



March 2006

## **Migration as Gendered and Gendering Process: A Brief Overview of the State of Art and a Suggestion for Future Directions in Migration Research**

Alice Szczepaniková

### **Abstract:**

Migration is both a gendered and gendering process; it is important researchers recognise this to better comprehend how it effects the lives of migrants in regard to their social, civil and political rights in a destination society. The article reviews past investigation in this field and suggests fresh avenues for future migration research.

In the article published in 2000, a sociologist Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo argues: “We now have a clear understanding that migration is gendered and that gender relations change with migration processes” (116). I was inspired by this article as well as by the author’s other writings and decided to develop this seemingly obvious statement a bit further by offering a brief overview of the state of art in gender and migration research and by suggesting some future directions of investigation. I suggest a conceptualisation of migration as both a gendered and gendering process. Furthermore, I argue that it is important not only to explore how gender permeates migration practices, institutions and identities, but also to understand why migration processes are gendered in particular ways and what difference it makes for migrants and receiving societies. In what follows, I first review the existing literature about gender and migration and highlight examples of studies where the gendered and/or gendering

character of migration have been examined. Second, I indicate how these findings could be incorporated and further developed in future migration research.

Before I move on to elaborate on the gendered and gendering character of migration, let me first emphasise that this division is purely an analytical one. In reality, the two dimensions of migration cannot be separated because they intertwine and are mutually determining. However, I believe that it is useful to acknowledge that migration is not only a process that is “passively” shaped by gender ideologies and practices in countries of departure and countries of destination or, more specifically, by gendered demands for labour or changes in family reunification laws, to mention a few examples. It is also a process which can be analysed as an “active” and in many aspects even radical force that influences how migrants perceive themselves as gendered beings and what impacts migration has on gender relations and ideologies in societies of origin and arrival.

### **Gendered and Gendering Dimension in Migration Literature<sup>1</sup>**

While earlier studies focused mainly on writing women as active actors *into* migration studies, the following stream of research, which emerged in the 1980s and early 1990s, deals with *gender* and migration. Prompted by heightened awareness of the intersectionality of ethnicity, class, and gender and by analysing the dynamic and socially constructed character of gender relations, this research highlighted the question of how migration affects systems of gender inequality (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2000: 115). Thus I suggest that there was a shift from the emphasis on documenting and explaining the gendered character of migration towards exploring its gendering effects.

As to the gendered character of migration, various topics have been investigated in the migration literature. For example, processes of economic displacement heightened by export-led production in Third World countries were interpreted as migration-inducing but with different implications for female and male workers (e.g. Sassen 1984). Economic restructuring in advanced capitalist societies and the subsequent growth of employment opportunities for women in services, health care and microelectronics lead to gender specific migrant labour demands and this was reflected in migration movements. Across Europe, insufficient levels of welfare provisions has induced feminised migration processes; many

---

<sup>1</sup> A Working Group on Gender and Migration was established in 2002 within the framework of the International Migration Program. The group assessed the contributions of current scholarship on gender to the study of international migration and commissioned a series of disciplinary reviews of the literature on gender and migration that will be published as a special issue of the International Migration Review in Spring 2006.

female migrants have moved to seek jobs in the “casualized welfare sector”: domestic work, caring for dependent children and elderly and disabled people (Kofman et al. 2000).

Migrant men’s and women’s motivations and expectations associated with migration also influence migration processes. For example, several studies have documented that gains in gender equity are central to women’s desires to settle, more or less permanently, in receiving societies. In contrast, many men long for rapid return home in order to regain the status and privileges that migration has challenged (Pessar 1999: 587). Migrants’ experiences in receiving countries can also be examined in gendered terms. In estimating gendered ways of coping, various researchers have shown that migrant women prove to be more adept at locating and using financial and social services available in the new society and in using social-networking skills to gain extra sources of support (e.g. Franz 2003a; Kibria 1993; e.g. Ong 2003; Pessar 1994). This example points to difficulties inevitably associated with an attempt to draw clear divisions between gendered and gendering aspects of migration. The question could be raised: is it because women are, due to the position they often occupy in the family and community, generally more resourceful than men in situations of crisis? Or is it rather because of the particular conditions of migrants’ lives abroad that necessitate and induce such adaptations and cause women to reconsider their gendered responsibilities? Indeed, it does not seem of much use to try to resolve this issue at such a general level.

Moving now to examples of what I identify as the gendering dimension of migration processes, yet again, an array of topics can be raised. Gendered impacts of migrants’ presence in receiving societies have been analysed by Kofman et al. (2000). The authors argue that migration has helped to sustain the “hegemony of the white male breadwinner model” in Western Europe. In post-war Europe, migrant women “filled a gap in the labour market that indigenous women might otherwise have been expected to fill” and thus allowed them to remain in the position of housewives, outside of the regulated labour market (136). More recently, researchers have been discussing the fact that employment of migrant women as household labour has allowed some women to avoid renegotiating the gender balance at home. Due to the presence of migrant women, they do not have to make demands on their partners to increase their share of domestic tasks (Tacoli, 1999 quoted in Kofman et al. 2000: 144).

Looking at migration as an active force challenging gender relations in migrants’ families and social networks, Diana Kay seems to be one of the first researchers who explored this field. In her article about Chilean refugees in Britain (1988), she stresses the importance of differentiating the exile experience by gender as well as by social class. Let us take a closer look at her argument. By exploring men’s and women’s different involvement in public and

private spheres, she reveals “the widest gender gap” between some of the married couples she interviewed: “highly ‘politicised’ class-conscious men with a strong sense of collective biography, and...‘privatised’ women whose biographies focus on their roles as wives and mothers in a family (3). She does not approach the public-private division as static and unchangeable but rather as a “shifting terrain, whose contours are reshaped through changes in the distribution of power in society” (5). She examines the intersections of class and gender in Chileans’ exile experience. For Chilean men, exile represented a loss of power. Whilst for many middle class men, it involved the lack of personal influence and autonomy which they had known in their working lives back in Chile, for working-class men, exile seemed more of a deprivation in terms of the loss of collective power, previously derived from the context of their participation in political labour organizations in Chile (6). Women’s experiences of loss differed from those of men. Kay indicates two contrasting sets of experiences. First, for women who were used to working outside the home and wanted to continue working when in exile, the main problem was to accommodate their dual role in the situation of a lack of domestic help which used to be available to them in Chile (6). Second, for women who used to live as housewives, deriving their status from being mothers and wives, problems centred on the loss of their kinship networks, which had formed the foundation stones of their private domain. Not only did they find mothering without the support of wider kin to be more difficult in exile, they also experienced a social devaluation of motherhood in Britain (9).

These examples from the selected literature on gender and migration were put forward to illustrate various ways of approaching the gendered and gendering character of migration. What stems out of these accounts which could be applied and further developed in future migration research? I suggest that the impact of gender should be studied at various levels of analysis. These levels, however, should be treated not as a “separate stories”, dealt with within separate disciplines (e.g. political science, sociology, social anthropology) but rather as components of a complex jigsaw. These are some of the possible ways of studying the gendered and gendering character of migration: 1) by examining structural conditions of today’s societies: the ongoing restructuring of societies under the influence of global economy and its gender implications (e.g. Bakker 2003; Morokvasic 1993; Phizacklea 1983; Sassen 1984, 1998, 2003) or in the context of geopolitical transformations such as the fall of the communist regimes in the late 1980s and the dissolution of the Soviet Union (e.g.

Kosmarskaya 1999; Morokvasic 2004; Pilkington 1997)<sup>2</sup>; 2) at the level of institutions mediating and shaping migration such as the welfare state or labour recruitment strategies, where particular and, indeed, gendered identities of migrants are constructed and negotiated (e.g. Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Kofman et al. 2000; McDowell 2003; Sharpe 2001); 3) at the level of individual decisions and strategies embedded within family and wider social networks which brings us to the importance of in-depth, micro-level analyses of migrants' livelihoods (e.g. Abdulrahim 1993; Al-Ali 2002; Franz 2003b; Grasmuck & Pessar 1991; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Chamberlain 1997; Kibria 1993; Ong 2003).

Moreover, I agree with Morokvasic's argument that changes during the stay abroad can sometimes be seen rather as "a continuation of a trend initiated before emigration and as a consequence of the interaction between the migratory and the background influences" (1983: 27). Although the situation can be different, for example, in the context of refugee movements when more abrupt changes in social, political and economic fabric of societies are usually in place, I suggest that it is crucial to examine the specificities as well as continuities of migration processes. Analysis of background influences, that shaped migrants' decisions and opportunities to leave and reach their destination countries, constitute an important basis for understanding migrants' experiences and practices. In other words, it is important to acknowledge that although we, as researchers, may be primarily interested in migrants, i.e. people on the move, their lives do not usually start with migration, there are complex histories and legacies behind migration processes. Their understanding and interpretation will be crucial for exploring migration itself.

Finally, this text emphasises the importance of gender as a constitutive aspect of migration processes. The focus on gender does not imply that it is the omnipotent category through which we can fully comprehend migration processes and their outcomes. Recently, various feminist scholars have been working on the concept of intersectionality – examining how multiple categories of difference such as gender, class and ethnicity mutually constitute themselves. This approach has proven to be crucial for the study of migrant populations. Indeed, one can never speak (only) to "a migrant woman" or a "migrant man," s/he is always positioned in the matrix of class, ethnic and age relations that may shift in their relevance for her/his life depending on the particular context. Examination of these categories together with gender should help us to explore what I find to be a crucial question: What implications the

---

<sup>2</sup> These transformations can be both constraining and enabling for migrants and their impact on women and men can differ.

gendered and gendering character of migration has for migrants' lives and how it affects their access to social, civil and political rights in a destination society?

## Bibliography

- Abdulrahim, D. (1993). Defining gender in a second exile: Palestinian women in West Berlin. In G. Buijs (Ed.), *Migrant women. Crossing boundaries and changing identities*. Oxford: Berg.
- Al-Ali, N. (2002). Loss of status or new opportunities? Gender relations and transnational ties among Bosnian refugees. In U. Vuorella & D. Bryceson (Eds.), *The transnational family: New European frontiers and global networks* (pp. 83-102). Oxford and New York: Berg.
- Bakker, I. (2003). Neo-liberal governance and the reprivatization of social reproduction: Social provisioning and shifting gender orders. In I. Bakker & S. Gill (Eds.), *Power, production and social reproduction. Human in/security in the global political economy* (pp. 66-82). Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Franz, B. (2003a). Bosnian refugee women in (re)settlement: Gender relations and social mobility. *Feminist Review*(73): 86–103.
- Franz, B. (2003b). Transplanted or uprooted? Integration efforts of Bosnian refugees based upon gender, class and ethnic differences in New York City and Vienna. *The European Journal of Women's Studies*, 10(2): 135–157.
- Grasmuck, S., & Pessar, P. R. (1991). *Between two islands: Dominican international migration*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press.
- Hondagneu-Sotelo, P. (1994). *Gendered transitions*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hondagneu-Sotelo, P. (2000). Feminism and migration. *Annals of the American Academy*, 571: 107-120.
- Hondagneu-Sotelo, P. (2001). *Doméstica: Immigrant workers cleaning and caring in the shadows of affluence*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press.
- Chamberlain, M. (1997). Gender and the narratives of migration. *History Workshop Journal*, 43: 87-108.
- Kay, D. (1988). The politics of gender in exile. *Sociology*, 22(1): 1-21.
- Kibria, N. (1993). *Family tighrope*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

- Kofman, E., Phizacklea, A., Raghuram, P., & Sales, R. (2000). *Gender and international migration in Europe: Employment, welfare, and politics*. New York: Routledge.
- Kosmarskaya, N. (1999). Post-Soviet Russian migration from the New Independent States: Experiences of women migrants. In D. M. Indra (Ed.), *Engendering forced migration: Theory and practice* (pp. 177-199). Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books
- McDowell, L. (2003). Workers, migrants, aliens or citizens? State constructions and discourses of identity among post-war European labour migrants in Britain. *Political Geography*(22): 863-886.
- Morokvasic, M. (1983). Women in migration: Beyond the reductionist outlook. In A. Phizacklea (Ed.), *One way ticket: Migration and female labour* (pp. 13-31). London, Boston, Melbourne and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Morokvasic, M. (1993). 'In and out' of the labour market: Immigrant and minority women in Europe. *New Community*, 19(3): 459-483.
- Morokvasic, M. (2004). 'Settled in mobility': Engendering post-wall migration in Europe. *Feminist Review*(77): 7-25.
- Ong, A. (2003). *Buddha is hiding: Refugees, citizenship, the new America*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Pessar, P. R. (1994). Sweatshop workers and domestic ideologies: Dominican women in New York's apparel industry. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 18(1): 127-142.
- Pessar, P. R. (1999). Engendering migration studies: The case of new immigrants in the United States. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 42(4): 577-600.
- Phizacklea, A. (Ed.). (1983). *One way ticket: Migration and female labour*. London, Boston, Melbourne and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Pilkington, H. (1997). 'For the sake of the children': Gender and migration in the former Soviet Union. In M. Buckley (Ed.), *Post-Soviet women: From the Baltic to Central Asia* (pp. 119-140). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sassen, S. (1984). Notes on the incorporation of Third World women into wage labor through offshore production. *International Migration Review*, 18(4): 1144-1167.
- Sassen, S. (1998). *Globalization and its discontents*. New York: The New Press.
- Sassen, S. (2003). The feminisation of survival: Alternative global circuits. In M. Morokvasic, U. Erel & K. Shinozaki (Eds.), *Crossing borders and shifting boundaries: Gender on the Move* (Vol. I, pp. 59-78). Opladen: Leske + Budrich.

Sharpe, P. (Ed.). (2001). *Women, gender and labour migration: Historical and global perspectives*. London and New York: Routledge.