

Feminization of Migration: Is it a Double-Edged Sword?

Lana Alemam

Istanbul Aydin University, Turkey

lanaa.alemam@gmail.com

Abstract— Although frequently addressed, the concept of feminization of migration remains insufficiently researched. Contrary to the common belief that feminization of migration is an increase in the proportion of women in the overall number of migrants; this article aims at nuancing the misunderstood concept of feminization of migration, through distinguishing between feminization of migration process and feminization of research on migration.

Keywords— International migration, feminization of migration, gender, women, empowerment, gender mainstreaming.

INTRODUCTION

International migration, an omnipresent phenomenon that contributed to the evolution of humankind's history, and often becomes a global trend as it moves to the forefront of attention with every event changing the world's economic order, the states' political systems and international relations, and even with natural disasters taking place. The historical phenomenon has been the main focus of many scholarships, academic studies and mostly media, as it significantly changes political and economic states' policies.

The various theories of migration have long focused on states' security and neglected human rights—let alone women's rights—and the established loose global migration policies and laws were always too general or too fragmental; thus, looking at migration through different lenses such as gendered lens, for instance, rather than analyzing it as a single phenomenon per se, leads to better outcomes (Champion, 1993).

FEMINIZATION OF MIGRATION

Initially, the role of women during every stage of displacement had been widely abandoned for long decades, and the experiences of women during their migration journey were rarely taken into consideration. Doreen Indra has shown in 1987 that a systematic neglect of gender has been taking place in every facet of refugees, and mass media materials have contributed to the common belief that a refugee are men and only men (Houstoun et al., 1984).

Aiming at improving the situation of women migrants/refugees, the feminization of migration was introduced to international migration studies and managed to be seen as a “fact” of the new millennium's global migration scene (Piper, 2003). However, the term

was, and in all likelihood, is still used to describe an absolute rise in the numbers of women migrants moving on their own (mostly for economic purposes). However, the definition of feminization of migration has received a lot of challenges over the past 50 years and the fact that the definition of the term received many critiques over the past years resulted in constant changes of the definition, and made it hard to find a particular one of the phenomenon.

Now the debate over the appropriateness of using the term is complicated and beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, and in order to seek answers to the question that is meant to be put on the table here, it is crucial to establish a clear differentiation line between the feminization of migration process and the feminization of points of view on migration (Vause, 2009), and in the sake of doing so, a brief overview of the different definitions of the term is necessary.

While many migration researchers have defined the so-called feminization of migration as a contemporary phenomenon that indicates an increase in a sex ratio which describes the proportion of women migrants equaling or exceeding that of men in migration streams (Houstoun, Kramer, and Barrett, 1984), more recent studies have showed that historical migration flows were already gender balanced, during the interwar period (Schrover, 2013), and before that in the early twentieth century (Donato and Gabaccia 2015), or even during the infamous transatlantic slave trade that occurred among the African regions and the Americas between the 16th and 19th centuries, which were female predominant (Gabaccia, 2016).

Some other scholars have defined feminization of migration in terms of absolute growth in the visibility of women within the total number of international migrants, relative to that of women within the past decades, rather than men. Nevertheless, the growth was too small to prove this point of view, as the proportion of women grew from 46.8% in 1960 to only 49.6%, in 2005, which is apparently not enough to justify a feminization of international migration (Zlotnik, 2005). Feminization of points of views on migration. What we seem to be missing here is the fact that feminization of migration is not a contemporary phenomenon that took place about a half a century ago, but rather, women have been always on the move. Only women's experiences were mostly neglected in the scholarships written on international migration. Now in the late 1960s and early

1970s it was extremely important to feminize international migration research in order to bring women migrants' experiences out of the shadow, and to achieve a more just environment for women migrants (Castels and Miller, 2013).

Historically, migration scholarships have long portrayed migrants as male breadwinners usually followed by their "families" (the term that women migrants' role was limited to within migration literature). "What is Migration History?" is a case in point to exemplify this, as in their short introduction to the history of migration, Christiane Harzig and Dirk Hoerder pointed out that the common understanding of a "migrant" back in the 19th and mid-20th centuries was a young "male" dreaming of better opportunities in the west, "Go West, young man!" Whereas gender and race were not a category within the field of study according to the book, "Women were hardly mentioned," and all migrants thought to be "white", this wrongful common belief "overshadowed migration streams that were actually dominated by females" (Harzig and Hoerder, 2009).

In other words, feminization of migration scholars limited the existence of women in their researches to wives and children migrating to join their spouses, fathers and brothers (Castles and Miller 2009), which also neglected the important role of women as independent migrants (Kofman, 1999).

These researches limiting the role of women migrants to being passive companions, or family members were still an improvement when compared to those based on the assumption that migration was purely limited to males. And in spite of the gaps in the early gender and migration studies, these studies managed to successfully call the attention to women and increased visibility of their role, and the issue of gender relations in general (Cortes, 2016). Each study has contributed to a better understanding of international females' migration,

In fact, the positive outcomes of feminization of migration research have been quite remarkable in the past 5 decades, yet the negative consequences of feminization of migration were hardly noticed, or at least mentioned, by migration scholars. So, is feminization of migration a tool of women's empowerment or has it become new way of subordinating women?

As mentioned above, the visibility of women migrants and gender relations, in general, has increased in most of the academic literature in general, of a particular point, that written on migration during the past decades (Lutz, 2010). Yet, some of these works drifted away from the original goal of feminization of migration. Some narratives, for instance, portrayed migration as a

liberating path that frees women from restrictive family control and unequal gender roles, especially when women become the breadwinners abroad. In this case women were displayed as heroes, while on the other side of the coin, other narratives display female migrants as constant victims of trafficking, or sexual and racial abuse (Schwenken, 2008).

THE DUALISM OF FEMINIZATION OF MIGRATION

No matter how further attention gender receives in literature it is never commensurate, unless it is written to achieve gender-mainstreaming, and to change the ingrained structure of inequalities in gender relations and roles, rather than generalizing the idea that men are offenders and women are victims.

These extreme views distort the real image of migration and display men as rapists or traffickers, or "sexist pigs" who abuse women in the patriarchal societies, whereas women migrants are showed as passive victims who escape various forms of gendered-bias in countries of origin to reach countries of destination in which they are "always" discriminated, abused and trafficked based on their ethnicity/race, gender and the status of being migrants/refugees/asylum seekers.

This, also, creates a sexualized culture where sexual objectification is predominant and women are treated as special cases or objects. Meaning that, when we call for gender-equality and women's empowerment, we need to understand that gender is the different socially constructed masculine and feminine behaviors, roles and activities, while, sex, on the other hand, is the biological and psychological differences between men and women (Gullu, 2019).

Thus a feminization of migration research or points of view on migration is what we lack nowadays (Vause, 2009), rather than feminization of migration. Because understanding gender nuances the misunderstood definition of the term "feminization" which is not about a group of angry extremist women calling for coercive rights over men, or a radical reordering of society in which men's role is eliminated in the different aspects of life, including migration, but rather, it is about defining patterns and directions of the mobility of genders (Piper, 2005; Verschuur, 2013).

CONCLUSION

To sum up, it is hard to conduct a valid argument on the importance of feminizing international migration in the light of the demagogic definition of the term by researchers as "cliché" or mere slogans. The contrasting arguments on the feminization of migration have created an atmosphere of tension in the field. Although feminization of migration research has managed to drag

the world's attention to the fact that migration's consequences are not the same for men and women, it has placed women migrants at the heart of chaotic, paradoxical and counter-intuitive discussions.

Thusly, the dualism of feminization of migration lies in its importance to shed light on the neglected experiences and role of women migrants, whereas at the same time, and almost half a century later, the research has drifted away from its initial purpose of fighting gender inequalities, although the term "gender" did not exist back then.

This regression has disrupted gender identity and created ambivalence for women, in which they were put in a subordinate position to men depriving them of any agency, and even when they were meant to be represented as heroes, more restrictions were imposed upon them.

Concluding that international migration steams have witnessed periods of feminization and those of masculinization in accordance with different push and pull factors and other conditions, thus, it is more accurate and beneficial to use the term feminization of points of view on migration because that includes a feminization of the way we analyze migration steams and migratory context using gender-sensitive data collecting tools.

REFERENCES

- [1] Castel, S., & Miller, M. J. (2013). *The Age of Migration, Fifth Edition: International Population Movements in the Modern World* 5th edition by Castles, Stephen, de Haas, Hein, Miller PhD, Mark J. (2013) Paperback (Fifth Edition). One piece.
- [2] Champion, T., & Fielding, T. (1993). *Migration Processes and Patterns: Research Progress and Prospects* (1st ed.). *Belhaven Press.
- [3] Cortes, G. (2016). Women and Migrations: Those Who Stay. *EchoGéo*, 37, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.4000/echogeo.14892>
- [4] Gabbacia, D. R. (2016). Feminization of Migration. *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Gender and Sexuality Studies*, 1–3. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118663219>
- [5] Güllü, C. (2019). Syrian Refugee Women And Girls in Turkey & The Istanbul Convention. http://turkishpolicy.com/files/articlepdf/syrian-refugee-women-and-girls-in-turkey-the-istanbul-convention_en_6810.pdf
- [6] Harzig, C., Hoerder, D., & Gabaccia, D. R. (2009). *What is Migration History?* (1st ed.). Polity.
- [7] Piper N., 2003, Feminization of labor migration as violence against women. International, regional, and local non-governmental organization responses in Asia, *Violence against Women*, 9(6), pp. 723-745.
- [8] Piper N., 2005, "Gender and migration", commissioned background paper for the Global Commission on International Migration, Geneva, GCIM.
- [9] Schwenken, H. (2008). Beautiful Victims and Sacrificing Heroines: Exploring the Role of Gender Knowledge in Migration Policies. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 33(4), 770–776. <https://doi.org/10.1086/528744>
- [10] The Female Face of Migration. (2012). Caritas Internationalis, 1-16. <http://www.caritas.org/includes/pdf/backgroundmigration.pdf>
- [11] Vause, S., 2009, "Genre et migrations internationales Sud-Nord: une synthèse de la littérature", Centre de recherche en démographie et sociétés, Document de travail du Sped, 32, 50 p.
- [12] Zlotnik, H., (2005, May). International Migration and the Millennium Development Goals. Retrieved from: https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/migration_report_2005.pdf
- [13] Verschuur, C., 2013, "Theoretical debates on social reproduction and care: The articulation between the domestic and the global economy", in Oso Casas L., Ribas Mateos N., *International Handbooks on Gender Series*, pp. 145-161.