a leadership position? How does one, as a woman, become a leader in a region where this role is conventionally assigned to men? How do these situations and positions generate new ways of relating to and understanding the world?

The above questions concern two different empirical examples. The first set of questions relate to Syrian women's various forms of mothering in their everyday life in Berlin, while the second set of questions pertain to the experiences of a young woman, named Clara, succeeding her father to become the head of a borderland village situated between Bangladesh and the northeast Indian state of Tripura. These empirical cases are lifted from two different research projects galvanized by distinct research questions conducted by the co-authors of this article. While Magdalena explores (gendered) experiences of migration and forced displacement in Egypt, Turkey, and Germany, Éva examines the history of a Khasi family, one half of which lives in Bangladesh and the other half in Meghalaya (India). What connects these two distinct contexts and research agendas? The short answer to this question is that in both research contexts, kinship and generation emerge as ethnographically relevant concepts around which everyday life is organised. It is precisely this realisation that prompted us, as co-authors, to intensify our exchange pondering on questions such as: How can we make sense of generation within

the context of kinship? How are kinship and generation interrelated? What do we gain analytically when we conceptually combine kinship and generation?

As the exchange between us progressed, kinship and generation no longer appeared as separate social phenomena but rather as entangled in complex ways, inspiring us to link them together and eventually leading us to the merged concept of *kinship generations*. As our discussion continued, we found the concept useful since it helped us to explore not only what constitutes generations within shifting fields of gendered forms of relatedness, but also how generation contributes to the making and remaking of kinship in unpredictable ways. In other words, we think that the concept of *kinship generations* is a useful tool to probe into social "generativity" (Bear et al. 2015), offering insights into both the interrelation of kinship and generation and gender and social change, which bear relevance beyond our own ethnographic contexts. Following Kamala Visweswaran (1997, 616), we employ the notion of gender as a "heuristic device" and as an "entry point into complex systems of meaning and power."

In detailing Clara's journey towards village leadership and addressing women's practices of mothering in displacement, our aim here is not only to provide insights into the co-constitution of kinship, generation, and gender in the context of succession but to also offer a perspective on motherhood as a form of engagement. In each empirical example, kinship, generation, and gender intermingle in complex ways to reveal the slow transformations of selves and relationships while simultaneously generating new understandings of the world. However, before we offer more insights of the two empirical examples and delve into their analysis from the perspective of *kinship generations*, we locate the concept in contemporary anthropological debates while clarifying our understanding of kinship and generation.

KINSHIP AND GENERATION IN THE CONTEMPORARY ANTHROPOLOGICAL DEBATE

The study of kinship has changed considerably throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and now represents a remarkably diversified subfield of today's anthropology. Long gone are the days when anthropologists accepted biology as the foundation of kinship and aimed to provide answers as to how societies, as integrated systems, were structured and how they preserved their equilibrium (Ortner 1984). In questioning the primacy of biology related to kinship, feminist scholars such as Sherry Ortner (1974) were at the forefront. They challenged the supposed naturalness of the distinction between men and women, and they simultaneously disputed the consequences of the sexual divisions of labour generated by the separation of the public and private domains. The subsequent cultural constructivist approaches during the 1980s furthered feminist critique and drew attention to the fact that kinship based on biological ties represents a Euro-American ideology that had seeped into kinship studies (Schneider 1984) and impeded the view of how "relatedness" (Carsten 2000) is differentially constructed in distinct geographical contexts that extend beyond biologically determined bonds. Moreover, cultural constructivists exposed biology itself as a cultural construct.

Practice theorists, who in the 1990s followed cultural constructivism, both built on culturalist approaches and expanded them, insisting that kinship should be understood in "processual terms" (Carsten 1997, 4) and not as a "fixed state" (ibid., 12). By focusing on how everyday activities such as feeding, living together, marriage (Carsten 1997), care (Reece 2022), and shared parenthood (Thelen et al. 2013), establish and re-establish family ties, practice theorists effectively demonstrated the fluidity and mutability of kinship. Additionally, they did not disregard the importance of biological relatedness but viewed it as just one possible way through which family connections can be performed (Carsten 2011).

Studies dealing with motherhood and gender have also highlighted the need to pay attention to the varied and dynamic ways of forging kinship. Analysing familial relations, among them those of mothers and children, Suad Joseph challenged Western gender binaries and essentialism, stressing "the fluid and situated character of self" (Joseph 1993, 466). Based on her research on Arab families in an urban working-class neighbourhood in Beirut, she sought to "defeminize relationality, center-stage familial relations, and link familial and non-kin dynamics" (ibid.). Eventually, she proposed the concept of "patriarchal connectivity" to account for "relationally oriented feminine and masculine selves organized for gendered and aged hierarchy" (ibid.). In addition to critically investigating women's subjectivities and positions in patriarchal systems (see also Kandiyoti 1988), gendered perspectives on motherhood offer an understanding of the social and cultural construction of gender roles (Scheper-Hughes 1992, 341). Such perspectives highlight the value of thinking with the non-singular, relational subjectivity that reproduction entails (Gedalof 2009, 95), and they stress the relevance of intersectional approaches (Erel and Reynolds 2018). Analyses from within queer studies shed light on the various forms that family can take: the blood family, the "real" family (Zengin 2019), the "chosen" family (Weston 1997) comprised of LGBTQI community members, friends, and networks. Studies that applied a gendered perspective on siblings (Joseph 1994) or aunts (Balakian 2022) have also helped in reorienting and revitalising kinship studies since they centre on kinship in practice, relationships among the living, and members of the same relative generation (Peletz 1995, 350).

Building on the above insights, recent *critical kinship studies* propose rethinking kinship from new angles; for instance, how kinship and the state mutually constitute each other (Thelen and Alber 2018) and how kinship is implicated in the work of the capitalist global economy (McKinnon and Cannel 2013). The most recent critique is directed towards interrogating the often taken-for-granted primacy of humans in worldmaking and thus seeks to uncover multiple ways of forging

kinship by focusing on human and non-human relationships (Govindrajan 2018; Haraway 2016). At the same time, one of the most tenacious convictions of viewing kinship as a harmonious inner circle of reciprocal solidarity (see Sahlins 2011) has been critically reanalysed in recent critical kinship studies in which scholars point out that proximate human relationships are often a hotbed of conflict, tension, and aggression (Carsten 2013; Faubion 2001; Geschiere 2013; Hölzle and Pfaff-Czarnecka 2023; Lambek 2011). Through such insights, conflicts — once seen as the opposite of relatedness — are firmly reinstalled at the heart of kinship. Viewing disputes as constitutive of proximate human relationships sheds light on ambiguities and ambivalences (Jackson 2017, 99) and reveals multiple temporalities through which “processes of thickening” or “thinning of relatedness” (Carsten 2019, 136) become visible. In summarising these different empirical and theoretical contributions, most scholars today agree that, far from being a fixed state, kinship is rather “a fraught and formative field in which meanings are constantly being made and unmade” (Jackson 2017, 102); a definition with which we as co-authors concur.

In a similar manner, the concept of generation has undergone manifold transformations since the beginning of the twentieth century. Three approaches have prevailed: the structuralist, the genealogical, and the socio-historical. Within structuralist approaches, generation is employed to analyse how a given society reproduces a social order via the succession of social roles (Alber 2009, 109). Researchers studying intergenerational relationships and commitments within families engage with generations in a genealogical sense. Owning to this interest, they provide a far more dynamic understanding of generation than structuralist theories because they do not ignore conflicts that emerge between different age groups (Alber 2009, 112-113). A shift in anthropology towards a processual conceptualisation of generation and the recognition that it can offer insights into social transformations emerged with the re-discovery of Karl Mannheim’s theory (Alber 2009). Today, many anthropologists draw on Mannheim’s work in their conception of generations and thus evoke a socio-historical sense;

that is, a cohort expressing a feeling of commonality among people who share similar experiences because they lived through the same historical events (Alber and Häberlein 2010). Simultaneously, structural and genealogical conceptualisations of generation have remained due to their everyday relevance (see especially Häberlein 2016). As Alber and Häberlein (2010) assert, it is not problematic that the three conceptualisations of generation exist side by side, but rather that many contemporary ethnographies are vague about the way in which they use the concept of generation. Therefore, they call for more conceptual mindfulness regarding generations in ethnographic works.

Recent feminist scholarship has picked up the notion of generation to take a critical look at the social reproduction of the gendered inequalities or "exclusionary inheritances" that are embedded in patriarchal social orders (Ghosh and Shedev 2022, 246). In particular, feminist scholars stress the need to critically examine the etymological roots of gender, genus, genre, generations, and generate (i.e. "gens"). As Bear et al. (2015) explain, "[g]ens began as the Roman concept of a family unit descended from a common male ancestor and was scaled up to social distinctions like aristocratic lineage." Accordingly, the term "refers to a history of contradictions between male authority and female kinship ties that signals the mix of capture and generativity that characterizes all social power" (ibid.). In this sense, contradictions and tensions emerging from uneven distribution of power are key to trace "processes of generation" through which "socialites are made" (ibid.). In a similar vein, Sara Ahmed (2006, 557) draws attention to "the work of alignment," when children's sex, gender and sexual orientation are "being given a future in line with the family line." This process of orientation towards heterosexual futures is defined by compulsion, based on the presumption that the child must inherit the heterosexual life of the parents (ibid.). The concept of orientation thus exposes the direction a "good life" is supposed to take in terms of reaching certain points along the life course (ibid., 554). Ahmed's reflections are based on her argument that "what bodies 'tend to do'

are effects of histories rather than being originary" (ibid., 553). Ghosh and Sehdev (2022, 246) offer another intriguing intervention by analysing "the instability within the concept" of generation in order to determine how knowledge can be generated "suddenly or by surprise." Applying a "generational mode of thinking" (ibid., 247), the authors characterise kinship and generations as unpredictable and temporal, connected with practices of repair, and opaque, concealed and moving (ibid., 249–252). "*Generation* here alludes to the possibility not of maintaining linear associations over time but of holding and imagining the disjunctive and the distinct together across the rending action of boundaries" (ibid., 247).

Despite substantial developments in the study of kinship and the latest interventions related to generations, scholarly works that systematically trace how kinship and the three different notions of generations are interrelated remain scarce. Thus, by introducing the concept of *kinship generations*, we maintain that a closer look at how kinship and generations mutually constitute each other and how the three notions of generation interact, intersect, and correspond with each other rectifies not only a research gap but also has the potential to reveal modifications of normative orders and transformations of relationships with significant others. Let us turn now to Clara's case after which we switch the scene to a women's café in Berlin where displaced women meet regularly to learn and teach different styles of crochet.

BECOMING A VILLAGE HEAD

Ahbor died at age 82 in March 2014 leaving behind his wife, Elisabeth, four sons, three daughters, and two grandchildren. During most of his adulthood, Ahbor had lived in a Khasi village called Lakhai, situated on the Bangladeshi border to the Indian state of Tripura. Ahbor was an influential headman of Lakhai and enjoyed prestige in the region throughout his lifetime. Born before the Second World War, he witnessed both the partition of India in 1947 and Liberation War of

Bangladesh in 1971. However, the years following liberation were no less turbulent for the people of Lakhai, when state officials classified residents as forest encroachers and began criminalising betel leaf cultivation, which has been the primary income source for their subsistence until today. This classification marked the beginning of a prolonged political and legal dispute between the villagers and Bangladeshi state over the right to live in Lakhai. Ahbor, who cultivated extensive connections with influential people outside Lakhai, played a key role in this legal battle. His death, therefore, not only marked the loss of a beloved father but it also left a significant void owing to the sudden absence of a politically influential person.

Shortly after Ahbor passed, Ahbor's affinal family, who, as the establishers of Lakhai, reclaimed the right to village leadership, nominated his eldest daughter Clara, 37 years old, as his successor. Following the nomination, the people of Lakhai officially elected Clara as the rangbah shnong (village head) at the next village meeting. In this way, Clara became the head of Lakhai; the fifth since the establishment of the village in the early 1920s. Choosing a woman for such a position is possible among the Khasis, who are considered an ethnic minority in Bangladesh but a dominant ethnicity in Meghalaya (northeast India). Nevertheless, of the approximately 90 Khasi settlements in Bangladesh, only three are headed by women. The people of Lakhai selected Clara as their head due to her extensive experience and connections with government officials, activists, and missionaries, which are essential for fighting for the right to stay and live in Lakhai. Clara acquired these connections while accompanying her father to village meetings, court hearings and human rights gatherings and while working as an indigenous activist for the rights and recognition of Bangladeshi ethnic minorities over the course of twenty years.

Although Clara considered village leadership an important post, she had never aspired to achieve this position but rather regarded activism as her calling, for which she had even sacrificed establishing her own

family. After becoming a village head, however, Clara was forced to abandon some of her activist duties as the two responsibilities often clashed. Thus, for Clara, village leadership not only suddenly amplified her responsibilities but also caused her to abandon activism to fully dedicate her time and energy to the manifold issues emerging in the context of Lakhai. As the *rangbah shnong*, she currently oversees the well-being of a settlement with a population of more than 400 people belonging to thirteen clans. Her duties are to manage both internal threats, such as village disputes, as well as external threats, such as the imminent risk of being dispossessed by the state and forced to leave Lakhai, while representing the interests of the villagers externally, thus simultaneously serving as mediator and judge in the case of conflicts. She explained, “When they named me *rangbah shnong*, I became the mother of the villagers.”

By assuming a maternal position over the village residents, some of whom are much older than Clara, she appears at first glance to claim a position of dominance. In a certain sense, it indeed implies asymmetries similar to parent-child dependencies, particularly when it comes to disciplining residents who transgress common rules. From another perspective, however, it attests to emotional labour in the form of nurturing and sustaining relationships in the village that Clara feels compelled to offer. Indeed, far from an assured dominance, Clara struggles with everyday insecurities emerging from the fact that she is a young woman:

> When there is a village meeting, I am sitting with elderly men. This is awkward. By title, I have the highest position, but I am the youngest and also a woman. The biggest challenge is when I have to make a decision, because it affects everybody. […] I must learn a lot. […] But working for people is my priority. This I learned from my father (interview with Clara, 1 March 2018, Lakhai).

As the above quote illuminates, the duties of village leadership are entrusted to Clara while she is still in the process of learning how to

deal with the challenges of guarding common life. In other words, she is still figuring out how to act as a village head, a learning period characterised by personal exertions, struggles, and sacrifices. Following her father's advice and teaching while aspiring to fulfil villagers' expectations, Clara invests substantial energy into making small and fine adjustments to herself in that she persistently *attunes* herself to the needs of the people for whom she feels responsible. This is accomplished by *devoting time and energy*, even if it means less time for *herself*; sacrificing her own desires (i.e. activism, if these wants clash with common goals); and *controlling herself* to display mastery and self-restraint. For example, she purposefully wears austere cloths and no make-up to create an uncontentious appearance and she curbs her emotions such as avoiding loud laughter or displaying anger since these are considered as antithetic to persons occupying high social and political positions.

Her ongoing struggle to be attuned to the needs of others is driven by the desire to prove herself worthy of her father's legacy and reasoning that a young woman in a leadership position cannot afford to make any mistakes. Her pressures are amplified by the fact that she inherited not simply a position but also considerable difficulties, owing to Lakhai's unresolved legal status. Additionally, Clara faces novel problems: the annual rainfall has been decreasing, causing water shortages and diminished agricultural productivity in Lakhai. Thus, global climate change presents an unprecedented challenge in the village that could shape the future of coming generations in unpredictable ways.

MOTHERING IN DISPLACEMENT

Azza, a woman of Palestinian descent in her late sixties, and who has lived in northern Syria and Saudi-Arabia before she came to Germany in 2015, sits next to Magdalena as she teaches her how to crochet different stitches. Magdalena meets Azza every week at a women's

café in the east of Berlin. A group of approximately 40 women from various countries of origin is affiliated with the women's café. Although the number of women who attend the sessions varies, around twenty women usually come together on a weekly basis. A few are regulars and almost never miss a session. Others do not show up for weeks or even months, but eventually return to share stories about an internship, a trip to a relative, or a child's lasting disease that prevented them from participating.

Despite Azza's age and poor health, she attends the women's café regularly. She explains that she feels restless at home, and that she enjoys every opportunity to practice German and to exchange with others. In the spring of 2023, the women engaged in different handicraft projects to create a collage together. Nabila, a middle-aged woman of Kurdish descent who grew up in Damascus and did not speak Kurmanji at home, arrives with her four-year-old daughter Shams. She has three other children who are in their early twenties. She greets Azza as *ummy* (my mother), sits down next to her, and greets her with a kiss on the cheek. She fetches her piece of crochet work and asks Azza for advice on how to complete the complicated pattern she chose. Most Syrian attendees learned knitting and crocheting in their childhood from their mothers or aunts, and Azza and Nabila are no exception. While the women are working on their projects, Nabila praises Azza's handicraft skills, addressing her this time as *tayta* (grandmother). Azza bemoans the deterioration of her eyesight, explains that crocheting is an automated practice for her, and Nabila assists her when she senses that Azza is having difficulties seeing the pattern properly. When the social worker leading the women's café announces that the group will attend a gathering in the coming week, Nabila, noticing the uncertain look on Azza's face, assures her that she will pick her up and accompany her on the way to the unknown place. Azza is visibly relieved and pleased with this offer. "Azza is like my mother," Nabila explains to Magdalena. "I have a mother in Syria, but I cannot talk with her about everything.

Living in *ghurba* (displacement) changes you and she wouldn't understand" (Interview with Nabila, 6 June 2023, Berlin).

Nabila acts happy and chatty, but Azza tells Magdalena that she can see behind the happy façade. She has known Nabila for four years, and because of their daily contact, she is aware of Nabila's difficult circumstances. Azza and Nabila use a Syrian proverb to describe their connection: "The one who knows, knows, and the one who doesn't know says that it's only a handful of lentils." This proverb refers to a situation in which only those with intimate knowledge of the relationships at play can grasp its context and particularity, while the protagonists choose not to reveal the actual reasons behind their actions, even if this means that people may make wrong assumptions. Their use of this proverb can be read as referring to an intimate bond between the women based on mutual understanding and trust, nurtured by reciprocal care, and by allowing each other to get a sense of underlying feelings, uncertainties, and challenges that remain hidden to strangers.

Nabila's youngest daughter, Shams, accompanies her mother frequently to the women's café. One day, when Nabila attends the meeting without her daughter, she admits that, against her husband's advice, she finds it difficult to leave Shams in the kindergarten and prefers to keep her at home or pick her up early. She recollects how Shams tried to convince her in the morning not to drop her at the kindergarten by offering to help her in the kitchen and explaining that she worries when her mother stays at home alone without company. Nabila repeats this story three times on this day and is visibly moved by her daughter's care for her. Another attendee wonders whether Shams could be too attached (*ta'alaqa*) to her mother, but Nabila sweeps this concern aside, stating that a close relationship between mother and daughter is valuable and would certainly guarantee the daughter's care for her mother once she is old and dependent.

KINSHIP GENERATIONS: MAKING SENSE OF CLARA, AZZA, AND NABILA'S CASES

How to makes sense of Clara, Azza and Nabila's situation? Most importantly, what connects these different experiences emerging in different contexts? This is the point where we wish to make our case for linking kinship and generation together to explore not only what constitutes generations within shifting fields of gendered forms of relatedness, but also how generation contributes to the making and remaking of kinship in unpredictable ways.

As Clara's case illustrates, contrary to a structural approach to generation, succession should not be simply viewed as taking over a status position to gain authority but rather implies social and personal transformations and has palpable gendered implications. For Clara, such transformations mean the redrawing of the boundaries of the self to incorporate the needs of others. While she renounced biological motherhood for a few, she became the mother of many when she was elected as village head, thus shedding light on how her new position is reinterpreted as a form of motherly engagement. In Clara's example, being attuned to others is marked by gendered conventions and regulations. She is not only compelled to renounce her desires such as activism to devote more time and energy to her duties as newly elected village head, but she is also forced to exercise self-control. At the same time, she must suppress insecurities and doubts that emerged as she is a woman conscious of the fact that the social field in which she is obliged to act is conventionally reserved for older men. Clara had gradually learned from her father how to lead, how to comport herself to express soft but effective authority and how to communicate with officials, as she accompanied him to village meetings and human rights events, and as she observed her father's way of communicating with others on a daily basis. The transmission of such vital knowledge from father to daughter speaks to inter-generational relationships that transcend conventional gender roles, thus effectively transforming them. Moreover, by consciously deciding

to remain unmarried in the context of South Asia, where marriage is seen as the only socially acceptable way towards respectable womanhood, Clara actively redefines what is considered normal in terms of gender relations and positions, thereby generating new understandings of respectable femininity. Indeed, her leadership position grants her the opportunity to refuse, question, and modify normative gendered expectations tied to marriage and biological motherhood. Simultaneously adjusting and surpassing gendered expectations in Clara's case illuminates vividly the ambiguities *kinship generations* entails.

The transformations do not stop here. The fact that Clara succeeded her father changed the state of affairs not only in the village but also in her natal family by reshuffling the rights and duties and reshaping modes of interconnectedness between the six other siblings with whom Clara shares a common household. Although the head of the family is her older brother, Wanbor, the younger sisters and brothers consider Clara too as senior who deserves deference. By cultivating a close relationship with her nephew and niece, Clara's recent focus lies on choosing to whom she will transfer the knowledge she received from her father, thus securing the future survival of the village and her family.

By paying attention to the efforts and duties that characterise Clara's day-to-day life, both the cumbersome sides of kinship and the different notions of generations become evident: structural (via succession), genealogical (through intergenerational transmission of knowledge), and socio-historical (the political, environmental, and social circumstances that Ahbor lived through and that Clara now confronts). Thinking with Clara's example offers a reading of generations and kinship as embodied and lived knowledge (Ghosh and Sehdev 2022, 248), thus demonstrating the mutual constitution of kinship, generation, and gender.

Comparably, the short ethnographic scenes from Magdalena's ongoing research on Syrian families that settled in Berlin and Istanbul is

evocative of the relevance of kin relations and “kinwork” (di Leonardo 1987), literally stitching relationships together in displacement. Furthermore, the simultaneity of generational roles within individual lives is prevalent (Pooley and Qureshi 2016, 14) with Nabila and Azza concurrently being daughters and mothers and, in Azza’s case, also grandmothers. In particular, motherhood features centrally and has various meanings and connotations. Transgenerational mother-daughter relationships are challenged by the younger generations’ displacement since certain experiences, changing perceptions, and practices may not be communicated to absent kin out of fear of being misunderstood. Physical proximity matters, and the insuperability of distance is, for Nabila and many others, a palpable and painful aspect of displacement. Displacement also disrupts the intergenerational transfer of knowledge, compelling dislocated persons to acquire knowledge from people other than blood relatives. This, in turn, challenges the assumption that generations only exist from the perspective of continuation. Indeed, as Ghosh and Sehdev (2022) correctly point out, disruption and discontinuity are integral to a generational mode of thinking. Nabila’s observation that her mother in Syria cannot fathom her experiences of displacement in Germany speaks to a painful process of “‘thinning’ of kinship over time and space” (Carsten 2019, 146).

As far as Nabila and Azza’s use of kin idioms is concerned, it is not only about addressing significant others to whom one does not have biological ties, but it is also about incorporating into these relationships morality and rules of familial relations (Joseph 1993, 20). Nabila and Azza engage in a process of kinning, thereby not only generating new affective bonds but also elevating their relationship to a significant and lasting one while simultaneously filling the void of everyday, in-person experiences of kinship with family members living far away. Similar to Clara in Éva’s example, motherhood, in Azza’s and Nabila’s case, features as a “modality of engagement” (Douzina-Bakalaki 2017, 13). Phaedra Douzina-Bakalaki (2017, 16) introduces this notion to analyse everyday life in a soup kitchen in Greece, where motherhood

was found to constitute a modality of engagement that "activated particular obligations and entitlements" and connected volunteers and recipients of the kitchen "through the symbolic vocabulary of kinship." We suggest that motherhood as a modality of engagement also refers to the possibility to sense, understand, and support each other. Furthermore, as Sarah Willen (2014, 86) argued relying on an encounter with an illegalised migrant mother in Israel, Nabila's bond with her daughter can be understood as a way of pulling oneself together and of crafting an "inhabitable space of welcome." Moreover, Nabila's relationship with Azza points to the distance she senses between herself and her own mother and "the significance of children as embodiments of [a] sense of 'the future in the present'" (Carsten 2000, 696). Finally, Nabila's perceptions and practices of mothering her youngest can be considered succession in the form of a "kin-contract" (Joseph 2005) involving relations of reciprocal care. Hilal Alkan (2022, 748) argues that such a contract is created "within a spiral of care-giving that spans over a life time that is put into motion by reciprocity that is immanent to gift and care relations" (2022, 748). Thus, Nabila, who lovingly cares for her daughter, expects that her daughter will succeed her by taking over caring obligations once Nabila becomes old and dependent.

CONCLUSION

Taking into consideration the rich literature concerning kinship, most of which already includes a dynamic understanding of relatedness, one might wonder whether there is indeed a need for a concept like *kinship generations*. In closing the article, we wish to reiterate that *kinship generations* has not only conceptual but also methodological advantages. First, it allows to think with a sharpened awareness of the co-constitution of kinship and generation. While anthropologists have produced rich ethnographies about intergenerational relationships and how generation, in a socio-historical sense, offers insights into large-scale social processes, scholarly works that systematically trace how kinship and the different notions of generations — structural,

genealogical, and socio-historical — are interrelated remain scarce. Thus, with our conceptual proposition, we wish to alert others to this gap. Second, the concept allows us to consider social change while zooming in and out of a situation and placing local events as part of larger historical transformations. Neither Clara nor Nabila and Azza's examples are personal incidents separated from larger world events. Clara's becoming a village head is informed by the global indigenous movements struggling for survival in nation states characterised by a strive to achieve cultural and political uniformity. Nabila and Azza would most likely not be crocheting in a women's café in Berlin if they had not been displaced by war. While forced to face and navigate such events, they transform not only themselves but also the parameters of kinship and gender, thereby generating new perceptions of the world. Third, *kinship generations* enable us to capture empirically a larger time span and to overcome the limited capacity of the ethnographic eye, which is directed towards the here and now and the local. Instead, *kinship generations* render it possible to track "relations in time" (Reynolds Whyte et al. 2008). Fourth, the concept of *kinship generations* not only helps us make sense of various experiences and encounters during our respective fieldwork but can also frame the process of co-writing this piece. We follow Ghosh and Sehdev (2022, 248), who stress that feminist collaboration "can offer gendered insights on how to see, feel, and think about 'generation'", and argue that this also applies to notions of kinship. Specifically, we propose that co-authorship is a form of "writing vulnerable" (Behar 1996, 13) involving honest conversations about which aspects of the self are the most relevant filters through which one perceives the research topic (Behar 1996, 13). Using *kinship generations* as a mode of being, co-authors can contribute to a "process of building theoretical tools for dialogue" (Ebron and Tsing 1995, 390), as we did in this short essay while searching commonalities between our respective research contexts.

Finally, we suggest that the concept of *kinship generations* has the potential to become a useful tool in analyses of gendered forms of

relatedness. We demonstrated in this piece that an interrogation of notions, sentiments, practices, and meanings of motherhood benefited from and lent itself to the application of the concept *kinship generations*. With this, we could disentangle the role that generation plays in the form of succession, and assess how kinship features in processes of having, establishing, and maintaining affective ties that are forged, assumed, challenged, or transformed.

Notes

[1] The term has been coined by the authors themselves on the basis of recent critical scholarship within kinship studies that aim to draw attention to misleading dichotomies and their roots within the discipline.

[2] The vignette was partially extracted from Hölzle 2023.

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