

Do Women Benefit from Migration? An Editorial Introduction

By Nicola PIPER and Amber FRENCH

Do *women* benefit from migration, and if so, how? This special issue of *DIVERSITIES* attempts to provide some insights into this straight-forward sounding yet complex question, ultimately aiming to draw some conclusions on how migrant women fare in terms of gender justice, empowerment, and rights. Its purpose is to accompany ongoing work on migration and gender at the international level, which often focuses on economic aspects of migration outcomes at the macro, community or household level based on conventional means of assessment. By contrast, the starting point of this issue is a human rights based approach in its broad definition beyond the realm of international legal instruments. It offers a dialogue on how women themselves evolve throughout migration, ultimately gaining or losing from the experience vis-à-vis male migrants and other groups of migrants, as well as non-migrating women.

This collection of works has three distinguishing strong points. First, it offers an array of perspectives from gender and migration specialists, researchers involved with migrant associations, as well as international policy analysts. Secondly, the authors' contributions are based on a variety of different methods, qualitative and quantitative. Thirdly, the papers cover a strikingly broad range of geographical contexts on which only a certain degree of work has already been published in English, including migration on Hispaniola since the 2010 Haiti earthquake, South-South migration within Latin America, and migration from Africa to Europe.

But what exactly is meant by “female migration outcomes” in this issue? We invited contributing authors to formulate their own

interpretations and views on this question. As Gaye and Jha point out in their article on “Measuring Women’s Empowerment through Migration”, it is problematic to rely on existing human development/gender indices such as the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM), the Gender-related Development Index (GDI), the Gender Inequality Index (GII), and the UNDP Human Development Index (HDI). Other authors in this volume interpreted “outcomes” in terms of a number of variables ranging from:

- quantitative (years of education attained, income) to qualitative (legal status, knowledge and awareness);
- observable (job status, social inclusion, deskilling) to obscure (escaping oppressive gender roles)
- internal, or linked to migrant women’s personal situations and conditions (notions of rights and entitlements, personal security, decision-making power), to external, or influenced by external forces (legal authorities, migrant associations).

Moreover, the contributing authors go above and beyond these starting points by sharing their insider knowledge and first-hand accounts with *migrant women as dynamic individuals who change over time and space, and whose presence changes places* in multi-directional ways. In other words, learning and acquisition of knowledge (in the sense of normative interpretations and practices linked to this understanding) is a two-way process shaping migrants, the places they come from and the places they go to. Migrants are also influenced by socio-cultural changes non-migrants “back home” are experiencing, as shown in the contribution by Jettinger.

The papers in this issue examine individual-centered outcomes, based on the now well-established fact that women have significantly different migration motivations, patterns, options and obstacles from men. They also explore collective responses to the migrant experience by migrants themselves or concerned citizens on their behalf via civil society organizations of the “service provider” or “advocacy” kind as well as diaspora associations. Ultimately, the authors analyze how these and other factors determine the gains and losses of migration for women, addressing the impacts that socio-cultural norms, home country development and the migrant experience have on these outcomes.

Indeed, gender-based inequalities, injustice, discrimination and outright violence continue to permeate all societies to a certain extent, in some form or another. Such outcomes are often brought to the surface through, or are the result of, the migrant experience which, for women, typically means dual discrimination on the basis of being female and a non-citizen or absent citizen. Yet migration may allow women to turn these negative outcomes around by gaining greater control of their lives, whether through escape from traditional gender roles, improved knowledge and awareness about their rights, or newfound financial independence. Whether they migrate between two societies with opposing or comparable human development situations, women may find that they are liberated simply by having taken on a new role because of the move. As succinctly expressed by Tanja Bastia and Erika Busse in their contribution to this issue:

“A change in women’s status is to be achieved through their exposure to different gender norms so that they might start questioning the assumption that gender inequality is ‘naturalized’. These migrant women might begin appreciating the socially constructed nature of gender difference. Women’s position might also change by virtue of their new incorporation into foreign labor markets, which provides them with greater avenues for autonomy and independent decision-making.”

On the other hand, as Bridget Wooding points out in her account of human trafficking after the

Haiti Earthquake in 2010, there is still much to be done to more effectively protect women from physical and psychological harm:

“In the area of gender equality the legislation criminalizing rape for the first time in 2005 was a significant step forward. Notwithstanding the latter sign of progress, women continue to have difficulty in accessing the judiciary system and persistent gendered stereotypes coupled with a lack of knowledge on women’s human rights by actors within the judiciary maintain a cycle of impunity.”

Especially in the expanding literature on the “migration-development nexus” it is often assumed that migrants change due to the experience in often more developed countries in the North or that migrants bring back experiences to their countries of origin (as per the concept of “social remittances”, Goldring 2004). However, as also argued by Piper (2009), this depiction tells only part of the “remitting” story and not only do migrants bring socio-cultural remittances to the places of destination but change can also occur in the country of origin and can then be remitted to migrant diasporas in the Global North (as per Jettinger, this volume).

Net gains could also turn negative if destination country policies give insufficient weight to protecting those who work in domestic and care sectors. Discrimination in the destination society, or migrant women’s poor perception of their rights (see Piper and Mora’s contribution in this issue), may prevent them from establishing stable livelihoods for themselves and their families. In such situations, various contributions to this issue show the crucial role played by civil society organizations. As an increasing body of scholarship has demonstrated, migrant supporting or migrant rights advocacy organizations have been mushrooming in most regions of this world. They differ greatly in their attempt to address injustices and inequalities experienced by migrants. Outcomes depend on activists’ personal involvement in attempting to transform processes of inequality (Routledge and Cumbers 2009) and most effective, as has been argued, are organizations run by migrants themselves (Piper and Ford 2006). Yet, the specific ‘labour condition’ and status held by

migrants often prevents them from being able to self-organize. As Mora and Piper (this issue) argue, the need for a job and an income often takes precedence over articulating grievances as 'rights demands' (see also Briones 2008). In such circumstances, active support by local organizations is vital, and not only in their role as "service provider" but also as "advocate".

Ultimately, we hope that this special issue of *Diversities* will embark its readers on a trip

around the world, updating them on the status of women in various steps of the migration process and stages of life experience at the beginning of the 21st century. Perhaps the most resounding message we wish to leave is the role of migration as a bridge between the worlds of migrants and non-migrants, between "here" and "there", with migrant and non-migrant individuals in their roles as activists, workers, spouses, parents - and as women.

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