

9-21-2018

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Recommended Citation

Coppola, Nicolamaria (2018) "Gendering Migration: Women, Migratory Routes and Trafficking," *New England Journal of Public Policy*. Vol. 30: Iss. 2, Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp/vol30/iss2/6>

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Gendering Migration: Women, Migratory Routes and Trafficking

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This article examines international migration from a gender perspective. It asserts that migration can be empowering for women, and at the same time it may exacerbate their vulnerabilities, including abuse and trafficking, particularly when migrants are low skilled or irregular.

The migration of women is an important component of international migration. According to a report by Hania Zlotnik, the number of female migrants across the world increased by 63 percent—from 35 million to 57 million—between 1965 and 1990, an increase 8 percent higher than that of male migrants.¹ In 2000, the United Nations Population Division estimated that 49 percent of all international migrants were women or girls.² According to the 2015 UN *International Migration Report*, globally, the proportion of women among all migrants fell from 49 percent in 2000 to 48 percent in 2015.³ Much of this decline was due to the growing share of male migrants in high-income countries that do not belong to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Between 2000 and 2015, the proportion of female migrants in such countries fell from 45 to 40 percent. The share of female migrants also declined in middle-income countries. In the high-income OECD countries, however, the share of female migrants increased slightly during the same period: from 51 to 52 percent. Considerable differences exist across major areas in the proportion of women among all international migrants. Since 2000, the proportion of female migrants has increased in all major areas except Africa and Asia. In Europe, the female share of migrants rose from 51.6 percent in 2000 to 52.4 percent in 2015. Likewise, in North America, the percentage of women among all international migrants rose from 50.5 to 51.2 percent during this period. The larger proportion of female migrants in those major areas was the outcome mainly of the aging in place of migrants who had arrived decades earlier and the fact that women, including migrant women, tend to have longer life expectancies than men. By contrast, in Asia the percentage of female migrants fell from 45.6 percent in 2000 to 42.0 percent in 2015. The reason for this decline rests primarily with the high concentration of men among recent migrant inflows.

Despite the substantial flows of migrant women, there is a significant lack of sex-disaggregated data in migration analysis. Only since the 1980s has research begun to focus on women and migration. A report by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, however, shows that from 1990 to 2010 the number of countries with sex-disaggregated migrant data has actually decreased.⁴

Empowerment or Disempowerment of Migrating Women

To understand the role of women in migration, we need to pay attention to how gender relations play into each aspect of the migration cycle.⁵ Migration research is often based on economic or financial cost-benefit analyses. When analyzing female migration and gender, it is critical that the analysis include a social interpretation rooted in gender norms and culture.

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Gender is the social construct of “male” and “female,” and gender norms shape roles, expectations, and behaviors associated with masculinity and femininity. Gender norms can both empower and constrain rights and opportunities. A gendered analysis offers a perspective on gender relations, on how gender affects access to resources, and on differences in power and equality in economic, social, and legal structures.

Migration can be empowering for women, allowing them to obtain access to employment and education while improving gender equality and strengthening agency—the ability to make independent decisions to achieve desired outcomes. Conversely, migration may also exacerbate vulnerabilities, including abuse and trafficking, particularly when migrants are low skilled or irregular. Understanding the intricacies of gender and migration can result in better programs and policies that enhance the benefits and decrease the costs for female migrants. For this understanding to come about, reliable and accurate data are urgently needed, along with in-depth gender analysis in migration studies.

Gender has always been an important factor in migration analysis. As Marlou Schrover argues,⁶ the concept “perceived profitability” has been used to explain differences between men and women in migration patterns since the introduction of the family strategy model by Larry A. Sjaastad in 1962.⁷ According to the neo-classical (or push-pull) model and the family strategy model, people move if a cost-benefit analysis points to gains from migration. Since it is assumed that men have a higher earning capacity than women, it is usually advantageous for them to migrate. When women migrate as much as men, or more, their decisions may be part of a family strategy related to remittances; women in these instances may earn less than men but they send more money home to their families when they migrate.⁸ The decision to migrate, however, is not necessarily a product of “collective calculations”; decisions are made outside of and sometimes against the desires of a family.⁹ Migrant men and women have access to different networks, they value resources differently, they have different exchange opportunities, and they develop different exchange relations. Networks of women tend to be less formalized and less visible than those of men. Migrant women move and live in familial contexts more often than men do and they develop more kin-based networks. Men more frequently migrate in non-kin networks. Despite this predominant trend among men, exceptions have been noted when women are involved. Seyla Benhabib and Judith Resnik have pointed out that emerging networks of migrants involving women usually consist of these women accompanied by dependent children, dependent elderly, and the men they are involved with.¹⁰ Benhabib and Resnik also state that this trend is now applying as well to migrant men, who are being accompanied by children, parents, and partners. Migrant men tend to join or establish organizations that are oriented toward their country of origin, whereas migrant women favor organizations that are oriented toward the country of settlement. Migrant men experience downward social mobility, which they compensate for by joining organizations where their (former) status is recognized and bolstered. Immigrant women who did not work before their migration and who entered the workforce after migration experience a gain in status and feel less need to fall back on homeland-oriented organizations.¹¹

Women migrate under family reunion schemes to pursue studies or to work as labor migrants. Increasingly, however, women are being trafficked to work in the sex industry, or they are exported as wives under arranged-marriage schemes or exploited as undocumented domestic workers with no legal or social protection.¹² They also flee from wars, violence, and conflicts, often crossing as refugees to the European Union under life-threatening conditions, which are often fatal.¹³ This heterogeneity of factors makes it very difficult to reach uniform conclusions about the empowerment or disempowerment of migrating women.

Analyzing Gendered Migration

To understand gendered mobility, mainstream approaches to migration present limitations in that they either concentrate exclusively on push-pull factors understood as resulting from structural frameworks, such as relations of production and new systems of accumulations under neo-liberal market arrangements, or they focus predominantly on individuals' agency and reasons for migrating.¹⁴ A gender approach shows the inadequacy of the push-pull model. The difference between male and female migratory patterns cannot be seen as the result of an individual choice based on a rational economic calculation independent of structural factors. Gendered norms, international regulations, and cultural and religious pressures shape, hinder, or prevent individuals' subjectivities and ability to exercise their choices. Nor can migration be understood solely from within a political economy approach wherein migrants are the inevitable outcome of an unequal worldwide distribution of economic and political power. Against this background, Sylvia Chant and Sarah Radcliffe, for example, propose a household-strategy approach to understanding gender selectivity in migration patterns that focuses on economic factors, such as the gender division of labor and of relations of production, and the reproductive roles and hierarchies within the household.¹⁵

In that light, and as Ruba Salih argues, a meso-level of analysis is needed to fully understand contemporary forms of women's migration and their gendered nature: migration needs to be analyzed as the result of a dialectic relation between structures and agency.¹⁶ To understand the gendered dynamics of contemporary migration, three levels must be unfolded:

1. the migratory regime that includes the relations between countries of residence and of origins and the conditions of entry and residence;
2. the migratory institutions (both the formal and informal institutions and networks through which individuals negotiate migratory regimes); and
3. individual migrants whose migration choices are influenced by their personal histories and households.¹⁷

The participation of women in migration depends on the social roles of women, their autonomy and capacity to make decisions, their access to resources, and the existing gender stratification in the countries of origin and destination.¹⁸ Gender inequality can be a powerful factor leading to migration when women have economic, political, and social expectations that cannot be realized in the country of origin. As with any migrant, the migration outcomes for women vary in accordance with whether their movement is voluntary or forced and whether their presence in the receiving country is legal or not.

Causes and Consequences of Female Migration

The findings of the 2014 *World Survey on the Role of Women in Development*, presented to the Second Committee of the UN General Assembly in October 2014, permit certain generalizations about the causes and consequences of migration for women.¹⁹ For women and men, the economic and political context of the country of origin conditions how migration decisions are made and how migration occurs. When practices or policies in the country of origin discriminate against women, for instance, by limiting their access to resources or educational opportunities or by hindering their political participation, the capacity of women to participate fully in society and contribute to it is reduced. These limitations also affect the potential of women to migrate and determine whether women can migrate autonomously or not. Gender relations within the family determine who migrates on his or her own, men or women. Gender norms about the inappropriateness of women's migrating autonomously, the

constraining effects of their traditional family roles, and women's lack of social and economic independence all hinder women's participation in international migration.

Women migrate to work abroad in response to gender-specific labor demand in countries of destination that reflects existing values, norms, stereotypes, and hierarchies based on gender. Thus, although laws regarding the admission of migrant workers are generally gender neutral, the demand for domestic workers, nurses, and entertainers focuses on the recruitment of migrant women. Moreover, in countries of origin as well, the female labor supply is the result of gender norms and stereotypes that steer women to certain traditionally female occupations. Recruitment intermediaries, whether private or official, also contribute to reinforcing gender segregation in the labor market. In addition, expectations about reciprocity within the family in countries of origin may favor the migration of women if daughters are seen as more likely to remit consistently and to undertake the responsibility of helping the family left behind.

Migration is related to the level of empowerment of women, with migration levels among women being higher when female earning potential is more highly valued in the country of origin and women have access to local employment and income-generating opportunities. Access to such opportunities, however, may dampen the need or desire for migration.

Migration affects not only the migrants themselves but their family members who may remain in the country of origin. Gender relations and gender hierarchies in both sending and receiving countries determine the gender-specific impact of migration. Women remaining behind when their male relatives (husbands or parents) migrate may find themselves co-residing with other male relatives who may restrict their activities outside the home. In many instances, women left behind in the country of origin must undertake income-generating activities to compensate for the income lost by the departure of their male relatives if the latter do not send remittances regularly. Adding financial responsibilities to the other responsibilities that women have, such as child-rearing, can lead to stress but can also give women the opportunity to gain autonomy and experience in decision making.

In destination countries, gender relations and hierarchies and policies or practices that lead to gender inequities condition the effects of migration on migrant women. The legal status of migrant women, the gender norms implicit in admission regulations, and general attitudes toward migrants are also important factors that influence the subsequent experiences of migrant women.

Conventions, laws, and practices governing the rights of women and migrants in receiving countries affect migrant women. Women who are recruited as domestic workers or who are unauthorized workers in the country of destination are particularly vulnerable. According to Jose C. Moya, domestic work could be labeled as a "classic immigrant women's niche."²⁰ Migrant women migrate and often care for children or elders in foreign countries, leaving behind their own dependents in the care of others.²¹ Part of this literature about "missing mothers" provokes moral questions in receiving countries: Are "we" depriving children elsewhere of care? Often women who migrate were caregivers within their own families before migration. This debate and discourse about "transnational mothering" is not matched by debates about men who leave their children behind, or "transnational fathering."²² Migrant women are also affected by gender inequality in the society of destination. Labor market segmentation based on gender and the segregation of women in traditionally female occupations (nursing, secretarial work, garment industry work, etc.) mean that migrant women are often paid less than migrant men who are concentrated in higher-paying occupations. Thus, earning inequality between migrant women and migrant men persists in countries of destination. When migrants start small businesses in the country

of destination, female family members may work without remuneration in response to norms and practices that undervalue their contributions.

Nonetheless, when women become migrant workers or participate in the labor market of the receiving society, they tend to gain independence and autonomy, leading to a change in gender relations within their families. Gains of that nature at the household level, however, may not necessarily extend to other spheres of a woman's life, such as the place of employment or her ethnic community at large.

Migrant women display considerable agency. They contribute to the economic development of their countries of destination through their competencies and skills, and to that of their countries of origin through their remittances and their increased experience when they return to those countries. Often, migrant women help other family members to migrate by paying for the costs of the move. As migrants, women are sources of remittances that may be used to improve the well-being of other family members and foster economic growth. In countries of destination, migrant women work to improve their own and their families' standards of living, and they often press for changed gender relations within their families. In many countries, they also form and participate in nongovernmental organizations that lobby for gender equality. Upon return to the countries of origin, migrant women may disseminate information about the importance of rights and opportunities for women.

Trafficking for Prostitution and Forced Labor

The trafficking of women and girls for prostitution and forced labor is one of the fastest-growing areas of international criminal activity. It can safely be said that the subject of human trafficking is overstudied.²³ The literature shows great continuity since the 1850s, with its emphasis on youth, innocence, whiteness, corruption, and foreignness.²⁴ Trafficking is used as a synonym for prostitution, which, in turn, is equated with abuse. The sex-trafficking discourse, involving innocent victims, violated borders, and criminality, is part of "problematizing" migration and is used to justify restrictive migration policies. A large part of the literature deals with attempts to define and count. What percentage of women who are trafficked work in prostitution? A recurring phrase in reports is "an unknown but substantial number."²⁵ Trafficking is continuously redefined, making all attempts to count difficult. Trafficking is linked to slavery, and to human organ harvesting, forced marriages, child abduction, prostitution, and female genital cutting. In the 1920s and 1930s trafficking in humans was linked to trafficking in arms and drugs. Beginning in the 1990s, trafficking in human beings was linked increasingly to illegal migration and later to terrorism. Personification is now and has been for more than a century a favored strategy of claim makers, and scholars tend to reproduce this strategy: the personal story of a woman or girl is put center stage. Around 1900, the stereotypical victim of white slavery was called Maria; now the stereotypical victim of trafficking is called Natasha, and trafficking is called the Natasha trade.²⁶ Stories about trafficked victims include personal and heart-breaking details about the lives of the women, who are referred to mostly as girls, even when they are well beyond the age of girlhood. Personification is very effective for drawing attention to a problem but has the disadvantage that it results in attempts to save the victim, rather than to solve problems. Women who are trafficked are the most vulnerable of all migrants, because trafficking involves exploitation, coercion, and the abuse of power. Trafficking builds on existing gender inequalities. Trafficked women frequently originate from regions where there are few employment opportunities for women and where women are dependent on others and lack access to resources to change their situation. Trafficked women and girls often believe they will work in legitimate occupations but find themselves trapped into forced prostitution, marriage, domestic work, sweatshop work, and other forms of exploitation that are similar to

slavery. Strategies need to be developed to protect and empower women in these situations. Actions to prevent trafficking include the dissemination of information on the methods traffickers use to attract and entrap women, the dangers involved, and the legal channels open for migration, as well as the provision of better employment opportunities in the country of origin.

What's Next? Recommendations from International Forums

Countries recognize the benefits and risks of female migration and increasingly have discussed gender and migration in international forums, such as in the UN Population Conference in Cairo in 1994 and the UN Women's Conference in Beijing in 1995, as well as the ten- and twenty-year reviews of each. Ensuring the rights and protection of migrant workers enhances the benefits of migration for origin and destination countries, contributes to poverty alleviation, and improves the lives of migrants and their families.²⁷

Many international conventions, declarations, and laws have been established to protect women and migrants. The International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families focuses on basic protections and equality of treatment for migrant workers, regardless of status. It also indicates additional rights required for migrants of legal and regular status. The convention promotes the shared responsibilities of states to protect basic rights such as freedom of movement; freedom from torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment; freedom from slavery, servitude, or forced compulsory labor; and the right to life. Furthermore, it promotes rights regarding due process; cultural, economic, and employment rights; and rights for migrants' families and children.²⁸ But only 46 states are party to the convention. In contrast, 189 states are party to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which promotes the human rights and equal treatment of women and girls.²⁹

General recommendation no. 26 of CEDAW focuses on the rights of female migrant workers, highlighting migrant women's basic rights as well as the gender-based differences, vulnerabilities, and forms of discrimination migrant women face. It ends with recommendations to the states that are party to the convention. In addition to these conventions, in 1994, the UN General Assembly adopted the Resolution on Violence against Migrant Women, which was later adopted by the UN Commission on the Status of Women and the UN Commission on Human Rights.³⁰ As of June 2013, 176 states had either ratified or acceded to the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime. Supplementing this convention are the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, and the Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea, and Air. By July 2016, 156 states had ratified and 137 states had acceded to the protocols.

Other relevant international conventions and committees include the Domestic Workers Convention; the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights; the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination; and the Convention on Migrant Workers, which includes provisions on migrant women in articles 10, 11, 16, and 70.³¹

Anjali Fleury, in her working paper on women and migration, lists the most prominent and relevant recommendations by experts and organizations, which include the following:

1. "Ensure migrant women are granted full human rights" and can access services and resources for basic rights. Migrants should receive the same protections, standards, and access to services as nonmigrants. Countries should ensure that rights are safeguarded. Migrants should be protected regardless of status. Families left behind in origin countries should have access to resources within their own countries, particularly

when spouses migrate, and also in transit and destination countries. Migrant women should have access to health services, regardless of legal status. Health workers should be trained to ensure that health systems are gender sensitive and culturally sensitive. The rights of migrant women should be legally protected and migrant women should have access to legal services and remedies, for instance, in reporting violence and workplace complaints. Legal services should be gender sensitive and linguistically and culturally accessible and appropriate.

2. “Provide access to financial institutions and better channels for sending and receiving remittances.” Migrant women need increased access to formal financial institutions as well as services geared to the needs of women. Financial services, such as financial literacy training and support for enterprise creation, should be available for women. In addition, providing formal, easy, and safe channels for remittances would allow families to receive more remittances, which would raise household incomes and improve local economies.

3. Promote nondiscrimination in access to labor markets and job sectors, thereby increasing access and opportunities for women. Invest in skills development and education of women and female migrants. In addition, countries are encouraged to recognize the academic degrees and qualifications of migrants to help ensure that migrants are not underemployed and their skills and contributions are fully recognized.

4. “Provide support for migrants before, during, and after migration.” Countries are encouraged to provide support to migrants, including predeparture programs, as well as additional support for vulnerable groups, such as women at risk of HIV/AIDs and trafficking and abuse before, during, and after migrating. Services for returnees should also be provided, and should include psychosocial rehabilitation; socioeconomic, psychological, and legal services; and active efforts to destigmatize migrants, particularly migrant survivors of trafficking and abuse. Migrants should also be provided access to microenterprise training and financial institutions. Furthermore, diasporas should be supported and strengthened, particularly women’s participation in diasporas.

5. Offer and encourage community education, awareness raising, and training. Make available predeparture programs with information about safe methods for migration, approved and accredited recruitment agencies, rights entitlements, and where to find assistance and services in origin, transit, and destination countries. Create partnerships with media institutions to raise awareness.

6. “Regulate and monitor recruitment agencies and immigration officials.” Recruitment agencies should be carefully monitored and regulated and accredited by governments. Recruitment agencies should be mandated to include contracts for migrant workers and to provide contacts with consulates and embassies in destination countries.

7. Provide resource centers through embassies and consular services. In addition to providing resources and training, embassies and consular services should provide diplomatic and consular protection. Potentially an officer on staff should be specifically responsible for migrant women and girls.

8. “Require training on gender sensitivities and human rights.” Training programs should be required for recruitment and employment agencies, as well as for border officials, immigration authorities, police, judicial and health personnel, and other relevant workers.

9. Increase public awareness and recognition of the benefits of migration and migrant contributions in origin and destination countries. In destination countries, efforts should be made to provide for social inclusion of migrant women. Improving perceptions of migrants will help lessen xenophobia and other risks migrants face.

10. Strengthen women's political participation. Increased political representation will result in better advocacy for women's needs and the promotion of women's rights. For instance, the responsibility for the provision of care should be shared among governments, employers, and families.

11. Regulate domestic work, thereby ensuring the rights of domestic workers with regard to salary, health, working hours, and other protections. Include methods to monitor workplace conditions.

12. Strengthen partnerships, consultation, and involvement of all stakeholders, including migrant women and the civil society organizations that represent their interests, as well as embassies, consular services, and governments.

13. Create bilateral, multilateral, and regional dialogue and agreements that include provisions for sharing information and best practices to ensure migrant rights, support, and protection. Perpetrators of violence or violations of rights should be properly persecuted and punished with cooperation between states.

14. "Revise laws to ease barriers to safe migration for migrant women." Laws should be gender sensitive and rights based, and laws that discriminate against female migrants should be revised. This effort must include regularizing women's migration and revising discriminatory bans, thereby allowing women methods for legal migration that will lower the risks of smuggling and trafficking or irregular and unsafe unemployment. Laws that restrict employment or access to legal or human rights, as well as laws that discriminate against women migrating for family reunification, should be revised. Immigration laws should offer options for independent immigration status from spouses, in cases of domestic violence, and work permits that are not dependent on a specific employer, in cases of abuse or exploitation. Laws should be gender sensitive and provide special provisions for victims of trafficking. Laws should promote independent movement and access to travel documents.³²

Countries have already taken their own measures to improve the benefits of migration and decrease the risks and vulnerabilities of migrants. Although these efforts are laudable, the risks and issues faced by migrant women continue, and the full benefits and opportunities of migration to advance gender equality remain to be realized. More efforts are needed to strengthen preventive measures, improve training and capacity building, enhance protection and assistance, and build greater bilateral, regional, and international cooperation. Much could also be achieved through greater advocacy, efforts to raise awareness, and legislative and policy initiatives.

Notes

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