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Women in International Migration: Transnational Networking and the Global Labor Force

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BRONTE KUEHNIS, JAN 31 2021

Women are continuing to migrate at an increasing rate, particularly within Europe, Africa, and Oceania, and have developed a pronounced role within the global labor market (Pew Research, 2006). In the international community, a dialogue has disseminated to include gender in migration research and highlight divergence among experiences for migrant women. Gender differences impact who migrates and to where, the risks associated with migration, how people migrate and utilize their networks, resources available, and ties maintained with the country of origin (IOM, 2019). It is fundamental in gendered migration discussions to understand how the foundations and changes to gender power dynamics, roles, and expectations are altering the flow of female migration. Alterations to migration trends have related labor market needs to the reasons why women may be migrating. In fact, more female migrants are migrating independently for work, education, or to fulfill a role as head of household (Migration Data Portal, 2020). The presence of migrant women in the labor force is also greater than that of non-migrant women in all countries except those of low-income (Migration Data Portal, 2020). To further examine the gender-specific experiences of migrant women and how these experiences are reflected in the global labor force, this paper will seek to answer the following question: What driving factors produce the decision to migrate among female labor migrants?

Most studies on migration have typically only focused on males, or combine the migration patterns of both men and women into one category (Boyd, 1989; DaVanzo, 1978; Todaro, 1969; Pessar & Mahler, 2003; Boyd & Grieco, 2003). The unique experiences of female migrant workers are also often overlooked in the scholarly community because of the perpetuated assumption that women either migrate as dependents of a male breadwinner or are left behind by their husbands who have emigrated (Pedraza, 1991). Even the general assumptions which consider women in the migration process at all still place them as a secondary actor to male migrants. However, female migrant workers have a dominant force in migration trends, and their experiences are distinct from their male counterparts. In fact, the female presence in labor flows into the United States has been increasing for several decades (Donato, 1994; Sassen-Koob, 1984). Globally, the number of female migrants relative to population has been steadily inclining, with 79.6 million emigrated in 1995 and 130.2 million in 2019 (Migration Data Portal, 2019).

There are several risks associated with female migration. While migrants in general are subject to the lowest wages, female migrants in particular are increasingly targeted for dead-end and often temporary low-wage work (Fernandez-Kelly, 1994; Fernandez-Kelly & Garcia, 1988). Overall, migrant women are more highly exploited due to lower wages, risky working conditions, and the types of jobs available to them. Highly-skilled migrant women are very often underemployed and receive less pay and status for their qualifications, and this has been observed in developed countries such as New Zealand (Fleury, 2016). Female migrant workers have a dominant role in the service sector, including domestic work, as well as garment and microelectronic industries (Fernandez-Kelly & Garcia, 1988; Boyd & Grieco, 2003). For undocumented workers in sectors such as domestic work, there are many workers' rights violations that occur consistently including sexual harassment, lack of payment for services, and extended work hours (Chavez, 1992).

The risks surrounding migration do not discount the agency of migrant women. In fact, women have a fundamental role not only in improving their own migration conditions, but also a wide scope of transnational interactions. The theories which best convey this role also serve as a more pragmatic model for international migration than traditional

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interpretations. The next sections will examine various viewpoints to determine the reasons why women migrate and apply relevant theories to critically examine such claims. This paper will analyze sex-disaggregated data on female migration and reach the conclusion that the world systems model is the most authentic indicator of the determinants for women to migrate and work abroad.

Push-pull theories of migration originate from Ernst Ravenstein's "Laws of Migration" (Ravenstein, 1876, 1885, 1889). The major extensions of the laws which address gender conclude that females are more migratory than males over shorter distances, males are more present in international migration than females, and the primary causes of migration are universally economic (King, 2012). Ravenstein's research has launched subsequent studies to introduce a mathematical model consisting of various factors which "push" migrants out of a given country and "pull" them into another (Dorigo & Tobler, 1983; Lee, 1966; Tobler, 1987). Thus, the original push-pull model for migration has been expanded to incorporate a varying series of push and pull factors at different degrees of influence to predict migration patterns.

While Ravenstein's initial laws found economic factors to dictate both push and pull factors, more recent studies have found that a multitude of "push" factors can more accurately predict migration than "pull" factors (Jenkins, 1977; Massey, et al., 1994). These conditions include the state of economic development, institutional conditions, governmental policies, and regime of the country one emigrates from (Jenkins, 1977; Massey, et al., 1994). Push-pull theories create an equation for various causes of migration relative to the actual outcome of migration but do not necessarily capture, however, the structural inequalities within systems of international migration. The push-pull model often neglects other significant influences such as historical implications, family dynamics, and sociopolitical and economic dependency between nations (O'Reilly, 2013). Legacies of colonization, for example, account for the relations between groups and states across borders, and maintain economic, political, interpersonal and social ties between postcolonial and colonizing states.

The microeconomic model of migration observes individuals and their households to indicate that people are more likely to migrate to maximize their own human capital. Microeconomic theories are often perceived as idealistic because they provide human agency to the study of migration and emphasize the importance of an individual's decision to emigrate from their country of origin (Wood, 1982). Models which highlight the agency of one's own decision to migrate are particularly relevant to the migration of women, as female migrants are often overlooked as main actors in migratory processes. DaVanzo (1978) found that families whose heads of household are unemployed or dissatisfied with their current jobs are more likely to emigrate than those not looking for work. While this finding is significant, the study did not observe single-parent households nor the wages or employment of wives. Therefore, it cannot be determined if the employment status of women specifically is an indicator of family migration as interpreted through this micro data model.

Household units in migration have been criticized in previous scholarship due to their lack of representation of the role of women in labor migration (Matthei, 1996). It is significant that women are especially active in determining the migration of themselves in addition to their kin and children (Matthei, 1996). Traditional household measures also lack inclusion of single-mother households, divorced or separated women, and single women who have never been married. As such, this interpretation is inadequate when considering a wider range of family migration, of which the decision to marry or divorce may be a determinant of the decision to migrate (Mincer, 1978). One study which observed three Asia-Pacific countries found that microeconomic theory could be applied to highly skilled migrant workers, but family and lifestyle conditions were also prominent determinants of emigration and return migration (Gibson & McKenzie, 2009). This literature suggests that economic prospects alone do not provide a sufficient model for family or female migration.

The world systems approach views migration as an indicator of interactions between countries and within a transnational lense of communication and movement. When applied to female migration it can reveal how women contribute to an international network of migrant communities and employment opportunities. While social networks have been identified as a fundamental role in the decision to migrate, relevant literature often neglects the significance of women by assuming they are the dependents of male counterparts or are absorbed into the household (Massey, et al., 1989). On the contrary, Barbara Pinto in her experience as an immigration attorney in the United

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States has observed that many if not most of the women who seek out immigration services are single and not a member of any other household (Pinto, 2020). In developing and underdeveloped countries, more women are emigrating independently and not as a dependent or household member (Sorensen, 2004). Prior research on migrants from countries in Central America, Southeast Asia, and Europe indicate that women utilize their international social networks to arrange their own transportation to migrate (Hondagneu-Sotelo, Triano, & Phizacklea, 1996; Georges & Wiest, 1990; Stivens, 1987; Singh, 2006; Richter, 2004). Furthermore, female migrants are found to assist each other in acquiring jobs upon arrival (Chavez, 1992). However, this advantage in transnational networking applies particularly to women in domestic and low-paying work rather than professional or highly-skilled women (Hagan, 1998).

Transnational migration is a more recent characterization to describe migrants who settle in a new country but maintain close ties with their country of origin. A study on the transnational connections of migrants from St. Vincent, Grenada, the Philippines, and Haiti finds that these economic, political, and social ties encourage migrants to remain invested in the family relationships and economic stability of their home countries, and this often results in return migration (Shiller, Basch, & Blanc, 1995). Transnationalism may serve as a strong indicator of the decision to emigrate or for return migration among modern migrants, and this complex movement contributes to culturally multi-layered communities. Social remittances between sending and receiving countries allow transnational communities to “adopt certain new ideas and practices while filtering out others,” (Levitt, 1998, 943-944). Women are particularly active in sending financial remittances to family in their country of origin, and female migrant domestic workers in New York have been known to use between 20 to 75 percent of their income for remittances (Colen, 1986). Female migrants also initiate “child fostering”^[1] with family to participate in international labor migration (Matthei, 1996).

Since migrants build a strong community presence with time in receiving countries, social ties and economic reliance also emerge from their movements. I predict that these ties between the country of origin and the receiving country provide more certainty in international migration systems and contribute significantly to the decision to migrate among migrant women. Transnational feminism refers to an anti-war activist movement, which was predominantly active during WWI and WWII, of which feminists contributed to the establishment of transnational networks and cooperation to achieve peace while solving global issues. I argue that this movement may also apply to the laws of migration in that the migration experiences of women who seek something that is lacking at home, work, or in the community, largely contribute to transnationalism. This can be exemplified through the collaborative networks between female migrants which determine their movement to receiving countries as well as their financial stability upon arrival, and those which launch the international migration of other women. The impact of these networks applies to economic systems and the various sectors that female migrant workers have a considerable presence in, and additionally to the establishment of immigrant communities which occurs over time. Hence, I propose that transnational networks cause women in particular to migrate and seek work abroad. This hypothesis can be drawn from the world systems theory because it considers the foundations that have been established through historical interactions between states and their peoples, and how this applies to the structure of those power relationships today. These foundations include the settlement and movement of migrants into the global labor force, and the unique treatment and experiences of women in these systems.

Following the rise in women’s migration, a feminist perspective has developed for transnational migration, and this field of study identifies how gender inequalities differentiate migration experiences along with divisions in labor and care services (Parreñas, 2009; Boyd & Grieco, 2003). The gendered lens on migration highlights the social institutions surrounding race and gender which contribute to contrastive experiences between men and women. Some of these differences, such as a tendency to rely more on family ties among women, have been interpreted through the development of this paper. However, targeting gender-specific indicators for the decision to migrate is less approached in literature as the answers lie within a complex web of theories which are applied distinctly to each type of migration: such as labor, temporary, refugee, illegal, and permanent (Boyd & Grieco, 2003). Differences among the experiences of female migrants and the decision to migrate have also been observed in the context of the location of sending and receiving communities or countries (Ghosh, 2009).

According to the 2004 *World Survey on the Role of Women in Development*, female migrants have a growing presence as migrant workers and more often move voluntarily “to become the principal wage earners for their

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families,” (2004 World Survey, 2006). This finding may indicate that migrant women chose to migrate for work to improve their own human capital, job security, or work opportunities, which supports the microeconomic model. It could also suggest that women seek to exert control over their own movement and capital concertededly, and this conclusion can explain transnational networking among women while rejecting the household model. Migration has also been found to advance the autonomy, capital, self-esteem, authority and value placed within families and communities, social equality, access to services, and reproductive, political, and human rights for women (Fleury, 2016).

Education and employment rates have ubiquitous influence on migration trends, and its relation to working women’s decision to migrate varies across region and status. Indigent or underserved women are more likely to migrate in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, higher education and employment rates in Mexico lead more women to migrate, and high employment and dissatisfaction in job positions indicate the intent to migrate among Moroccan women (Fleury, 2016). Despite the variations in these findings, it is evident that education level and job satisfaction motivate emigration and specific movements. Further observations expand on gender norms, structural inequalities, and gender discrimination at home and in the community as major driving factors towards a woman’s decision to migrate from countries in Africa, South Asia, Central America, and Europe (Fleury, 2016). Social networks within the transnational and at home stimulate international migration among women. In El Salvador and Morocco, women who migrate reduce the stigma and uncertainty associated with migration for other women (Mahler, 1999; Crivello 2003).

An increase in global female workforce participation and reduced access to social services in developed countries has led to a dependency from high-income countries on the labor force of low-income countries (Omelaniuk, 2005, as cited by Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2002). This dynamic between developed and lesser developed states has expanded the reliance on globalized economies and opened up various work opportunities in service sectors for migrant women (Omelaniuk, 2005, as cited by Sassen, 2003). This finding supports world systems and dependency models, as it places female migration at the center of the exploitation by “core” wealthy countries of the resources (including labor) in “periphery” underdeveloped countries for a cheaper cost. While there are several benefits for women to migrate, including elevating their economic independence and human capital, work opportunities may still be limited to the demands of developed or emerging countries. For female migrants from countries that are integrated into specific sectors of the global economy, such as the Philippines and India in the medical care industry, the appeal to migrate may become more secure.

Previous research has developed several key findings on changes in the determinants of female migration as well as demographic shifts among migrant women. Global competition and its leverage on the labor market have led more migrant women to seek work in the service sector rather than agriculture and manufacturing (Pew Research, 2006). As migrant women have become more dominant in the service sector, it may indicate that their essential presence in specific markets is contributing to the rise in female migration. Additionally, women are migrating more often to gain control over their mobility and standard of living, and this reflects a liberalization in gender relations (Pew Research, 2006). Since women also migrate to reap the benefits of greater socio-political freedom, gaining control over some aspect that is not immediately accessible is a theme among intent to migrate. Female migrants are becoming more educated since 1980 regardless of region of origin and age, less are migrating during their youth or childhood, and less are arriving married or having ever been married (Pew Research, 2006). The increase in education among female migrants can reflect global efforts directed at equal access to education and youth enrolment, especially in rural areas. The increasingly single movement of female migrants may be the effect of altered gender relations which determine intent to migrate.

The expansion of female migration has allowed for a more gender-balanced flow of international migration. Significantly, the increase in the migration of women is true among both the lesser-skilled and highly-skilled, with more highly-skilled women emigrating from less economically developed countries (Dumont, Martin, & Spielvogel, 2007). Literature from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) notes that the rise in international mobility of highly-skilled migrant women is disproportionate to the general migrant population when considering that women face unequal access to secondary education compared to men (Dumont, Martin, & Spielvogel, 2007). This raises further questions as to the causes for women with a higher education to be more inclined to migrate, particularly from lesser developed countries.

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Notably, women assist each other whether intentionally or indirectly in expanding women's international migration and migrant work opportunities across every region. There is a connection between gender-specific benefits of migration and the intent to migrate for better wages or jobs, wider enjoyment of civil liberties, and authority over one's own capital and security. There are also gendered risks involved in both the movement to a receiving country and treatment upon arrival. Female migrants often rely on the previous migration experiences of other women as well as their connections to communities in both the sending and receiving countries to lower these risks. Both limited education and a higher education correspond to the intent of women to migrate, and improved employment rates in the sending region may influence the actual opportunities or perception of job opportunities within the receiving community.

Based on the data interpreted through this paper, it is suggested that the world systems theory is the most accurate model in explaining why female labor migrants choose to migrate. The complexity of transnational networking and international mobility can reflect the multidimensional conditions which influence female migration. More women are emigrating single, and the desire for better work opportunities and status elevation in another country may be reassured in the experiences of generational populations of migrant women. Established transnational networks lower the risks for both single women and women with children. There is a greater affirmation of security upon arrival that is specifically adapted to the migrant woman's distinct experience in networking. Additionally, these connections are likely to lower the risks associated with transportation, immigration status, lack of community, low capital, and limited job opportunity. Furthermore, international labor demands have placed migrant women in a role where they do not compete with non-migrants within their sectors in developed and emerging countries. Since this is not true of migrants received in lesser developed countries, the dynamic between states illustrates the role of migration in the global economy and labor force. Additionally, less job opportunities in low-income countries and a prominent desire for economic independence can indicate why more women are migrating for work. In conclusion, the differences in female migration between higher and lower income countries supports the world systems model.

In consideration of the previous discussion, I suggest further research to identify differences in the experiences and decision to migrate between highly and lowly skilled female workers. As indicated in the above data, there are discrepancies between these groups, such as the advantages of networking. While some findings suggest that high employment can be indicative of the migration of women, this may better suggest limited accessibility to resources or obstructions to advancement while employed. Further research on the motives for return migration among women and its effects would advance the study of gendered migration, as transnationalism is known to be incorporated into this movement of people.

With the documented experiences of migrant women in mind, I note that many countries around the world require a complete reconstruction of their immigration policy to meet international migration demands and basic standards of human dignity. While exploitation, violence, and discrimination against migrants have gendered connotations, it is endured by all migrants at varying degrees consistent with intersectional analysis. Thus, comprehensive and universal policy must be applied to protect the human and working rights of all migrants, while acknowledging women's experiences and vulnerabilities. Specifically, I recommend policy to ensure migrants have equal access to resources including legal, medical, reproductive, educational, financial, and basic needs. Policy should aim to protect migrant and immigrant communities against discrimination and violence at work, at home, in public, and on the move. Protections of migrant working rights must be implemented equally regardless of immigration status. It is encouraged that all government agencies and immigration officials be closely monitored and directed to uphold migrant rights.

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Note

[1] "Child Fostering" refers to an interaction between female kin to launch transnational migration. When a woman migrates and leaves her children with family in the country of origin, she may send remittances to family for child care and economic security. The women receiving remittances are then able to build enough capital to secure their own migration.

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