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Comparative Perspectives Symposium: Gendered Migrations

A Silent but Mighty River: The Costs of Women's Economic Migration

Adele Jones

Interregional and international migration is occurring at a faster rate today than at any other point in history, and currently there are an estimated 175 million people living outside their country of birth, approximately 49 percent of whom are women (IOM 2005). Women's involvement across all forms of migration is growing, both in terms of the number of female migrants and in the role women play in utilizing migration strategies to improve the economic well-being of the family. For instance, the majority of persons trafficked are women, and women account for about 70 percent of the estimated 25 million persons internally displaced by conflict (Alicea and Toro-Morn 2004; IOM 2005). Increasingly, women are also exercising career and economic choices that involve movement from rural to urban areas and also to other countries. Emergent labor shortages in richer countries—which are linked to improved options for women in those countries, with more women opting out of jobs with low status and undesirable hours—have resulted in the specific targeting of women workers from poorer countries. In some countries women make up the greatest percentage of migrant workers; for example, the majority of workers migrating from the Philippines to the Middle East are women (IOM 2005). Set against realignments in world politics, facilitated by globalization, and fueled by social and personal factors, the migration of women workers also reflects new directions for women's agency. For example, as an increasing number of women take on the lead-migrant role

“A silent but mighty river,” a phrase inspired by the 2006 State of World Population Report (UNPF 2006), describes the global impact of a growing female migrant workforce, otherwise termed the feminization of migration.

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within their families, they are reconfiguring gender relations and challenging the structures that have traditionally positioned them not as independent subjects in immigration proceedings but as legal appendages of husbands (Mohanty 1991).

The language of migration

Typologies of migration—economic, forced, displacement, exile, asylum, undocumented, and trafficking—like the phenomena they seek to describe, are subject to dominant political forces and hegemonic discourses. Although these typologies are generally presented as gender- or value-neutral terms about which there is universal understanding, categorizing the experiences and motives of migrants is contested territory. It is always necessary to examine whose interests such definitions serve and to understand that the conceptual landscape these terms construct is embedded within specific historical, political, and geographical terrains.

Migration categories expedite policy formulation. However, they also have the effect of reducing complex phenomena—the hybrid identities and the multilayered transition and social transformation processes created by the movement of people across geographic, national, and cultural boundaries—to an inert set of descriptors. Different patterns of migration produce different diasporic communities and give rise to different migrant identities. Rather than reflecting situated subjectivities, migrant categories ascribe an externally defined meaning to these experiences, based on perspectives loaded with political intent. So, for example, the child born in the United Kingdom to a nurse who is a migrant worker from Guyana is likely to be delineated from other British children by the descriptor “second-generation immigrant,” a term that captures nothing of the child’s subjective transitional experience yet forever fixes the child in the position of outsider. That the official language of migration is inextricably wedded to popular discourses that frame migrants in pathologizing ways is well documented. This, the parallel market in which the currency of migration terms circulates, reveals implicit racialized and gendered codes (and, increasingly, those based on religion) that serve to separate out a nation’s outsiders (Davies 1996; Jones 2001). This discursive construction of the alien other is a prevailing theme in migration. Avtar Brah (1996), writing from her perspective as an Indian woman migrant, describes the ways in which this other is also inferiorized. In developing this theme further, it must be understood, however, that inequality is itself unequal and, indeed, inferiorization is not an essential characteristic of being an

outsider but rather is inscribed by gender, class, ethnicity, race, and post-colonial positioning. For example, the British engineer working for a multinational oil company in Trinidad is a British expatriate and the French man in his Dominican tax haven a tax exile; these constructs signify outsider but not inferiorized other. However, the female factory worker from Aruba who migrates to Holland to work is constructed as other and is inferiorized.

Migration policy: Institutionalizing patriarchy

The coterminous discourses of nationalisms and migration that underpin migration policy are clearly not benign. They are rooted in patriarchal ideologies that are constituted or reconstituted depending on the historical, political, and social context (Charles and Hughes-Freeland 1996; Davies 1996; Alicea and Toro-Morn 2004). Hannah Arendt's analysis of the origins of totalitarianism provides a convincing argument to show how ideologies of race, gender, and class have come to be institutionalized within the political and social structures of society (1968). Migration policy, as an organizational determinant of social and economic relations, is widely acknowledged as a key element of the structures Arendt refers to. It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that perspectives on migration, discursively configured in relation to patriarchal values, are translated into institutional practices that perpetuate gender inequality. In her analysis of British immigration law, Chandra Talpade Mohanty identifies the ways in which women are defined only in relation to men and how immigration laws are used to sustain heteronormative patriarchal familial arrangements (1991). This is an example of what Dorothy Smith calls "the operation of the relations between the discursive paradigm and discursive practice" (1990, 177).

No discussion of women's migration is complete without acknowledgment of women migrants' struggles for rights recognition; however, this essay is concerned largely with structures of inequality within the sphere of migration, and the focus is thus primarily on the interconnection and institutionalization of these structures, or relations of ruling (Smith 1990). It is important, however, to point out that oppositional migration politics is a field of dynamic and progressive social action about which feminist scholars have written extensively. I turn now to examining some of the ways in which methodologies for analyzing migration contribute to the minimization of women's experience and the roles that women play.

Analyzing migration analysis: The case for a gendered approach

Macroeconomic analysis (a dominant approach in many studies of global labor migration) treats female migration simply as a by-product of the overall increase in service work as a share of the global market (Thomas, Hosein, and Yan 2005). Economists argue that worker mobility from poorer to richer countries maximizes the value of labor resources, thus promoting global production. Other studies have focused on the economic benefits of migrant labor, not only for host countries but also for originating countries, especially in relation to remittances and the skills and investments of returnees (UNPF 2006). In many poor countries, not only do remittances outstrip international development funds, but also they can be more effective in reducing poverty because they directly target families, meet needs identified by the recipients themselves, and produce trickle-out benefits to communities. Such is the persuasiveness of these arguments that managed migration strategies are increasingly centered on poverty reduction policy (although there is little evidence that migration reduces poverty overall; DFID 2007). What these studies have in common is that they represent a hegemonic stranglehold on methodologies that privilege economic factors over social and political ones. As economists act together with policy makers and international organizations, the dominance of these approaches is affirmed, and the experiences of female migrant workers are reduced to cost/benefit analyses, with inadequate attention being paid to gender issues. This is despite the fact that, as Brah points out, “the emergent new international division of labor depends quite crucially upon women workers” (1996, 49).

It must be pointed out, however, that some writers have addressed the gender dimensions of migrant labor. For example, Judith van Doorn points out that although women migrants generally earn less than men and are more likely to occupy lower paid jobs, women overall remit a greater proportion of their earnings. She also argues that as women’s earnings are more likely to be spent on health care, daily living needs, and education, women make a greater contribution to development than men, who typically spend their money on consumer items and investments (van Doorn 2002). In foregrounding the role of women in development, van Doorn makes an important contribution to knowledge in this area; however, even this analysis is based on an economic model. The significance of gender relations in the study of migrant labor, however, is not simply that women and men circulate differently in the global economy (Kofman et al. 2000), that more women have economic freedom, or that there are gender-specific economic outcomes, but that it is through the intersection of gender, poverty, and global capitalism that the feminization

of migration is occurring. The need to focus on the role of gender is thus made more pressing not only because of the growing number of female migrant workers but also because their experience is likely to differ from that of men (Taran and Geronimi 2003). In light of the importance of gender to a complete understanding of the migrant experience, the final section of this essay uses a gender-centered approach to explore some of these issues in relation to a specific group of migrant workers: Caribbean nurses.

Nurse migration: Some macrolevel and microlevel implications

Although there are some exceptions, economic migration generally benefits receiving countries more than sending countries, since immigration policy is largely set up to facilitate the movement of educated and skilled persons. The migration of Caribbean nurses poses some specific challenges to the development of the region, since it constitutes not only a loss of social and professional contributions but also a loss of government investment in their education and training. In 2005 the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) reported that nurse migration had led to losses in government investments in nurse education, estimated at between US\$15 and \$20 million per annum, and that health worker emigration was undermining the health care systems in the region (2005, 28).

The PAHO review also highlights concerns about the declining quality and reductions in health care services in the region and attributed this to a 35 percent nurse vacancy rate across the public sector as a direct consequence of migration. This review showed that the impact of this nurse vacancy was wide ranging, particularly since the provision of health care in the Caribbean is heavily dependent on nurses. In Guyana, for instance, a country with a high percentage of its population living in rural areas, most health care is provided by nurses (Anderson and Isaacs 2007, 394); however, the PAHO review concludes that across the region there are now insufficient nurses to deliver even essential health services. In addition, many hospitals have had to merge patient care units; there are increasing cancellations in elective surgery and a general decline in the availability of specialist services (PAHO 2001). The loss of specialist nurses creates particular problems, both because of the costs involved in lengthy specialist training and because any reduction of specialist nurses (e.g., intensive care nurses) can undermine a country's health care provision, especially for very small countries. These losses are taking place within a context in which major demographic and epidemiological changes in the

region call for increased, not reduced, health services. For example, there is a growing population of elderly people with chronic health care needs, and there are escalating health challenges related to HIV/AIDS as the Caribbean grapples with an advanced HIV epidemic that is second in prevalence only to that in sub-Saharan Africa (UNAIDS 2006). The current migration rate of health workers has set back health sector reform in many Caribbean countries, and thus questions must be raised about the ability of these countries to meet Millennium Development Goals (ECLAC 2003). While nurses who migrate to richer countries often receive additional professional training in the host country and there are clearly potential benefits for Caribbean countries when they return, it is also the case that fewer nurses return than migrate, and of those who do, very few return to work in the public health care system (Byron 1998).

There are also implications for women themselves that need to be considered. Studies of the migration of nurses from the Caribbean tend to regard the subject as if it were a nongendered phenomenon even though, as in most parts of the world, nursing in the Caribbean is overwhelmingly a female-dominated profession. There is need, therefore, to examine the broader gender issues and the social costs of nurse migration for the nurses themselves.

For many Caribbean nurses, migration is economically and socially beneficial for them and their families. However, set against these benefits are costs that are often concealed. In the Caribbean, women carry the major responsibility for family care, and it is estimated that 40 percent of households are headed by women (Barrow 1998, 76). In line with the findings of a recent study of migrant nurses in the United Kingdom, Caribbean nurses who migrate are more likely to be older, married, and/or heads of family households than, for instance, nurses from Australia and New Zealand, and they are also more likely to be the main breadwinners in their families (Buchan et al. 2005). Changes in immigration regulations in host countries and the short-term nature of contracts make family relocation very difficult, and migration thus often results in long-term family separation, with children and older dependent relatives remaining in the home country. In these situations, female responsibility for family life does not cease but rather is changed (Bach 2003). Yet little is known about the emotional and psychological effects on women who manage transnational families or the strategies used in sustaining long-distance parenting. The working environment in the host country may also contain hidden costs that can affect health and well-being, and Caribbean nurses who migrate to more economically advanced countries may find themselves subject to a process of inferiorization. James Buchan and

coworkers' study of international nurses in the United Kingdom indicates that migrant nurses experienced discrimination within their work environment (2005, 16), and an article on institutional racism (Allan et al. 2004) suggests that nurses from overseas are made to feel different because of their color, culture, and language. This process of inferiorization is institutionalized through negative stereotyping and a career structure that disadvantages nurses not trained in the United Kingdom (Allan et al. 2004).

Another area in which the gender implications of nurse migration are underacknowledged is in the surrogate care of children, elderly people, and the sick. When a nurse migrates and leaves her family behind, it is usually another woman (a female friend, a grandmother, or another female relative) who provides care for her family in her absence, and when Caribbean nurses are nursing sick people elsewhere, it is other women, by and large, who step in to meet needs neglected because of underresourced health care services. The link between women who migrate to work as caregivers and nurses and those who have increased caregiving responsibilities in the home country as a consequence has been conceptualized as a "global care chain" (Yeates 2004, 79). Highlighting this link is important because it increases the visibility and contribution of women's labor more widely and sheds some light on the pressures women face at both ends of the migration experience. These global familial networks, underscored by versions of patriarchy that are inscribed by Caribbean histories and cultures, create a pivotal point around which women negotiate and manage their changed responsibilities. It is around this pivotal point that the strain is being felt by many Caribbean women.

Conclusion

Gender matters. Gender matters in migration at the level of ideology, discourse, policy, and in the lived realities created by the migratory experience. How gender matters is different for men and for women; this essay has focused specifically on how gender matters for women migrant workers. While it is important to uphold the right of women to travel and work freely across the world, and it is clear that migration can result in increased economic freedom for women, the failure to address gender inequality as a central issue in migration processes both reflects and contributes to the marginalization of migrant women's voices, masks hidden social costs for women, and undermines the potential gains to be made.

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QUERIES TO THE AUTHOR

1. Au: Sentence reworded slightly; does this accurately reflect your intended meaning? (“Yet little is known...”)

2. Au: Byron 1994 is not cited in the text; please let us know where it may be cited.

3. Au: Added URL for Taran and Geronimi 2003; OK?

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