

Migration and Development: Gender Matters

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A panel on gender is important to our collective project of informing future research and policy on migration and development. The questions raised and knowledge produced by scholars attentive to gender are always focused on power. As such, a gender perspective insists on socially and politically embedded understandings of migrants, migration, and development. As both Rachel Murphy and Carolina Taborga remind us, this is a necessary stance in light of the common constructions of migrants as mere surplus labor or as *homo economicus*. In practice, such thread-bare constructions encourage development schemes in migrant communities and nations that fail to attend to local gender ideologies and norms, or to the sexual divisions of labor in social reproduction, production, and citizenship. Moreover, a gender perspective—with its attentiveness to dispersed power—becomes a corrective to narrowly economic notions of development. As Taborga warns, the dominant development paradigm converts structural inequities into technical problems best solved at the level of individuals and households. A gendered approach, by contrast, insists that development include the expansion of capabilities, rights, and agency. In such a formulation of development, gender is but one among many structures of power that create inequities and promote containment, negotiation, and struggle.

The panelists join those who charge that international policy debates and interventions—including those about migration—are insufficiently informed by knowledge produced through gendered research (Piper 2006). A panel on gender offers an opportunity to assess our abilities to provide policymakers with the over-arching findings so often solicited. Here our claims must be at once bold and modest. There is a large and compelling body of scholarship demonstrating that *gender matters*. This literature documents that the causes and consequences of migration are gendered, as are the associated migratory bodies and institutions. Accordingly, Murphy (who focuses on Asian internal migration) and Taborga (who privileges Latin American immigration) discuss how dynamic gender ideologies and practices in origin and destination sites influence personhood, legal status, production, and social reproduction. Our panelists find that women's personal and collective gains in migrant households, workplaces, communities, and nations are uneven, contingent, situational, and often contradictory. For example, Murphy notes that much of the normative change accompanying the migration of Chinese women “occurs under the orbit of claimed conformity with existing ideas about gender attributes and roles.” This includes workplace protest under the banner of female politeness, and migration

under the banner of a sacrificial notion of motherhood. That gendered research should unearth the uneven and situational nature of migration's impacts across multiple scales is hardly surprising. Feminist and gender scholars belong to a deconstructivist tradition: one which disturbs notions of the unitary subject and grand theory.

In practice, this means that the bold statement that gender matters must be coupled with more modest claims about how our specific findings might be extended more widely. Yes, gender differences exist in the remittance practices of internal migrants and immigrants. Yet, as Taborga cautions, development initiatives involving remittances are bound to suffer if *place specific* gender inequities in financial systems, in land and business ownership, and in the operation of diasporic and migrant associations are not understood and redressed. In short, fine-grained local research in specific origin and destination contexts remains crucial to the success of development initiatives sensitive to gender.

Moreover, across any particular social field, the expansion of women's and men's capabilities, rights, and agency will prove uneven and likely contradictory. Hence, a vulnerable Dominican nanny in Spain may herself be exploiting the labor of her mother or daughter left behind. A transnational immigrant mother may be bound in chains of sacrifice, but there are many loops on that chain. Extreme caution is required, therefore, in advancing generalizations about the role that gender assumes in development within local, national, regional, and global migration circuits. In each context, we must consider how gender intersects with other axes of power such as generation, class, race, and ethnicity.

Murphy proposes multiple scales that need to be considered in the study of gender, migration, and development. Nonetheless, she focuses upon gendered social norms and social roles relevant to migration. Murphy concludes that "[t]he migration process subsumes and reworks existing normative arrangements including the gendered divisions of labor and gendered attributes and roles of individuals that are maintained through socialization and obligation within the networks of the rural family system." Among the many strengths of the paper is the author's attention to migration's modest and often uneven impacts on patriarchal norms and practices. For example, she notes that Chinese wives who have been partners in internal migration may struggle to retain their personal and interpersonal gains by refusing, upon return, to relocate to their rural communities of origin. Unfortunately, such women are often thwarted in their attempts to establish independent off-farm undertakings in neighboring towns due to gender discrimination on the part of financiers and local authorities. If, as Taborga's paper asserts, the goals of sustainable

development include the empowerment of women and gender equality, then a message of Murphy's paper is that within Chinese migratory social fields, patriarchal gender norms and other gender inequities remain hard nuts to crack. Nonetheless, Murphy does point to a few promising trends. These include: the increased acceptance of mobility for married Chinese women into previously restricted settings; greater equality between migrant spouses in destination areas; workplace activism among migrant daughters; and reduced son preference among migrant workers in Chinese cities.

Although contributing to a fuller understanding of the relationship between gender and migration, Murphy's paper engages less directly the third feature of the panel—development. It is here that Taborga's contribution excels. She and her colleagues at the International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW) propose an analytical framework for future research on the dynamic relationships among migration, gender, remittances, and development. Elements in this framework include: the gendered global economy; the feminization of migration as a household survival strategy; and gendered ideologies and labor markets in origin and destination countries. As Taborga notes, the framework “aims to better answer such pressing questions as: How does the growing feminization of migration affect remittance flows? How might remittances contribute to the achievement of gender equality? And, how might we mobilize remittances to achieve sustainable development that includes women?” Rebuking gender-free development models and interventions, Taborga notes that a feminist perspective on remittances challenges the popular assumption that the productive investment of remittances is the only positive development outcome. This assumption highlights only one aspect of peoples' economic lives and diminishes the value of other types of investments, including those that are emotional, symbolic, and communitarian.

Both Murphy and Taborga raise two central points about contemporary global migration. First, it removes *gendered* individuals from households. Second, women predominate globally among remittance receivers (i.e., wives, mothers, and other female caretakers). More research is needed, especially in those societies with large numbers of female-centered families, with traditions of child fostering, and with matrilineal forms of kinship. But Murphy is correct in alerting us to a disturbing finding emerging in some research, that children whose mothers are absent appear to be the most vulnerable. In contrast, when mothers remain behind and administer remittances, migration seems to exert a positive impact on children's diet, health, and education. In light of women's growing participation in internal and international migration, more research is needed on how the departure of culturally-constructed, female nurturers affects the material and emotional wellbeing of the children left behind.

On the one hand, the two papers chart similar territory. Both describe powerfully how the changes promoted by migration are instigated by and filter back upon gendered terrain. On the other hand, the two works are complementary. Murphy highlights research on gender and internal migration, while Taborga focuses on studies of international migration. To date, there has been little comparison between, and fertilization across, the literatures on gender and internal migration, on gender and international migration, and I would add, on gender and refugees. What is striking about the panelists' papers is how similar their findings are regarding the modest impacts (im)migration has had on improving gender inequities in places of origin and destination. What, then, are the most strategic targets to ensure the protection and extension of women's gains within migratory social fields? A promising target noted in both papers is along fissures developing within conventional, gender norms of parenting. In many societies, mothering is understood to be place bound and to privilege acts of social reproduction. By contrast, fathering is normatively conceived to be more mobile and is associated with primary breadwinning. As mothering by absent migrant women comes to encompass both significant income production and nurturing, an opening emerges in how gendered parenting is conceived and practiced. This creates the space for women to participate more fully in local, national, and global discussions about development. Given their dual roles as *nurturers* and *producers*, migrant women/mothers have the potential to emerge as champions of sustainable and more equitable forms of development. My own research in the 1990s on organized Guatemalan refugee women, who negotiated the terms of development in their returnee communities, revealed such a pattern (Pessar 2001).

Finally, much of the literature on gender and migration has struggled with popular misconceptions which hold that gender equals women, and gender operates foremost in the contexts of households and families. Both Murphy and Taborga are successful in noting the multiple scales ranging from the body to the global economy in which gender operates. Nonetheless, given the unevenness of the available literature, both authors emphasize the household and family. I know I speak for the panelists when I urge researchers to include these micro-level units, while branching out to associated, meso and macro-level arenas. In this spirit, I would propose gender-sensitive research on migration and development, which is cross-scalar and inter-disciplinary (see, Donato et. al. 2006; Mahler and Pessar 2001). To illustrate, a gendered study of remittances would begin at the scale of the body. It would consider, for example, how the gendering of migrant laborers' bodies relegates many women to employment in the low paying and insecure caring sector. It would also explore how the gendered bodies of remittance senders, managers, and recipients affect such outcomes as diet, health, and education. A trans-scalar

approach would continue to move up in scale until it reached global entities like the World Bank and the international women's movement. Among the topics to be explored at this scale would be how global discourses about migration and development are gendered and whether such discourses reflect or challenge Third World Women's understandings of local and global capitalism.

*Gendered Globalization and the Feminization of Migration:
A Paradigm Swing*

For the most part, the authors avoid certain pitfalls and limitations of the growing scholarship on gendered globalization and the feminization of migration. I would suggest that this new scholarship represents a paradigm swing, of sorts, in the study of gender, migration, and development. The swing has definite virtues, including the insistence that globalization is not gender neutral and the widening of conventional migration studies to include such phenomena as sex work and international adoption. Nonetheless, its foci threaten to narrow our engagements of gender, migration, and development to impoverished women's survival strategies and to care work in globalizing economies. For the remainder of this introduction, I will comment on four central features of the new paradigm: scale, demographics, the categorization of migrant women, and empowerment. My purpose is decidedly not to disparage the important literature on the feminization of migration and on gender and globalization. Rather, it is to suggest areas for rethinking and potential revision. At various points in my discussion, I will also return to issues raised in the papers by Murphy and Taborga.

Scale is a central feature in the *feminization of migration* paradigm. In their influential volume, *Global Woman*, Ehrenreich and Hochschild (2003) proclaim that women are independently joining the vaunted ranks of men who travel long distances for work. While no doubt unintentional, their celebration plays into a gendered geography: one that views mobility across long distances as more significant and noteworthy. The danger, here, is the marginalizing of women's long histories of internal and cross-border migrations, especially in Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa (Piper 2008), as well as more recent trends in female internal migration, which Murphy draws to our attention in the case of China.

Demographics are a second, key element in the literature on gendered globalization and feminization of migration. Quite rightly, scholars underscore the virtual parity between male and female immigrants. An acknowledgement of this equivalence should effectively put to rest popular thinking about the immigrant as male. My one quibble, however, is why it has taken so many decades to acknowledge a trend that has been ongoing

since the mid-20th century. This half-century time frame necessitates a longer historical engagement with globalizing political-economic and cultural trends than most of the newer scholarship on the feminization of migration affords. We will need a greater integration of works on military bases and war brides, on global industrial restructuring, on gender, violence, and refugee displacement, on structural adjustment programs North and South, on the growth of global cities, and on global transfers of care work. As currently constituted, today's scholarship over-emphasizes global, informalized care work to the detriment of other forms of female employment in manufacturing and higher skilled professions. The presentist bent also fails to engage the household, labor, and political struggles of earlier waves of immigrants and refugees. These struggles have helped to frame the discourses and to build the networks and associations, which more recent female and male migrants have inherited.

Some clarification is in order regarding the statistical evidence supporting the feminization of migration. To start with the basics: where do the figures that Taborga and others cite about rates of female and male immigration originate? How reliable are these figures, especially in light of common complaints that immigration statistics are often not disaggregated by sex? Will the rate of female immigration grow and outdistance that of males, as theorists of gender and globalization seem to suggest, or has an equilibrium of sorts been reached? (United Nations population statistics suggest the latter; Hania Zlotnik, personal communication, March 2008). And lastly, how are undercounts of women or men in national censuses and in survey research likely influenced by such phenomena as gender differences in legal status and sex-segregated labor markets (e.g., the incorporation of women in domestic service and sex work versus high tech employment)?

Questions about the gendered demographics of 21st century migration arise when we take up a paradox raised in Taborga's paper. On the one hand, she informs us that the number of female immigrants has grown globally at a faster pace than male immigration. On the other hand, work permits and legal residence are less available to women than men. How are we to account for this inconsistency, especially in light of the claim that women are emigrating in growing numbers as independent subjects not as beneficiaries of family reunification? If both of these trends are true, then, we require more research on how women navigate the contradiction between legal regimes that discriminate against them and escalating rates of female migration. Here, additional research on female-centered social networks would be useful: especially those networks that operate in matters of asylum, in correspondence marriage, and in manufacturing, domestic, and sex work.

Gendered demographics become relevant when we consider proposed policy

changes in North America, Europe, and Australia aimed at reducing family reunification quotas in favor of guest worker plans (ILO 2004). If we take the male-centric discourse surrounding recent U.S. debates as illustrative, we might well surmise that women will be losers in systems that reward temporary work over family reunification. Yet, a different pattern may hold in European nations, which allocate a substantial number of work visas to providers of care services (e.g., Spain and Italy). A gendered perspective would lead us to ask: How do we account for the contrasting ways in which developed countries with a growing female labor force regulate immigration to address care deficits? Why do certain nations view care for the young, old, and infirm as a social right while others construe care as a responsibility best managed privately by female family members? On a related point, students of gender and development would be well served to research more systematically how the feminization of migration has, and will continue to impact, state and corporate policies directed at compensating family care work (Zimmerman, Litt, and Bose 2006).

Let me turn now to the *type of female labor* featured in most discussions of gendered globalization and the feminization of immigration. In my view, there is an unfortunate flattening in the category of woman present in this scholarship. This is particularly the case, when following the pioneering theorizing of Saskia Sassen (1996), researchers have elected to emphasize female migration as a “survival strategy.” This widely-advanced contention flies in the face of a large body of research, which documents that international migration from developing countries is positively selected in favor of those with greater human and social capital. This leads me to ask whether scholars have been overly eager to dub most female immigration as a survival strategy of the global poor. Have some made the mistake of conflating immigrant women’s socio-economic status at destination with their status prior to migration? There are, after all, many case studies indicating that factory and care workers, as well as correspondence brides, experience profound deskilling and the lowering of class status when they migrate abroad (Parreñas 2001; Constable 1997; 2005). Might it not be that a significant segment of female immigrants are being called upon to shoulder *not survival* but their families’ precarious middle-class and working-class status? If this is the case, as I suspect, we require more research on how the emigration of more positively-selected female immigrants impacts the true survival strategies of impoverished, third-world women and men.

In celebrating migration as a female survival strategy, we also run the risk of diverting attention from that segment of female migration which falls under the rubric of “brain drain.” More research is needed on how the formal recruitment of teachers, nurses, and other female professionals impact development (in the broadest sense) in countries of origin. The need for such

research is underscored by a recent study, which documents that the number of practicing female nurses in the U.K. from Africa has increased dramatically over the last five years. This transfer of workers only intensifies a care crisis, which finds 66 nurses per 100,000 in Nigeria and 129 per 100,000 in Zimbabwe. The ratio in the U.K. is a more enviable 847 per 100,000 (Aiken et al: 2004).

Finally some parting words on the *empowerment* of immigrants. Reminiscent of earlier dependency theory, there is a tendency in many works on the feminization of migration to see the glass empty or decidedly half full. Perhaps, this is an overcorrection to earlier scholarship which, as Taborga notes, championed developed nations as sites and engines for the liberation of Third World female migrants. Yet, today's overcorrection finds authors asserting that female immigration "restores features of oppressive feudal relations, such as indentured servitude, servile relations, political disenfranchisement and sexual slavery" (Hawkesworth 2006:24). This emphasis on migrants as victims needs to be balanced against research, such as that contained in the Murphy and Taborga papers, which document the modest gains in gender parity occasioned by migration. We also require additional research substantiating those *collective* efforts, on behalf of and by migrants, which seek to challenge and reverse those contemporary, feminizing strategies of power designed to create helplessness and dependence among migrant women and men (Piper 2008).

In drawing our attention to empowerment, I purposefully underscore the word collective, because communitarian efforts resist neo-liberal projects, which seek to individualize, privatize, and re-domesticate responses to global deprivations and uncertainties. With this in mind, I would urge us to consider how researchers might best counter those neo-liberal initiatives which, in the name of gender equity, replace women's collective self-help programs with commercial and micro-credit programs based on individual entrepreneurship and personal fiscal responsibility. Is it fair to say, following Hawkesworth (2006), that in co-opting the discourse of women's empowerment, key supranational entities have erased the critique of capitalism at the heart of Third World feminists' alternative vision of development?

Finally, the literature on the feminization of migration has been largely silent on matters of refugee status and exile. An important exception is found in the work of feminist legal scholars, who examine the causes and consequences of gender discrimination in refugee law, institutions, and practices (Bhabha 1996; Crawley 2001). Pioneering research in the U.S. documents that women are far more likely to gain asylum when, on the advice of NGOs and legal counsel, they depoliticize their claims, (Oxford

2005). The women then claim persecution on the grounds that they have been the victims of “exotic” sexual practices, rather than on the grounds of their actual participation in targeted labor or political organization. More research in the United States and elsewhere would indicate whether this is a common pattern. If so, it would reveal a serious give-back: one in which progressive struggles to convert persecuted women into a recognized social category in refugee law have fallen hostage to a familiar gender geography. A geography in which women are relegated to the “private,” micro scales of the body, the household, and ethnic cultures.

Conclusion

Gender matters when we research and frame policy on migration and development. Despite the fact that gender inequalities exist in all societies, Murphy and Taborga correctly observe that significant variation exists in how gender inequities are organized, embodied, and best redressed. This variance is governed by local gender norms and institutions, as well as by the positioning of origin and destination contexts within national, regional and global economic, cultural, and racial orders.

Murphy and Taborga contribute to a growing and lively body of scholarship on the feminization of migration and its relationship to development. This scholarship is extremely valuable in slaying the myth of the male immigrant and in revealing that globalization, like migration, is a fully gendered phenomenon. My remarks have been intended to build upon and help refine the focus of the literature on gendered globalization and migration as we seek to better research and theorize the links among migration, gender, and development. In this spirit, I have pointed to matters of scale, demography, categorization, and empowerment which require revision and further exploration.

Let me say in conclusion, that in the early 80s, when I began my research and writing aimed at engendering migration studies, I was quite convinced of the lack of concepts, analytical frameworks, and research methods to lead the way. Now, I am confident that we possess powerful tools to document how gender infuses migration and development, including the associated scales though which both operate. This leaves me with the conclusion that the problem is no longer a lack of analytical frameworks or substantiating documentation. Rather, the challenge is to convince scholars of migration and development as well as policy makers that gender is important and to provide them with the tools to think and act with an eye to gender difference and gender equity. One step in the right direction would be to include a paper like Carolina Taborga’s not in a separate panel on gender and migration, but in a session on migration and economic globalization, and to

reposition Rachel Murphy's paper in the panel on family and networks. We will only bring migration to the service of development in its fullest sense when a free-standing panel on gender and migration is no longer thinkable and my role as gender maven becomes obsolete.

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