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How to cite:

Kofman, Eleonore and Raghuram, Parvati (2022). Gender and Migration. In: Scholten, Peter ed. Introduction to Migration Studies. IMISCOE Research Series. Springer, Cham, pp. 281–294.

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Version: Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1007/978-3-030-92377-8_18

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Chapter 18

Gender and Migration



Eleonore Kofman and Parvati Raghuram

In the past few decades, [gender](#) has become one of the most significant optics through which to view and analyse migration. Migration has moved up the political agenda and women and men have become differentially entangled within these discussions. In this chapter we review some of the ways in which gender appears in migration debates, the different arguments around gender and on the forms of migration through which these have been routed, and some questions for future research agendas. This chapter is therefore necessarily selective and unable to provide a comprehensive review of the rich literature on the topic.

18.1 Gender and Migration: Making It a Topic

Despite the fact that Ravenstein's theories of migration highlighted the significance of women in migration streams as early as 1885, most migration research, analysis, and theory remained fixated around the figure of a migrant man for almost a century afterwards, although as Donato and Gabaccia (2015) have shown, female migrants were dominant in the US by the 1930s. Focusing on women raised questions around how one distinguishes the autonomous migration of women from family migrants and how their economic contribution should be recognised (Office of Women in Development, 1979). A focus on [labour migration](#) as the primary modality for migration, both internal and international, on particular sectors of the economy in which men dominate, and the individualisation of migration as a solo enterprise all

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led to this empirical focus. However, [family migration](#) continues to be one of the most important sources of migrants in OECD countries.

Since the 1950s, most migration globally has been driven by male-led [urbanisation](#), very often overturning family-based pastoral migration and other forms of mobility. Although women migrated even during this period, the male selectivity of migration was largely overturned in subsequent decades. Circular migration, repeat migration and permanent outmigration were often a sign of rural deprivation but also of customary practices of land management that had been disrupted through colonisation. Migration was thus historically multi-layered with each layer having different gendered implications.

Latin America was the first region to note female dominated migration into domestic work, sex work and entrepreneurship (Bunster et al., [1985](#)). Both Latin American and African literatures showed how women juggle responsibilities for children and parents along with work (Izzard, [1985](#)). This early research pointed to several important challenges. First, it was difficult to distinguish the ‘autonomous’ migration of women from family migration and what the implications of this might be. Should female migration be analysed through the language of choice or was it a necessity? Moreover, was autonomy an appropriate way of analysing women’s mobility given their tethering in social reproduction and family life? Secondly, recognising women as solo migrants meant recognising their economic contributions to society but this raised a further question: should they be analysed in the same way that men’s contributions were? For instance, the role of the family was a dominant theme in existing research on women while men were treated primarily as economic actors. What difference did it make if women, especially women in cities were to be analysed as economic migrants (Office of Women in Development, [1979](#))? Did they require their own framework for analysis (Thadani & Todaro, [1978](#))? Finally, what exactly did autonomy mean? How far were women’s choices shaped by economic and familial reasons and how much was mobility a result of a bid for freedom and choice? Moreover, how far was data skewed by women’s and men’s responses to questions around why they migrate? Globally it appeared that men prioritised economic causes but women offered a mix of causes when asked [why they migrate](#) (Office of Women in Development, [1979](#)). These are questions that have continued to shape gendered migration research. Early research also explored the differential use of [migration networks](#) by women and men and the fact that women tended to depend on older networks while men forged new networks to facilitate migration. Women did not also appear to gain the economic gains that men had made through migration. Hence, the differential causes, consequences, and modalities of migration among men and women were analysed.

The presence of women in migration and the subsequent analytical opportunities and challenges were substantively picked up by Morokvasić ([1984](#)) in the context of Europe. Her research was the harbinger of many studies on women migrants. These studies have varied in foci but, especially in the last two decades, they have been dominated by themes and insights which we develop subsequently. However, since the 1990s, migration literature has become dominated by a global imaginary and is to a great extent losing sight of the long history of [internal migration](#) (Chant, [1992](#)).

<p>Migration Data Portal Gender and Migration https://migrationdataportal.org/themes/gender-and-migration</p> <p>UNDESA International Migration https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/data/estimates2/estimates19.asp</p> <p>UNHCR Global Trends Integrating Gender into UNHCR statistics https://unstats.un.org/unsd/gender/Finland_Oct2016/Documents/UNHCR_ppt.pdf</p>

Fig. 18.1 Key data sources

There was recognition that even if not everybody moves, migration still affects many people in many places, leading Castles and Miller (1993) to call this “the age of migration” in which the feminisation of migration, especially labour migration, was characterised as the fourth major trend in the contemporary world. Though widely used to characterise contemporary migration, several critiques of the concept of feminisation have noted that this phenomenon is not new (Donato & Gabaccia, 2015) and varies substantially between countries (Vause & Toma, 2015) and regions with men being dominant in the six GCC countries. It was not just female authors who highlighted the significance of gender and households and gender in migration studies but also a leading male migration scholar (Portes, 1997).

Male migrants remained a significant component of migration streams in sectors such as construction, sea-faring and agricultural work. During the same period there has also been an increase in highly skilled migration, especially in male dominated sectors such as information technology and finance. However, women play an important, albeit little acknowledged (Kofman, 2000), part in these skilled flows, especially in welfare sectors such as medicine, nursing and teaching, where migration continues to be seen through the lens of brain drain.

In terms of data on gender breakdown, for the first time in 1998, the UN published global data disaggregated by gender for the period 1960–1990, which it extended in 2002 for the period from 1990 to 2000 (Zlotnik, 2003). More recent sources of disaggregated data can be found in the Migration Data Portal section on gender and migration which reviews sources provided by the ILO and UNDESA (Population Division of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs). In the next section, we trace the growth of gender and migration as a field of study and a number of key topics and concepts concerning labour, family, and asylum as well as the development of intersectionality as an approach to understanding the heterogeneity and differential power relations applying to gendered migrations (Fig. 18.1).

18.2 Expansion of Gendered Migration

Publications on gendered migration, though increasing in the 1990s (Willis & Yeoh, 2000), grew rapidly in the 2000s in Asia, Europe, and North America, reflecting a growing preoccupation with receiving countries in the Global North and their demand for labour in feminised sectors. A review of publications in international migration noted gender and family as **the fastest growing cluster** at the turn of the twenty-first century (Pisarevskaya et al., 2020). This was accompanied by a series of theoretical developments within broader global and transnational paradigms connecting people and places which would begin to shape the research agenda and demonstrate how economies and societies were being affected by global and gendered migration flows of reproductive labour (Kofman & Raghuram, 2015). Sassen (2000) conceptualised these South to North flows of domestic and sex workers as counter geographies pertaining to the narrative of globalisation and global cities.

Another major conceptual framework for the global transfer of labour was **global chains of care** (Hochschild, 2000). Drawing on fieldwork undertaken by Parreñas, Hochschild defined them as “a series of personal links between people across the globe, based on the paid or unpaid work of caring”. Their work suggested that women who moved into the paid labour market in countries of the global North were replacing their care work not through redistribution with men but through employing women migrants from the global South. These women, often from urban conurbations were, however, themselves leaving behind a care deficit as they had responsibilities for reproductive labour such that women from rural areas moved into their households to fill that care deficit. These chains of care were dependent on international and national inequalities in wages with each link in the chain representing a point where the value of labour was being realised in waged forms. These care chains have dominated debates on migrant care as similar patterns were seen to be occurring in many parts of the world. The concept rapidly became influential among female migration scholars (Herrera, 2013; Lutz, 2010) analysing recourse of Northern households to migrant labour from the South and poorer countries in Europe (Lutz & Palenga-Möllnbeck, 2012), to fill deficits of domestic and care work. As the chain moved downwards to countries of origin, and where care needs were filled by family members or urban migrants, the surplus value of this labour diminished.

The global chains of care framework was criticised for its narrow and limited application to transnational motherhood and care of children. It presumed an absence of men, heteronormativity, and failure to see women and men as sexual beings and was based on a narrow range of institutional sites through which care was provided (Kofman & Raghuram, 2015; Manalansan, 2006). Subsequently studies highlighted the significance of migrant men in the provision of care for the elderly (Gallo & Scrinzi, 2016) which has become the sector with the greatest shortage of labour (Peng, 2018). Men too have “gendered experiences marked by both masculine privilege and social marginality” (Davalos, 2020).

Generationally, grandmothers too participated as paid carers, for example to support younger Ukrainian women in Italy (Tyldum, 2015), who may leave families due to problematic marriages and the stigma of divorce. Older women may also migrate for varying durations as 'swallows' to assist their children as unpaid carers or for personal satisfaction and autonomy (Lulle & King, 2016). However, the extent of the latter is much circumscribed for many nationalities by visa and immigration policies unlike the relative ease of circulation for EU citizens. Finally, the care drain could have been conceptualised as a **brain drain** given that the evidence that education enables women from poorer countries to migrate: 20% of highly educated women from sub-Saharan African have emigrated but only 0.4% of the least educated (Dumitru & Marfouk, 2015, p. 40).

A political economy approach to this type of labour conceptualised care work as occurring across multiple sites and institutional architectures, i.e. a care diamond consisting of the state, voluntary organisations, the market, and the family (Razavi, 2007), each of which had both local and transnational elements (Williams, 2018) and was influenced by state, social policy and immigration regulations (Williams, 2018; Amelina & Lutz, 2019). Particularly in countries where the migrant in the family model prevails as in Southern Europe (Bettio et al., 2006) and East and South-East Asia (Peng, 2018), large numbers of migrant domestic workers are employed, often with precarious contracts and especially in East and South-East Asia in systems of temporary labour. In Europe, on the other hand, an increasing proportion of the care work force has been supplied by labour from Eastern European enlargement countries whilst the frequent regularisation programmes in Southern Europe have enabled domestic and care workers to acquire a residence permit. At the same time, the corporatisation of care highlights the fact that the provision of care for children and the elderly has become big business in households and in elderly care homes (Farris & Marchetti, 2017; Pazhoothundathil & Bailey, 2020). The recruitment of labour too is increasingly being undertaken through agencies and companies of different sizes. Thus, there are a number of actors and institutions at micro-, meso-, and macro-levels (Williams, 2018) which have to be understood intersectionally and with sensitivity to how care definitions, practices, ideologies, and labour have evolved over time in different parts of the world (Raghuram, 2012, 2016).

Others have emphasised the complex circulation of care among those who move and those who do not and across different classes (Baldassar & Merla, 2014). Furthermore, the operation of the chain in the South initially paid scant attention or acknowledged the diversity of family forms and strategies families adopted for the care of children and older people, forgetting the long history of differential gendered formations and roles that have evolved locally (Hansen, 1984). In more recent years, researchers have explored the diverse responses to the departure of family members and return across different regions in the South (Mazzucato & Ditto, 2018). This has led to explorations of proximate, online and distance care circulations among transnational families and differential mobilities of family members to undertake care. Such research has shown the differential care needs of people over time and across space and how these require a transnational conceptual lens which embraces the diversity of material, social and symbolic exchanges between places.

Although domestic and care work are crucial employment sectors for migrant women, the strong focus by feminist researchers on these gendered labour markets is problematic; it reinforces stereotypes of migrant women (Catarino & Morokvasić, 2013) and fails to recognise the much broader gendered migrant division of labour extending across a diversity of skill levels and sites (private and public). Other sectors, both lesser skilled and more skilled, have also relied heavily on female migrant labour but have been much less studied. Certainly, the growth of global labour migrations has been accompanied by the intensification of non-standard employment relationships, contracting out of services, and deregulation of labour. Female-dominated sectors or those with substantial numbers beyond those employed by households (Amrith & Sahraoui, 2019) include hospitality, retail, contract cleaning in hospitals (von Bose, 2019), offices, public spaces, bodywork—such as beauty parlours, hairdresser, and manicurists (Wolkowitz, 2006)—and sex work to name a few. These become particularly apparent in Africa, where female cross-border enterprise in such sectors are particularly prevalent (Ojong, 2017). Moreover, what all these sectors show is that, as Ojong argues, sometimes migration comes first and gender later and that men take up work in feminised sectors where and when migration opportunities arise.

Furthermore, the dominant focus on less-skilled employment pushes into the background the circulation of skilled female migrants and endorses the paradigmatic separation of (male) skilled and (female) less-skilled understandings of migration. Women working in skilled sectors tend to dominate reproductive sectors, such as health, social work, and teaching, which often do not pay as much as male occupations, although many educated women work in mixed or male-dominated sectors (Raghuram, 2008). Yet the current global race for talent in which states seek to attract skilled migration, “is profoundly gendered, with significant implications for the skill accreditation, labour market outcomes, rights of stay, and gendered family dynamics” (Boucher, 2016, p. 30). So too is student international mobility. In 2017, there were nearly four million international students studying just within the OECD countries (OECD, 2019). Gender matters in [student migration](#) (see chap. 10 in this volume) before, during, and after migration but on the whole this is much less explored (Raghuram & Sondhi, 2021; Sondhi & King, 2017). The question this raises is whether skilled women are differentially empowered through migration (compared to non-migrants, lesser skilled women, and skilled men) (Raghuram, 2008) or have they simply reconstituted subordination (Ojong & Muthuki, 2010)? Moreover, when women move as nurses and teachers, what kinds of deskilling do accompanying spouses face, and how do they challenge, accommodate or subvert new gender orders (Pasura & Christou, 2018)?

Women not only move to continue their reproductive roles as waged work but also within families as [family migration](#) remains the largest source of permanent migration in OECD countries, ahead of labour and humanitarian migrations (OECD, 2017). Around 38% of all migrants entered through this route. The largest group are spouses entering as marriage migrants, followed by children and parents. In Asia, such migration has expanded massively (Chung et al., 2016) in countries such as South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan, where it intertwines with labour flows from poorer

to richer countries in what Constable (2005) calls global hypergamy. Women marry men who have a weak position on the marriage market but are in a higher socio-economic location due to labour migration. Location in the global North or in richer countries makes men desirable partners. Moreover, marriage migration also articulates with **other forms of migration**, especially in other reproductive sectors (Lan, 2008).

Families are also increasingly stretched across locations, sharing finances and care work with different kinds of householding strategies through the life course (Douglass, 2012). Immigration regulations play a major role in how one is able to perform family (see Chap. 7, this volume), especially as countries have made the conditions of entry **stricter for family members**, particularly parents and non-dependent children, or have restricted family reunification to the skilled (Bonizzoni, 2018) or those who meet minimum income thresholds. Besides, countries define family in migration policy more narrowly than for non-migrants and are not cognisant of how families live in many countries of large-scale family migration. So while cohabiting and LGBTQI couples have acquired familial rights or rights akin to family—rights formerly reserved for heterosexual married couples—these rights have not always been extended to migrants. Moreover, they must demonstrate their intimate lives to bureaucrats (Groes and Fernandez 2018).

Refugee flows and internal displacement have increased massively with the proliferation of protracted conflicts and political instability including in the Middle East and Africa (Hyndman & Giles, 2017). By the end of 2019, 79.5 million people of concern (refugees and internally displaced) around the world have been forced from home. It represents over three times the number of people of concern compared to the figure at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Women comprise the majority of those escaping generalised conflict, but only a minority of those manage to seek asylum in the Global North because moving long distances requires considerable resources and frequently necessitates the use of smugglers (Damir-Geilsdorf & Sabra, 2018). For example, Syria, the largest refugee-producing country, had an estimated 6.5 million Syrian citizens internally displaced and more than 4.8 million in neighbouring countries by the end of 2016. Women form the majority of the internally displaced in Syria itself and about half in neighbouring countries such as Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey (Freedman et al., 2017) but fewer further afield.

Not all asylum seekers are escaping from generalised conflict; they may be seeking to get away from gender-related forms of persecution, such as domestic violence, forced and early marriage, genital mutilation as well as experiencing difficulties in openly expressing their sexual orientation and gender identity (Freedman et al., 2017). Feminist scholars have drawn attention to the fact that the 1951 Refugee Convention failed to incorporate gender-related persecution and suggested ways in which such considerations could be incorporated within the limits of the Convention (Macklin, 1999).

The issue of **asylum seekers** and refugees in Europe became more visible as a result of the sudden increase in 2015. It also brought out the need for more disaggregated data, not just by gender but also in relation to other social divisions, and greater knowledge about the gendered experiences of border crossings and

journeys. Initially men predominated in the flows across the Mediterranean and were depicted as threatening; their own vulnerability often going unrecognised (Turner, 2017). For a short period before the EU-Turkey deal in March 2016, the proportion of women crossing the Eastern Mediterranean to Greece increased, as a result of which refugee women are now a sizeable and growing group in Europe. According to data from Eurostat, about half a million women obtained international protection in Europe since 2015, of whom 300,000 are in Germany. Furthermore, the share of women among those whose asylum claim is recognised is also larger than their share among asylum seekers; the share of women among those obtaining international protection status increased from 29% in 2015 to 38.1% in 2019. The presence of refugee women is expected to rise further through family reunification as most spouses concerned are women (OECD, 2017).

More studies on the gendered nature of journeys across international borders under inhospitable conditions, the harm, distress, and violence displaced people are subjected to and the agency they deploy needs further attention to avoid inserting women's stories into prevailing stereotypes of asylum seekers and migrants. For example, sex work is frequently coupled with sex trafficking, especially for certain nationalities, such as Nigerian women in Italy, who are closely associated with sex work and rendered as pure victims without any agency (Rigo, 2017). However, studies show their resilience while traversing Libya, a dangerous country where many individuals had experienced serious harm of sequestration, forced labour, kidnapping, and sexual violence from a variety of sources (Plambech, 2017). Moreover, it is not easy to distinguish sex trafficking from using sex to undertake a journey. Other aspects, such as age, disability, and sexuality also intersect with gender in shaping asylum seekers' and refugees' journeys and settlements.

One of the means of processing asylum seekers into those to be settled with rights, those left in limbo and those to be deported, is the application of vulnerability in conjunction with nationality, which has led to a listing approach of characteristics (single parents with children, pregnant women, unaccompanied minors) simplifying subjects in need of protection and serving to restrict access to protection and services. So, although in Europe women fall disproportionately into the vulnerable categories (Belloni et al., 2018; Kofman, 2019), such a classification may make it difficult to offer them appropriate support. As Butler (2016, p. 15) commented "once groups are marked as 'vulnerable' within human rights discourse or legal regimes, those groups become reified as definitionally 'vulnerable', fixed in a political position of powerlessness and lack of agency. All the power belongs to the state and international institutions that are now supposed to offer them protection and advocacy".

18.3 Intersectionality

Gendered migration research has often focused separately on women and men although the importance of understanding the relations between women and men in shaping the causes and consequences of migration are increasingly being realised. Gender, class, race, and the notion of nation (see Chap. 12 of this volume) are all constitutive in the migration process and are themselves being reconstituted globally through migration.

Some of these are captured through notions of intersectionality, said to be one of the most significant contributions of feminist theory to the social sciences. The ‘emancipated’ slave Sojourner Truth’s request to be included into the category ‘woman’ is one of the first claims to intersectionality and formed the title of bell hooks’ foundational text on intersectionality (hooks, 1981). Black women have been at the forefront of demands for recognition of the multifaceted and complex nature of women’s lives – as it sits at the intersection of multiple hierarchies and power relations. Combahee River Collective criticised white middle class feminists for speaking for all feminists. However, it is Crenshaw (1990), a black legal scholar’s work that really put these experiences on the conceptual map. The most important arenas of inequality in intersectional theory are gender, ethnicity/race/nation, class, sexuality, disability, and age/generation. Together and separately, they produce and reproduce unequal life chances—assigning traits to individuals and allocating them to particular social roles (Amelina & Lutz, 2019). Gender-specific allocation can be seen in household roles and labour processes. The interplay of axes of inequalities differ historically and spatially and therefore require empirical investigation to capture the structural/institutional contexts and subjective identity (Rathzel, 2010, cited in Amelina & Lutz, 2019, p. 12) in relation to discrimination and action. One may be subordinate along one axis and privileged along another.

These conceptual inheritances have become important in migration research too. For instance, the recognition that most women who migrate for work are young and in the reproductive ages has meant that both maternity (Constable, 2014) and mothering (Erel et al., 2018) have become important themes in migration research. Similarly, Nakano Glenn (1985) played a key role in drawing out the interaction between gender, race, and class in relation to different generations of black, Mexican-American, and Chinese-American women. Crucially what they point to is the overlapping and deepening effect of race on women migrants, whereby racialised women consistently have poorer opportunities to migrate, have difficulties during migration and have poor outcomes after migration.

Class, however, continues to work alongside these to enable some women to overcome other forms of discrimination, at least partially. Class is written into [migration policy](#) in multiple ways, but primarily through the proxy of skills (Boucher, 2020). Skilled migration schemes select for class. Qualifications and wages are often the basis for identifying skills but when they operate in gendered labour markets which discriminate against women, class operates alongside gender to produce intersectional outcomes. Moreover, some sectors which also require skills

are simply not recognised as skilled sectors, especially where the skills required are embodied rather than ‘embrained’. This too affects women from different classes differentially.

18.4 Conclusion

Gendered migration has grown in significance across the migration research and policy agendas of the last 30 years. This research has had key empirical foci, especially around women in gendered roles—as care workers, domestic workers, and as family members, but also as asylum-seekers. It has also made important theoretical contributions, especially to theories of intersectionality and transnational thought. Nevertheless, some of the early questions posed in the 1970s, with which this chapter began, continue to be pertinent.

Moreover, the contemporary conjuncture offers new challenges for gendered migration. COVID-19 has speeded up some mobilities, impeded others, and completely stalled others. Moreover, although certain sectors that have become important during the pandemic, such as health and cleaning, have been led by females and migrants, these workers are still, despite their significance, generally seen as disposable and replaceable. What COVID-19 does point to, however, is that such work is set within and articulates differentially with productive sectors. As such, the articulations between production and social reproduction need further attention. The shift to home working in some office-based sectors might herald long-term changes in migration as face-to-face and on-site delivery of work is eschewed. This too has important implications for future research. Although this review has focused overly on research which has been led by those in the global North, the global South has contributed vastly to understandings of migration (Asis et al., 2019; Kofman, 2020). While this is particularly apparent in the Asian case, a truly global gendered migration needs to learn from the empirical, theoretical, and analytical agendas arising from other parts of the world too. Finally, this chapter has highlighted that most migration research has established itself within the domain of migration theory rather than gender theory (Raghuram, 2020).

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