



The feminization of international labour migration

Denise Paiewonsky

Gender, Migration and Development *Series*

The United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (UN-INSTRAW) promotes applied research on gender issues, facilitates knowledge management, and supports capacity-building through networking mechanisms and multi-stakeholder partnerships with UN agencies, governments, academia and civil society.

Gender, Migration and Development Series
Working Paper 1
"Feminization of international labour migration"

Author: Denise Paiewonsky

United Nations International Research and Training
Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW)
César Nicolás Penson 102-A
Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic
Phone: 1-809-685-2111
Fax: 1-809-685-2117
Email: info@un-instraw.org
Webpage: <http://www.un-instraw.org>

Copyright ©2009
All rights reserved

The designations employed and the presentation of the material in this publication do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the Secretariat of the United Nations or UN-INSTRAW concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area, or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations or UN-INSTRAW.

The feminization of international labour migration

Denise Paiewonsky

Gender, Migration and Development Series

Working paper

1

What does the “feminization of migration” actually mean?

In recent years the term ‘feminization of migration’ has become commonplace, even entering the public domain through media reports. But how accurately does it reflect the changes taking place in the sex composition of migratory flows? The term is misleading insofar as it suggests an absolute increase in the proportion of women migrants, when in fact by 1960 women already made up nearly 47% of all international migrants, a percentage that increased by only two points during the next four decades, to about 49% at present (Zlotnik, 2003). Although a net feminization of flows has occurred in certain regions, what has really changed in the last decades is the fact that more women are migrating independently in search of jobs, rather than as ‘family dependants’ traveling with their husbands or joining them abroad. In addition to this change in the pattern of female migration, the other significant change taking place concerns the level of awareness on the part of migration scholars and policy-makers as to the significance of female migration and the role of gender in shaping migratory processes and, most importantly, the increasingly important role of women as remittance senders.

It is nonetheless true that in recent decades the number of women (and men) migrants has increased significantly in response to changing labour markets globally, particularly the massive demand for cheap female labour from poor countries to fill the growing demand for caregivers in rich countries (see Working Paper #2). The care crisis in the developed world thus provides an outlet for the catastrophic failure of development policies worldwide, and most particularly for the effects of the neoliberal structural reforms imposed on poor countries

over the last decades, which have resulted in growing unemployment and underemployment, reduced social services, labour displacement, and increased poverty in many countries and regions. Insofar as men are increasingly unable to fulfill their traditional roles as economic providers to their families, and the demand for female caregivers continues to rise in the industrial countries, the pressure on women to seek new survival strategies for their families will continue to fuel the increase of female migrants worldwide.

The regulatory frameworks of destination countries (and to a lesser extent, of source countries) also play an important role in channeling migration, not only by directly or indirectly promoting the immigration of particular groups according to the requirements of their labour markets, but also through laws and policies that restrict labour mobility, deny or complicate migrant’s access to legal status, and restrict their access to basic social and labour rights. The case of Dominican woman migrants in Spain and Switzerland illustrate some of these mechanisms. By freely providing visas to women willing to work as cabaret dancers and entertainers, Switzerland recruited a large number of Dominican women to work in the sex trade, who then faced numerous restrictions to move into other occupations or to obtain legal papers (except through marriage to a Swiss national). Spain, on the other hand, makes it quite easy for migrant women to enter domestic service by keeping the sector unregulated, so that women without residency or work permits can easily find jobs. The informal and unregulated nature of domestic work benefits employers by keeping wages low and preventing the workers from accessing a number of social services and protections. Other regulations make it difficult for migrants to move into different labour sectors, even if they have the qualifications to do so.¹

¹ For instance, in Spain, an employer who wishes to hire a foreigner must first visit a government office to verify that no nationals are available for the position. Likewise, the bureaucratic complications, delays and costs of validating a university degree helps to explain why so many women with university degrees end up working as domestics or other low-level service occupations.

Perhaps the most notable feature of female migration is the extent to which it is founded upon the continued reproduction and exploitation of gender inequalities by global capitalism. For the most part, female labour migrants perform 'women's work' as nannies, maids and sex workers –the worst possible occupational niches in terms of remuneration, working conditions, legal protections and social recognition. In this way, gender acts as a basic organizing principle of labour markets in destination countries, reproducing and reinforcing pre-existing gender patterns that oppress women. But it is not only women who perform these jobs, but women of a particular race, class, ethnicity and/or nationality –i.e., gender cross-cuts with other forms of oppression to facilitate the economic exploitation of women migrants and their relegation to a servile (maids) and/or despised (sex workers) status. Gender inequality in the countries of origin also plays an important role in the migratory decision, in a number of ways: for instance, women are often 'selected' to migrate by their families based on the expectation that they will sacrifice themselves to a greater degree than men for the welfare of their families –i.e., work harder, remit a higher proportion of their earnings, spend less on themselves, endure worse living conditions.

While economic reasons generally underlie the migratory decision of both men and women, other gender-related factors are sometimes involved in the woman's decision –albeit these have so far received very little attention by researchers and policy-makers. Among them are the desire to escape from an unhappy marriage or a violent husband, the search for new relationship opportunities, or as a means to escape family pressures to marry (as is often the case with lesbians). UN-INSTRAW's Colombia case study found a significant number of middle-age women whose main reason to migrate was not related to economic or family reasons (as their children are already grown up) but rather to the expectation that new relationship opportunities are easier to come by in Spain than in Colombia, where women their age have a difficult time finding new sexual part-

ners. Both the Colombian and the Dominican case studies found that unsatisfactory marriages factored in many women's decision to migrate, as it was easier for them to end the relationship after they had moved to another country (which contradicts the common assumption that the migration itself is the cause of the marital break-up). As non-economic motivations generally receive little attention from researchers, findings such as these sometimes turn up as accidental by-products of research –as was the case with Bernhard et al.'s (2006) study of Latin American women migrants to Canada, which accidentally found that in one in three cases the need to escape from violent husbands triggered the woman's decision to migrate.

Gendered impacts of female migration

Gender affects every aspect of migration: its causes, patterns, processes and impacts at every level, including the subjective personal experience of migrants. It also affects the research priorities, conceptual frameworks, and explanatory models of migration scholars and policy-makers, particularly when gender is treated as a variable and not as a central theoretical concept (Pessar, 1999). But, as pointed out by Hondagneu-Sotelo (1992), patriarchy is neither a monolithic nor a static construct, and thus gender norms and structures operate very differently in different settings and contexts, even within a group sharing similar class and racial-ethnic characteristics. So although gender operates as a basic organizing principle of the migratory experience for both women and men, it can do so in dissimilar and even contradictory ways. Thus we find that the migratory experience can simultaneously reinforce gender norms and inequalities at some levels, while challenging them at others. As UN-INSTRAW's (and many other) case studies show, by allowing women to become economic providers for themselves and for their transnational families, migration can increase

their self-esteem, personal autonomy and status. They may become property owners in their local communities, buying land and housing, and even starting a small business at some point; and they will almost certainly improve their bargaining position within the household and enjoy increased social recognition from the community as a whole.

But women's achievements in these respects must be balanced against the pervasiveness of traditional gender norms and ideologies, and the multiple forms of inequality and discrimination they give rise to, which women will experience throughout their migratory experience and beyond, as illustrated by the case of Filipino domestic workers in Italy. Like other women migrants, they experience the double jeopardy of being both female and foreign, and correspondingly experience more intense discrimination than their male counterparts. They are segregated into the lowest paying jobs and often suffer the severe isolation and over-exploitation that characterize domestic employment, especially in the live-in modality. They may spend years without seeing the children they left back home and be unable to save money for their old age because they are expected to remit a huge portion of their income to their families. And they will be blamed by others -and blame themselves- for 'abandoning' the children they left in the care of fathers or female relatives. The discourses of women migrants as well as the discourses about women migrants (both scholarly and popular) continue to underscore their greater responsibility for family and children. Migrant women often measure their achievements only in terms of the benefits they are able to provide to their families, and they are praised by others in similar terms.

Women's identities thus continue to be constructed in terms of their familial and care giving roles, as when the research literature emphasizes the role of the household in the decision-making process that leads to female migration, but does not do so in the case of male migration

-thus disregarding or underestimating women's personal agency, on the one hand, and the role of family and household on men's migratory decisions, on the other. This can also lead to a dangerous idealization -and even naturalization- of the family, which can be portrayed as a harmonious and homogeneous unit where men and women naturally perform their socially assigned roles -and in the process obscuring the power imbalances and conflicts of interest that may underlie the decision-making dynamics. The portrayal of women migrants as constantly self-sacrificing for the well-being of their families, and their related idealization as reliable remitters, better managers of remittances, more credit-worthy investors, etc. not only feeds on this gendered construction of women, but can also lead to their instrumentalization by community development interventions that are often built around women's role as remitters or as remittance managers.

In this context, and given the conceptual and empirical complexities involved in evaluating the gender impacts of migration, praising the empowerment potential of migration for women may turn out to be both unwarranted and premature.

References

Bernhard, Judith, Patricia Landolt and Luin Goldring (2006), "Transnational, Multi-local Motherhood: Experiences of Separation and Reunification among Latin American Families in Canada". CERIS, Policy Matters, No. 24, Enero 2006.

Hondagneu-Sotelo, Pierrette (1992), "Overcoming Patriarchal Constraints: The Reconstruction of Gender Relations Among Mexican Immigrant Women and Men" Gender & Society, Vol. 6, No. 3, 393-415

Pessar, Patricia (1999), "Engendering Migration Studies: The Case of New Immigrants in the United States"; American Behavioral Scientist 42; 577.

Zlotnik, Hania (2003), The Global Dimensions of Female Migration, <http://www.migrationinformation.org/Feature/display.cfm?ID=109>