

# Women and Migration: Incorporating Gender into International Migration Theory

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## **Introduction**

Over the last 25 years, there has been little concerted effort to incorporate gender into theories of international migration. Yet, understanding gender is critical in the migration context. In part because migration theory has traditionally emphasized the causes of international migration over questions of who migrates, it has often failed to adequately address gender-specific migration experiences. Without clear theoretical underpinnings, it becomes difficult to explain, for example, the conditions under which women migrate, or the predominance of women in certain labor flows and not in others. Furthermore, traditional theory fails to help us understand the circumstances that encourage women to become transnational migrants, to enter into trafficking channels, or to seek refugee resettlement. Answering these questions and other more gender-sensitive inquiries requires showing how a seemingly gender-neutral process of movement is, in fact, highly gender-specific and may result in differential outcomes for men and women.

Today the question, "How can gender be incorporated into our understanding of migration?" remains only partially answered for a variety of reasons. For example, understanding migration and constructing useful theories must take into account many different types of migration, including temporary, permanent, illegal, labor, and conflict-induced migration. Developing a gendered theory of migration has been difficult because the disciplines of anthropology, sociology, political science, economics, demography, law, and history have tended to focus on only a few types of migration and stress different explanations. Also, incorporating gender as an explicit part of migration theory has more recently been influenced by developments in feminist perspectives in North America, which continue to challenge more orthodox views.

## **Bringing Women In: An Overview of Current Theory**

In the 1960s and early 1970s the phrase "migrants and their families" was a code for "male migrants and their wives and children." The women's movement, however, with its emphasis on the situation of women, caused some to question the near-invisibility of women as migrants, their presumed passivity in the migration process, and their assumed place in the home.

Research in the 1970s and the 1980s began to include women, but did not cause a dramatic shift in thinking about who migrated, how immigration was explained, or the likely consequences. One of the central questions about women during this period was

whether migration "modernized" women, emancipating them from their assumed traditional values and behaviors.

Gradually, the "add women, mix and stir" or the "gender as a variable" approach appeared in more and more research. Yet, this research ultimately did not question the underlying models used to explain why people moved, where they went, and how they integrated. Instead, differences between men and women were noted, and then explained as reflections of different sex roles. In the neoclassical economic models and the push-pull demographic models of the 1970s and 1980s, for example, migration was seen as the outcome of individual decisions. The responsibilities of women as wives and mothers (and the role of men as breadwinners) were thought to influence the decisions of women. These gendered responsibilities were believed to explain why women were less likely than men to participate in migration decisions or in the labor force of the host country when they did join their husbands.

The development of new economic concepts and theories that emphasized the importance of the family or the household as the primary site of decision making was also criticized for effectively substituting the rational, calculating individual with a rational, calculating household. Critics note that family/household decisions and actions do not represent unified and equally beneficial outcomes for all members. This is because families and households, as units where production and redistribution take place, represent centers of struggle where people with different activities and interests can come into conflict with one another. When placed within ongoing power relations that operate in families and households, such diverse interests and activities strongly suggest that the interests of men and women in families do not always coincide and may affect decisions about who manages to migrate, for how long, and to what countries.

The dual argument that gender is an integral part of the migration process and that theories of migration must incorporate it has also influenced other areas of migration research. For example, critics have observed that economic factors do not have a gender-neutral impact. At the macro level, national economic development may affect the economic roles of men and women in different ways, thus stimulating or retarding the international migration of women versus men. Similarly, the demand for labor in receiving countries can also be gender-specific, as seen in the migration of women domestic workers to North America, the Middle East, and Europe. Emphasizing the need to incorporate gender has also influenced network theory. Early research that focused on the importance of networks to stimulate and sustain migration from one area to another tended to emphasize networks of men. More recent research shows that women have their own networks with other women and utilize them both to migrate and to settle in a new country.

**Gender as a "Social Construction" and Its Impact on Migration Theory.** Ongoing developments in feminist theory throughout the 1980s and 1990s further contributed to a focus on gender, rather than one based on individual decisions of men and women. Gender is seen as a core organizing principle that underlies migration and related processes, such as the adaptation to the new country, continued contact with the original country, and possible return. Most important is the view that while sex is defined as a biological outcome of chromosomal structures, *gender* is "socially constructed." In feminist theory, gender is seen as a matrix of identities, behaviors, and power relationships that are constructed by the culture of a society in accordance with sex.

This means that the content of gender — what constitutes the ideals, expectations, and behaviors or expressions of masculinity and femininity — will vary among societies. Also, when people interact with each other, by adhering to this content or departing from it, they either reaffirm or change what is meant by gender, thus affecting social relationships at a particular time or in a particular setting. This means that gender is not immutable but also changes and, in this sense, is both socially constructed and reconstructed through time.

The feminist view of gender as a "social construction" has raised two questions that have fuelled much of the research in the study of women and migration over the last decade. The first relates to patriarchy, or the hierarchies of power, domination, and control men use to rule women. How does patriarchy, which gives men preferential access to the resources available in society, affect women's ability to migrate, the timing of that migration, and the final destination?

The second question focuses on the interpersonal relationships between men and women. How do women's relationships to family members, including spouses, change with migration? In other words, how is patriarchy altered or reconstituted after migration? Some studies ask if labor force participation in the host country affects women's authority within the family and their sense of control, and contributes to men assuming more responsibilities for housework and childcare. Others ask if migration of either men or women influence power relations and decision making between men and women.

Studies that examine transnational migration, where migration creates and sustains social ties and various activities between two or more countries, often focus on individuals and the interpersonal relationships among individuals. One initiative in migration research undertaken by anthropologists is to examine the dynamics of power relationships when men migrate, leaving women behind in the origin country.

### **Women and Migration: Toward Theoretical Clarity**

Since the 1960s, international migration theory has indeed become more gender sensitive, moving from the predominant view of female migrants as simply the wives and children of male migrants to incorporating explanations of the unique experiences of women migrants themselves. However, in an effort to correct the "invisibility" of women in migration theory, there is a chance that researchers will begin to over-emphasize the migration experience of women, paying less attention to that of men. This would inadvertently undermine the gendered view of migration that helps explain the experiences of both males and females.

To encourage the further development of international migration theory, what is needed is a general theoretical framework that guides research and helps explain the unique experiences of both males and females at all stages of the migration process. But, in light of the history of "bringing women in," how exactly is gender involved in the migration process? There are three distinct stages where gender relations, roles, and hierarchies influence the migration process and produce differential outcomes for women: the pre-migration stage, the transition across state boundaries, and the experiences of migrants in the receiving country.

**The Pre-Migration Stage.** In this stage, many factors exist that shape the decision to migrate and make migration more or less possible for women. These include both systemic and macro factors, such as the state of the national economy, and individual or micro factors, such as gender-specific stages in the life-cycle. These factors are further divided into the following three areas: 1) gender relations and hierarchies; 2) status and roles; and 3) structural characteristics of the country of origin.

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Gender relations and hierarchies within the family context affect the migration of women because it is usually within the family that female subordination to male authority plays itself out. The family both defines and assigns the roles of women, which determine their relative motivation and incentive to migrate, and controls the distribution of resources and information that can support, discourage, or prevent migration.

The interaction of women's roles, status, and age within a particular socio-cultural context result in a "migratory probability" which can also affect the ability of women to migrate. A United Nations report on women and migration argues that the impact of women's status and roles on their propensity to migrate must be considered at three

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levels: individual, familial, and societal. Individual factors include age, birth order, race/ethnicity, urban/rural origins, marital status (single, married, divorced, widowed), reproductive status (children or no children), role in the family (wife, daughter, mother), position in family (authoritative or subordinate), educational status, occupational skills/training, labor force experience, and class position. Family factors include size, age/sex composition, life-cycle stage, structure (nuclear, extended, etc.), status (single parent, both parents, etc.), and class standing. Societal factors include those community norms and cultural values that determine whether or not women can migrate and, if they can, how (i.e., labor or family reunification) and with whom (alone or with family).

In other words, the culture of the sending society determines the likelihood that women in various positions will migrate. In this sense, a woman's position in the sending community not only influences her ability to autonomously decide to migrate and to access the resources necessary to do so, but also the opportunity she has to migrate at the point when the decision is being made.

Finally, certain macro characteristics of the country of origin can also influence gender-specific migration propensities. These characteristics can interact with the gender relations and the position of women in the sending society and affect decisions about who moves and when. These characteristics include: the state of the economy (agrarian, industrial, level of development); the types of economies present within various communities (i.e., all developed, mixed agrarian/industrial, some subsistence

horticulturalists); the level of displacement caused by economic changes and shifts in production technologies; land tenure laws; labor market conditions and conditions of work (wage levels, benefits); the ability of the economy to provide jobs and the type of jobs available (number of industries); the ability of the national government to provide related infrastructure (education, job training); the geographic location of the country and the language(s) of the sending society; the relation and integration of the national economy into the world economy; the supply and demand conditions for the factors of production in sending and related receiving communities; and the presence or absence of established migration systems with other areas.

**Gender and the Transition Across State Boundaries.** Decisions made at the pre-migration stage are influenced by a variety of gender-related factors. In certain instances, men are more likely to migrate, while in others women may be the ones to leave. A decision to leave, however, is not the same as being allowed to exit or to enter a specific country. Through their policies, nation-states are major actors in a gendered international migration process.

National policies of the countries of origin can influence migration through prohibitive, selective, permissive, promotional, or expulsive rules of exit that may affect men and women migrants differently. These policies are frequently conditioned by implicit or explicit assumptions about the status and roles of men and women both within the family and in society. For example, some labor-exporting countries have implemented "conditions" in their policies to protect women from exploitation that effectively prevent them from engaging in labor migration.

Immigration laws and regulations of the country of destination also influence the migration of women and men. These policies can influence the ability of women and men to migrate in three ways. First, the migration policies of many receiving countries implicitly assume a "dependent" status for women and an "independent" migrant status for men. Women are often classified by their relation to men (e.g., wife or daughter) with whom they migrate regardless of their own, independent status.

Second, by implicitly defining immigrant women as "dependent" and men as "independent," immigration policies of receiving societies place women in a "family role" rather than a "market role." This, in turn, can reinforce some of the factors responsible for the social vulnerability of migrant women. This is especially true in labor-importing countries that separate the right to work from the right to reside and where women who lack a work permit may be employed illegally.

Third, traditional sex roles and stereotypical images regarding the place of women in society can influence the type of work for which migrant female labor is recruited. Women admitted as workers are generally concentrated in "female" occupations, such as domestic service or nursing. When women enter on the basis of labor-market skills, many are in service occupations. In countries that recruit migrant workers on a temporary basis, most women are admitted as domestic workers, which includes those specializing in childcare.

In addition to nation-states, intermediary organizations and institutions also influence who gets in, and thus the gender composition of immigration flows. Domestic workers and workers in the sex trade, for example, may enter countries under the auspices of

organized intermediaries. Although not part of the policies of the countries of origin and destination, these intermediary institutions and agencies, both legal and illegal, work to circumvent established policies. The actions of intermediaries can increase the likelihood that women will migrate because they act as networks linking potential female migrants with demands for female labor in destination countries.

Finally, international conventions that influence immigration policies also may be gendered. This can be seen in the United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, which defines who is a refugee. Critics charge that this definition favors the recognition of men as refugees because forms of persecution experienced by women in private settings are less likely to be recognized as grounds for persecution.

**Gender and the Post-Migration Stage.** Men and women may be treated differently and experience resettlement differently once in a receiving country. Integration outcomes are primarily influenced by three factors: 1) the impact of entry status on the ability to integrate and settle; 2) patterns of incorporation into the labor market; and 3) the impact of migration on the status of women and men.

If immigration policy determines the entry status of migrants, entry status in turn often determines residency and employment rights. This can also be part of the eligibility criteria for social welfare programs. Entry status is more likely to handicap female migrants than male migrants because residency and employment rights and related entitlements often differ by gender. Because migrant women are often viewed by the state as "dependents," their rights may become legally dependent — sometimes precariously so — on the migration and residency status of other family members. This may affect the ability of migrant women to obtain those rights and entitlements in their own right.

How women are defined at entry also may affect other social rights and entitlements, including the capacity to gain legal citizenship quickly, to access language-training classes, to obtain job training, and to access income security programs. For this reason, studies of immigrant women argue that women more often than men are denied full citizenship; that is, the full civil, political, and social rights and responsibilities that normally come with membership in a society.

Racial, birthplace, and gender-based hierarchies that exist in countries of destination are important and influence the incorporation of women and men migrants into the labor market. Women may have different experiences than men because they are frequently segregated into traditional "female" occupations, such as domestic work, childcare, or garment manufacturing. Even highly skilled immigrant workers may have different experiences based on their gender. The gender hierarchies that affect all women in general also handicap immigrant women in particular, influencing job opportunities, work environment, and wages vis-a-vis their male counterparts.

In the receiving country, migration may also alter the status and gender relations of men and women. New economic roles and new responsibilities affect spousal relationships, in some instances leading to considerable negotiations and resistance to change by both men and women. Studies have examined the alteration in marital power and the process of negotiation not only for immigrant couples, but also in cases where one partner is still living in the origin country.

The literature on female migration generally focuses on two broad aspects of status that can change as a result of the migration process. The first is the position of migrant women within their families. For some women, migration may mean an increase in social mobility, economic independence, and relative autonomy. This is especially true if women's moves are accompanied by increased participation in the labor market.

New economic and social responsibilities may change the distribution of power within the family, leading to greater authority and participation in household decision making and control over the family's resources. These also may cause positive shifts in the relationship between immigrant women and their husbands and children.

However, participation in the labor force does not automatically improve equality between a migrant and her husband. For some migrant women, labor force participation may increase the burden that they must carry unless they find new alternatives to old roles, particularly those of childcare and housework.

The second aspect of status change discussed in the literature on women and migration focuses on the impact of moving from one form of gender stratification system to another. Generally speaking, this means moving from one system of patriarchy to another. Here, the literature on women and migration emphasizes the interaction between the societal and family contexts. While migration may lead to an improvement in the social status of women, it may not change their relative position within the family.

## **Conclusions**

Gender is deeply embedded in determining who moves, how those moves take place, and the resultant futures of migrant women and families. If international migration theory is to incorporate gender appropriately and effectively, it must take into account the subtle as well as the obvious factors that coalesce to create different experiences all along the migration spectrum. Further defining and understanding these forces and outcomes will greatly enhance the theoretical grounding of international migration in general and the individual experiences of migrant women around the world.

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[http://www.migrationinformation.org/issue\\_mar03.cfm](http://www.migrationinformation.org/issue_mar03.cfm)