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Module IR 472 UNDERGRADUATE
Europe and Migration
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Feminisation of Migration

Blessing or Curse for Women?

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Introduction: Feminisation of Migration

„The underlying assumption in studies of migration has been the male pauper – a single or married male who looks forward to amassing capital with which to return to his native country. Thus, the corollary assumption has been that it is males who typically make the decision to migrate and that females follow.” (Pedraza 1991: 305,306).

Today this has changed as migration has feminized. More and more most notably young, single women migrate in order to find work and a better life (Engle 2004:20).

What they find is very often exploitation.

The demographic changes in the industrialized countries, the enormous growth of the service sector and due to emancipation a higher amount of women working, create a need for a huge amount of service personal in the health care, child care sectors as well as in the accommodation of the elderly. These are typical occupations of women and as many employers for there own convenience want them to live-in, women are the preferred employees. Migrant labour became a female domain.

The feminization of migrant labour and of migration itself has several, many different consequences for the women. While examining them one has to take into account the various constellations regarding how and with whom they live and migrate, their background and their reasons for migration.

Whether female migrant labour improves the position of women within their families and society or not is in question. But quiet certain is the fact that migration and in particular the feminization of migrant labour caused and causes change within the gender relation. “Migration may challenge traditional gender roles – absence of one spouse may leave the other spouse with both greater decision-making power and a greater burden of responsibility and labour.” (Bridge-Report 2005: 19).

I. Reasons for the Migration of Women

1) Increasing Income

There are many different reasons why women migrate. More and more single women migrate, still in the most cases it was not exclusively their own idea and wish. “Women may have little influence on migration decisions in the household. Even where women migrate alone this is

likely to be with reference to, or even determined by, the household livelihood strategy and expectations of contributions through remittances.” (Bridge-Report 2005: 10).

Women just like men migrate mostly due to economic reasons. They try to seek a better life in the host countries and send back the money they earn. So basically their reason is to find work in another place in order to improve their own and their families’ economic situation.

2) Family Reunification

The second reason for women to migrate is family reunification. “Where family reunification (right to migrate to join other family members in the destination country) is possible, it is in general women who appear more likely than men to migrate to join or accompany other family members or because of marriage.” (Bridge-Report 2005: 11).

As Parvati Raghuram points out, the male dominated labour market determined women to follow their husbands who found work opportunities somewhere else in order to reunite the family (2004: 304, 305).

3) Gender Discrimination and Norms

Another reason for women’s migration is gender discrimination and norms. These are according to the Bridge-Report women who want to earn more money and gain more economic independence as well as women who migrate in order to flee sexual violence and abuse. Also single women, widows and divorced women migrate because they have been socially stigmatized. Young women suffering from the suppression of their freedom, the pressure to marry, or to remain chaste until marriage as well as lesbians who migrate in order to find better conditions for an anonymous life away from control through their families in countries with greater social acceptance and more modern legislation.

4) Trafficking

Furthermore trafficking is a phenomenon of women’s migration. According to the UN Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime, Article 3 “Trafficking in persons shall

mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation.” (Bridge-Report 2005: 14).

The highest number of trafficked women and girls mainly for sexual exploitation come from Moldova, followed by Romania and the Ukraine (Engle 2004: 65).

5) Conflict, Disaster and Persecution

Lastly the Bridge-Report states conflict, disaster and persecution as reasons for women to migrate. According to the UN Beijing Platform for Action in 1995 “women and children constitute some 80 per cent of the world’s millions of refugees and other displaced persons, including internally displaced persons. They are threatened by deprivation of their right to return to their homes of origin as well as by violence and insecurity. Particular attention should be paid to sexual violence against uprooted women and girls employed as a method of persecution in systematic campaigns of terror and intimidation and forcing members of a particular ethnic, cultural or religious group to flee their homes.”

II. Positive Outcomes of Female Migration

1) Empowerment through Work

When looking at the positive aspects of female migration one has to distinguish between single and married women. Positive aspects occur mostly with married women. Their reasons for migration are quiet clear as they basically have to follow their husbands who decide to move to the city for example. For instance Turkish rural women: As pointed out above, the current changes on the labour market and the increasing aging of the societies in the highly industrialized countries demand a high amount of female labour force. “Transnational companies are promoting a growth in vocations typically associated with assumed characteristics of female labour. These vocations include, but are not limited to, the service,

hospitality and entertainment industries (including the sex and sex tourism industries), health care and care management for elderly (...)." (Engle 2004: 19).

As men often find no jobs or as they don't earn enough money to maintain a life for their families in the city, women have to contribute to the income of the family, sometimes they become the sole breadwinner. By doing so they gain power, independence and as the ones who bring home the money they can demand more often to have a say when decisions have to be made.

Whereas many studies show that other factors apart from earning money play a huge role in order to change the position of female migrants who work into a more powerful and self-determined one, Tahire Erman points out that it can and does have a positive impact on migrant women when they contribute to the family income: "However, in some families, working outside the home has favourably redefined women's responsibilities regarding housekeeping. (...). When women worked outside the home, sometimes at more than one job, the sheer demands on time and physical endurance meant that eventually husbands had to lower their expectations." (1998: 161).

By this the traditional gender role perception can be challenged as the husband has to take over duties his wife usually had to do but now as breadwinner of the family doesn't have the time and energy for it anymore. This change may be of great help in order to improve women's self-confidence and to stand up against the patriarchal structures that suppresses them. Earning money does have a huge impact on women's self-perception and even if the traditional structures are still valid and very hard to get rid of, "patriarchal roles in the households were transformed, the women's self-esteem was heightened, their capacity to participate as equals in house-hold decision-making was enhanced, and they secured more income with which to actualize their roles. " This happens more and more in the case of women from the Dominican Republic migrating to the United States of America (Pedraza 1991: 322).

2) Improvement of Living Conditions and Social Status

Another positive aspect of female migration is an improvement of their living conditions and social status: "In their village, they were oppressed in their patrilocally extended households. Young married women were expected to live with their in-laws and surrender to their authority. After they moved to the city with their husbands and started to live in their nuclear families, they found opportunities to use their potential." (Erman 1998: 153).

Away from the kinship that watches every step of a couple the husband more likely would allow his wife to work. Without the eyes of the extended family he doesn't have to fear to loose respect because he can't earn enough money to support his family.

3) Changing of Roles and Norms

Furthermore migrant women can experience respectively get to now a life away from roles and norms they use to know. By learning about other ways of life they may question their own conceptions of life and emancipate. "The relations in migrant families in the city are not as structured and closed as they are in the village, at least in the beginning of migration. The kin-ordered patriarchal family in the village operates within well-established norms and roles. In this context, it is accurate to say that a peasant woman's life is a predetermined path. On the other hand, the move to the city may open up new possibilities for redefining these roles and norms." (Erman 1998: 159).

III. Negative Outcomes of Female Migration

1) Increasing Threat of Being Trafficked and Exploited

The negative aspects of trafficking and forced migration are clear to everyone as they are an aim to exploit those women. Actually one could state that the feminization of migration contributed to and is one reason for the trafficking of women. "When the widespread feminization of migration in Asia, (...), is taken into account, it is logical to deduce that a majority of female trafficking victims will come from that part of the world." (Engle 2004: 53). So it is obvious that where there is increasing female migration there is also increasing trafficking of women. And we also know that the feminization of migration stems from increasing demand of female migrant labour in the highly industrialized countries and the women's desire to earn money in order to maintain a better life for themselves and their families. The one goes along with the other. Not only that women are being exploited when doing domestic work, at the same time those women wanting to migrate in order to work in another country's service or domestic sector are exposed to the threat of being trafficked.

2) Exploitation in the Domestic Labour Sector

Once women get to the countries in order to work for example in the domestic sector they have to face exploitation which is mostly invisible. Isolation, personalised relations with the employer, and atomisation make domestic work one of the most difficult labour sectors to organise.” (Anderson 1999: 126). This creates a breeding ground for exploitation of women as nobody can effectively control this sector.

Anderson also points out that female migrant labour in the domestic sector is often considered as a kind of favour because of pitifulness of the employing family and they are also expected to live with the family they work for. “This is presented as a favour, as allowing a woman to live as ‘part of the family’, and does not take account of the fact that the woman has her own family, and, indeed, usually only left them to earn cash for remittances.” (Anderson 1999: 125). Two of the biggest flows of female migrant labour consist of women from Moldova and the Philippines.

Particularly in the case of Filipinas it is obvious how the feminization of migration and of migrant labour means a degradation of women to an export article. The Philippine government shows blatantly their appreciation of Philippines going abroad: “Most government officials however capitalize on the declaration of the International Labour Organization (ILO) that the Philippines is a global model for managing its labor migration. Hence, most government officials are proud to declare on the versatility of the Filipino workers and their being “world class” workers, aside from being the country’s modern heroes. Nevermind if they are badly treated in many countries.” (The Migrant Watch).

One more aspect of the exploitation of these migrant women is also their expected duty to pay remittances to their families back home. This means a huge burden for those women who have the responsibility for their whole family back home and thereby stand under enormous pressure to be successful (Bridge-Report 2005: 26).

3) Domestic Violence

Disadvantages also occur to married women. Most women who accompany their migrating husbands and were doing the household in their old environment as it is expected from them. Men as the general breadwinner of the family have to face the changes of the labour market. “The limited economic resources of the families necessitated the pooling of the potential contributions of all family members, including the women.” (Erman 1998: 151)

The improvements of women's lives stressed above can also have a harmful effect. If migrant women work and by this challenge the typical role allocation they have to face serious disturbances within their families. The man not being the breadwinner of the family anymore, not finding a job to support a family becomes depressive and feels to be deprived of his social status.

This causes very often domestic violence because the men have to face a completely new role allocation and in order to keep up their superiority over their wives and their pride they use physical and psychological violence. They never learned to solve conflicts another way and are not able to cope with other ways of life.

4) Disruption and Predetermination of Women's Careers

Even non-rural married migrant women have to cope with many problems. If they follow their husbands who migrate mostly because of job opportunities they risk unemployment and by this make themselves dependent on their husbands. "Such disruptions in women's careers brought about by the migration of their husbands seem certain to lower women's earnings. (...). At least some of the income differences between men and women arise from the interruptions of women's careers caused by the migration of their husbands and the inability of many (if not most) wives to use migration to further their careers in the same ways that most men do." (Long 1974: 347).

Conclusion: Migration without Emancipation

Nothing has changed that much yet. Also in highly developed countries such as Finland migration is still a rather disadvantage for women. In most cases the family or the couple is actually only migrating because of a job opportunity for the spouse. "As a result, wives may become unemployed, underemployed or exit the labour force at the destination." (Nivalainen 2004: 170). Obviously migration does not contribute to the improvement of the position of women in the world.

Long even argues that migration is a main obstacle for women to emancipate regarding their careers and their choice of occupations: "It might even be argued that the husband's migration influences not only the career development of the wife but also the initial choice of career.

Such occupations as elementary school teaching, nursing, and secretarial work are traditional occupations of women. They are also fairly readily transferred from one area to another and can be practiced in almost any part of the country.” (1974: 348).

Migration might not be the cause for the inequality of the sexes but it increases already existing inequalities and exposes women to situation that delimitates their chances to emancipate.

Female migrant workers are being exploited in the service sector and women moving from rural paces to the cities have to cope with contradiction of being the only person in the family who can find a job and at the same time being punished exactly for that because husbands can't cope with their new roles as breadwinners. Women seem to be the great losers of the migration game.

But still migration can also be an opportunity for women as seen in the rural Turkish women moving with their husbands to the city, by this escaping the oppressive village structures and gaining more self-confidence. Still this is mainly an exception than a rule. The sole fact that they migrate alone is not sufficient for their emancipation. This becomes most obvious when we look at why women mainly migrate. They migrate because they live in conditions that are not bearable. If women migrate because of this very reason they are even more likely to become victims of oppression. For example: “The root causes of migration and trafficking greatly overlap. The lack of rights afforded to women serves as the primary causative factor at the root of both women's migrations and trafficking women.” (Pearson 2000: 33). Even worse is the fact that migrant women in many cases have to face worse conditions in the host countries than in their homes.

To make migration an opportunity for women to gain experience and self-confidence, the sending as well as the receiving countries have to apply measures and laws that protect those women. If for instance countries like the Philippines deal with their female population as bargaining export articles and countries like Italy, Germany and more receive them and host them like this, female migrants will also in future be an object of exploitation and this will even more keep them from emancipating.

The women paying remittances to their families or communities obviously still stuck in the mainly patriarchal structures of their home countries. “Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong remit enormous amounts of money to the Philippines, contributing to the growth of their communities back home.” (Engle 2004: 43). This is a very crucial point. The Philippine government will not make any effort to improve its economic status quo in order to provide its population with good jobs at home when there is this huge acceptance for their cheap

female personal and when by this those women work for the people back home. Those women have to carry the can for the failure of their country. Both the Philippines and other countries by receiving those female migrants contribute to the definition of them as pure export article. And this is not only the case in the Philippines.

When we talk about emancipation and how migration is related to that we should also talk about the solidarity between women. Women in highly industrialized countries need more personal that is doing what they were used to do such as domestic work, child care, health care and provision of the elderly. With the emancipation in these countries this has changed and more and more women work. This work is now done by millions of female migrants. They pay the price for the emancipation of the others. Emancipation must not happen at the expenses of millions of women from underdeveloped countries.

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