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Contextualização

FEMINIZATION OF MIGRATION?

Roberto Marinucci*

The following article analyses the feminization of migration trying to make clear its meaning in the international and contemporary migratory context. According to the author, the feminization can be understood as an increasing number of female migrants, as a change on the analytical criteria of the migratory phenomenon by including the approach in gender and/or as a change in the female migrants' profile. In the ending part, it is evaluated how far the contemporary geographical displacements can represent a real place to increase women's power and freedom.

Keywords: Feminization; Woman; Gender; Vulnerability; Empowerment

O artigo analisa o conceito de feminização das migrações visando explicitar seu significado no contexto das migrações internacionais contemporâneas. Consoante o autor, a feminização pode ser interpretada como aumento numérico das mulheres migrantes, como mudança dos critérios analíticos do fenômeno migratório mediante a inclusão do enfoque de gênero e/ou como transformação do perfil da mulher migrante. Na parte final, avalia-se até que ponto os deslocamentos geográficos contemporâneos podem representar um real espaço de empoderamento e libertação das mulheres.

Palavras-chave: *Feminização das Migrações; Mulher; Gênero; Vulnerabilidade; Empoderamento*

Until nowadays, the subject about gender was not enough valued in the international migrations' analysis. Decades ago, starting from the as-

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sumption that migration would be related to work, women were believed to participate in migration only as a companion, or, eventually, in family reunion. From this perspective, to understand the main characteristics of the migratory act, it was necessary to search men's migration, the only active agent. Eventually, it would appear complementary studies that were deep specific aspects of the feminine migration. This way, they used to mean that migration was always restricted to men.¹

However, the changes to the women's role in many societies, their insertion in the labor market, the advancement on the emancipation process, and, above all, the increasing number of female migrants, make more and more (questioning) arguable and outmoded the reduction of women as just the passive agents on the migratory act. Besides, it is seen, in a clear way that (the) women's migration in its constitutive elements could have deep differences in its characteristics related to men. Thus, it makes impossible generic and neutral analysis and evaluations connected to the gender subject (gender insensitive).

Therefore, the expression "feminization of migration" started to be used, more frequently, to point out, in a generic way, the changes that women went through in the last decades concerning the migratory context. Nevertheless, in which sense the contemporary migration would be more feminine? Are we facing a new reality or a new reading to an old reality?

In this article, three interpretations on the concept of "feminization of migration" will be presented taking into consideration quantitative increase (chap.1), major visibility (chap.2) and change in the female migrant's profile (chap.3). Finally, in the last chapter, an evaluation of the contemporary feminine migration will be outlined, in order to find out how far this feminization contributes to increase women's power and to promote their rights.

1. Quantitative feminization of migrations

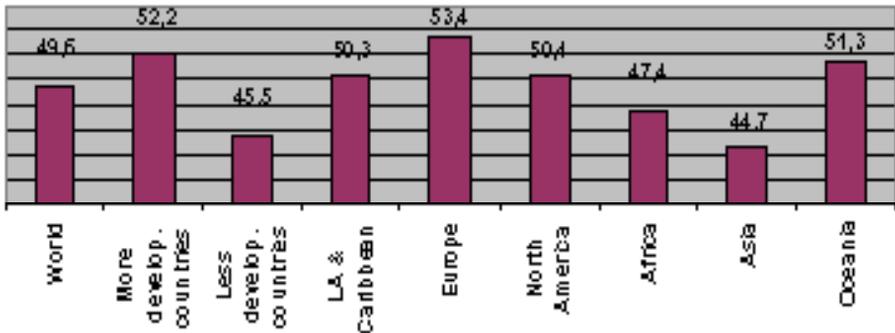
Some researchers, in order to clarify the meaning of "feminization of migration", talk about quantitative feminization. Their goal is to express the increase of feminine participation in the international migrants' context.²

¹ Cf. GRIECO, Elizabeth M.; BOYD, Monica. *Women and migration: incorporating gender into international migration theory*, p. 1-2. According to the authors, "neglect was inherent in equating 'men=general' and 'female=specific'. Such equation was evident in the use of the word 'migrant' to mean 'male migrant' and in the omission of the term 'male' or 'men' when examining male migration, while, in contrast, studies about migrant women included the term 'female' or 'women' in their titles" (*Ibidem*, p. 1).

² Cf. MARTINEZ, Jorge Pizarro. *El mapa migratorio de América Latina y el Caribe, las mujeres y el género*, p. 19.

- Graph 1 -

Percentage of feminine international migration by geographical areas - 2005



Fonte: World Migrant Stock: The 2005 revision

According to UNO, in 2005, 49.6% of international migrants were women, what corresponds to about 94.5 million people. It can be observed on Graph 1 that women are the majority among migrants from all regions of the world, except Asia and Africa.

Among the countries called as economically well developed, the quantitative feminization of migration is very meaningful. In North America, since last century in the 30s, women represented the majority in migratory flow.³ In Australia, the phenomenon is more recent, having started only in 2000. Europe is, nowadays, the continent that has the highest percentage (53.4%), reaching the top of 57.6% in Eastern Europe.

Among the aspects that may justify the high feminine migration in northern countries, family reunion can be highlighted – above all, in countries with old migratory tradition – as well as the major possibility of emancipation and access to certain opportunities in both educational and labor areas.⁴

On the other hand, in the southern countries, the feminine migration presents the lowest rates. In Asia, for example, the percentage is 44.7%. Although, considering the sub-regions, it can be noticed that women are the majority in Eastern Asia (53.5%) and their percentage is near men in other regions, except for Western Asia, where the percentage falls down to 38.8%. In this case, the extremely low number of female migrants in the Middle East is crucial, above all in the Gulf area, an important migratory

³ UNFPA. *Estado de la población mundial 2006*. Hacia la esperanza: Las mujeres y la migración internacional, p. 23.

⁴ Cf. ZLOTNIK, Hania. International Migration Trends since 1980, in UNFPA (Coord.). *Internacional Migration and the Millennium Development Goals*, p. 18.

pole where the female migration percentage is lower than 30%. Moreover, it can be emphasized that in many Asian countries, the number of women who emigrate – including to other continents – overpasses the number of men. It is the case of Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Philippines and others.

In the African continent, the extreme poverty, desertification of the territory, diseases and warlike conflicts caused a huge increase in female mobility. It went from 42% in 1960 to 47,4% in 2005. An intense feminine migration is registered in Western and Eastern Africa, where the percentage is between 48% and 49% in south area. Africa has, also, intense extra continental migratory flows to the European Union and to the Persian Gulf.⁵

According to Zlotnik, Latin America and the Caribbean are the first “developing” region that achieved parity between male and female international migration, since 1990.⁶ It is important to remember, nevertheless, that the situation is not homogenous: while in South America the percentage of female migrants overcome men’s (50.8%), men’s migration still prevails in the Caribbean (49.4%) and in Central America (49.5%). Related to inter-regional migration, as shown on graph 2, aside countries with prevalent feminine migration – for example Argentina, Chile and Venezuela – there are others in which the opposite occur – for example Brazil, Paraguay and the Dominican Republic.⁷

The enhanced Latin American and Caribbean female mobility is strengthened by the extra-regional emigration’s analysis. In Spain – second pole of attraction after the USA – the number of Latin American and Caribbean women, in December 31, 2006, achieved 54.2% of total migrants in the region. It represented the unique group with female majority. These women represented 41.7% of total foreign women in the country. Related to other countries, the higher feminization rates registered were: Guatemala (72%), Brazil (67%), Nicaragua (66%), Honduras (65%), El Salvador (64%), Mexico (62%), Dominican Republic (60%), Venezuela (59%) and Costa Rica (59%). In Italy, according to *Dossier Statistico 2006* of Caritas/Migrantes, an analogue situation is registered: 67.4% of migrants originally from Latin America and Caribbean are women. The majority comes from Peru (20%), Ecuador (19%), Brazil (13%) and Cuba (7%).⁸

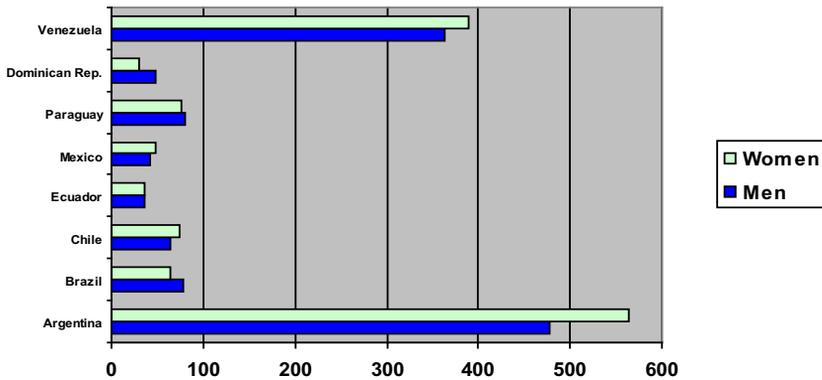
⁵ UNFPA, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

⁶ Cf. ZLOTNIK, Hania. *The global dimensions of female migration*. 2003. Available at: <http://www.migrationinformation.org/Feature/display.cfm?ID=109>. Accessed on: 15/06/2007.

⁷ More recently, an OECD study, issued in 2007, reveals that women were 50.5% of the international migrants in Latin America and the Caribbean (Cf. “Mulheres são maioria entre imigrantes da AL, diz estudo”. Available at: <http://www.lustosa.net/noticias/34101.php>. Accessed on: 18/07/07).

⁸ CARITAS/MIGRANTES. *Immigrazione. Dossier statistico 2006. XVI Rapporto sull’immigrazione*, p. 101.

- Graph 2 -
Foreign population born in LA and Caribbean
By living country and gender (2000) - in million



Fonte: Projeto IMILA do CELADE

Concluding, all that information testifies the massive feminine presence in the international migratory flows, what confirms the “quantitative feminization”. The differences among various regions depend on many aspects. In general, the countries with old immigration tradition usually have a high number of foreign women, above all, due family reunion. However, those countries that attract especially temporary work force, the feminine migration depends on the kind of job that the labor market offers.

Also, it can be emphasized that the feminine migration, on a quantitative point of view, is deeply conditioned by gender-related factors. The researchers Boyd and Grieco support the gender conditionals that are present on the pre or post migratory stages.⁹

The hierarchical and patriarchal relations in the family of origin can prejudice the autonomic decision as well as women’s access to necessary resources, in terms of money or information.¹⁰ The cultural and axiological context of the society has a huge influence, as it creates women’s role and their limits on the migratory act.

In addition, there are gender conditionals, at the place of arrival that can also influence the decision to migrate and, above all, where to migrate. The immigration policies, although apparently neutral, can make women’s arrival easier or harder when establishing parameters related to number and kind of admitted migrants. The feminine migration can also

⁹ GRIECO, Elizabeth M.; BOYD, Monica, *op. cit.*

¹⁰ BOYD, Monica. “Push Factors Resulting in the Women’s Decision to Migrate”, in UNFPA; IOM. *Female Migrants. Bridging the Gaps Throughout the Life Cycle*, p. 29.

be discouraged by the cultural stereotypes related to the women's role in the place of arrival.

In the same segment, the social nets – important factor in the feminine migratory act, especially in the choice of the place of destination – can introduce patriarchal patterns. In the case of illegal nets, there is always the fear of trafficking people for sexual exploitation or suffering any other violence.

Finally, considering these gender variables, we agree with Boyd and Grieco when they infer that migration can be seen as a sex selective process.¹¹ Generally, everything indicates that women face more obstacles than men to migrate. However that statement may not be true, depending on the gender structures in the departure or arrival societies, on the labor market demands and immigration laws.¹²

To this ending part, it can be highlighted that, in spite of all these obstacles, the presented information reveals, in a very clear way, that the quantitative feminization process of international migrations is constant and progressive.

2. Feminization of migration as a visibility of female migrants

Despite the facts mentioned above, currently there is no unanimity related to the quantitative feminization of migration. Hania Zlotnik, for example, supports that the total increase in the number of female migrants in the last decades, although constant, is very low. In fact, in the last 45 years, at international level, it grew less than 3 percentage points (from 46.8% in 1960 to 49.6%, in 2005).¹³

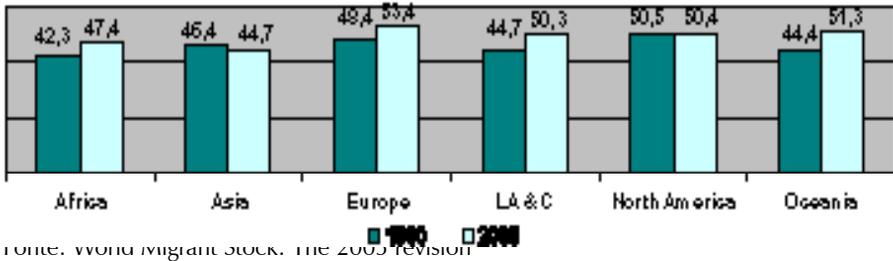
Considering different continents (Graph 3), the increase of female participation was about 5 percentage points in Africa, Europe and Latin America/Caribbean, and about 7 points in the Oceania. Nevertheless, in North America the percentage kept the same, and in Asia had about 2 points reduction, basically because of the strong reduction of female migrants in Western Asia (from 46.9% in 1960 to 38.8% in 2005).

¹¹ GRIECO, Elizabeth M.; BOYD, Monica, *op. cit.*

¹² In Spain, for example, about 50% of the migrants' annual are fitted by domestic workers.

¹³ Cf. ZLOTNIK, Hania. *International Migration...*, *op. cit.*, p. 17-19. According to the author, "for more than 40 years female migrants have been almost as numerous as male migrants: in 1960 there were 35 million female migrants and 40 million male migrants, by 2000, although the total number of migrants had more than doubled, the gap between females and males remained about the same, 85 million female migrants vs. 90 million male migrants" (*Ibidem*, p. 19).

- Graph 3 -
Female migrant's percentage by year and living continent (1960 - 2005)



There is no doubt that it had an increase. However, some information from the United Nations shows that the women's presence was very intense in last century, during the sixties. The 2005 IOM report supports that, among migrants, almost half are women (49% in 2000), a proportion that has been changed a little in recent decades.¹⁴ Could this little change justify a "quantitative feminization" of the international migrations? Did the female migrant subject enter in the international debates simply because of the slight increase?

Some migration's theorists understand that female migrants, although having intensely participated in the flows in many decades ago, they are still invisible to the analytical approaches. The word "invisibility" can be understood as the absence or limited use, in the past, of a gender focus considering a better comprehension of the migratory phenomenon. Women, in this perspective, were invisible, especially concerning the particularity of their migratory experience.¹⁵

A first reason for that invisibility is in the etymological comprehension of the migratory phenomenon in terms of economy and work. It usually started from the supposition that the labor markets were the main cause for the flows. Therefore, women's participation in the labor market was slight; migration was considered, primarily, a male phenomenon. A typical case is represented by the neoclassical theories, in which the decision act was basically accomplished by working men. It could be inferred that women

¹⁴ IOM. *World Migration – 2005. Costs and Benefits of International Migration*, p. 13. In a polemic article, Hervé Le Bras refuses with *gran banalidad* the idea of migration's feminization, asserting that the women's flows, since the XIX century end, either precede or follow flows of men depending on the kind of job and women's situation in the original country. (LE BRAS, Hervé. "El fin de las migraciones", in *Estudios Migratorios Latinoamericanos*, v. 17. 50, abril 2003, p. 13).

¹⁵ Cf. DEPARTAMENTO DE ASUNTOS ECONÓMICOS Y SOCIALES (ONU). *Estudio mundial sobre el papel de la mujer en el desarrollo – 2004. La mujer a la migración internacional*, p. 14.

performed only a passive and dependent role – as mothers and wives – therefore, it was not significantly enough for the general comprehension of the phenomenon. Even when enough visible, the women’s migration was disdained and considered as a simple variety of the masculine migratory pattern.¹⁶

Also, structuralist theories, when considering human displacements as consequences of structural coercion, focused more on the class’ subject, making relative the gender approach and omitting the inferior condition that women suffered when integrating the capitalist market. Finally, the more recent theories of migratory nets, even prioritizing the role of strategic social groups, rarely considered the stratifications and gender conflicts present inside these nets, illusorily interpreted as spaces where decisions are taken in a symmetrical and participative way.¹⁷

Facing this scene, in order to recover women’s role on migrations, gender variability started to be included in researches. Information about women was included to questionnaires and reports. However, according to Boyd and Grieco, the analytical criteria, often, continued to be gender insensitive, “without either reassessing the latent conceptual framework or developing new models to explain gender differences”.¹⁸

Even when there was a concern to deepen the gender topic using analytical criteria (gender sensitive), available information and researches had a limited reflection in the social means of communication and in political area. It had an insignificant interference in the elaboration of public policies, so it did not assured a stronger visibility of feminine migration.¹⁹

Finally, it is believed that, currently, prior to a quantitative feminization of migrations, a greater visibility of women is taking place. It is originated with the incipient gender approach as an epistemic criterion that makes possible a broad comprehension of international migrations. Without any doubt, the feminine emancipation process and the consequent axiological and ideological changes contributed to women’s visibility in many societies.

That new approach does not use the epistemic gender criterion as “sex” – that remits to biological aspects of men and women – but as a “social construction” historically and culturally dependent. According to the UN, *el género remite a los significados sociales asociados con ser*

¹⁶ Cf. MARTINEZ, Jorge Pizarro, *op. cit.*, p. 46-47; GRIECO, Elizabeth M.; BOYD, Monica, *op. cit.*

¹⁷ About migration’s theory, see: SOARES, Weber. “Análise de redes sociais e os fundamentos teóricos das migrações internacionais”, in *Revista Brasileira de Estudos de População*, v. 21, n. 1, jan/jun 2004, p. 101-106.

¹⁸ GRIECO, Elizabeth M.; BOYD, Monica, *op. cit.*

¹⁹ Cf. CEPAL. *Migración internacional, derechos humanos y desarrollo en América Latina y el Caribe*. Síntesis e conclusiones, p. 33-34.

*hombre o mujer, incluida la formación de las identidades, las expectativas, los comportamientos y las relaciones de poder que surgen de la interacción social.*²⁰ The geographical displacements of men and women are conditioned by these stereotypes, beliefs and expectations related to men and women's correct behaviors. Saying in a different way, la perspectiva de género reconoce la influencia de las desigualdades entre los géneros que existen en los países tanto de origen como de destino e ilustra la forma en que esas desigualdades pueden tanto facultar a las mujeres para el cambio como perjudicarlas en el proceso migratorio.²¹

A great challenge is to think about the hermeneutical and analytical criteria of the migratory process in order to include, also, women's experience, whose migration is not anymore *un caso especial o una derivación de la migración del hombre*. Now, the female migrant is seen as *agente de cambio (agent of change)*, historical actor in the social changes.²²

Concluding, what had extremely changed in the third millennium, more than the number of women who emigrate, was the way migratory reality is analyzed. Now, it is deeply conditioned by the gender point of view. The expression feminization of migration is a synonym of the female migrant's major visibility.

3. Qualitative feminization of migration

Focused on the new profile of the contemporary migrant woman, a third analytical approach of feminine participation in the international migrations does not exclude the progressive quantitative increase and the changes on the epistemic criteria. According to UNFPA,

*si bien a lo largo de la historia las mujeres, en su mayoría, han migrado debido al matrimonio o la reunificación familiar, en los últimos decenios aumentó el número de mujeres – casadas y solteras – que migran por sí solas o en compañía de otras mujeres u otros migrantes ajenos a su círculo familiar.*²³

²⁰ DEPARTAMENTO DE ASUNTOS ECONÓMICOS Y SOCIALES, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 1.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 13. According to the UN, a gender approach must reply to four important questions: *¿de qué manera afectan las expectativas, las relaciones y las jerarquías asociadas con ser hombre o mujer al potencial para la migración y a los procesos de migración para mujeres y hombres? En segundo lugar, ¿de qué manera afectan las desigualdades en materia de género de las sociedades de acogida a las experiencias de las mujeres y los hombres migrantes? En tercer lugar, ¿en qué medida y de qué formas beneficia o perjudica la migración a mujeres y hombres? Y en cuarto lugar, ¿qué medidas deben adoptarse para garantizar la igualdad de oportunidades y resultados para mujeres y hombres migrantes?* (*Ibidem*, p. 15). The answers to those questions can show how the gender disparities determine the migratory patterns of men and women and, moreover, how far the geographic displacements are factors of challenging, maintenance or reformulation of disparities.

Family reunion continues to be, certainly, one of the main causes of the feminine migration, above all in the northern countries.²⁴ However, the number of women that displace for work reasons grows more and more, because they are the first provider for the family. They usually get paid jobs in the arrival country to assure their own support and that of their families.

In this context, it is said on feminization of work²⁵ or turning women into proletarian²⁶ in order to present, at international level, the feminine insertion in the labor market. This is a strongly evident reality in Eastern Asia, where every year, millions of women go out of Sri Lanka, Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand to work in Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore or Middle East.²⁷

In the world's northern countries, above all, in European Union, the search for women to take care of citizens and children, with schedule flexibility and low salaries, grows. The increase of this demand is a product of changes in gender relations inside those countries where the insertion of native women in the labor market became common. This way, in Parreñas point of view, a paradox takes place. Women's emancipation in the northern countries is accomplished by the exploitation of the southern women's work force:

*para livrar-se do peso do trabalho doméstico, as mulheres [nativas] dependem da comercialização deste trabalho e compram os serviços das mulheres mais pobres e a baixo preço. E em nossa sociedade globalizada, são as trabalhadoras migrantes do Sul que estão liberando cada vez mais as mulheres do Norte desse peso. Todavia, isso traz conseqüências significativas para a relação entre mulheres. O progresso de um grupo de mulheres dá-se às custas da desvantagem de outro grupo de mulheres, porque, no processo de livrar outras mulheres desse peso, às trabalhadoras migrantes do Sul comumente é negado o direito de cuidar de sua própria família.*²⁸

In other words, Parreñas considers that native woman's emancipation does not happen due to changes in gender structure within family, with a

²³ UNFPA, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

²⁴ Cf. COMISIÓN DE POBLACIÓN Y DESARROLLO – CONSEJO ECONÓMICO Y SOCIAL. *Seguimiento de la población mundial, con especial referencia a la migración internacional y el desarrollo* – Informe del Secretario General, n. 16.

²⁵ GRIECO, Elizabeth M.; BOYD, Monica, *op. cit.*; cf. OIT. *En busca de un compromiso ético con los trabajadores migrantes en la economía globalizada*, p. 34-35.

²⁶ SASSEN, Saskia. *Globalizzati e scontenti. Il destino delle minoranze nel nuovo ordine mondiale*, p. 127.

²⁷ OIT, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

²⁸ PARREÑAS, Rachel Salazar. "Entre as mulheres – Desigualdades de trabalho doméstico e de gênero entre as migrantes na nova economia global". *Concilium* 298, 2002/5, p. 29.

consequent renegotiation of work division with males or due to claims for public policies that value domestic work. The palliative solution is to unload on the female migrants' domestic responsibility, often denying them the right to take care of their own kids.²⁹

Patricia Castellanos³⁰, also, when analyzing the situation of Peruvian domestic workers in Chile, recognizes that the dilemma of many migrants is to let their kids to take care of other people's children, with the consequent formation of transnational families:

*La separación de las familias, la responsabilidad económica de la mujer migrante respecto a su familia en el país de origen y la delegación del cuidado de los hijos, ha generado un nuevo tipo de hogar familiar de carácter transnacional. Esta familia sigue cohesionada alrededor de los acuerdos establecidos por sus miembros, pero ahora funciona sin que la madre esté presente en la cotidianidad de la crianza de sus hijos.*³¹

Although, what makes million of mothers to abandon their children and make these "far away" families? Castellanos mentions what many people call "feminization of poverty", in other words, the vulnerable economic situation originated with the difficulty for women to enter in the labor market, or to support herself in typically "feminine" jobs, which are poorly paid and extremely precarious. Moreover, it can be remembered that in many countries the number of homes where the woman is the head increased: many of them, responsible for the family support, felt obliged to migrate to improve family income. This is one of the factors that would explain the Peruvian migration to Chile and Nicaraguan to Costa Rica, according to Castellanos.³²

Deepening this subject, it is important to emphasize that the change in the female migrant's profile does not happen only with her insertion to the labor market. In some regions of the world, where women achieved an expressive emancipation, the biggest feminine autonomy may be the mobility reason. From this point of view, migration is the emancipation consequence. In other contexts, it is exactly the search for emancipation that makes women to go out or run away from their own country. UNFPA believes that many women

²⁹ From this point of view, the gender approach would have the objective to deepen not only the male-female relation in the migratory context, but also the female-female relation, making evident which way this relation can contribute or damaging each other's empowerment. Indeed, female-female relation should be analyzed using other parameters, such as cultural, ethnical and economic diversities that can contribute to the comprehension of these relations.

³⁰ Cf. CASTELLANOS, Patricia Cortés. *Mujeres migrantes de América Latina y el Caribe: derechos humanos, mitos y duras realidades*, p. 43-52.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 47.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 44-45.

*migran para huir de matrimonios abusivos y tradiciones patriarcales que limitan sus oportunidades y su libertad. Otro factor que impulsa a muchas a partir es la discriminación contra ciertos grupos de mujeres: madres solteras, mujeres solteras, viudas o divorciadas.*³³

Migration, in this context, is understood as a path to run away, to escape and set free from oppressive situations.

In this final approach, the feminization of migration is related to the change in the female migrant's profile that, currently, is getting a protagonist role. It is encouraged or influenced by social and economic reasons, changes in the labor market, as well as by changes or searches for change in gender relations.

Concluding the third part, it can be highlighted that the three interpretations of the concept for the "feminization of migration" are not related to each other in a replaceable way but complementarily. Nowadays, it could be asserted that grew the woman's participation in the international migrations, increased her visibility and changed her profile.

A last question must be answered: is the feminine migration a real space to women's empowerment or is it a space for being dominated? Is the new female migrant's profile a symptom of the effective woman's autonomy or does it hide a new way of subordination?

4. Feminization of migration and women's empowerment

Until now, it has been said "feminization of migrations", "feminization of work" and "feminization of poverty". Maybe, could there be a "feminization of power", too? "Power" is understood as the women's empowerment when it is possible for them to have self-determination and when they are independent to make their own choices. To assume power, in this case, does not mean having a coercive right over the other person, but having equal relations in which each one is seen as a citizen of rights, therefore protagonists of their own choices. Finally: is women's participation in the international migrations an empowerment instrument or a new way of subordination?

It is not easy to answer this question. In 2005, Erica Usher, from the International Organization for Migration, elaborated a document about the relation between the millennium development goals and migration.³⁴ Related to the third goal – the search for equality between sexes and women's empowerment – the document mentions that migration can have ambivalent effects.

³³ UNFPA, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

This way, the new woman's profile "can lead to greater independence and autonomy of women by increasing the proportion of women in paid employment situations, which thus has the potential to contribute to the attainment of Goal number 3". Among the good effects, Erica Usher considers the influences over the new generations, "providing children with different model of female's role" and remittances as a way to overcome severe poverty.

On the other hand, the document highlights also some challenges that the migratory act brings: the risk of disintegrating the traditional family relations; the extreme vulnerable situation that many migrant women find themselves, in the crossing moment or entering in the arrival country; the double discrimination in work place, because they are women and foreigners; the social pressure related to the traditional gender role; the problems with visa related to the husband dependence.

The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), in the report *El Estado de la Población Mundial, 2006*³⁵, supports that there are more probability that the migratory experience is positive when the woman displaces herself alone, in a regular administrative fashion, and when she works outside home. Although, in family reunion cases there is the risk that the male limits the woman social relations in order to preserve the cultural identity or the "honor". This way, women and children can be in a strong isolation because they left in the original land a net of friendship that is not re-established in the arrival place.

On the other hand, according to the same report, sometimes, the insertion experience is so positive that the female migrants are afraid to go back to their hometown because they are suspicious of losing the achieved autonomy. There are some cases, also, that the woman's migration contributes for the husband/partner to question and to change the traditional gender roles.³⁶ From this point of view, the feminization of migrations affects traditional male roles, obliging man to think about his gender identity.

The so-called social remittances, also, contribute to that, in a determinant way. In Nieves María Rico's words,

las remesas sociales son las ideas, los comportamientos, las identidades, y el capital social que fluye desde las comunidades de destino hacia

³⁴ USHER, Erica. *The Millennium Development Goals and Migration*.

³⁵ UNFPA, Erica, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

³⁶ *Un estudio sobre mujeres que habían emigrado de Indonesia comprobó que muchas manifestaron que sus esposos las trataban con más respeto y asumían mayores responsabilidades en la crianza de los hijos. En los Estados Unidos, los esposos de migrantes dominicanas tendían a contribuir más a las tareas del hogar y a pasar más tiempo en él que con sus amigos (Ibidem, p. 31).*

*las comunidades de origen, y viceversa. Las ideologías de género sobre las normas, los roles, y las relaciones de hombres y de mujeres, son remesas sociales intangibles que acompañan flujos transnacionales de personas, dinero, y otros objetos materiales. Estos flujos **transforman las realidades en ambos lados, creando nuevas versiones de lo que significa ser hombre o mujer, cómo se negocian pautas en el hogar, quiénes pueden trabajar fuera de la casa, quiénes deberían realizar las tareas domésticas,** etc.³⁷*

Through “social remits”, the migrant woman can play an important educative role with the original community, especially with the new generation, offering alternative models of gender relations. Nevertheless, depending on the cases, these axiological influences can create also strong reactions and internal conflicts, in the family area as well as in the community.

Deepening this thought, Castellanos considers that current women’s geographical mobility does not correspond, necessarily, to an autonomous act, even when it is accomplished in an individual way. Related to domestic servants, in her research, Castellanos supports that, frequently, the decision to migrate refers to a family decision that intend to increase the income by the union of the paid domestic service and the non-paid domestic service of other women (sisters, daughters, aunts, grandparents etc.) in the original place.³⁸ Thus, the individual migration is not necessarily an autonomous migration.

Blanca Villaseñor and José Ascensión Morena Mena have the same opinion. When analyzing a group of migrant Mexican women deported from the USA, they support that

el contexto cultural de la familia de la mujer migrante está cambiando, porque la mujer va tomando un papel más independiente y activo, aunque desde otro punto de vista no se puede descartar que la decisión haya sido motivada por la desesperación, por la desesperanza y por la pobreza.³⁹

Finally, in these cases the women’s migration is less an autonomous act than a reaction to certain existing situations that makes them to assume

³⁷ RICO, Nieves María. *Las mujeres latinoamericanas en la migración internacional*, p. 8 (The bold-faced type is mine).

³⁸ CASTELLANOS, Patricia Cortés, *op. cit.*, p. 50. Parreñas, when analysing the southern migrants in economically richer countries, asserts that the economic strategy is based on the higher offered salaries in domestic works abroad compared to their original place. This way, the migrant woman can contract another woman to take care of her children, and even so she has ample gains. (PARREÑAS, *op. cit.*, p. 30-31)

³⁹ VILLASEÑOR ROCA, Blanca; MORENO MENA, José Ascensión (coord.). *Mujeres migrantes en la frontera norte.*, in *Idem. Las mujeres en la migración. Testimonios, realidades y denuncias*, p. 143.

migration as a survival strategy, individually and/or familiar.

On the same line, Ofélia Woo, when delineates the Mexican female migration to the USA, recognizes that the salaried work could create changes in the gender relations although being more an economic necessity: *el trabajo de las mujeres no es necesariamente una decisión para independizarse o empoderarse, es para sobrevivir*.⁴⁰

In many cases, women who emigrate alone have the responsibility of supporting their own kids and/or their own relatives.⁴¹ In this context, female migrants live a vulnerable and dependent situation⁴² originated with the necessity of sending remittances and, in many cases, of paying her traveling debts. Thus, sometimes, they are obliged to tolerate hideous violations of their rights in order to keep a job. It is a situation that produces more subordination than autonomy.⁴³

Many international organizations' reports relate abuses suffered by female migrants, beginning with the allurements for sexual exploitation (trafficking) and fiancées' trafficking⁴⁴ until human rights infringements during the crossing or in the arrival places. In general, it is mentioned the double discrimination as woman and as foreigner. It can be added the discrimination related to the administrative irregularity, the color of skin, ethnicity or and/or religion.⁴⁵

Moreover, as we saw, the mothers' migration is provoking the called transnational families, in which the woman lose the right to take care of her

⁴⁰ WOO, Ofélia. "Origen y destino de las mujeres migrantes mexicanas", in VILLASEÑOR ROCA, Blanca; MORENO MENA, José Ascensión, *op. cit.*, p. 30-31.

⁴¹ According to a research done in Mexicali city, in the northern Mexican border, with Mexican migrants arrested and deported, 73% had economic dependents, 66% of those are their children. (VILLASEÑOR ROCA, Blanca; MORENO MENA, José Ascensión, *op. cit.*, p. 133).

⁴² The vulnerability theme is usually related to the migration's feminization. It is good clarify that, in this case, vulnerability is not understood as an inherent female characteristic, but a social reality originated with structures and *ethos* of culture, patriarchal, discrimination. It contributes, in fact, to stereotypes and gender inequalities. In this sense, more than the vulnerability of migrant woman, it should be discussed female migrants in vulnerable situation, in order to highlight the contextual elements that define being vulnerable.

⁴³ In the specific case of the domestic workers, the ILO recognizes that they are one of the most vulnerable groups in the present human mobility context: *Las condiciones de trabajo de los trabajadores del servicio doméstico varían enormemente: se los trate a veces como miembros de la familia de sus empleadores, pero en otros casos se los explota, en condiciones que equivalen a las de esclavitud y trabajo forzoso. A menudo, la jornada de trabajo del personal del servicio doméstico es larga e incluso excesiva (15 ó 16 horas al día, por término medio), sin días de descanso ni compensación por las horas extraordinarias; su salario suele ser muy bajo y tienen un cobertura insuficiente en lo que atañe al seguro médico. Se los somete también al acoso físico o sexual, a la violencia y los abusos y, en algunos casos, se les impide física o legalmente salir de la casa del empleador recurriendo a amenazas o a la violencia, o a la retención del pago de los salarios o de sus documentos de identidad (OIT, *op. cit.*, n. 191).*

⁴⁴ Cf. UNFPA, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 32.

own kids, maintaining the “far away” relationships by means of remittances, infrequent contacts and pre-established agreements. The distance of the mother can create family problems. According to ILO, for example, there are many cases in Sri Lanka that *los hijos de mujeres emigrantes abandonan la escuela o están expuestos al descuido y a abusos, incluido el incesto*.⁴⁶ Another challenge is the maternity away from home. This situation is problematic, mainly to migrants who have more difficulties to return to their own land – for example, the poorest and the ones who live in an administrative irregularity. In these cases, the maternity far from the deepest own identity references can create very serious psychopathologies.

Finally, the complexity of international contemporary migrations makes possible a simplistic answer to the initial question. In general, migrations have an ambivalent feature: they can be an empowerment space, but also a space for infringement of women’s primary rights. It is a suggestion that when analyzing this subject avoid stereotypes or simple approaches. In most cases, the same woman can be a victim in certain situations and in other situations an active agent for changes in personal and social realms.

In a world that is still characterized by an *ethos*, very patriarchal and male, it is believed that most women in a migratory context have to face preconceptions and gender discriminations. Through this point of view, the quantitative increase of migrant women and, at the same time, the growing number of women who migrate alone represents a serious challenge that requires urgent and effective answers from the international community, from governments involved and the civil society.

On the other hand, the major visibility of feminine migration, although incipient, represents an important help for public policies’ elaboration focused in assisting migrant women in specific situations, promoting their protagonist. A broad evaluation must consider also the family situation, specially the children that live in the original place, far from their mothers.

The feminization of migrations is also a sign of million women’s clamor that, in geographical displacements, search for more autonomy and liberation from asphyxiating realities. Many of them accept to face serious risks in order to accomplish their dreams. It is believed that this potential for change expressed in these women’s clamor, courage and choices can be a fertile seed for the construction of a more humane world.

⁴⁶ OIT, *op. cit.*, n. 77.

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