How migration spurs battles over women

Jørgen Carling
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Andrada Radu (flickr.com/photos/merixon)

Migration affects the lives of women in many ways. One subtle but critical mechanism lies in disputes over 'who' migrant women are. Migration researchers can play a role in making the battles apparent and showing how they matter.

I have collected fifteen articles that have inspired me to write this post. I'll mention them as I write, highlighting what I think they bring to our understanding of battles over women in the context of migration. You'll find the abstract and full reference for each article at the end of the post.

The battles I refer to can, for the most part be related to a simple question: *Who are 'migrant women'?* Let's leave aside the demographics and socio-economic profiles of women who migrate and focus on the idea of 'migrant women'. A good place to start is the message that the Director General of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) published on the occasion of International Women's Day 2015. The Director General's carefully worded message paints a picture that I think is typical in the field of policy and practice: migrant women are strong, yet in need of protection; they are pillars, yet vulnerable; they are leaders, yet need to be empowered.

It's easy to point out that the IOM's description is riddled with tensions. This is not a problem—life is full of tensions and contradictions. But it's worth pausing to think about the attempt to fill the notion of 'migrant women' with meaning. Even if the description is a multi-faceted one, we are still left with a fixed category: migrant women.

'We can learn a lot from them' writes the IOM Director General about migrant women. I agree. In my own research, I have relied heavily upon ethnographic methods, which are

essentially about learning from people who talk about their experiences. But I've grown increasingly sceptical of learning from people as 'representatives' of a particular category.

These tensions have a long history of being debated in feminist research: the very idea of a women's day presupposes that women 'in general' are a meaningful category, but using it in a general way—as in references to 'migrant women'—raises a series of theoretical and political issues. Does the label subsume diversity under a stereotypical image? Is it a meaningful aspect of experience for the individuals who are labelled in this way? How is the label represented, and by whom?

So, 'migrant women' is a label that is given meaning through acts such as the IOM's message, grassroots activism, and a host of other statements and events on the occasion of International Women's Day. The research literature shows how many other processes of labelling, defining and appraising are parts of migrant women's lives.

The struggles over the meaning of being a migrant woman play out as a two-way process. At a general level, labels and stereotypes take shape and are given meaning. This is happening continuously on a range of arenas, from everyday life to the media and political debate. Most often, the labels and stereotypes are not about the abstract notion of 'migrant women' but rather about specific 'types' of migrant women.

Cinzia Scolari provides a very explicit example of these processes, showing how the Ukrainian stigmatizes migrant women as 'prostitutes' (if they go to Italy) and 'defectors' (if they go to the US). Such moral judgement of migrant women on the basis of their geographical origin or destinations is remarkably common, be it through official discourse or everyday small-talk. We encountered another example in the Norwegian component of the THEMIS project, led by my colleague Cindy Horst. Among Brazilians, there was a notion of 'the girls from the Northeast' that was talked about in terms of their region of origin, but essentially concerned perceptions of class and moral standing.

Stefano Corso (flickr.com/photos/pensiero)

The question of *who* migrant women are depends of how their migration is understood. Hyunok Lee vividly illustrates this point by analysing the competing perceptions of marriage migration from Vietnam to Korea as either a form of trafficking of the creation of multicultural families.

As these examples illustrate, the moral judgement of migrant women is typically linked to sexuality and reproduction. In another study of Ukrainian migration, Guri Tyldum shows how public discourse and the media produce an image of migrant mothers as women who abandon the duties of motherhood. For women who leave their children behind to

work abroad, the notion of sacrifice is central to redefining their actions in morally justifiable terms. Guri's discussion of sacrifice resonates with my own recent work on sacrifice in remittance scripts.

Moral condemnation of migrant mothers appears to be more widespread in Central and Eastern Europe than in other regions of female out-migration. In the article that Lisa Åkesson, Heike Drotbohm and I wrote about migration and motherhood in Cape Verde, we show how the societal acceptance of separation helps women tackle the expected and unforeseen challenges that it involves. As I have argued elsewhere, the welfare of children who stay behind when their mothers migrate is directly affected by the ways in which society judges or respects the mothers' choices.

The subtle battles over migrant women sometimes play out in legislation. In Isabella Cheng's article she shows how Taiwanese legislation regulates the immigration of women with the aim of 'disciplining the wife and making her a capable mother for the nation'. Women who come from poorer countries and don't speak Chinese are categorically perceived as inferior. But as child-bearers, they are seen to have the biological potential of serving as instruments for maintaining the homogeneity and prosperity of Taiwan.

It can be easy for researchers to identify and condemn those who stigmatize female migrants. Speranta Dumitru instead addresses the sexism of how research on the issue of migration and care is carried out. Female out-migration has increasingly been addressed in terms of 'care drain', a new term modelled on the well-established 'brain drain'. But the very notion of care drain, Speranta Dumitru argues, is founded on sexist assumptions and represents a form of 'methodological sexism'. The article is published with open access and deserves to be widely read and cited!

I wrote that the struggles over the meaning of being a migrant woman play out as a two-way process, and I have discussed how labels and stereotypes are given meaning at a general level. The other side of the process is the subtle micro-level linking of specific women with particular labels or stereotypes. A powerful mechanism through which this happens is *gossip*. Joanna Dreby's and Heike Drotbohm's articles are among the few studies that treats gossip as a consequential aspect of transnationalism. Based on research on migration from Mexico and Cape Verde, respectively, the articles demonstrate the broader social functions and consequences of gossip, especially for women. As Heike puts it, gossip is not 'just talk' but imposes particular orders and moralities.

(I've become particularly interested in gossip because my colleague Tove Sagmo I are finalizing a paper on the related topic of migration and rumour. It's been an exciting venture that I look forward to sharing).

Women are not only objects of labelling, judgement, and chatter in the context of migration, they actively engage with the labels and stereotypes. Christine Jacobsen and May-Len Skilbrei address this two-sidedness in their study of 'representation and self-representation' of women from post-Soviet societies involved in prostitution in Norway. The article is interesting to read alongside Martina Cvajner's study of self-representation among middle-aged Eastern European domestic workers in Italy. In both cases, the women's social navigation related to stereotypes that were grounded in prejudicial notions of

Eastern European femininity. Yet, in both cases, appropriation of 'true' femininity became a resource for assertiveness and self-respect.

A different stereotype that many female migrants live with is that of the oppressed Muslim woman. Patricia Ehrkamp nuances the picture in her article on young women of Turkish origin living in Germany. She lays out what she calls the 'complex entanglements of compliances and resistance' and dispels the 'simple assumptions of migrant women as overwhelmingly victimized by their potentially violent men'. Such assumptions are not only widespread in Western societies, but increasingly hijacked by right-wing groups that use alleged concern for Muslim women as a resource in anti-Islamic rhetoric.

For the women in Patricia Ehrkamp's study, resistance was primarily a matter of practices in everyday life. Other forms of resistance take place through migrant women's collective mobilization. Olga Bailey uses the example of African Women's Empowerment Forum, an NGO in Nottingham, to illustrate the potential of grassroots activism to empower migrant women both individually and collectively. The collective empowerment is partly about reclaiming and reshaping the image of African women in society.

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The combination of 'women' and 'migration' typically makes us think of migrant women. Indeed, everything I have written so far has had this focus. But if we think of all the women whose lives are affected by migration, female *migrants* are probably in minority. The last three of the articles I have assembled specifically highlight how migration and transnationalism is shaped by women who do *not* migrate. As Julie Vullnetari puts it in the case of Albanian women: they are often the most important pillar for supporting the family migration strategy when remaining behind.

Sean McKenzie and Cecilia Menjívar similarly illustrate this supportive role in their study of Honduran women whose husbands or sons have migrated to the US. They focus on the experiences of communication between the non-migrant women and migrant men and on the stress, anxiety, and added responsibilities that men's migration adds to women's lives.

The interwoven material and emotional aspects of staying behind when others migrate are also addressed by Ivana Bajic-Hajdukovic in her article on elderly Serbia mothers of migrants. The mothers send Serbian food to their children abroad, a practice that gives the mothers a sense of wholeness in their lives and helps them overcome separation. The children, however, have often developed other tastes and ask their mothers to stop sending food. To the elderly mothers, the rejection of the food is experienced as a repudiation of themselves.

These studies of women who stay behind illustrate that migrant women have no monopoly on sacrifice. I have met a lot of hardship in my own research on Cape Verdean migration, but an account that struck me with particular force was precisely from this perspective. A woman who is now abroad told me of previously being an emigrant's wife in a small village, among several others in the same situation. They were subjected to constant surveillance and suspicions of infidelity; their marriages did not provide emotional support, yet constrained everyday life, she said. 'We were like widows of men who were still alive.'

Out of the fifteen articles that I have gathered, two have mixed author teams and the rest are written by women. This is probably quite representative of studies of women and migration, even though migration research is being carried out in by men and women in roughly equal numbers. So where are the men? Some are doing research on men, masculinities and migration, of course, but female researchers are actually doing a fair share of that research too!

Ten years ago this month, I gave a presentation on 'The gender dimensions of international migration' to the Global Commission on International Migration. The resulting report is my only publication with an explicit focus on gender. Since then I have written or co-authored a few other publications on either male or female migrants, including the article on mobility moralities and motherhood that is among the fifteen that are assembled here. Engaging deliberately with the gender dimension has always been rewarding, not only because gender is important in its own right, but also because it sheds light on the dynamics of migration and transnationalism in ways that are lost in studies that either disregard gender or treat it simply as a variable.

And how does the researcher's gender matter? I have mixed feelings, just as with the notion of 'migrant women' in general. On the one hand, it clearly matters if the researcher is a man or a woman; on the other hand, there's a risk of essentializing and affirming sexist stereotypes. In a recent article I wrote together with Marta Bivand Erdal and Rojan Tordhol Ezzati, we advocate a nuanced and dynamic approach to positionality in migration research: it makes a difference who you are as a researcher, but the 'who' cannot meaningfully be reduced to a single category.

Women and migration: suggested readings

Åkesson, Lisa; Carling, Jørgen and Drotbohm, Heike (2012) 'Mobility, moralities and motherhood: navigating the contingencies of Cape Verdean lives.' *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies,* **38(1): 237-260.**

> In this article we discuss how transnational motherhood is managed and experienced in contexts of uncertainty and conflicting pressures. We propose a conceptual approach and apply it to a specific case: female migration from Cape Verde to Europe and North America. The analysis is based on extensive ethnographic fieldwork conducted by the authors in Cape Verde and the diaspora over the past decade. We first address the ideal of and expectations towards transnational mothering in Cape Verde, relating these to local forms of kinship, fostering and household organisation. We demonstrate that lengthy separations between mothers and young children are socially constructed as a normal aspect of transnational lives: they are a painful necessity, but are not automatically assumed to be traumatic. In an ideal situation, the biological mother and the foster mother play complementary roles in what we describe as the transnational fostering triangle. Subsequently, we ask how transnational mothering is confronted by

unforeseen incidents and obstacles, which we refer to as contingencies. We relate these contingencies to the negotiation of individual and collective ideas and aspirations. The Cape Verdean case is interesting in a comparative perspective because of the social acceptance of mother child separation. Our analysis explores how this acceptance co-exists with the real-life challenges of transnational mothering.

Bajic-Hajdukovic, Ivana (2013) 'Food, Family, and Memory: Belgrade Mothers and Their Migrant Children.' *Food and Foodways,* **21(1): 46-65.**

This article explores the link between food, memory, and cultural transmission in the context of migrant adult children and their mothers left behind. Since the fall of Yugoslavia in 1991 these women have experienced severe social, financial, and emotional disruption caused by the consequences of war, hyperinflation, postcommunist turmoil, and the loss of children to migration. All this had a profoundly disorienting effect on these elderly women, leaving them to their own means to re-establish the sense of "wholeness" in their lives. Sending food to migrant children served to instill a memory of who these women are to their children and to remind migrants of their family. It also served mothers themselves to reiterate their role as "mothers" within a wider social network and society. Cultural transmission in the sphere of domesticity is one of few available ways for these elderly women to attain at least some sort of power in a male-dominated patriarchal Serbian society. Food, it will be argued here, does not only help migrants restore sense of "wholeness", but it serves as a powerful tool in the process of social reproduction.

Bailey, Olga G. (2012) 'Migrant African women: Tales of agency and belonging.' *Ethnic and Racial Studies,* **35(5): 850-867.**

This paper explores issues of belonging and agency among asylum seekers and refugee women of African origin in the UK. It discusses the ways these women engendered resistance in their everyday life to destitution, lack of cultural recognition, and gender inequality through the foundation of their own nongovernmental organization, African Women's Empowerment Forum, AWEF, a collective 'home' space. The focus of this account is on migrant women's agency and self-determination for the exercise of choice to be active actors in society. It points to what might be an important phenomenon on how local grassroots movements are challenging the invisibility of asylum seekers' and refugees' lives and expanding the notion of politics to embrace a wider notion of community politics with solidarity. AWEF is the embodiment of a social space that resonates the 'in-between' experience of migrant life providing stability to the women members regarding political and community identification.

Cheng, Isabelle (2013) 'Making foreign women the mother of our nation: The exclusion and assimilation of immigrant women in Taiwan.' *Asian Ethnicity,* **14(2): 157-179.**

Citizenship awarding is politicised. Conceiving female marriage migration as a national threat, Taiwan's citizenship legislation is consciously designed and purposefully utilised to achieve exclusion and assimilation. Driven by a nationalistic impetus, it shows how Taiwan imagines itself as a modern, prosperous and homogenous nation and projects upon the immigrant outsiders as a threat to its self-identity. Examined through immigrant women's lived experiences, this citizenship legislation is biased by gender, class and ethnicity. The implementation of the legislation is not only an example of symbolic politics but also banal nationalism realised at grassroots level in the private domain. Immigrant women's lived experiences show that exclusion and assimilation stemmed from banal nationalism is not just an operation of symbolic politics but is also enmeshed with their everyday life.

Cvajner, Martina (2012) 'The Presentation of Self in Emigration: Eastern European Women in Italy.' *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science,* **642: 186-199.**

This article, based on five years of ethnographic fieldwork, describes the strategies for the presentation of the Self employed by Eastern European immigrant women in the Italian northeast. These middle-aged women migrated alone, are employed as live-in care workers, and often lack legal status. For them, migration is a deeply felt trauma, which they narrate as being forced upon them by the collapse of the USSR and the failures of the transition to a market economy. They perceive their life in Italy as degrading, their work is stressful and undignified, they miss their children, and they are often seen as poor mothers with questionable morals. Consequently, they seek to dilute the social stigma, presenting positive images of their selves and claiming respect from a variety of audiences. The women continuously

endeavor to define their current condition as accidental and temporary and to assert their right to a better future.

Dreby, Joanna (2009) 'Gender and Transnational Gossip.' *Qualitative Sociology,* **32(1): 33-52.**

Transnational social networks powerfully shape Mexican migration and enable families to stretch internationally. In an atmosphere of such high dependence on social networks, it would be rare for families not to be affected by the opinions of others. This article analyzes this often-overlooked aspect of social networks, gossip. I analyze gossip stories prevalent for one type of migrant family, those in which parents and children live apart. Drawing on over 150 ethnographic interviews and observation with members of Mexican transnational families and their neighbors in multiple sites, I describe both parents' and children's experiences with transnational gossip. I show that in a transnational context, gossip is a highly gendered activity with different consequences for men and women. Although targeting both women and men, transnational gossip reinforces the expectations that mothers be family caregivers and fathers be family providers even when physical separation makes these activities difficult to accomplish.

Drotbohm, Heike (2010) 'Gossip and social control across the seas: Targeting gender, resource inequalities and support in Cape Verdean transnational families.' *African and Black Diaspora,* **3(1): 51-68.**

In this article I make use of transnational Cape Verdean gossip in order to elaborate on social asymmetries between members of transnational families. Drawing on anthropological fieldwork carried out in Cape Verde, I reflect on the content of gossip stories as well as the motivations and reactions of those involved. Gender and resource inequalities are identified as the most prevalent issues, fixed on matters of intimacy, reciprocity, and transnational support. Furthermore, the analysis of the extended network of people involved in these mutual evaluations suggests that members of transnational social networks reflect on newly emerged kinship hierarchies by redefining gender norms, familiarity, and claims to knowledge. The article demonstrates that transnational gossip stories are not 'just talk', but they impose particular orders and moralities relevant for those included into them and hence, they should be understood as a powerful tool for exercising social control across national borders.

Dumitru, Speranta (2014) 'From "brain drain" to "care drain" : Women's labor migration and methodological sexism.' *Women's Studies International Forum,* **47(B): 203-212.**

The metaphor of "care drain" has been created as a womanly parallel to the "brain drain" idea. Just as "brain drain" suggests that the skilled migrants are an economic loss for the sending country, "care drain" describes the migrant women hired as care workers as a loss of care for their children left behind. This paper criticizes the construction of migrant women as "care drain" for three reasons: 1) it is built on sexist stereotypes, 2) it misrepresents and devalues care work, and 3) it misses the opportunity for a theoretical change about how skills in migration contexts can be understood.

Ehrkamp, Patricia (2013) "I've had it with them!' Younger migrant women's spatial practices of conformity and resistance.' *Gender, Place and Culture,* **20(1): 19-36.**

This article examines how younger migrant women from Turkey maneuver the public and private spaces of their everyday lives in a neighborhood in Germany, and how they challenge and affirm the patriarchal practices and gender norms that husbands, fathers, and older migrant women seek to impose within and outside private homes. Younger migrant women selectively comply with gendered and generational norms of veiling and dress, while at the same time also reworking gender roles, and avoiding and transgressing masculinist spaces. Younger migrant women's practices and spatial representations in mental maps reveal the complex entanglements of compliances and resistance, and dispel simple assumptions of being overwhelmingly victimized by their potentially violent men that are so prominent in contemporary Western societies.

Jacobsen, Christine M. and Skilbrei, May-Len (2010) "Reproachable Victims'? Representations and Self-representations of Russian Women Involved in Transnational Prostitution.' *Ethnos*, 75(2): 190-212.

The article investigates how the concept of victimhood is constructed within debates on transnational prostitution and trafficking, and how representations of victimhood intersect with representations of the person/self, class, ethnicity, gender and nationality. Using research findings based on observation and interviews with women from post-Soviet societies involved in prostitution in Norway, we discuss how the women embrace, resist or rework dominant representations of migrant prostitution and attendant notions of victimhood, as well as how they relate to multiple notions of the person/self, femininity and nation through their handling of the stigma of prostitution

Lee, Hyunok (2014) 'Trafficking in women? Or multicultural family? The contextual difference of commodification of intimacy.' *Gender, Place and Culture*, 21(10): 1249-1266.

This article attempts to link commercially arranged cross-border marriages to the discussion of the commodification of intimacy and to explore how a transnational phenomenon is contextualized in national politics. The question of commodification – what can or cannot be assigned economic value – has been a contentious area of intersection between economics and ethics, and intimacy has often been at the heart of the recent debate on commodification. Yet, commercially arranged cross-border marriages are perceived differently in Vietnam, a country that sends brides, and in Korea, a country that receives brides. In Vietnam, cross-border marriage has been portrayed negatively and is often associated with trafficking in women. Although a similar discourse exists in Korea, the official discourse on cross-border marriage has focused on supporting multicultural families. The difference in discourse with respect to the same phenomenon suggests that the tension around commodification is not necessarily shaped uniformly across the national border. In this article, I juxtapose the contrasted discourses and policies on commercially arranged cross-border marriages in both countries and discuss the contexts that may have contributed to the difference in discourse. By doing this, I show that the global trend of commodification of intimacy and the cultural meaning of this phenomenon cannot be divorced from national politics.

McKenzie, Sean and Menjívar, Cecilia (2011) 'The meanings of migration, remittances and gifts: views of Honduran women who stay.' *Global Networks*, 11(1): 63-81.

In this article we examine the non-economic, emotional meanings that men's economic migration has for the wives and mothers who stay in two rural communities in Honduras. Combining the literature on economic sociology and on the social meanings of relations within transnational families, we identify three areas that allow us to capture what the men's migration means for the women who stay – communication between the non-migrant women and migrant men, stress and anxiety in women's personal lives, and added household responsibilities. Through interviews with 18 non-migrant mothers and wives and qualitative fieldwork in Honduras, we find that women's interpretations of men's migration are not simple, black-and-white assessments. Instead, these are multifaceted and shaped by the social milieu in which the women live. Whereas the remittances and gifts that the men send improve the lives of the women and their families, these transfers also convey assurances that the men have not forgotten them and they become expressions of love.

Solari, Cinzia (2014) "Prostitutes' and 'Defectors': How the Ukrainian State Constructs Women Emigrants to Italy and the USA.' *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 40(11): 1817-1835.

Scholars of sending countries emphasise the role of economics in shaping state policies towards emigration. They argue sending states are converging around a set of discursive strategies that aim to facilitate the influx of remittances from emigrants. One such strategy uses discourses of cultural nationalism to celebrate emigrants as 'heroes' of the nation. Drawing on a state-sponsored media campaign and ethnographic data, I found the Ukrainian state does the opposite. It stigmatises its emigrants to both Italy and the USA as 'prostitutes' and 'defectors', respectively. However emigrants are differentially stigmatised. Emigrants to the USA are simply dismissed, but the Ukrainian state constructs migration to Italy as a shameful social problem. It does this even though emigrants to Italy send back significantly more remittances. Economic interests cannot explain Ukrainian state practices towards emigration. Instead, in the context of post- Soviet transformation, I suggest the Ukrainian state has prioritised the construction of a

national identity. The state then constructs policy with an eye to cultural rather than economic outcomes. I argue the Ukrainian state actively stigmatises the migration to Italy because it poses challenges to the nation-building process, whereas the migration to the USA is peripheral to this key state concern.

Tyldum, Guri (2015) 'Motherhood, Agency and Sacrifice in Narratives on Female Migration for Care Work.' *Sociology*, 49(1): 56-71.

In this article, I address the stigma associated with female migration in many regions of large-scale female mobility. Showing the use of and the relationship between different narratives of female migration in Western Ukraine, I challenge some of the assumptions of the care drain perspective, and show how this perspective implies a risk of losing sight of female agency in descriptions of female migrants. In many communities of origin for female migrants there is widespread criticism in the media and popular discourse of mothers who leave behind children and enjoy the good life abroad, with claims that female migration happens at the cost of family and children. Due to the stigma produced by this discourse, female migrants who are also mothers often prefer to speak of their decision to migrate as an act of sacrifice. Studies that frame female migrants as mothers tend to reproduce these narratives of sacrifice at the cost of understanding female migration where women go abroad to improve their own lives. As a result, the focus is shifted from the women's agency and reasons for leaving, to the consequences of their absence.

Vullnetari, Julie (2012) 'Women and Migration in Albania. A View from the Village.' *International Migration,* 50(5): 169-188.

Since the fall of communism in the early 1990s, Albania has experienced migrations of epic proportions: 17 years later almost one in four Albanians has emigrated and lives abroad, primarily in Greece and Italy. Albanian emigration has by and large represented a typically male-dominated model, whereby men have "led the way" and women have followed as family members. Despite the considerable participation of Albanian women in this migration, their roles and experiences remain under-researched. Based on in-depth interviews with rural migrant women and their families, as well as additional ethnographic material collected from 2004 to 2006 in Albania and Greece, this paper aims to fill this knowledge gap. The findings demonstrate the various ways in which Albanian rural women participate in the migratory process. They are often the most important pillar for supporting the family migration strategy through their productive and reproductive labour when remaining behind. They are also closely involved in decision-making about the migration of other family members. Furthermore, they have been among the pioneers of the early 1990s migration themselves, including taking the long and risky journeys across the mountains to Greece. Overall, their contribution to the migrant household is beyond their presumed reproductive role and includes a strong economic component. While some "traditional" norms and values persist and are reinforced during migration, change does take place, albeit at a slow and gradual pace. However, for the emancipatory benefits women could accrue through migration to be enhanced, immigration policies need adjusting to address their position as fully autonomous economic and social actors, thus reducing their dependency on male "bread-winners." Albanian women's particular migratory experiences, combined with their increasing numbers as migrants, make a compelling case for further attention from researchers and policymakers.