Local/Global Encounters

Interregional Migration: The challenge for gender and development

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ABSTRACT  Sara R. Farris interrogates contemporary debates on migration and development by highlighting the role played by gender. She focuses on female migration to Europe with an historical and sociological perspective, showing how the number of women involved in international migrations has dramatically increased in the last 20 years. She analyses the main patterns of female migration and the challenges and specificities associated with the increasing presence of women in the receiving countries. She then shows how this growth in female migration is associated with development by drawing examples from recent literature and especially from South Asian contexts.

KEYWORDS  female migration; developmental policies; Europe; South Asia; gender studies

Introduction

A recent article by the well-known migration scholar Stephen Castles (2008) reported an anecdote that gives a clear idea of the contemporary public debate on migrations and development. After being told that development policies do not reduce but rather increase international migration, an ex-EU external affairs policy official admitted that he was shocked. One of his strongest beliefs had been undermined: that is, the idea that development policies reduce international migration because they are supposed to increase the wealth of the country and to prevent people from feeling the need/desire to leave it. The fact that the link between developmental policies and international migration has been overlooked, if not totally denied by international bodies, can be confirmed by observing that it was only very recently that the World Bank, for instance, initiated a Research Programme on international migration and development.

The inextricable link between development and migration appears to be strongly confirmed by the data on international migration trends. According to the last report made available by the United Nations the number of international migrants in the world doubled between 1960 and 2005 with about 190 million people living outside their country of birth. However, there appears to be a prejudice that is even stronger than the one that leads to the neglect of the relation between migration and development policies: namely, the gendered nature of international migrations. According to
Morrison, Schiff and Sjöblom, authors of the first World Bank Report on international women migrations, ‘the current share of women in the world’s population of international migrants is close to half, and available evidence suggests that migration flows and their impacts are strongly gendered. Until recently, however, there has been a striking lack of gender analysis in the economics literature on international migration and development’ (2007: 1). Why is the participation of women in migration flows overlooked? Is there a difference in international migration patterns between women and men? And above all, what is the link between development policies and women international migrations?

Assessing the nature of women’s international migrations worldwide is an impossible task in the short space of an article. In order to answer these questions, I will therefore focus first on female migration flows to Europe, particularly from South and South-East Asia, and then on the relation between the increasing feminization of migration and developmental processes that have taken place in South Asia.

The increasing feminization of migration flows to Europe

Unlike the period until the late 1940s, Northern Europe started to become a receiving and not a sending area of migration flows after the Second World War. In the 1950s and early 1960s, the industrial core of the European Community (EC) (Germany, France, Belgium, The Netherlands) recruited workers from Southern Europe, by means of the financial help provided by the Marshall Plan for post-war reconstruction, thus favouring new economic development. These initial intra-European migration flows from the South to the North of the continent after the Second World War were thus immediately marked by developmental policies.

Nonetheless, the subsequent industrialization of Northern Italy and the political and economical changes that took place in Spain, Portugal and Greece – the main ‘sending countries’ of migrants up to that point – led to internal migration in these countries or to repatriation of workers who had earlier gone to Northern Europe. Thus, by the mid-1960s there was a decline in intra-community mobility. More and more migrant workers came from outside the EC, especially from Turkey and North Africa, while in the UK – which entered the EEC in 1973 – migration flows continued to arrive predominantly from the Commonwealth, particularly from the Caribbean and South Asia, almost without restrictions until the 1960s. Despite the variety of situations and nationalities involved in the post-World War II international migrations to Europe, a main feature of these flows of mobile workers was their gender: they were in fact mainly men. This element was due, above all, to the demand for labour in key sectors traditionally employing men, for example heavy industry. Thus women, although present in these flows, were still a low percentage of the entire migrants’ population in Europe (Böhning, 1984).

However, the economic downturn in Europe following the oil crisis of 1973 (reorienting the entire Western economy towards what has been termed Post-Fordism) altered the nature of migration into Europe. As economic growth slowed, guest-worker systems were shut down (though we should remember that it was largely unskilled labour that was excluded in this process). The primary reason for migrants entering Europe now became family reunification. The proportion of women migrating into Europe thus increased. Furthermore, the difficulty of acquiring work permits in northern European states oriented labour flows into southern European states, which until then had been states of emigration and had not yet developed clearly defined immigration policies. Although women had always been present in migration flows (and even in predominant numbers depending on the community – Filipinos or Malaysians, for instance), their number increased from the 1970s, mainly as family reunification permit holders but increasingly as workers (Sinke, 2006).

Patterns of female migration to Europe

Despite the evidence of the increasing feminization of international migrations from the 1970s onwards, the literature on the topic as well as the
public debate has mainly been gender neutral (Carling, 2005). Nonetheless, even though small in number and often neglected, there have been a number of studies that have tried to break such a gender-blindness. In the 1980s and 1990s, these studies have helped especially to identify different patterns of female migrations, particularly focusing on the role played by women in the so-called 'migratory chain'. They have also highlighted the difference between women and men migrants in the receiving contexts, both in economic and socio-cultural terms.

Two types are usually identified in the literature with regard to the patterns of female migration. The first pattern includes those women migrants called dependants. This category is used to signify women who started migrating to Europe in the 1970s up to the present, mainly for familial reunification. This type has represented almost all female migrants from communities with Muslim backgrounds. Their status as dependants has tended to emphasize their passive involvement in the migratory project of the family and also their inactivity in the labour market. However, an increasing number of studies has finally questioned these assumptions. First, several qualitative inquiries have shown how these women play an active role in the migratory decisions. Second, although these women have often been described as 'inactive' in the labour market, they have been, in reality, frequently employed in the black sector (especially in domestic service, as many studies throughout Europe report). Additionally, of course, they also provide unpaid domestic work for the family, which is too often disregarded in the literature on the economic role of women migrants joining their family members in the immigration contexts. This pattern of female migration, for instance, has been dominant in Italy, the UK and France among, respectively, the Moroccan, Bangladeshi and North African communities.

The second pattern of female migration to Europe identifies those women migrants who started the migratory chain and were then followed by other family members. They have therefore been called forerunners. In general, women who migrated before their partners and family members in the late 1970s and at the beginning of the 1980s used to come to Europe from countries with a Christian Catholic majority. Women from these countries (Philippines, South America and increasingly Eastern Europe after 1989) migrated into Europe due to special bilateral agreements (in the UK until 1980, for example, special quotas for the recruitment of domestic workers were in place; Filipino women obtained the most permits). They also arrived by means of more 'informal' channels (in Italy, for example, Catholic organizations functioned as mediating institutions for women from developing countries – especially South America, the Philippines and the former Italian colony Eritrea).

With regard to the differences at the economic and cultural level – broadly speaking – between women and men migrants in the contexts of immigration, the academic as well as the public debates tend to highlight several aspects that identify migratory processes as highly gendered phenomena. The trend of the increasing feminization of international migration flows in Europe from the 1970s onwards has revealed at least two elements that are worth stressing. First, the growth of female migrants has demonstrated that the idea of guest-worker systems – namely, the idea that it could have been possible to employ foreigner workers for as many years as they were required and then to get rid of them – was illusory and ineffective. In fact, the post-1973 stoppage policies forced male migrants to settle and to stabilize their migratory project, resulting in them seeking to reunify their families in the receiving country. Second, the dramatic presence of women migrants has revealed the worsening conditions of welfare states regimes in northern Europe (or their absence in southern Europe) after the economic downturn. The increasing participation of so-called ‘national women’ in the formal labour market has led to a need for a replacement labour force for those services (particularly care services) that the ‘national women’ had previously performed. In reality, it has largely been migrant women who have filled this role.

Furthermore, with the increasingly political nature of migration (especially after the fall of the Berlin Wall) and the securitization of issues related to migrants, the specificity of female
migration in Europe has been recognized in at least two senses. First, women migrants, as spouses and mothers, have been identified as the key element for social and cultural integration. The latter has increasingly mobilized both academic and political debates and it is one of the main fields in which the harmonization of migration policies in Europe is taking place. In this context, women migrants have been called ‘vectors of integration’ (Kofman et al., 2000). A second crucial peculiarity of women migrants lies in the fact that they are not perceived as an economic threat (nor as a threat to personal security, as the mass media has increasingly depicted male migrants – especially from certain areas – as criminals and deviants). While male migrants, especially after the economic downturn in 1973 and especially in southern Europe, have often been considered to be ‘in competition’ with national workers, women migrants have not been perceived in the same way. This has been mainly due to their labour segregation in sectors in which national women are not available.

In light of this, we can see how international migrations cannot be fully understood without the prism of gender, especially considering the recent flows. While the initial growth of women migrants in the late 1970s was in reality mainly due to family reunification, female migratory patterns have enormously diversified over the last 20 years, as more women have tended to become forerunners of the migratory chain. What has occurred in the ‘sending countries’ to lead this growth and change of patterns? Can we identify a link between this phenomenon and recent development policies?

Female migration and development

When we try to answer the above questions we discover that different theories have attempted to explain the increasing feminization of international migrations that occurred in recent years in distinct ways. Focusing on these theories will allow us not only to acknowledge some of the most important academic debates surrounding the phenomenon of international female migrations, but also to recognize how many different elements are involved in the processes that lead to the mobility of women from developing countries towards Europe.

The first theoretical paradigm that attempts to explain these phenomena includes so-called push-pull factors analysis and behavioural models. These theories not only tend to locate decision-making in individuals, but rather within wider social units. They also tend to conceptualize the reasons for migration within a quite reductive economic framework (cf. Castles, 2008). Although describing some aspects involved in the migratory processes, individual choice theories could be criticized in several respects: first, international labour migrations have a ‘selective nature’, which means that it is not the poorest who can afford the difficulties of migration (as in a push-pull paradigm), but rather people with some resources (educational, financial and so forth); second, and more importantly, these approaches are based upon the assumption of migrants’ free movement. However, there are very strict regulations both in sending and in receiving countries, which do not allow people, and especially women, to make ‘individual free choices’. Bangladesh provides a good example of this situation. As reported by Siddiqui from the ILO (2005), the Bangladeshi Government issued several circulars in the 1980s and 1990s imposing a ban on the migration of, alternatively, either all categories of female workers other than professionals, or only unskilled and semi-skilled categories. Finally, in 2003, the Government eased the restrictions on the migration of unskilled and semi-skilled women over 35 years, while those under 35 years are still not allowed to migrate on their own (Siddiqui, 2008: 13). In light of this example, we can thus not only question the simplifications of ‘rational choice theories’, but also understand the nature of Bangladeshi women migrants in Europe. As already noted, women from Bangladesh started increasingly migrating towards Europe, especially in the 1980s and 1990s. Nonetheless, they are almost all reported as ‘dependants’, namely as migrants for family reunification. The strict ban on women migrations from Bangladesh thus can explain part of this reality.
The second cluster of theories is grouped under the label of family theories. These theories have focused on the family unit as the key to understanding migration, studying the decision to migrate as part of household strategies. For example, the Sri Lankan government signed several bilateral agreements in the 1970s with receiving countries in search of female labour (domestic labour, hospitals, etc.). Several studies of this process have emphasized how entire households participated in the decision of allowing a woman of the family to migrate. In many cases, marriages with locals were arranged before the departure in order to ‘protect’ the woman and in order to plan the future reunification of the family in the receiving country. These theories have also focused upon the household as the receiver of migrants’ remittances (which have grown exceptionally and are one of the reasons for the World Bank’s interest in migrations as a supposed vector of development). Women’s remittances are considered by these theories to be more reliable and a basis for long-term development. Studies in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, the Philippines and Indonesia, for example, have shown that women send a larger percentage of their remittances back to the sending country than men, partly because their position as domestic workers means that their food and lodging is provided by the employer in the receiving country. These remittances have enabled the households to invest in higher levels of health care, education and so forth. Although these approaches have the merit of depicting an important level of the migratory project and the role played by extended families in supporting the migrant member, they obviously need to be framed within the wider context of international labour demand and uneven development between sending and receiving countries.

Network analysis theory – the third most important paradigm we will consider on this topic – focuses on the migratory chain, attempting to analyse the role of social networks and the other institutions that link individuals across time and space. Social networks are argued to be crucial in sustaining migration flows (providing information, accommodation and employment for incoming migrants) and to provide an important link between the individual actor and the structural context that fashions migration flows (Boyd, 1989). This theoretical corpus has recently been reinforced by the so-called institutional migration analysis, which provides an account of the complex of international organizations and institutions that link employers in the developed or rapidly developing economies with individuals in the furthest peripheries of the third world – for example, public and private recruiting agencies (Portes et al., 2007). In this regard, Sri Lanka constitutes an interesting example. In the last 20 years, the Sri Lankan government took several institutional measures in order to favour the encounter between labour supply and demand, and especially with regard to women. As reported by Siddiqui, ‘pre-departure skill and awareness trainings, free insurance coverage, provision for pension scheme, low interest pre-departure loans, low interest housing loans, scholarship for women migrant children, distribution of school books and equipments, organizing health camps for left behind family members are some of the incentives used by the government’ (Siddiqui, 2008: 12). The combination between social and institutional networks, thus, seems to have had an important impact especially upon the migration decision of women from South Asia in recent years.

Finally, world system theory explains female migrations as the result of women’s incorporation into and/or expulsion from the new capitalist mode of production. At the heart of these accounts is a focus on the unequal distribution of economic and political power on a global level and the way in which migration is a mechanism for mobilizing cheap labour from the ‘periphery’ for capital in the ‘core’ countries. This theory focuses on ‘economic restructuring’ after the Second World War and the decolonization process, arguing that the ex-colonial countries have continued to exploit former colonies by maintaining and creating privileged channels through which they can have access to cheaper materials and labour. ‘Developmental measures’ play a significant role here in shaping migration patterns. For example, the Sri Lankan government’s decision to enter into free trade zones and endorsement of
structural adjustment programmes at the end of the 1970s allowed the establishment of numerous industries oriented towards export (particularly garments) that employed women from rural areas in particular. The subsequent closure of these factories and unemployment of these women did not lead to their return to the rural areas; rather, more often, it led to migration as an alternative. Saskia Sassen’s analysis of female international migrations (although she cannot be entirely assimilated to world system theory (WST)) provides numerous examples of the role played by the offshore economy not only in incorporating and expelling these women into and from new modes of productions and social relations, but also in teaching them ‘how to migrate’ and how to become economically independent. Female unemployment thus creates a basin of potential labour power available for core countries where demand for female work in the care sector is high (Sassen, 2008).

Conclusion

The increasing feminization of international migrations even from those countries from which male migrants are still predominant – as in the case of South Asia – enables us to draw out the intimate link that exists between migration processes and development strategies. In the receiving countries in Europe, women not only play different roles in the cultural negotiations that take place at the heart of the so-called integration dilemma, but they also play a crucial role in the economy, allowing national women to participate in the official labour market while replacing them in what is still perceived to be a feminine vocation: that is, care labour. The presence of women migrants thus speaks to us of the state of welfare regimes in Europe as well as of the difficulties of conceiving care and reproductive labour in the household as tasks to be shared between women and men. On the other hand, the predominant presence of women migrants in the care sector in Europe tells us something about development policies in the sending countries. In many cases, as we have seen, the international recruitment of women for the care sector has taken place by means of bilateral agreements between sending and receiving countries. Moreover, international female migrations are also the signs of the failures of so-called development policies (de Haas, 2008). As the world system analysis explains very clearly, women have been the first to be recruited in the new factories and sweat shops opened with the entrance of the respective countries in the Free Trade Zones, and therefore were the first to be expelled from the labour process once these businesses failed and/or were transferred to more ‘convenient’ areas (i.e., with cheaper labour). These processes have impacted upon women more than men, for several reasons. By eroding the self-sustaining rural economies and forcing women to move towards industrial labour, these policies and processes have also dismantled the cultural habits and family models that used to regulate the relationship between women and men in rural areas. These processes thus have had a chain effect upon international migration processes and have rendered the migration of women already trained in industrial labour processes less unlikely.

As a result, we can see how development policies and international migration are ultimately parts of the same process. The increasing internationalization and feminization of migrations should thus be seen as one of the consequences of the increasing internationalization of the economy and the feminization of the international labour market.

Note

1 Though not the most recent one, an excellent overview on the topic is still Kofman et al. (2000).

References


