

Is there a feminisation of migration or feminisation of migration research?

This research note addresses one of the key themes included in the section '*The Changing Character of International Migration since the 1980s*' of Chapter 12 (Population and Migration). This section presents the main aspects that have characterised international migration since the 1980s. The chapter addresses (1) the centrality of refugees in migration flows; (2) the growth of undocumented migrants; (3) the transnational character of migration; and (4) how the significance of independent women in migration flows is one of the features of the new era of migration. I argue in this note that *more than a feminisation of migration flows, there has been a strong feminisation of migration research and discourse since the 1980s*. This feminisation of discourse has been due to the increased strong contestation of feminist scholarship from the previous invisibility of women in migration research, more than an increase of women participating in migration experiences.

In the last two decades, scholars have claimed that there has been a shift in gender ratios and a period of feminisation of migration flows, which characterised a new age of migration (Castles and Miller, 1998)¹. As it is developed in the chapter, early migration studies only dealt with women 'left behind' by the migrant husbands. However, these claims about the feminisation of migration flows are contested by studies showing that the share of women international migrants rose by just 2 per cent in the period 1960–2000 (from 46.6% to 48.8%) (Zlotnik, 2005)². This modest increase does not seem to reflect the large body of literature on women and migration since the 1980s. Scholars are starting to argue that women have been always participants of migration trajectories and what has occurred has been a feminisation of the scientific interest in the issue of gender and migration, more than a feminisation of migration processes. Thus, the greater visibility of female migrants in research over the last decades is due to the feminisation of the 'migratory discourse' and has contributed to the perception of an increasing feminisation of migration (Oso and Garson, 2005)³.

But why has this visibility of migrant women taken place and how? The visibility of migrant women since the 1980s has been the result of an enduring claim of feminist literature to advocate for the visibility of women in migration studies, which has evolved successfully. The first stage of migration research is characterised by the invisibility of women and/or gender perspective and during the seventies and eighties, feminist scholars argued against the exclusion of women from migration studies. The development of feminist research within migration studies has revealed that 'birds of passage are also women' (Morokvasic, 1984⁴) and the invisibility of women has been due to the 'gender blindness' of researchers and the scarcity of quantitative sources where gender disaggregation was available. In other cases, research would report on women as being dependant on their husbands or parents, not leaving space to analyse individual trajectories or significant contributions to the economic sphere.

Migration scholarship has argued (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2005)⁵ that this problematic omission has been solved by firstly what has been labelled as the 'add and stir' approach and secondly, the 'women only' approach (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2005)⁶. The first has been a useful step to compare differential values – mainly quantitative – for men and women, but does not acknowledge that gender is about power relations and negotiations and cannot be understood by simply including women in the equation. The 'women only' research develops deep portrayals of women's lives but runs the risk of presenting a victimized image of immigrant women with limited capabilities to mobilize their resources (e.g. women as trafficked and exploited agents). The late 1980s and early 1990s migration studies are characterized by the inclusion of new feminist approaches in migration

research, leading to the analysis of gender relation dimensions. Consequently there has been a growth in the analysis of the gendering of migration patterns, as well as the intersection between migration trajectories, gender relations, ethnicity, class, etc. (Anthias, 2012)⁷.

Despite this large body of scholarship focusing on gender analysis in migration studies, research offering consistent empirical measures on the feminisation of migration flows is scarce (Donato, 1992)⁸ and usually the studies developed are focused on one country (Donato et al, 2011)⁹. Empirical research on the evolution of gender composition of migration flows is needed to contribute to these debates.

References

¹ Castles, S. and Miller, M. J. (1998): *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World*, New York: The Guilford Press.

² Zlotnik, Hania (2005). "International Migration Trends since 1980", in UNFPA (coord.) *International Migration and the Millennium Development Goals*. New York UNFPA, 2005, p. 29-38.

³ Oso, L. and Garson, J. (2005): Migrant women and the labour market: diversity and challenges, in *OCED and European Commission Seminar*, Brussels, 26-27 September 2005, 16 p.

⁴ Morokvasic, M. (1984): "Birds of passage are also women" in *International Migration Review* Vol. 18, No. 4, Special Issue: Women in Migration (Winter, 1984), pp. 886-907

⁵ Hondagneu-Sotelo, P. (2005). *Gendering Migration: Not for feminists only and not only in the household* (No. 363), in *Working Paper Series*, Princeton University, Center for Migration and Development

⁶ *Ibid*

⁷ Anthias, F. (2012): "Hierarchies of social location, class and intersectionality: Towards a translocational frame" in *International Sociology*, November 28, 2012

⁸ Donato, K. (1992) "Understanding U.S. Immigration: Why Some Countries Send Women and Others Send Men." In D. Gabaccia, ed. *Seeking Common Ground: Multidisciplinary Studies of Immigrant Women in the United States*. Greenwood Press.

⁹ Donato (2011): "Variations in the Gender Composition of Immigrant Populations: How They Matter", in *International Migration Review* Volume 45 Number 3 (Fall 2011):495–526