

## The Feminisation of Migration? A Critical Overview

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For a long time gender was not considered a critical factor to understanding the drivers behind international migration. Rather, women were seen simply as spouses who accompanied husbands, with economics being the central impetus for global migration flows (DeLaet, 1999). This state of affairs started to change in the 1980s with a landmark special issue on women in the *International Migration Review* (1984). Since then, the expression that there has been a ‘feminisation of migration’ has become commonplace (INSTRAW, 2007), despite the fact female migration is not a new phenomenon, but simply remains largely unaccounted for in migration studies (see Donato, Alexander, Gabaccia, & Leinonen, 2011). For example, Castles and Miller (1998: 9) argue that the feminisation of migration is one of the five major factors to play a role in migratory flows, stating that “women play an increasing role in all regions

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and all types of migration”. Similarly, Piper (2003: 726) argues that the feminisation of labour migration is “a fact” of the new global migration scene. However, others are not so certain that the term is entirely accurate. Indeed, Vause and Toma (2015) question such claims by pointing to the statistics and seeking to further problematise the expression, and it would seem for good reason.

Available statistics from the 1960s show that for a long time, sex ratios have been close to parity, with 47 out of every 100 migrants being female, and this has remained largely unchanged. In the 1990s this figure increased only marginally to 48 percent and by 2000 was still below parity at approximately 49 percent of migration. Further, the overall figure as of 2013 has returned to 48 percent (Piper, 2008; UNDESA, 2013). In other words, men still remain the major category of migrants, and this suggests that such claims of a feminisation process do not reflect accurately the empirical facts on the ground. Therefore, an alternative explanation is required. One reason for this desire to pro-claim migration as being feminised might relate to the fact that women were previously absent from the literature and now their voices are being incorporated in policy and research agendas alike (Buijs, 1993; DeLaet, 1999; Green, 2012).

Nevertheless, the concept of feminisation is not without some merit. When one explores migration compositions on a regional basis, a more nuanced picture emerges that illustrates that while one cannot claim a uniform feminisation that speaks of women as the dominant migrant category, a distinct feminisation of migration has indeed been taking place in various parts of the world. For example, between 1990 and 2013, the proportion of women migrating increased in all areas with the exception of Africa and Asia, and as of 2013, women constituted more than half of all migrants in 101 countries or areas. The major recipients of this surge in female migration have been Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, all with 52 percent, and North America close behind with 51 percent (UNDESA, 2013).

Thus, there is certainly a gendered element to migration within specific geographies and around certain service sectors that warrants attention and begs the question: What are the causes behind these gendered variations in migration flows across regions? Further, the fact that women are the dominant migrant category across a variety of service provision areas also suggests that women are not always passive victims in this process. As such, this chapter will discuss some of the dynamics engendering these

variations around feminised migration, and in doing so, will also look to both elucidate some of the gendered differences in the migrant experience and explore the issue of agency in female migration.

## DRIVERS OF FEMALE MIGRATION

A key aspect of female migration that needs more rigorous examination are the drivers that take place independently of males and families (i.e. the trailing spouse). Here, the plethora of factors that have been identified are as wide-ranging as can possibly be imagined: from changing socio-economic dynamics in sending societies to economic and social development in receiving host countries, and encompassing ever-changing cultural perceptions of women migrants, as well as rising levels of divorce in some labour-exporting countries. It is also true that gender relations in both sending and host societies have played critical roles in shaping gendered patterns of migration that differ from region to region. Thus, in order to “understand the sources of these transformations, we need to appreciate influences operating at the global, state, community, and household levels” (Hofmann & Buckley, 2013: 510).

Therefore, from a macro perspective, and as Sassen (2000) argues, a “feminisation of survival” began in the 1980s on account of the introduction of Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) designed to help service the debt of developing countries in the Global South (Mexico, Argentina, Brazil, etc.). The SAPs were built on the neoliberal model that mandated that the role of the state should be minimised through the privatisation of public utilities and called for the liberalisation of domestic markets. Through these cost-cutting measures, it was envisaged that the savings could be used to repay debt. However, this failed to transpire and countries were left with severely cutback services, particularly in education and healthcare, which had been replaced by a ‘user-pays model’ that often left non-government organisations (NGOs) to fill the void (SAPRIN, 2004). According to Sassen (2000), this failed experiment by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank has led to increased unemployment and poverty, that in turn has created what she calls “alternative circuits of survival” that function largely in the shadow economy. A major alternative circuit that emerged on the back of the increased unemployment caused by the SAPs is the sex trafficking of women, which by 1998 was producing a profit of US\$7 billion for criminal gangs. She notes that nursing and domestic work have also emerged as feminised circuits out of this crisis.

Piper (2003, 2008) provides a similar account in that globalisation is now simply producing the replication of gender roles across the globe. Like Sassen (2000), she notes that a major indicator of increased female migration is high levels of male unemployment and a demand for feminised job types in receiving countries. More specifically, she argues that women are taking on jobs in gendered welfare states in response to a crisis of care, which is often seeing them take on subordinate roles as domestic workers or pulled into the sex industry.

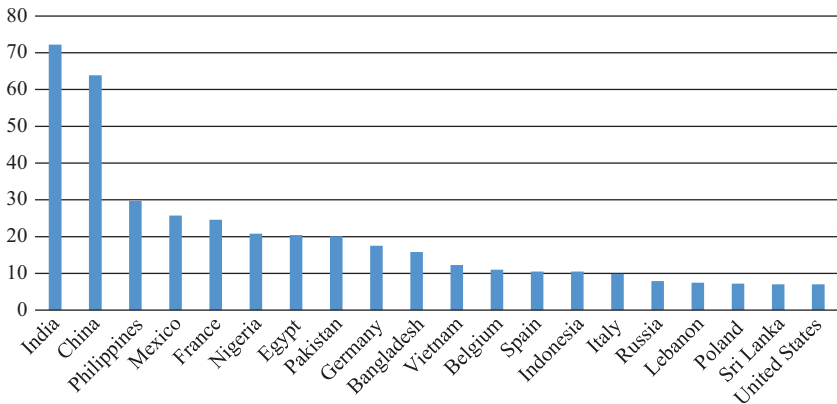
However, in order to understand how it is that there are only pockets of feminisation as opposed to a more uniform shift in migration patterns, a more micro-oriented level of analysis is required that goes beyond broad structural issues. Namely, more instructive lenses are shifts in local policy regimes in relation to migration, socio-economic changes in countries, and changing social attitudes towards migrants (Hofmann & Buckley, 2013). For example, many sending and receiving countries have extremely gendered policies with regards to migration for work, wherein some see the value to the economy in terms of remittances, whilst others, for cultural reasons, see women in need of being protected (see for example Bélanger & Rahman, 2013; Chan, 2014). A good example of this convergence of additional factors is the region of Southeast Asia.

In the 1990s, a number of countries in Southeast Asia underwent rapid economic development, which saw them shift from being regarded as developing economies to newly industrialising status (Kaur, 2007). The big movers in this regard were Singapore and Malaysia, followed by Thailand, which created a complementarity with its poorer regional neighbours. With the increase in wealth came a greater demand for unskilled and semi-skilled labour to substitute those who no longer wished to undertake such work, and typically the work in question was gendered in nature—namely, domestic care work. This growth in demand for female migrant workers saw Indonesia and the Philippines become major source countries. As of 2005, Malaysia was recruiting 60,000 Indonesian domestic workers annually, while Singapore welcomed between 8000 and 9000 domestic workers a month, with approximately 63,000 of its then 150,000 migrant domestic work labour force hailing from the Philippines. Since then, both countries have continued to readily recruit migrant women, both increasing their stock from the 1990s by 125 and 240 percent respectively as of 2013 (Kaur, 2007; Sijapati, 2015).<sup>1</sup>

From the sending countries, this growth in export of migrants is a major boon that can be understood from within the rubric of the

migration-development nexus. The workers who travel overseas send remittances, and for poorer countries this represents a significant boost to the economy. Indeed, remittances—“money and goods transmitted to households by migrant workers working outside their country of origin” (Rahman & Fee, 2012: 689)—are big business, providing a total of US\$441 billion to developing economies in 2015 (World Bank, 2016). As such, countries rely heavily on this to help build gross domestic product (GDP). For example, both the Philippines and Indonesia regularly rank in the top 20 of remittance receiving countries, with over US\$29 billion and US\$10 billion in remittances respectively (see Fig. 2.1). In the case of the Philippines, these remittances constitute around 10 percent of the nation’s GDP. Further, incentivising the export of female unskilled and semi-skilled domestic labour is the fact that there is a gendered aspect to the provision of remittances. Studies found that although women generally earn less than male migrant workers, they tend to send more money home:

While globally, women remit approximately the same amount as men, research suggests that women tend to send a higher proportion of their income regularly and consistently, even though they generally earn less than men. Also, remittances sent by women are more able to respond to emergency situations. (UNPFA, 2011)



**Fig. 2.1** Top 20 remittance receiving countries 2015 (\$US billions) (Source: World Bank, 2016)

Typically women provide money that is directed at poverty alleviation through the provision of funds for nutritional, educational, and health-care needs, while men tend to buy consumer goods, such as televisions, cars, and undertake investments in property and livestock (International Organization for Migration, n.d.; UNPFA, 2011).

Another factor driving the flow of female migrant workers are the policies of many receiving countries in Southeast Asia and East Asia that facilitate the continual flow of domestic workers, whilst at the same time constrain their capacity to settle permanently as they seek to protect their own cultural heritage. For example, Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong and Taiwan typically allow domestic workers to enter on contracts only for two years that bind them to a specific employer. These contracts are renewable; however, if the individual wishes to work for another employer, they need to return home and reapply from their home country, with the exception of Hong Kong, where a short amnesty allows for the securing of employment elsewhere. Similarly, Japan until 2014, banned foreign domestic workers but allowed women in through a side door by allowing unskilled and semi-skilled workers to be employed as ‘skilled workers’, which meant as dancers and hostesses in bars and like establishments on short-term visas (Yamanaka & Piper, 2005). Now Japan is trialling a new programme in six of its regions as a way of dealing with the ‘greying’ of the workforce and increased care needs for the elderly and to facilitate local female participation in the workforce.<sup>2</sup> As part of the trial, domestic workers will be granted resident status, but like those mentioned earlier, the length of stay will be limited. Further, no restrictions are going to be placed on the countries that can provide workers, but it is anticipated that the Philippines, Indonesia and other Southeast Asian countries will be major sources (Johnston, 2014; Seii, 2014).

In other words, receiving countries, through their policies, are actively creating circuits of female migration by forcing domestic workers to routinely return home after short stints (Yamanaka & Piper, 2005). To attempt to stay on beyond their contracts opens them up to further risk in what is already a precarious form of employment. Domestic workers on contracts are afforded little rights across Asia, with no countries apart from Hong Kong having specific laws that offer protections, and those that are applicable to domestic workers are often not practised or enforced (Islam & Cojocar, 2016). Indeed, domestic workers, on account of being employed in private homes, are rendered somewhat invisible and vulnerable to abuse at the hands of their employers.

This risk is magnified when contracted workers transition to the status of illegal migrants, allowing the employer more leverage to underpay workers whilst subjecting them to both psychological and physical abuse. For example, in Malaysia, severe immigration laws mean that visa overstayers can face up to five years in prison, heavy fines, caning and indefinite detention (Islam & Cojocar, 2016; Yamanaka & Piper, 2005).

Conversely, while some countries seek to create conditions that facilitate female migration, others seek to actively prevent it from taking place. Bangladesh, for example, has banned female emigration on multiple occasions between 1981 and 1998 until it was made legal in 2003. However, while allowed, there are still many socio-political barriers to women migrating abroad for work. For example, women must be over the age of 25 to qualify, not to mention certain religious practices such as *purdah*<sup>3</sup> that negatively affect female migrants and the social status of their families. Subsequently, as of 2010, only 27,706 of the country's 390,702 migrant workers were women (Bélanger & Rahman, 2013). Effectively, as Oishi notes (in Chapter 3 of this volume), the Bangladeshi state positions itself as the 'protector of women', as members of the government see the possibility of abuse of their women as a loss of dignity for the nation not worth the remittances that might be gained. Indeed, fear of abuse is a significant factor driving female migration policy and has led to the contradictory discourses of migrant women being depicted either as victims or heroines on account of being trafficked or abused, or for sending much of their salaries home as remittances to help alleviate poverty and boost the economy, both of which raise the issue of agency.

### WOMEN MIGRANTS BETWEEN AGENCY AND VULNERABILITY

There seems to be no in-between for women migrants but rather two powerful competing tropes. There is the image of the 'sacrificing heroine' who sends home more money than her male counterparts, which goes towards healthcare and education rather than conspicuous consumption, and there is the 'beautiful victim' (Schwenken, 2008). The latter is women who are taken in by the sex trade and trafficked. However, there is a degree of irony in these two competing narratives in that they both ultimately represent female migrants as the victim who is getting a bad deal. Further, the narratives, by routinely presenting women as victims, also deprive them of any agency.

*Indonesia: Women as Remittance Heroes and Victims of Abuse*

An example of this oscillation between heroism and victimhood are the discourses around female migration in Indonesia. As touched on earlier, Indonesia is one of the largest providers of domestic labour in Southeast Asia and receives over US\$10 billion in remittances from all its workers abroad. This predominantly comes from female migrants as they represent around 80 percent of the nation's estimated 6 million migrant workers. Given the magnitude of their contribution, the state actively refers to its female migrants as 'foreign exchange heroes'. Indeed, foreigners visit-ing the Soekarno-Hatta International Airport can see a banner that states *Selamat datang pahlawan devisa* (Welcome, our remittance hero) (Chan, 2014; Nugroho & Cahayani, 2012) (Fig. 2.2).

A part of the discourse that legitimates this non-traditional and decidedly un-Islamic practice of wives and mothers separating from their families to go overseas and work is that, women are positioned by the state as under-taking this sacrifice for the national family's larger goal of economic development. In this way, female migrant workers are not stripped of their idealised femininity and are positioned as performing a national service, which in turn justifies the use of the term 'hero' (Chan, 2014). Further, by defining it as a national duty, it simply renders the women as under direc-tion of the state, rather than as agentic beings in their own right.

Yet, when there are cases of abuse, the narrative changes quite dramati-cally. The state becomes a paternalistic protector that decries "precarious labour and trafficking-like labour migration" (Chan, 2014: 6956) and seeks to restrict women's mobility. For example, with the beheading of two Indonesian women, Siti Zainab and Karni binti Medi Tarsim,<sup>4</sup> who were domestic workers in Saudi Arabia, the government has banned 21



**Fig. 2.2** 'Remittance hero' welcome sign at Soekarno-Hatta International Airport (Source: Bettinger, 2011)



Middle Eastern countries.<sup>5</sup> The rationale behind this drastic move was that the government, according to Manpower Minister Hanif Dhakiri, “has the right to stop the placement of migrant workers in particular countries if it is believed that their employment degrades human values and the dignity of the nation” (AFP, 2015). Once more the plight of Indonesia’s women was not their own, but rather tied to the state, which now needs to stop them from becoming victims.

This dichotomy presented by the Indonesian government fails to capture the fact that women who go overseas are not migrating for the state or seeking its protection. As Fanany and Fanany point out (in Chapter 4 of this volume), while the women who travel abroad to work as maids are typically poorly educated, they are not naïve. Rather, the women who choose to go undertake risk assessments where they weigh the hardships against the monetary reward and opt for the higher wages offered abroad as it can set them up for when they return; and this is a similar story that plays out in other locales such as Mexico.

### *Mexico and Its (Forgotten) Remittance Heroes and Internal Migratory Victims*

In the early 2000s, with the ascent of President Vicente Fox, the narrative around migrants changed from one of being a traitor to that of ‘national heroes’. This was on account of the fact that remittances constituted the third largest source of income for the state, behind oil and tourism (*New York Times*, 2000). However, unlike the Indonesian experience, this narrative is largely gendered in favour of men. The designation of heroes was meant only for men, while women were presented as passive receivers of remittances (despite constituting around 42 percent of migrants) (Fry, 2006). As a government official noted, women needed to work and not just receive money from their spouses:

I think women’s role is very important because now they are doing productive work, it’s not the same ... imagine, if you lived in Mexico and your husband went to the US and sent you remittances, let’s say \$500 a month, but you wouldn’t do anything, you just receive the money and that’s it, no? Well, ok, you eat, you dress and you bring the kids to school, but you don’t do anything productive, you just receive the money, yes? So, I think that these productive projects are women’s contribution as a counterpart to remittances, so that apart from receiving remittances from their husbands, they also produce. (quoted in Kunz, 2008: 1404–1405)

This mentality that women were passive but needed to produce led the drive to get women to work in the *maquiladoras* (assembly line factories). As of 2002, there were an estimated 3251 *maquiladoras* in Mexico, with the vast majority positioned on the Mexican side of the Mexican-American border (Villalobos, Smith, Lazzarotto, Ahumada, & Restori, 2004). These *maquiladoras* typically hire women. For example, 60 percent of workers on the northern border are women and the *maquiladoras* attract internal migrants from the northern and central states as well as women from Central and South America. The rationale behind this biased recruitment is women have nimble fingers for the monotonous and tiring tasks like the pinning together of switches and plugs (Tuider, 2015).

However, once the women of Mexico became active workers, they were not hailed as heroes for helping to contribute to the economy like their male counterparts. Rather, a body of literature sprung up that tends to emphasise their position as victims. In particular, scholars focused on how the women are exploited in terms of wages and work conditions and are routinely sexually harassed, face violence, and are ultimately disposable, in that the low-skilled labour they provide is easily replaced. In doing so, the female *maquiladoras* workers are—like in the government discourse noted earlier—regularly discussed in reference to being passive and docile, with some going so far as to engage with the metaphor of the workers being ‘cyborgs’ (see Bui, 2015; Livingston, 2004; Wilson, 2003).

Yet, while the conditions faced by these female workers are undeniably true, it represents only part of the story; to focus predominantly on the negative aspects simply reifies the notion that female workers in the Global South are victims and denies them agency (Bachour, 2015). Indeed, as Tuider (2015) shows in her study of workers in Ciudad Juárez, the opportunities provided by the *maquiladoras* are also positive in that they provide women with a sense of dignity and freedom:

I mean, all the benefits they give you here, the maquilas, they do not give you there [Durango, Colorado]. Well, I had to do two jobs to manage. I worked Monday to Monday, all the days a week. And, well, at least you noticed that you earn the same like here. Here I work Monday to Friday. That gives me time off three days, and I earn what I have earned in one week. And I have savings, I have a car, special shifts, two meals, that I had not there. Well, the money gives you a little bit more freedom here than there. And, yes, that’s why, that was the reason why we came here. (Sonia, biographical interview, Ciudad Juarez, March 2008) (quoted in Tuider, 2015: 34)

Here, it can be seen that Sonia's decision to work in the *maquila* in Ciudad Juárez, as opposed to the factory in Durango, Colorado, was an active one and yielded considerable benefits, in terms of better hours and more money.

Alongside this, Tuidar (2015) notes that the decision to work in the assembly lines is empowering in other ways. Namely, the work allowed some women to overcome marital violence and gave them a position of confidence from which to negotiate with their husbands. Thus, like the Indonesian experience, women in Mexico who migrate to the Mexican-American border towns are often misrepresented in official and scholarly discourses as being victims of the needs of the state and global economic processes, without any regard for them as agentic beings. Rather, they are understood as the docile part of the workforce; easily manipulated, intimidated and discarded as required. Such accounts belie the reality where female *maquila* workers are knowledgeable, resilient and prepared to fight for their rights. For example, female workers have formed *promo-toras* (communities of social justice) that share information on the rights that female workers have in the *maquila* industry, which has led to legal victories against American companies on issues such as not granting severance pay when the company relocated (Bachour, 2015)

## CONCLUSION

As can be seen from the discussion in this chapter, the notion that a feminisation of migration has taken place needs further critical exploration. Indeed, for the past five decades, the number of migrating women has remained steady at approximately 48 percent, leaving men the slightly dominant category. However, while one cannot claim a strident feminisation of migration, there are certainly specific regional and sectoral areas of migration that have become more feminised, such as the case of home care in Southeast Asia. This is due to the gendered nature of the policies of the leading economies in the region, Singapore and Malaysia, which have strong demand for domestic workers. This development, combined with a surplus of labour in both Indonesia and the Philippines, and desire to reap the financial rewards from remittances, has created a female circuit of migration. Alongside this, it is apparent that women who do move in these pockets of feminised migration are not passive, simply moving at the behest of state and global economic imperatives. Rather, this notion of women as passive and docile workers, simply manipulated and victims

of exploitation, are discourses propagated by states that are in turn reified in academic discourses and only tell part of the story. As illustrated in the vignettes about Indonesian domestic workers and Mexican factory workers from the borderlands, the decision to migrate is often carefully weighed against the risks versus benefits, and has the capacity to be both empowering and liberating. Thus, more detailed sociological and ethnographic research, not unlike that undertaken by Fanany and Fanany (see Chapter 4 in this volume), that explores the life-worlds of female migrants in the Global South is required to provide more nuanced and balanced insight into their decision-making.

## NOTES

1. Indonesia also exports considerable numbers of domestic workers to the Middle East. As of 2013, Saudi Arabia is host to 1.5 million Indonesians (World Bank, 2016).
2. Japan has a low female participation rate, with only 60 percent of women in the workforce compared to 80 percent of men (Japan Today, 2013).
3. *Purdah* is the practice of secluding and protecting women to maintain their modesty and morality (Hashemi, Schuler, & Riley, 1996).
4. The two women were found guilty of murder. Forty-seven-year-old Siti Zainab was convicted of stabbing and beating to death her employer's wife, while 37-year-old Karni binti Medi Tarsim was convicted of killing her employer's four-year-old child (Buchanan, 2015).
5. The ban includes Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates and Egypt (AFP, 2015).

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