

In Memory of Professor Ellu Saar: Editorial for the Commemorative Issue of STSS

This commemorative issue of *Studies of Transition States and Societies* honours the memory of Ellu Saar, Professor of Sociology at the Institute of Social Studies (IISS), Tallinn University, who passed away at the age of 68, on 2nd June 2024. Prof. Saar was a foundational figure in the Estonian sociological community, whose scholarly contributions and institutional leadership broke ground in education, social stratification, and inequality discussions in post-socialist and European contexts and made Estonian sociology and society visible internationally. She worked at the IISS since its establishment in 1988 (and which later became part of Tallinn University), contributing 36 years to building and strengthening this research centre. As a long-serving editor, adviser, and supporter of this journal, her intellectual sharpness and commitment left a lasting imprint on STSS.

The decision to dedicate this issue to her is both a commemoration and an intellectual gesture. At the heart of this issue lies a shared concern with educational pathways, social inclusion, and intergenerational inequality – themes that Prof. Saar explored throughout her academic career. Professor Saar's academic journey began with a degree in applied mathematics from the University of Tartu in 1978, followed by a PhD in applied sociology from the Belarusian State University in 1983, where her dissertation focused on the social mobility of youth with secondary education.

She made significant contributions to educational sociology, where she investigated mechanisms of the reproduction of inequality and the role of formal and informal education in shaping life chances (Saar & Robert, 2025; Saar, Holford & Ure, 2013; Saar, 2011; Helemäe, Saar & Vöörmann, 2000). A hallmark of her scholarship was its comparative orientation. She was a key figure in multiple cross-national projects, including the EU's Framework Programmes. Notably, she led the EU Sixth Framework Programme project LLL2010 (*Towards a Lifelong Learning Society in Europe: The Contribution of the Education System*), marking the first time an Eastern European partner coordinated such a project in the social sciences.

Professor Ellu Saar was a passionate advocate for the life course perspective, emphasising the importance of the availability of longitudinal data in understanding drivers and consequences of life transitions and cumulative social inequality. One of her contributions in this area was her leadership of the YouthLife project (Life course perspectives in studying youth transitions to adulthood: bridging qualitative and quantitative approaches) aimed at initiating the panel linked with PISA data on youth in Estonia by integrating qualitative and quantitative methodologies through a collaborative partnership between Tallinn University, the University of Bamberg, the University of Southampton, and the Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute.

As a long-time professor at Tallinn University and a key contributor to the Institute of International and Social Studies, she mentored generations of students and scholars, and helped shape Estonia's sociological community. In recognition of her contributions, she was elected a member of the Estonian Academy of Sciences in 2022 and received the Estonian Research Prize in Social Sciences in 2014.

This dedicated issue features articles that collectively honour Professor Ellu Saar's multifaceted scholarly legacy in three thematic clusters.

The first cluster centres on education and the intergenerational transmission of inequality. **Heiskala, Tuominen, Erola and Kipi-Jakonen** focus on children, asking if household structures help close the income gap between children from higher and lower-educated families across Europe? Indeed, children living in highly educated households also more often live in two-adult families, have fewer siblings living with them, and have parents that were older when entering parenthood compared to others. While this household structure – the number of adults and children in the household – matters, this explains only a modest part of income inequalities, suggesting that family policies alone have limited potential to equalise these disparities. The paper by **Gutfleisch and Kogan** examines how gender and ethno-national origin intersect in shaping the likelihood of studying science, technology, engineering, mathematics and medicine (STEMM). Students of

Turkish or Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) descent – both men and women – are more likely to enrol in STEMM fields than their German-origin peers. Children whose parents work in STEMM fields are more likely to study STEMM themselves; this link is a bit stronger for boys than girls, and it does not differ between ethnic groups.

The second thematic cluster examines how *institutional contexts, social norms, and network resources shape inequalities in employment, well-being, and old age*. **Unt, Lauri, and Täht** explore how childcare policies and gender norms affect the motherhood wage penalty across occupational groups in Europe. While traditional gender norms and generous parental leave generally reduce mothers' earnings across the social strata, the availability of childcare particularly benefits women in high-skilled occupations. **Abuladze** analyses how social support networks contribute to the survival of older adults, especially under disability-related stress. The results show that, regardless of stress levels, women with larger networks are less likely to die early. **Puur, Klesment, Sumil-Laanemaa, and Leppik** examine how welfare state arrangements, such as pensions and social protection expenditures, reduce the risk of material deprivation among older persons across Europe, highlighting the importance of institutional factors in mitigating late-life inequality.

The third thematic cluster examines how *conflict, political preferences, and institutional contexts shape identity, belonging, and collective action*. **Kogan, Kosyakova, and Tubergen** explore how the migration decisions of Ukrainian women – whether to stay, leave, or return – are tied to their personal values and visions of how the Russia-Ukraine war should end, revealing that migration choices are deeply intertwined with political attitudes to conflict resolution and not only with economics or safety. **Mutnansky** analyses the sustained ethnic mobilisation of the Hungarian minority in Romania, highlighting how institutional factors and kin-state enable continued identity maintenance.

The book review section in this issue features four interesting books. “Uncovering the Hidden Cost of Capitalism: Insights from the Imperial Mode of Living” by Nilay Barlas (2025); “Moral Economic Transitions in the Mongolian Borderlands” by Orhon Myadar (2025); “Post-Communist Transformations in Baltic Countries: A Restorations Approach in Comparative Historical Sociology” by Veronika Kalmus and Marju Lauristin (2025) and finally “Urban informality: An introduction” by Daniela D’Urso (2025).

We extend our sincere gratitude to all the authors and reviewers who contributed to this issue, not only for their intellectual engagement but also for their commitment to meeting tight deadlines, which enabled us to mark the first anniversary of Prof. Saar’s passing with a timely and coherent volume.

This issue also coincides with a transition in the editorial leadership of STSS. Going forward, we warmly welcome Marge Unt, a Professor of comparative sociology, as the new editor-in-chief, whose research closely aligns with the journal’s focus and who brings with her a deep commitment to comparative research using the life course lens. We are also pleased to introduce Dr. Kairit Kall as junior editor, whose expertise in labour relations adds further strength to the editorial team.

Under the leadership of the renewed editorial team, STSS will continue to serve as a platform for critical, comparative, and interdisciplinary research on societal transformations, particularly through the lens of life course dynamics, educational and labour market inequalities, and institutional change. The journal remains committed to fostering scholarly dialogue that is theoretically rich, empirically grounded, and policy-relevant – in the spirit of the intellectual vision Prof. Saar so consistently represented.

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