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Transnational Responses to a Global Pandemic
How im/migrants living in Newfoundland and Labrador have responded to COVID-19

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RESEARCH NOTE

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Introduction

COVID-19, much more than a disease, has come to represent a historic period of global turbulence. This pandemic was not only marked by physical suffering associated with its rapid infection rate; it was marked by mental and emotional anguish associated with its cascading impacts in nearly all facets of life.

Over the course of the pandemic, government authorities struggled to determine how best to curb the spread of the virus while balancing health concerns with economic and social considerations. This translated into a disjointed global approach as countries, states and even cities around the world blazed their own unique paths through the unchartered territory within which they suddenly found themselves.

Canada responded to the crisis in piecemeal fashion as progressively more information became available about the virus. Some of the more prominent policies employed by the country included the repatriation of citizens, the closure of international borders and the introduction of generous financial supports. Regarding the latter, the Canadian Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) and the Canadian Recovery Benefit (CRB) both provided income support to individuals that were employed or self-employed and were financially impacted by the pandemic (Government of Canada 2022b; Government of Canada 2023a).

Canada is unique in many ways within the global arena in that its healthcare authority rests at the provincial level. Naturally, in the case of COVID-19, this decentralized health care system translated into a mosaic of approaches across the country as each province and territory adopted those public health measures deemed most appropriate for their population (Adams and Wannamaker 2022).

In Newfoundland and Labrador, the province took advantage of its small population and relatively less porous border to swiftly lock down the population and clamp off any choke points through which the virus could otherwise enter. The province tightly regulated the inflow of individuals, prohibiting travel for non-essential reasons and mandating heavy isolation orders for those who did travel. A low population

coupled with strong systems for contact tracing resulted in a very low caseload throughout the pandemic, with restrictions truly only easing in any meaningful way after vaccination roll-out (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador 2022).

For many residents of Newfoundland and Labrador, watching the news and seeing the fragmented effects of the virus amass pain and suffering unequally across the globe proved a mere point of interest as they sat securely within the supportive and relatively untouched borders of this province. For international immigrants and migrants (im/migrants) living in Newfoundland and Labrador, however, their transnational existence meant that they were forced into a front-row seat as they watched the disparate effects of the pandemic play out among those they cared about living in other parts of the world. While many residents in the province could comfortably slip into a COVID-induced insular existence, transnational im/migrants living within these provincial borders did not enjoy this same freedom.

According to Statistics Canada's population projections for 2018 to 2043, even in optimistic outlooks, Newfoundland and Labrador consistently "exhibits the highest median age and proportion of the population aged 65 and over across Canada in 2043" (Statistics Canada 2019, 26). This aging population coupled with negative natural increases are contributing to a projected population decline over the next 20 years. Understanding this reality, Newfoundland and Labrador has been prioritizing im/migrant attraction for some time and the province is already host to some 12,000 immigrants (Statistics Canada 2016; Graham and Pottie-Sherman 2021). Im/migrants thus represent an increasingly large portion of Newfoundland and Labrador's economic and social backbone; understanding their pandemic experience is a critical area of inquiry.

This article presents findings from a larger research initiative which looks at the effect that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on im/migrants living in Newfoundland and Labrador. In particular, this research is interested in how the global pandemic may have impacted the sending and receiving of financial and social remittances — a critical

resource exchange which is flowing through migration corridors and directly connecting this province to the rest of the world. The findings described herein are drawn from 30 semi-structured interviews conducted through this research project. This study contributes to the small but growing body of literature looking at how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted remittances and transnational relations. It represents the only such research which looks specifically at the case of Newfoundland and Labrador as a smaller, more peripheral location for im/migrant reception.

In the subsequent sections, I discuss some of the key literature that exists on the topic of remittances and how they have been impacted by COVID-19 and then turn to a summary of what the pandemic looked like in the case of Newfoundland and Labrador. Thereafter, I describe my research methods and then draw key findings regarding the experience of im/migrants living in Newfoundland and Labrador during the pandemic, particularly focusing on the impact COVID-19 had on their remittance sending and receiving. Finally, I end with a discussion and short conclusion on these findings.

Existing Literature

As the world has become progressively more globalized, through increased travel, trade, and improvements to communications technology, it has become easier for individuals to remain anchored in more than one locale, effectively adopting an identity that transcends international borders. This emerging reality has led to a surge in studies on "transnationalism" and the many forms it adopts, including the important role of remittances. In the sections below, I explore relevant literature on remittances as well as the (still shallow) body of research exploring how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted these transnational flows and connections.

Transnationalism and remittances

Although rising from deeply seeded roots, the term "transnationalism" emerged into the light of academia in the 1990s within the field of anthropology, growing in notoriety not long thereafter across numerous disciplines (Waldinger 2013). Defining what constitutes transnationalism has proven a slippery investigative journey, with numerous scholars drawing boundaries around a variety of cross-border activities in an effort to delineate what constitutes a truly transnational existence (Vertovec 2001; Tedeschi, Vorobeva and Jauhiainen 2022).

The concept of transnational individuals has been important as it has shone light on the fact that im/migrants do not neatly settle within their host boundaries, effectively erasing former ties, but rather that they straddle boundaries and maintain important ties to home communities (Itzigsohn and Saucedo 2002; Schiller, Basch and Blanc-Szanton 1992). What this transnational living looks like represents an unfolding reality.

Waldinger (2017) notes that as im/migrants cross national borders, they step into a "liminal conceptual space," within which a layered panoply of unequal existences unfolds to organize each newcomer according to the immigration status with which they enter. Furthermore, the dual existence they inhabit has the potential to crack abruptly based on the global political atmosphere; a terrorist attack or other crisis can quickly shatter the thin ice upon which a transnational individual stands (Waldinger and Fitzgerald 2004).

In spite of the inequalities faced and the often-precarious state of in-between that im/migrants must embody, research continues to demonstrate the fortitude, resilience, creativity and generosity of these individuals. This is perhaps best understood in looking at the flow of remittances.

Remittances are widely understood to represent those monies that are sent across international borders from migrants living in "developed" countries to their friends and family living in "developing" countries. Remittances have received international attention as a unique

source of development funding; unlike traditional foreign aid, remittances are praised for their ability to circumvent many political and/or corrupt bureaucratic obstacles, landing directly in the hands of individuals that can use the funds for both consumption and investment (Baldé 2011).

Research on remittances has come a long way over the last few decades. While once representing a severely understudied area, there now exists a significant body of knowledge on this topic. A common narrative amongst remittance research is an optimistic understanding of the proven and potential development impacts of these resources. These studies note that remittances have overall beneficial development gains, including promoting economic growth, helping to reduce income inequality, improving family wellbeing and alleviating poverty (Mughal 2013; Nyberg-Sørensen, Hear and Engberg-Pedersen 2002; Sobiech 2019; Zárate-Hoyos 2005). Some research has also pointed to these funds being more consistent and, at times, counter-cyclical, particularly when compared to other forms of private financial transfers as well as foreign direct investment (Sobiech 2019).

Not all research on remittances is in fact excessively positive, however. Indeed, several studies point to more muted, or even damaging findings. This includes the fact that these flows may exacerbate income inequalities, damage countries' balance of trade, spark inflation, bolster autocratic rulers and lead to government complacency (Ahmed 2012; Bayangos and Jansen 2011; Mughal 2013).

Looking at the reasons for remittance sending, researchers have pointed to a variety of motivations ranging from pure altruism to pure self-interest; and families receiving remittances are found to spend the money on things ranging from general consumption to investment in human capital (education, health care), as well as infrastructure and business-related expenses (Terry and Wilson 2005).

Looking beyond a purely financial perspective, another dimension of remittances that has emerged as a sociological area of interest over the last two decades has been the consideration of intangible flows coming from im/migrants. Levitt (1998) termed these flows

"social remittances," and noted they include such things as new ideas, behaviours and social norms. She highlights the fact that im/migrants can be selective of what they embrace from their new societies and thus what they bring home with them. Meanwhile, those living in home communities will be equally selective of what they choose to accept and emulate and those things they reject (Levitt 1998). With our increasingly interconnected world, the myriad ways in which these ideas and behaviours may be shaped and shared across borders are only growing.

Beyond the exchange of ideas, skills and knowledge, there is also a broader understanding of social remittances in terms of more generalized cultural sharing that is occurring through transnational networks and families built through increased migration (Bailey 2009). Faist (2008) points to the fact that the existence of transnational individuals that are still actively engaged in their home communities has led to the existence of numerous forms of organizations and networks which serve to facilitate and elevate both social and financial remittances to achieve local development goals. These institutions interact with political counterparts and are having an increasingly important role in communities. Levitt and Lamba-Nieves (2011) discuss these in terms of "collective social remittances."

Importantly, Levitt (1998) notes that social remittances do not always represent positive characteristics that are transported from host to home community. Negative and damaging ideas and behaviours are also at risk of being brought back home. This is echoed in Tuccio and Wahba's (2020) summary and review of economic literature on the topic of social remittances, which stresses the crucial influence of destination country norms. Poignant examples of negative social remittances raised by Levitt and Lamba-Nieves (2011) include consumerist values, rigid work structures that may undermine informal trust networks and material manifestations, such as gated communities, that serve to further cement socio-economic strata.

Within remittance literature, often the focus is on the immigration pressures that high income countries must endure and manage, and

the remittance-related benefits accruing to the lower- and middle-income migrant-sending countries. One area that has not been widely acknowledged or studied is the reverse flow of financial and social remittances. That is, those resources that are coming from im/migrants' birth or former communities to their host communities through migration corridors (De Haas 2005).

Currently there are few researchers that have started to note the importance of taking this broader understanding of the remittance enterprise. Faist (2008) is one of these scholars and he calls for the research community to include a recognition of how migration is benefiting those countries that are already considered "highly industrialized." He posits that these countries benefit from im/migrants as they can bring with them valuable norms associated with human rights and democracy, among other things.

Mazzucato (2011) looks at how reverse remittances amass in such a manner as to support the im/migrant living in the so-called "developed" country. She points out that family and friends in im/migrant home communities provide critical supports to the traveling im/migrant, including child-rearing support, management of investments and assistance in obtaining immigration documentation.

Thus, while the majority of literature associated with remittances tends to focus on a unidirectional flow of financial resources across national boundaries, slowly this field is expanding to recognize the diverse impacts associated with transnational individuals living, working and interacting across borders. The present study takes this more expansive view of remittances to consider both the financial and social dimensions of these resources, while also reflecting on the multidirectional flow of remittances, encompassing home, host and third countries. Importantly this study reflects on this network of exchanges within the context of global disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, which remains an understudied area associated with remittances. Below I highlight some of the (limited) research that has emerged on this topic to date.

The impact of COVID-19 on remittances

Initial projections at the start of the pandemic foretold steep declines in financial remittances as a result of economic contractions the world over (World Bank 2020). This was a particularly daunting prediction given the fact that so-called "developing" countries — those most reliant on remittances — were also those in which the populations were most vulnerable to the economic impacts of the crisis.

In the first half of 2020, shortly after the onset of the pandemic, there was indeed a marked drop in remittances (Cardozo Silva et al. 2022; Kpodar et al 2021; Weeraratne 2021). Nevertheless, in spite of this brief decline, remittances proved resilient, with many countries experiencing an increase in their remittance inflows over the course of the global pandemic (Babii et al. 2022; Cuecuecha and Vasquez 2022; Kpodar et al. 2021; Weeraratne 2021). Of note, both rising infection rates in home countries as well as generous financial supports in host countries were found to result in higher remittance-sending behaviours (Babii et al. 2022; Kpodar et al. 2021).

Turning to the question of social remittances during the COVID-19 era, Galstyan and Galstyan (2021) conducted interviews with transnational Armenian families with relatives living outside of Armenia. They noted that distinct remittances were shared across borders that related to both information regarding how to cope with the pandemic as well as "emergency" supplies, such as protective gear. They termed these remittances "pandemic transnationalism" and noted that they had very real impacts on the ways transnational families reacted during the pandemic.

Adding to the research on this topic, the present study considers the impact of the pandemic on remittances coming into and out of Newfoundland and Labrador. Undertaking this research in St. John's, NL marks a departure from existing literature on remittances more broadly, which tends to focus on larger economic hubs rather than smaller, more peripheral im/migrant destinations. The island of Newfoundland, moreover, experienced the pandemic in a unique way, given

its isolation and small population size. Understanding how the province responded to COVID-19 is thus an important backdrop to this research.

Newfoundland and Labrador and the COVID-19 Pandemic

In January 2020, the world became aware of a new illness in China, which shortly thereafter spread to Europe where cases surged, effectively overburdening national healthcare systems and resulting in thousands of deaths (Katella 2021). On March 11th, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. This led countries and regions to adopt largescale efforts, from cancelled events to border shutdowns, all in an effort to limit the spread of this illness (Katella 2021). These responses, however, varied greatly across the diversity of country, community and cultural contexts.

On March 14th, 2020, the province of Newfoundland and Labrador reported its first case of COVID-19. The individual in question was living in Labrador and had just returned from a cruise in the Caribbean. Cases had already erupted across Canada, with the first case of COVID-19 in the country confirmed on January 25th, 2020. Given the swift spread of the illness outside the borders of Newfoundland and Labrador, this first case quickly sparked deep concern among community members and the provincial government took firm action to snuff out the virus. At the same time, the government also began holding regular media briefings to keep the population apprised of the unfolding situation (CBC News 2021).

A series of closures followed; schools, daycares, gyms, theaters, bars and other establishments were ordered to close their doors to the public. On March 18th, the Health Minister declared a public health emergency in the province and, on the heels of this announcement, on March 22nd, the first significant cluster of cases was confirmed; this cluster sprung from two heavily attended funerals. Virtually all non-essential businesses closed thereafter, with many workplaces — including schools and other service providers — moving to online delivery (CBC News 2021).

During this time, the province was on full lockdown; households were told to "stay in their bubble" and only interact with their immediate household members. While there was ambiguity in the early days of COVID-19 around the use of face masks, in April 2020 increasing guidance emerged around the benefits of using masks and, soon thereafter, the province instituted mandatory face masks in public places. Individuals were also informed to maintain social distancing: keeping six feet (two meters) between each other (CBC News 2021; Zhang et al. 2021).

Starting April 30th, the province began — very slowly — to ease some restrictions, allowing people freer movement and permitting a "double bubble" of households. These restrictions continued to ease over the course of the pandemic as Newfoundland and Labrador fared extremely well in terms of the limited number of cases as compared to the rest of the world (CBC News 2021).

The small number of cases, in large part, was attributed to the isolated nature of the province — and especially the island of Newfoundland. This isolation was cemented through a travel ban that came into effect on May 4th, 2020, which only allowed residents of Newfoundland and Labrador as well as exempted individuals to enter the province. This travel ban has been attributed with reducing the potential number of COVID-19 cases by an astounding 92% (Hurford et al. 2021).

Residents in Newfoundland and Labrador, and across Canada more broadly, were also provided with financial support if they lost employment as a result of the pandemic. This support came in the form of the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) and the subsequent Canada Recovery Benefit (CRB), which provided between $600 and $2,000 bi-weekly to affected individuals from the onset of the pandemic through October 2021 (Government of Canada 2022a; Government of Canada 2023a). This incentive helped enable individuals to stay at home during the pandemic rather than feel forced to work, ultimately helping to limit the spread of the virus.

On December 16th, 2020, Newfoundland and Labrador delivered the first COVID-19 vaccine and a full vaccine campaign unfolded

thereafter, prioritizing vulnerable individuals and slowly moving towards full vaccination of the province. The optimism around these advancements, however, hit a speedbump in February 2021 as the province experienced another cluster of cases, which were said to have erupted as a result of a new COVID-19 variant (the B117 virus variant). While this initially sparked another lockdown, the province eased restrictions much quicker after this incident, with restrictions beginning to ease by the end of February (CBC News 2021).

Overall, as of August 5th, 2023, the province of Newfoundland and Labrador has seen 55,780 cases of COVID-19 and 351 COVID-related deaths (Government of Canada 2023b). This represents a very small caseload and death count as compared to the rest of the country and world. The unique experience of weathering the COVID-19 storm in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador no doubt had a profound impact on its residents, particularly those with connections in other — more heavily impacted — regions of the world.

This study focuses on the unique experience of im/migrants from lower- and middle-income countries who moved to St. John's, NL before COVID-19 and experienced this unprecedented moment in history within the province of Newfoundland and Labrador. This research explores how these individuals fared throughout this period, as well as how their experience permeated across national borders through their exchanges with friends and family in the form of financial and social remittances.

Research Methodology

The present findings were gathered as part of a larger research initiative funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and the Institute of Social and Economic Research. This research initiative seeks to explore the various impacts that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on im/migrants living in St. John's, NL and the analysis presented herein represents some of the key findings that have emerged through this larger project.

For this research, I utilized qualitative analysis and employed semi-structured multilingual interviews with im/migrants from the Global South who moved to St. John's, NL before the onset of COVID-19. Participant interviews took place in St. John's and/or online between May 2022 and April 2023, after which point the data captured was analyzed for key themes and trends. In total, 30 participants were interviewed for this research. These individuals ranged in age from 20 to 55 years and were drawn from populations coming from Latin America, Asia, Africa and the Middle East.

Just over half of the interview participants (16/30) identified as women, and the other half (14/30) identified as either men or non-binary. Similarly, roughly half (16/30) of the participants were married, while the remainder (14/30) were either single or in non-marriage relationships. Finally, a little more than half of the participants (17/30) originally came to St. John's in order to pursue university studies at Memorial University, while the remainder (13/30) came to the city for other reasons; this included coming here for family, work and/or as a refugee.

The interview questions were organized around five main thematic areas: background information, financial remittances, social remittances, migration experience and overall experience with the pandemic. Given the semi-structured format of the interviews, participants had the option to discuss themes as much or as little as desired and were encouraged to deviate from the interview questions if they had other relevant topics they wished to raise. Moreover, interviewees were given the option to do interviews in either English, French or Spanish with myself, and were informed that a translator could be employed if they wished to do the interview in a different language. In the end, 11 of the interviews were conducted in Spanish and the remainder were conducted in English.

Following each interview, I used Sonix software to generate a draft transcription from the interview recording. This software package was selected based on its capacity to transcribe in multiple languages. After each transcription was complete, I thoroughly reviewed it and edited it for accuracy. Once all transcripts were finalized, I

cross-analyzed each to identify trends in responses. All interviewees were assured that their information would be anonymized in any publications. As such, in the findings that follow, interviewee names and any references to their country of birth have been scrubbed.

In their well-known 1999 publication on transnationalism, Portes, Guarnizo and Landolt highlight the importance of ensuring the concept of transnationalism reflects a new understanding of the cross-border exchanges that have emerged. They caution that this term should not merely be applied to international phenomena that have already existed under other terminology; rather, they note that the study of transnationalism should be centered on "the high intensity of exchanges, the new modes of transacting, and the multiplication of activities that require cross-border travel and contacts on a sustained basis" (Portes et al. 1999, 219).

I argue that the magnitude, strength and influence of both financial and social remittances exchanged through im/migrants reflect a distinct phenomenon that has blossomed through the forces of globalization. I believe this network of exchanges indeed embodies a form of transnationalism and, for this reason, within this study I refer to interviewees as transnational individuals.

The research findings that follow are focused on international im/migrants as a unique subset within the population of Newfoundland and Labrador. This study presents the experiences of these individuals as standing apart from other segments of the population in the province. In so doing, however, I acknowledge that I cannot make definitive statements about what life was like for non-im/migrants as this study is centered on im/migrant narratives.

The Impact of COVID-19 on Im/migrants in NL and their Remittances

Despite the broad diversity of interview participants in terms of their countries of birth and other identifying characteristics, there were clear thematic threads woven across the 30 interviews. These not only

related to the exchange of remittances before and during COVID-19, but more broadly with participants' experience with the pandemic and the lessons they learned throughout this period. In the findings presented below, I first describe a key theme among interviewees associated with their overall experience of the pandemic and then move into a discussion on how this experience impacted financial and social remittance sending and receiving behaviours.

Overall Pandemic Experience

A clear tension point noted by respondents was their recognition that COVID-19 represented a global phenomenon yet was handled through location-based responses; and, indeed, the international community has attracted criticism for its fragmented response to the pandemic (The Independent Panel 2021). While the virus moved swiftly across borders, ultimately revealing the invisibility of state frontiers as they relate to the delineation of populations, political boundaries were nevertheless cemented and marked differences emerged in terms of how each region responded to the crisis.

This disjointed approach did not merely reflect a mosaic of distinct political opinions and approaches, but also revealed enduring inequalities as countries scrambled to put their citizens first and acquire any benefit they could to ensure first and foremost their own safety against the threat of the virus. As one interviewee noted: "We went back to default in terms of 'I come first.' Countries were like, 'okay, we need to take care of our people' ... The divisions that we know exist, they became sharpened. [Countries said] 'we need to take care of our people first.'"

Another participant noted that, although they knew that international disparities existed prior to the onset of the pandemic, the crisis put these "under a magnifying glass." They noted feeling "helpless" being stuck on one side of a border (in Newfoundland and Labrador) while having family on the other.

When asked about their overall pandemic experience, a frequent topic that would arise involved the feeling of being trapped, given

isolation orders and heightened restrictions around movement. This aspect of the pandemic was particularly salient in the case of transnational individuals, as their existence prior to the pandemic expanded far beyond the island of Newfoundland to include regular travel to visit family and friends in their country of birth. Having that expansive existence shrink to the walls around their home in St. John's proved deeply uncomfortable.

Importantly, the feeling of being trapped in the province did not reflect these individuals' desire to merely be back in their birth country or other former country of residence, but rather it reflected their desire to recapture their transnational freedoms. One participant went back to their birth country to visit right before the onset of the pandemic and subsequently got stuck in that location for longer than intended. They reported feeling forcibly separated from their home (St. John's) and the discomfort associated with the realization that their options and their freedom had been stripped from them. Similarly, another participant mentioned going to their birth country for a short visit during the pandemic and faced significant challenges trying to get back to St. John's thereafter. They reported feeling upset about facing this barrier and nervous about traveling again as they were concerned that they might face similar challenges when trying to return to St. John's in the future.

Thus, as transnational individuals weathered the COVID-19 storm, they were forced to recognize that their previously expansive lifestyle and identity had been severely curtailed; their transnational home had shrunk, which proved to be a distressing experience.

Standing behind firm boundaries, participants were also made painfully aware of the stark differences between the way Newfoundland and Labrador handled the pandemic versus their birth countries. In general, government failures in other parts of the world emerged as a strong critique among interviewees during these discussions. Several participants noted their birth country governments' limited guidance particularly during the early days of the pandemic and the spread of misinformation regarding COVID-19. This often culminated in significant vaccine

hesitancy among birth country residents — including friends and families of im/migrants living in Newfoundland and Labrador.

Interviewees were also upset at the measures employed by their birth country governments to stop the spread of COVID-19. Some noted heavy-handed restrictions that resulted in job losses and economic contractions, while others noted only loose restrictions that were not followed by the population. A common thread throughout these conversations was the limited financial support provided to those suffering financially from the COVID-19 measures that were put in place and thus the pain that ensued as friends and family were made increasingly vulnerable during this period. As one participant notes: "Health [authorities] said you should be in the house, because there's a lot of risk. But there was not enough monetary support, so people still had to go to work…. from what I understood, if people didn't go, they were going to get fired."

Participants also noted differences in pandemic responses not just when looking at their birth countries, but also when considering other communities and regions as revealed through discussions with friends or through watching the news. Compared to their experience in Newfoundland and Labrador, participants recognized additional challenges faced by people around the world, particularly those living in larger cities with higher population densities, poor urban housing and limited access to outdoor public spaces. They contrasted this with their own experience of having more spacious homes and ready access to outdoor space and the ability to go for walks when desired.

Ultimately the overarching theme that was revealed through generalized discussions regarding the transnational pandemic experience was one of segmentation. While literature on transnationalism highlights the limited usefulness of recognizing national borders when discussing im/migrant lives, the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated their enduring importance. Transnational individuals living in Newfoundland and Labrador held a unique viewpoint on the pandemic as their cross-border identities enabled them to truly recognize and understand the meaningful differences associated with varying pandemic

responses while the virus swept across the globe. This, in turn, impacted both their financial and social remittances.

Financial Remittances

In speaking with im/migrants about financial remittances, one thing that was immediately clear was the beautiful generosity they exhibited towards their family and friends living away from the province. Interviewees shared the fact that outside of the pandemic period, sending money and/or gifts was not an irregular occurrence. In fact, of the 30 individuals interviewed, 27 reported that they had sent (or brought) either money or gifts to friends and family living away. Among these individuals, money was far more often the form the financial remittance took. This, they noted, was largely due to logistical hurdles and expenses associated with sending gifts via courier, as well as the favorable exchange rate when they considered the strength of the Canadian dollar as compared to the local currency in their country of birth.

When I spoke to interviewees about the money and gifts that they may have received from their loved ones living abroad, I was interested to find that unlike regular remittances, which tend to take the form of money, reverse remittances tend to come in the form of gifts. Within this frame, most respondents mentioned receiving at least one gift from family or friends abroad after they moved to St. John's. The main avenue through which these gifts arrived were individuals travelling; friends, family or even acquaintances were asked to carry gifts across borders to give to loved ones.

Only 11 out of the 30 people interviewed noted that they had received money at least once from their loved ones abroad. Among these 11 respondents, three noted that they received regular (or somewhat regular) remittances from their family to help cover their expenses. These three individuals all came to St. John's to study as an international student.

When comparing remittance sending behaviours before and during the pandemic, a clear trend among participants was a significant

increase in remittance sending during the pandemic. This aligns with the literature cited above, which revealed a surprising increase in overall remittance flows over the course of the pandemic, in spite of the grim financial outlook associated with the early days of COVID-19.

One of the chief drivers of this increased spending, according to Kpodar et al. (2021), was rising infection rates in im/migrant home countries. This aligned with participant responses, although I would expand this definition to include generalized hardships borne by those living in their birth countries and/or former countries of residence. This suffering occurred not only because of increased infection rates, but also on account of stringent government restrictions, economic contractions and job losses.

Respondents recognized the suffering occurring in their birth countries and they strived to help financially where they could. One respondent noted: "Life has been harder after the pandemic for people everywhere, but especially during the pandemic. It was harder to find work for my mom, so I think during the pandemic and after the pandemic, I'd send her more money compared to before."

Another respondent noted that they were sending two to four times as much money each month in remittances to family members during the pandemic compared to non-pandemic times. They noted "we have been helping because, for example, my dad lost his job. My mom was working from home for a while, [but the company] took away hours of work, days of work." They noted that before COVID, their reason for sending remittances was more centered around gifts — birthday gifts, Christmas gifts, Father's or Mother's Day gifts. They would send money instead of physical gifts, given the high cost of sending packages. During the pandemic, however, they noted that their main reason for sending support was due to job losses among family members.

A separate respondent noted that there were some monetary supports provided by their birth country government during the pandemic. This lessened the financial strain on their family; however, they still had to provide financial support to cater for additional unforeseen

expenses during this time. Of note, they provided a large sum of money as a loan to family members to enable them to purchase a private vehicle. This was done so that their family members would not be forced to use the overcrowded public transportation system, which would have exposed them to COVID-19. This and other heightened remittance expenditures during the pandemic may be considered "emergency" remittances within Galstyan and Galstyan's (2021) "pandemic transnationalism."

Several interviewees noted the importance of the Canadian government's C(E)RB programs, which helped financially carry people in the country during the pandemic. This also helped ensure continued generosity to friends and family living abroad.

Moreover, according to interview participants, the fact that the Canadian government provided such generous support also facilitated a decrease in reverse remittances. In particular, those individuals that were regularly receiving financial support from family members to help cover their everyday expenses noted no longer needing the same level of support on account of C(E)RB. In some cases, this represented a major relief to families that were themselves struggling financially in other parts of the world during the pandemic. For instance, one interviewee who prior to the pandemic received regular reverse remittances from their parents commented on how the Canadian government's support enabled them to support themself during this difficult period:

> At that point, finances and even our family company, it was in a serious decline. And there was no work, everything was stuck. No work here. No work there. Landlords here didn't want to even hear about having even one missed payment. No, they didn't want to hear that. Once I told my mom, 'Hey, the government might be allowing for the CRB cheques,' she [was so relieved, she] started crying.

While the receipt of money seemed to decrease during the pandemic, so did the receipt of gifts. As previously noted, the receipt of the gifts

before COVID-19 very often relied on physical travel: either the interviewee, their family, or someone in their periphery travelling internationally. During the pandemic, air travel all but halted completely. This resulted in far fewer gifts being shared between family and friends across borders. As one interviewee noted:

> [Before COVID], every time my suitcase goes to [my birth country] it is full of gifts and every time it comes from [my birth country] it is full of gifts because there is my husband, my sister, my friends, and those who send things to my mom [for me to take back with me]. But nothing during COVID because we could not travel.

Thus, the travel restrictions not only meant that transnational individuals could no longer see their loved ones in person, but it also halted the important exchange of gifts, which served as a means of connection to family and friends prior to the pandemic. Meanwhile, these same transnational individuals living in Newfoundland and Labrador carried the burden of not only their own pandemic distress, but that of their families, living in locales with far fewer supports and experiencing greater suffering associated with financial constraints and job losses. Im/migrants in Newfoundland and Labrador responded with generosity and support, which they drew from their own limited resources.

Social Remittances

Prior to the onset of the pandemic, there was a near constant flow of information shared between im/migrants that moved to St. John's and their friends and family living abroad. The stories shared between individuals often oscillated between information on Newfoundland and Labrador as a distinct and unique locale and life in Canada as a whole. This included discussions on the people, the culture and environment, as well as general perceptions around the differences and similarities between im/migrants' country of birth and their new home.

This flow of information shifted dramatically during COVID-19, however. In the context of information sharing within the province, interview participants noted their interactions reduced significantly as households became locked down, restricting interactions to only those in their "bubbles." When they did converse with others in the province, interviewees noted sharing information about how the pandemic was unfolding in other parts of the world. This was often received with shock and surprise as others living in the province were largely unaware of the fact that the pandemic could be experienced so differently from one location to the next.

Meanwhile, interviewees simultaneously noted increased virtual interactions with family and friends living abroad during the pandemic. Conversations with these individuals were also focused on COVID-19 and included updates and inquiries regarding the pandemic approach of each location as well as, at times, value-driven communications and pointed advice regarding appropriate health guidelines. For instance, many respondents regularly advised their friends and family against large gatherings, such as going to church or using public transportation. They noted the importance of social distancing and getting out of the house for walks as a means of dealing with isolation.

Just as im/migrants communicating with their friends and family living abroad shared best practices associated with the guidance provided in Newfoundland and Labrador, so too did they receive information regarding birth country understandings and beliefs associated with the pandemic. One respondent noted, for example, that their family members recommended a daily steam cleanse, which was said to help clear sinuses and thus assist in the prevention and treatment of COVID-19. This participant noted their family would regularly check in to ensure they were practicing this measure.

A key friction point among transnational family members that was mentioned by several respondents was around vaccinations. While at times the discussions around vaccinations involved merely exchanging opinions on risks and comparing the vaccine roll-out in each country, in other cases family members expressed sincere concern and

significant hesitancy in receiving the vaccine. Explaining the vaccine hesitancy in their birth country, one respondent noted historical harms associated with misused medical experimentation. This dark historical truth ultimately left the population highly suspicious of any government-run program for mass vaccination. This respondent also noted problematic narratives within their birth country in which vaccines were being referred to not by their commercial names (Pfizer, Moderna, etc.), but by their country of origin (US, Russia, etc.). This added a complicated political layer to the acceptance of vaccinations.

To bridge opposing views regarding vaccinations, one respondent reported researching all the risks associated with the vaccines, such that they could communicate these to family members and ultimately convince them to get vaccinated:

> I went to Google Scholar and checked peer-reviewed scholarly articles about [the vaccine]... And I told them, "The worst thing that can happen is if you have a pre-disposition to some medical condition; you would have [experienced complications] eventually, the vaccine might have just sped it up… But highly improbable for you to have any troubles. You're going to get a sore arm, maybe. For the second one, it's going to feel like you have a cold. You'll be fine"… But the paranoia is still there… I needed to reassure them.

Another respondent noted that their family expressed such resistance to being vaccinated that upon receiving the vaccine themselves they lied to family members, stating that they would not be getting the vaccine to avoid any confrontation associated with their conflicting views on the matter.

These conversations around vaccinations, health guidelines and pandemic responses more generally follow Galstyan and Galstyan's (2021) noted social remittance trends of "pandemic transnationalism." Im/migrants living in Newfoundland and Labrador ultimately engaged in dialogue with their relations on how best to cope with the

pandemic, sharing information learned in their host community in an effort to minimize the spread of the virus and protect their friends and family.

Discussion

Looking at the experience of transnational individuals living in Newfoundland and Labrador during the COVID-19 pandemic, we are lent a unique insight into the simultaneously global and local realities associated with this pandemic. For individuals holding a self and home identity that spans across national borders, the abrupt and forceful global fragmentation caused by COVID-19 proved to be a jarring experience.

Despite the headway the world has made in terms of growing in globalized equality, the pandemic swiftly ushered in a tribalistic response among governments. Regional responses pointed to a desire among political authorities to prioritize their own citizenry. This proved true in the case of Canada and Newfoundland and Labrador, as it did elsewhere. But in prioritizing only those residents within its borders, Newfoundland and Labrador, and Canada more broadly, did little to curb the spread of this global pandemic and ease the suffering of those most impacted by it.

Meanwhile, transnational individuals bearing witness to the pain and suffering that was being borne by those in regions outside of the province recognized the safety and privilege granted to them by being in an environment with fewer cases, lower risk and more government supports. In recognizing this disparity, they took on a double burden, stretching and sharing their own resources to help support those more vulnerable to the effects of the crisis living within their birth countries. As governments responded with tribalism, transnational individuals responded with altruism.

Beyond financial resources, these transnational individuals also helped spread critical social messaging. Trusting the approach undertaken by the province of Newfoundland and Labrador, im/migrants

chose to try and share how their host community was handling the situation and the guidelines provided, in an effort to emulate this behaviour among their family and friends residing in their birth countries and ultimately help curb the spread of COVID-19.

Newfoundland and Labrador is highly dependent on its im/migrant population, and this dependence is expected only to deepen as the population continues to exhibit negative natural increases. Recognizing the heightened need for migration, however, the province would do well to also understand the transnational identity of the im/migrants within its borders, particularly when considering the manner in which the province handles crises affecting its residents.

The concept and understanding of "home" are expansive for transnational individuals living in Newfoundland and Labrador. As this population (hopefully) grows, the province should make space for this larger idea of home, allowing discursive and political space for people that hold a transnational identity. During the pandemic, Newfoundland and Labrador aggressively carved out its provincial borders to insulate its inhabitants. In doing so, however, the province also cut off and complicated the existence of a critical segment of its population.

The accompanying narrative in Newfoundland and Labrador during the COVID-19 pandemic was one of provincial solidarity. Regular COVID-19 briefings in the province discussed exclusively how to protect residents in Newfoundland and Labrador; how "we" as a united provincial population could stay safe. Most recognizably, the population was reminded to "Hold fast, Newfoundland and Labrador. We are in this together" (Gushue 2021). The burden of suffering occurring outside the safety of Newfoundland and Labrador's provincial borders, while seemingly invisible to local authorities, was spilling into the lives of its transnational residents, with no formal recognition or supports. The provincial response to future crises should make greater effort to try and represent its diverse im/migrant population and take a view that considers life outside of its borders.

One of the roles interview participants noted taking on during the pandemic was helping to educate others living in the province on the

experiences happening in other parts of the world. Interviewees commented on how they would share stories of soaring COVID caseloads in political environments that were completely devoid of financial or other government supports. According to interviewees, these stories were a surprise to other residents in the province who were otherwise unaware of the uneven effects of the pandemic.

Understanding that a critical segment of the provincial population holds connections in other countries, authorities might have made space within their regular briefings to provide information on the COVID-19 experiences of other parts of the world. This would help educate otherwise unknowing residents of the realities touching the lives of the international im/migrants in their communities.

Likewise, while the isolation orders that were put in place served to curb the spread of the virus, opening social interactions simply to "bubbles" and "double bubbles" failed to take into consideration the fact that newcomers to the province may not have access to a "bubble" at all. In fact, research shows that immigrants living in Newfoundland and Labrador report being lonelier and having fewer people they can depend on than their native-born counterparts (Arora 2024). An estimated 24.7% of immigrants report feeling lonely "always or often," as compared to 11.5% of non-immigrants (Arora 2024). Likewise, 56.9% of immigrants note that they "often or always have people they can depend on when they really need it" compared to 77.8% of non-immigrants (Arora 2024). Bearing this in mind, the province could consider establishing means through which individuals without an existing "bubble" might be able to connect with others in a similar circumstance. This would serve to support not only newcomers to the province but any residents experiencing extreme isolation in the face of a crisis.

There were also key positive takeaways noted by im/migrants regarding the provincial and federal response. One of the main successes in Canada among transnationals was the funding support provided to those affected financially by the pandemic. The C(E)RB cheques that were made available to im/migrants in the province were an important lifeline that supported not just themselves, but innumerable others

living beyond the shores of Newfoundland and Labrador. The role that these financial supports served in easing pandemic suffering, particularly among those most gravely impacted by the crisis, should not be forgotten. Ensuring these resources are available in future crises should be a priority.

Ultimately if the province of Newfoundland and Labrador wishes to attract and integrate a thriving im/migrant population, it needs to recognize the transnational ties these individuals represent. Embracing this more expansive home and self identity is an important step for Newfoundland and Labrador as it becomes a more vibrant and diverse province. While the discussion above explores some options of how this could be accomplished, the first step in meaningfully considering this segment of the population is opening larger the conversation to encourage and welcome their unique perspective, particularly as it relates to how we might weather the next major crisis.

Conclusion

This article captures key findings gathered as part of a larger research project looking at the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the remittance sending and receiving behaviours of im/migrants living in Newfoundland and Labrador. This research reveals how the pandemic period brought with it a firming up of national and provincial borders and how this complicated the transnational lives of im/migrants living in Newfoundland and Labrador, as their cross-border sense of self and home became significantly diminished.

Im/migrants noted a heightened recognition of global disparities and firm country boundaries during the pandemic. Notably, in understanding the pain and suffering experienced disproportionately outside the boundaries of Newfoundland and Labrador, these transnational individuals used their own limited resources to try and reduce the burden on friends and family living in other countries. This included both increased financial giving across borders and decreased receipts of financial resources from abroad. Furthermore, im/migrants in Newfoundland

and Labrador shared the information and guidance they received from health authorities in the province regarding how best to curb the spread of the virus, including efforts to reduce vaccine hesitancy.

The double burden carried by transnational individuals living in Newfoundland and Labrador during the COVID-19 crisis was not recognized during the chaos of this pandemic period. While government-led narratives were focused on a cementation of borders and provincial solidarity, a significant portion of the population was living beyond these invisible lines. The generous transnational response of these individuals reflects a marked departure from the tribalistic reaction of countries and even provinces to the threat of COVID-19.

As efforts to grow the im/migrant population in Newfoundland and Labrador continue, the province would do well to recognize the increasing diversity of its resident base and prepare for how best to support this vibrant community during the next crisis.

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