

# Nineteenth Century Migration Trends and the Role of Women

Written by Kendra Morancy

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KENDRA MORANCY, JUN 28 2021

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Gendered roles and the role of women within the international community and the international space has shifted for generations. These paradigms have been challenged by feminist movements and ideals, human rights activists, and international conventions and agreements – all to bring us all closer to notions of gender equality, equality of the sexes, and international and national standards that promote the dignity of each and every individual in society. In this chapter, I analyze how the shifts in migration trends have affected women globally. To answer this question, I conducted a literature review using three primary sources that answered questions, such as: how have women migration trends changed? What are the trends that influenced this change? What are the causes and consequences of female dominated flows of migration? And what are the patterns of labor market incorporation of women migrants?

### Trends Defined

The most significant trend concerning women and international migration is that, by the last half of the 20th century, they dominated the largest of international migration flows (Pedraza 1991, 304). This trend goes against the long-standing stereotype that the average migrant is a single male and that the women and their families follow. While studies do show that women generally have moved across international borders to reunite with their families, this is not always the case (Pedraza 1991, 304). By 1984, males who were of working age only accounted for one-third of all immigrants into the United States (Pedraza 1991, 304). It is clear that by the late 1980s, the demographic of immigrants had transformed. The next question is why? Why were more women migrating throughout the 20th century?

The question of ‘why’ can be answered through multiple factors. The first and most obvious is the purpose of family reunification. According to Pedraza (1991), family reunification is what accounts for the sex distribution of immigrants in the US, as well as the availability of jobs in the health care industry, the socioeconomic conditions of the state from which they are emigrating, and lastly the presence of a US military base. I did not find suitable evidence to argue that the presence of a military base had a major impact on women immigrating the US I did have substantial evidence to prove the role of family in women’s migration trends. Often, migration is a part of survival for families, which then changes the dynamic between the individual and the household. Grasmuck and Pessar (quoted in Pedraza 1991, 308) state that, ‘since gender is central to household decision making, then gender is also a key factor of immigration’. If we follow this line of thinking, then we would also think that women actually have some power within their households across the various groups of migrants. Pedraza (1991) uses various examples of different migrant women’s experiences as immigrants into the US to highlight the impact of family reunification on the decision to move, which I discuss below.

In some cases, the act of migrating is a way of rewriting traditional family dynamics. In one study of the Dominican Republic, women had to stop contributing to their families through subsistence farming because of the rise in commercial farming (Pedraza 1991, 308). This economic transition ruined the structure of the traditional family in

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various ways. Sons were no longer seen as assets, but extra mouths to feed. Sons were then expected to emigrate to alleviate family concerns. The shift towards commercial farming also created a dependence on the husbands that the women had not experienced before. At that point, emigration was a way to escape complete dependency on their husbands (Pedraza 1991, 309). Immigration for women, in many cases, was a way of gaining more autonomy over their lives. This is evident in the way that women would often postpone returning to their home countries or to not return at all. Returning home was viewed as an early retirement from their jobs and a loss of their newfound freedom (Pedraza 1991, 310). This seemed to be the norm in women from developing countries overall, even in other regions of the world. In a 1989 study by Gugler, women in Sub-Saharan Africa also had to leave behind working the farms due to economic changes and the creation of job opportunities in the cities (Pedraza 1991, 310). In addition to job opportunities and newfound freedom, these women also gained higher life expectancies with the options of health care and even education.

These examples of women migration show that the second driving force behind the high rates of women migrating to the US is the transformation of social and economic structures in sending and receiving societies. This is evident in the cases that were presented, such as in the study on *maquiladoras* at the US-Mexican border. This 1983 study found that 85 percent of the workers in export-manufacturing plants along the Mexican border were female (Galhardi 1997). This trend of Mexican women flooding the US-Mexican border for work is a result of the new jobs that were generated in the service and manufacturing sectors in industrialized countries such as the US.

Another case of women emigrating due to social and economic changes is the plight of Irish women. A 1983 study by Hsia Diner says that Irish women were pushed by poverty, landlessness, social and economic dislocation, and the aftermath of the famine (Pedraza 1991, 320). This dislocation was an effect of the transition from an agrarian, feudal society to an industrial, capitalist one, much like the case in many other countries discussed above (Pedraza 1991, 313). Other factors that pushed Irish women to migrate were the lack of men to marry and a lack of jobs. Overall, Ireland held fewer and fewer attractions for women. One interesting trend involving the emigration of Irish women is that, once one emigrated to the US, that usually started a train reaction of others following suit. Sisters, mothers, nieces, and aunts would attempt to escape the 'interlocking relationship of land-family-marriage' to end up working as domestic service workers in the US (Pedraza 1991, 320).

Cuban women were different from Irish and the Mexican women in the way that they migrated. When these women immigrated to the US, they came to participate in the labor force as well, but they would eventually stop working to return to the Cuban value of women staying at home. Myra Marx Ferree calls this 'employment without liberation' (Marx Ferre 1985, 520). These women seemed to want to maintain the traditional Cuban household dynamic and worked only to help the family (Pedraza, 1991, 314). This may have been due to their original social class in their home country. Since these women would have experienced the luxuries that come with having a middle-class income in a developing state, they would obviously have aspirations to return back to this status.

It was evident that the type of work a woman immigrant did was influenced by several factors. One of the factors was her home life. Demanding jobs like domestic housework interfered with having a potential family life, but it did give them the consistency to save money. Domestic work was also safer than factory work, was not affected by economic downturns, and exposed them to middle-class American standards. The money that domestic workers earned allowed them to achieve upward mobility sooner and would include a potential future marriage, funds for a future business, or an education for them and their kids. These trends actually led to a quicker upward social mobility for Irish women than for Irish men. More importantly, there was also a trend of certain jobs being exclusively advertized to certain groups across racial, ethnic, social, and economic status. This reserved the unskilled, unprotected, and poorly paid jobs for women and people of color (Pedraza 1991, 315). A prime example of this was New York's garment industry. In the late 19th century, there was the inception of a market for ready-made and mass-produced women's clothing because of urbanization and the creation of a national market. Since this market demand began to grow around the time of a massive influx of Russian Jews and Italians, they were the main ones to enter these spaces. In addition to Russian Jews and Italians, Puerto Rican immigrant women also became a part of the garment industry. What made these three different ethnic groups flock to the garment industry was the level of skill required to fulfill this job in addition to the demand. Women who needed to work at home because of family obligations could do that by working as subcontractors (Pedraza 1991, 316). Today, the garment industry is still made up primarily of

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Latin American and Asian women migrants.

There are some notable differences between the different women migrant groups and their work status once they entered the US. This is seen with Cuban women and other Latin American women. Cuban women only worked to sustain the family until they reached American middle-class status and, once that was achieved, they would leave the work force. It is a known fact that a large percentage of Cuban refugees were already skilled and educated in their home country. Their goal was to help their husbands become self-employed in business. Mexican women immigrants would continue to work in their labor roles regardless of their marital status or family obligation. Mexican women would work the garment industry or in the other factories to help generate funds for their families, but there was also the possibility of supporting a home without a male head of household. As a result, Mexican women pursued personal fulfillment.

The more successful migrants come from English-speaking countries and have higher levels of education. These factors heavily affect their migration journey and job placement. English speakers with higher levels of education are able to assimilate into the US economy and potentially obtain jobs that require higher skilled workers. One key characteristic is that one extra year of education increased their labor market participation levels by 2.3 percent and their annual wages by between \$3,000–4,000 (Pfeiffer et al. 2007, 171). Even though the majority of the literature I review focuses on migrants moving to the US, it is important to note that the receiving country of all migrants influences the genders flows in relation to their economic needs (Pfeiffer et al. 2007, 29). An example of this is the garment industry and the rise of factories during the 20th century being an opportunity primarily for migrant women. The variation in these women's earning power is also attributed to the political and economic statuses of their home countries. Latin Americans had lower levels of market participation and performance in correlation with lower levels of education. Women migrants from Western Europe would have a higher earning power and a smoother transition into the US than those from less-developed states. Africans and Eastern Europeans had higher levels of market participation. Education levels of migrant women who arrived in the US in the 1990s varied across countries and regions. Where they obtained their education was more important. This study demonstrates that the group with a larger portion of tertiary educated migrants were from Central America, Asia, and the Caribbean. These groups gained this education after they migrated to the US in comparison with European migrants who gained their higher education, if any, at home (Pfeiffer et al. 2007, 159). The need to gain further higher education once they migrated is linked to the need to obtain stronger English-speaking skills as well as to move up in socioeconomic status. Other notable factors concerning a migrant woman's success were the number of children they had, age, and experience.

Government policies play a noteworthy role in the gender imbalances in global migration (Pedraza, 1991, 310). These policies are what made farming so unsustainable in countries such as the Dominican Republic and along Sub-Saharan Africa. Pricing policies brought down the value of cash crops and made it hard for local families to compete with big agri-businesses. Government policy in Lesotho actually restricted the migration flows of men and women. A 1983 study by Wilkinson proves that influx control laws were put in place in South Africa to restrict the movement of women (Pedraza, 1991, 310). This caused a predominantly male flow of migrant workers crossing the border into South Africa. As a result, the migration of women in search of jobs was internal within Lesotho. In some cases, immigration laws can favor family reunification, which will attract migrants who have families or single daughter or sisters who want to send for their female counterparts. In 1986, the US Congress passed the Immigration Reform and Control Act, which was a positive for women and men migrants crossing the US-Mexican border (Schiff, Morrison, and Sjöblom 2008).

Illicit migration is also worth mentioning in discussing the shift of women migration trends. This is because illicit migration is a gendered way of migrating internationally. Especially in the case of human trafficking. Why? The social status of women and children. If we look at human trafficking in Latin America and the Caribbean, the majority of trafficking victims are young adult women between the ages of 18 and 25, and in many cases between 12 and 17. This migration can be internal, such as in the case of the Dominican Republic or from the Dominican Republic to Haiti and vice versa. The driving factors for the victims are similar to those of other migrants, which include economic necessity, lack of education, and their role as single heads of households (Langberg 2005, 5). These illicit migrants face far more barriers than other, more legal migrants because of the nature of their 'work'. They will neither take home the majority of their earnings nor have the possibility of upward social mobility all because of their line of work

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and the social stigma aligned with it whether they work voluntarily or not. These women are trapped in a cycle that many cannot escape.

## Concluding Remarks

Whether legally or illegally, all of the trends in international migration concerning women are driven by the same factors. These factors include poverty, political and social transformations, gender inequalities, family reunification, and policy changes. The role that each of these groups fulfill in the US labor market differs according to the market needs of the receiving country, which in this case is primarily the US. The general trend is that the more educated English speakers have a more successful transition into the US market, which is evident in their higher earning capabilities and socioeconomic mobility. External factors that cannot change, such as race and ethnicity, also affect these immigrant women's abilities to emigrate and their assimilation within the US. The theme of self-realization and economic independence was very consistent across most groups that were mentioned except for Cuban-American women. That was due to their prior socioeconomic status in their home country and the way that they emigrated with the family wealth-building ideal. The illicit migrants do not get to enjoy the self-realization that the other migrant women do because of the social stigma and the dangers that come with sex work or labor trafficking. The wages are either too low, unsustainable, come with no safety, or provide no autonomy over one's life.

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