

# Feminist Theories and Migration Research—Making Sense in the Data Feast?

Aina Tollefsen Altamirano

## Abstract

Conceptual and theoretical issues are increasingly highlighted in research on international migration. This article looks at some recent developments within feminist geography and questions whether feminist theories can contribute to the understanding of international migration. Three main traditions are identified within feminist geography found in recent work on gender and migration. The conclusion is that migration research can benefit from feminist empiricism through detailed documentation and measurement of gendered migration streams, while the essentialism of anti-rationalist feminism could lead to over-generalizations in terms of male and female mobility. Post-rational feminist approaches to migration research could contribute to studies of subgroups of migrants (both women and men) and their relational position in different contexts.

## Précis

Les questions conceptuelles et théoriques sont de plus en plus mises en relief dans la recherche sur la migration internationale. Le présent article décrit un certain nombre de développements récents en géographie féministe et soulève la question de savoir si les théories féministes peuvent apporter une contribution à la compréhension du phénomène de la migration internationale. Trois traditions de géographie féministe sont principalement identifiées dans le cadre des travaux récents sur migration et sexage. La conclusion est que les recherches sur la migration ont à bénéficier de l'empirisme féministe par le biais d'une documentation détaillée et quantifiée concernant les courants migratoires

*fondés sur le sexage. Corollairement l'essentialisme du féminisme anti-rationaliste peut entraîner des généralisations abusives en ce qui concerne la mobilité masculine et féminine. Les approches procédant du féminisme post-rational en matière de recherche migratoire peuvent contribuer à l'étude des sous-groupes de migrants (hommes et femmes) et de leur dispositif relationnel dans des contextes distincts.*

A few years ago, the British geographer Tony Champion wrote that the challenge to migration research within the years to come would be to derive something sensible from the increasing mass of migration data available—in other words, the main problem would not be the lack of data but rather the interpretation and analysis of these data (Champion 1992). Although he referred mainly to research in the U.K. context, the point that conceptual and theoretical issues need to be more highlighted is relevant in a wider context as well. Many other migration researchers have commented on the general weak position of theories on migration—being either too general (i.e., laws of migration) or too specific and fragmentary (close to ideographic descriptions of unique contexts). Many would perhaps agree that today, there is a search for theories and concepts focusing on certain more general processes or mechanisms but which can have different outcomes and be understood differently from context to context.

It may also be, as Champion suggests, that instead of analyzing migration as a single phenomenon, it could be more useful to study subgroups of migration streams “essentially separately” as they reflect an increasing heterogeneity of society and a stronger spatial polarization. The focus would then be on the relation between migra-

tion and the societal context rather than migration *per se*.

Against this background, the article evaluates the actual and potential contribution of some recent developments within feminist geography to migration research. In what way can or could feminist theories contribute to the understanding of contemporary international migration? In short, can feminist theories make any sense in the (presumed) data feast within migration research?

To consider these questions I will first outline some central research traditions within feminist geography, following the works of Linda McDowell (McDowell 1993a, 1993b). I then move on to look at how some researchers have integrated a gender perspective in migration research—I cite three main works to illustrate different approaches (Zlotnik 1995; Chant 1992; and Buijs 1993). Finally, I conclude with a short discussion about what I see as the importance and relevance of these contributions.

## Feminist Geography—“A Diverse and Pluralistic Enterprise”

Linda McDowell wrote two articles in 1993 where she reviewed feminist geography during the last decade. She distinguished three main currents of thought within feminist geography, related to the developments within feminist scholarship in general. These currents do to a certain extent follow a chronological order, but they are not as clear-cut as they may appear at first sight. Instead they often overlap and run parallel in time.

The first current of thought that she identifies is feminist empiricism, which was a dominant geographical project during the 1980s. The second current is feminist standpoint theory, which developed and was influential during the mid- and late 1980s. The

Aina Tollefsen Altamirano is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Social and Economic Geography, Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden.

most recent current of thought is what she calls post-rational feminism, which is part of a recent skepticism about the centrality of gender as an analytical category in relation to other categories.

### **Feminist Empiricism**

A large number of studies were made during the 1980s in order to demonstrate empirically the situation of women in different geographical contexts. Consistent inadequacies in statistical data and an absence of detailed empirical studies motivated a great effort to map and "make visible" women in the social sciences, including human geography.

The main focus of most of these studies was on gender-based divisions of labour. They investigated the segmentation of the labour market, regional differences in employment structures, the urban environment from a gender perspective, the production/reproduction divide and comparisons of the situations of women in different cultural and geographical contexts. Basically, these studies could be seen as part of a rationalist project of exposing the unfairness of the exclusion and discrimination of women, so that these errors and inequalities could be corrected. A kind of "add women and stir" method, as McDowell puts it—a belief in that when correctly documented and described, rational human beings would in time eliminate the irrational discrimination of women. This optimism was soon frustrated, as nothing was corrected automatically so as time went by, more theoretical questions about power structures and the reproduction of the inequalities had to be asked.

### **Feminist Standpoint Theory**

The rationalist position in feminist empiricism was questioned by anti-rationalist currents in the mid-1980s. Radical feminism and the influential school of ecofeminism became established through a number of publications. McDowell (1993b, 306) describes the trend:

Rather than seeing discrimination on the basis of gender as unfair, rooted in rational humanist notions of rights, obligations and justice, work in this perspective celebrated the difference and attempts to reverse rather than abolish the traditional allocation of superiority to all that is masculine.

In this perspective, all that is "feminine" is revalorized, and the essential category of "being a woman" is highlighted. Not all of the studies within standpoint feminism are essentialist, but they do focus on gender as the central analytical category. More recently, there is an orientation towards analyzing gender symbolisms and representation, and how these are reproduced. Many of these studies are sensitive to differences between women, but they still consider gender to be the fundamental social category.

### **Post-Rational Feminism**

The most recent perspective within feminist geography identified by McDowell is what she calls post-rational feminism. Here there is a questioning of the centrality of gender itself in relation to other differences. Is it really so—which has been assumed by most feminist geographers—that some differences (gender) are more important than others?

For some writers, gender is no more and perhaps not even as basic as poverty, class, ethnicity, race, sexual identity, and age, in the lives of women who feel less divided from men as a group than, for example, white or bourgeois or Anglo or heterosexual men and women. The argument here is that a notion of gender as basic merely serves to reify, rather than critically contest, transform and escape the imposed myth of difference, while it ignores other critical and as yet subjugated arenas of difference. (Di Stefano 1990, 65)

One of the main influences on feminist geography within this perspective has come from post-colonial work in a "third world" context. Chandra Talpade Mohanty is cited by McDowell as an influential researcher

who has raised important questions for human geographers:

Who/what is the third world? Where is the third world? Is it spatially contiguous or discontinuous? Do third world women make up any kind of constituency? On what basis? How do questions of gender, race and nation intersect? (McDowell 1993b, 313)

What Mohanty does is to break away from essentialist notions to suggest "political rather than biological or locational grounds for alliance" (ibid., 313). Thus, in her view, gender is but one of the relations to take into consideration in the postcolonial situation. The spatial contexts must not be seen as fixed or bounded; place is "neither a categorical nor territorial concept, but is defined in *relational* terms, that is places are constructed from alliances and oppositional struggles to lines of power" (ibid., 313). This view can be of special relevance to migration research, as transnational migrations constitute a fundamental aspect of the postcolonial situation.

As we can understand from the above, feminist geography has during the last decade grown to become a complex and varied field of research, and despite its fragmentation, it can be concluded that there is a movement from mostly empirical studies to more theoretical and conceptual approaches. At the same time, all these perspectives exist simultaneously and may be emphasized in different ways depending on research focus. My next step is now to relate these developments to migration research.

### **International Migration and Gender**

The introduction of gender analyses in migration research within human geography dates back to the mid-1980s. Skeldon (1995) points out that migration research using biographical approach was primarily a "male" perspective until the second half of the 1980s. Chant and Radcliffe (1992) note that although gender imbalances in migration have been highlighted earlier in migration research within de-

veloping countries, there have been very few attempts to analyze these differences systematically. Their own work must be considered pioneering in this area (see e.g., Radcliffe 1990; Chant 1992). A number of other migration researchers point out both what has been termed the increasing "feminization" of international migration, and the need for both empirical and theoretical work in this field (Hugo 1995; Castles and Miller 1993).

A contribution to what could be called feminist empiricism is the work of Hania Zlotnik (1995). The main focus of her work is on how the volumes of male and female migrants have changed in international migration over the last decades. In general, there has been a consensus on the fact that there is an increasing feminization of migration in the world, especially since the introduction of restrictions on labour migration in Europe in 1973–74. Zlotnik challenges this view and demonstrates that in terms of gross immigration and emigration, there is no feminization. Instead, only in net migration do women outnumber men, as women participate less in return migration than men do. She is able to show that there are important differences in female and male migration to and from the United States, the Federal Republic of Germany, Belgium and Great Britain, but the causes of these differences are not analyzed. Her focus is instead on the quantification and characterization of female migration internationally. She looks at population statistics on female and male migration and argues that "numbers, origins and the timing of migration matter." Her point is that a first step for the understanding of the causes and consequences of international migration in general is a good documentation of migration by sex, and on the different characteristics of male and female migrants in international statistics. She might not agree with Champion on the existence of a data feast as far as female migration is concerned—her complaint is that data is far from sufficient for an adequate analysis. The fact that her statistics on female inter-

national migration are published in 1995 and not ten years ago, also shows that there are areas where further data are needed.

### Gender-Selective Population Movements

The fact that it is possible to identify differences between how men and women migrate—within and between countries—and that women's and men's use of time-space is restricted differentially in many contexts seems to be the obvious argument for introducing gender analyses in migration research. Chant and Radcliffe (1992) see the analysis of gender-selectivity in migration as fundamental for the understanding of economic, social and demographic change in the developing world:

Where men and women are, if they live together or apart, whether their movement to other parts of their countries or overseas is equally or differentially constrained through economic and cultural aspects of the societies to which they belong, are factors vitally important in the interpretation of development at both local and national levels in Third World countries. (ibid., 1)

The book collects essays in order to compare, interpret and theorize gender-selective migration in Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa and Asia. Chant concludes in the last chapter that there are certain similarities in the way gender-selectivity works across the different contexts. The following generalizations are made:

1. Men are more mobile than women, even in cases where female mobility is very high.
2. The temporary or long absence of migrant men from domestic space means that women obtain a certain autonomy, although their access to resources often is limited.
3. Men migrate "independently" more than women do.
4. The migration of men is more often linked to direct access to employment than women's migration.
5. The range of destinations is more varied and the distances longer in

men's migration—internally as well as internationally.

6. Women have fewer job opportunities at destination labour markets; they are mostly limited to domestic services and commerce.
7. The age structures of migrants vary between men and women; female migrants are young and many of them stop migrating when they marry; male migrants are also predominantly young, but they continue to a larger extent to migrate at later stages in the life cycle.
8. Men send remittances back to the "home areas" while women keep stronger personal, economic and social ties with relatives in areas of origin.

The most central factor in the shaping of gender-selective migration is, according to Chant, the organization and divisions of reproductive and productive labour at the household level. The fact that women are more involved in reproductive work and have more responsibilities can explain much of their restricted mobility opportunities in relation to men's. The way these gender-based divisions of labour (in both reproduction and production) vary between contexts also give insights as to why the levels of female mobility vary more over time and space than the levels of male mobility. In some contexts women participate more in agriculture; in others they have no access to waged agricultural work; in some contexts women are expected to work for cash; in others they are restricted from doing so. So the gender-based division of labour together with different social and cultural constructions of female and male identities affect the propensity and possibilities to migrate.

### Migration, Gender, and Other "Differences"

The third work I will cite develops the question of gender identity formation and change even further. It is the focus of many of the studies collected in the book *Migrant Women—Crossing Boundaries and Changing Identities* edited by Gina Buji (1993). In her intro-

duction, Buijs points out the purpose of the collection: to investigate the dynamics of change in gender relations which have been brought about by migrancy. So it is considered that the very experiences of migration are crucial as to how gender relations develop and change over time and space. This collection of essays can be seen as part of what McDowell classified as a recent development within anti-rationalist feminism, where gender symbolisms and the reproduction of gender relations are studied, here in relation to migration. But some of the contributions are examples of the post-rationalist critique of the centrality of gender in relation to other "differences." An example of the latter is the chapter by Parminder Bhachu (1993) called "Identities Constructed and Reconstructed: Representations of Asian Women in Britain." Bhachu points out the problems with ethnocentrism and the lack of understanding of the dimensions of class and race in her study of Asian and Black women in Britain. She shows that even though ethnicity is important to migrant women, so also is their "regional and class locations:"

London Asian women identify themselves differently from those in Northern Ireland and Scotland and according to the class positions that they occupy. This is not because there is no common 'ethnic' cultural base, but because younger Asian women emerge out of the particular localities in which they have been raised and from the particular class cultures to which they have been socialised. (ibid., 103)

But what about gender in her analysis? She is keen to demonstrate the differences between women, especially in order to counter the stereotype of Asian women as "passive/docile/conflicted/dominated by oppressive traditions and men." But she does not exclude gender—instead, gender, ethnicity, region and class are analyzed together. For instance, she analyses the fact that there are greater differences between indigenous white and black men in types of jobs and earnings than there are between indigenous white

and black women. Afro-Caribbean and Sikh women participate to a higher degree in the labour market in full-time employment than do indigenous white women, and they share the same proportion in professional, employer or management sectors as white women, while men's positions in the labour market are more unequal in terms of ethnicity and class. So gender plays a part, but it is not given priority in relation to ethnicity, region and class.

### Concluding Discussion

Do feminist theories contribute to the understanding of international migration? Can a gender perspective in migration research be of help in the search for new conceptual and theoretical insights? I would answer that so far, rather few attempts have been made to fully integrate feminist theory in migration research, but that the existing work certainly brings new and useful knowledge to the research field. The influences from the diverse traditions within feminist geography are only beginning to show. Firstly, feminist empiricism could contribute importantly to the detailed documentation and measurement of gendered migration streams—statistical data are still lacking, as pointed out by Zlotnik (1995). Secondly, the work collected in the book edited by Chant (1992) can be seen as an ambitious attempt to analyze systematically the dynamics of gendered mobilities. In most of the contexts studied, there are clear differences between male and female mobilities—so the focus on gender relations seems to be most appropriate. Certain generalities in these differences are identified (as listed above). A little caution against over-generalizations could perhaps be motivated, and Chant (1992) does take into account differences within male groups and female groups, especially concerning age. She points to the organization of reproductive and productive work at the household level as crucial for explaining these differences. A further analytical step from here could be to relate these findings to recent theoretic-

cal work on different forms of patriarchy (Duncan 1994) and on gender contracts (Hirdmann 1988).

Thirdly, and maybe especially significant for migration research is the recent questioning within feminist theory of the assumption that gender always should have priority over class, race or sexual identity. Post-colonial work on immigrant women in Western societies and on the relations between "third world" contexts and the West show that much feminist research has been ethnocentric in both problem definitions and concepts. For instance, as Ålund (1991, 63) points out, "the 'new feminism' tends uncritically to apply the traditional 'modernization' paradigm of Western perceptions of the Third World—an essentially ethnocentric and neo-colonialist ideology." In migration research, this critique seems specifically relevant as much of the central concepts and theories on migration reflect the experiences of Western societies, and in many cases do not integrate the findings from the vast body of existing research on migration in "third world" contexts. The new orientations do not mean an abandonment of gender, but rather a theoretical maturity that allows the incorporation of other subordinations and power structures into the analysis (McDowell 1993a, 158). In the field of international migration it could lead to research focusing on subgroups of migrants, where their relational position in different spatial contexts are exposed, while at the same time all totalizing categories must be avoided. The problematic essentialism developed in anti-rationalist feminism should not be reproduced. Migration research can benefit from the different traditions in feminist theory, but must leave essentialism behind. ■

### References

- Ålund, Alexandra. 1991. "The Power of Definitions: Immigrant Women and Problem Ideologies." In *Paradoxes of Multiculturalism: Essays on Swedish Society*, edited by Alexandra Ålund and Carl-Ulrik Schierup. Aldershot: Avesbury.

- Bhachu, Parminder. 1993. "Identities Constructed and Reconstructed: Representations of Asian Women in Britain." In *Migrant Women: Crossing Boundaries and Changing Identities*, edited by Gina Buijs. Oxford: Berg Publishers Limited.
- Buijs, Gina, ed. 1993. *Migrant Women: Crossing Boundaries and Changing Identities*. Oxford: Berg Publishers Limited.
- Castles, Stephen, and Mark J. Miller. 1993. *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World*. London: Macmillan.
- Champion, Tony. 1992. "Migration in Britain: Research Challenges and Prospects." In *Migration Processes and Patterns*, Vol. 1, *Research Progress and Prospects*, edited by Tony Champion and Tony Fielding. London and New York: Belhaven Press.
- Chant, Sylvia, ed. 1992. *Gender and Migration in the Developing Countries*. London and New York: Belhaven Press.
- Chant, Sylvia, and Sarah A. Radcliffe. 1992. "Migration and Development: The Importance of Gender." In *Gender and Migration in the Developing Countries*, edited by Sylvia Chant. London and New York: Belhaven Press.
- Di Stefano, Christine. 1990. "Dilemmas of Difference: Feminism, Modernity and Postmodernism." In *Feminism/Postmodernism*, edited by Linda Nicholson. London: Routledge.
- Duncan, Simon. 1994. "Theorizing Differences in Patriarchy." *Environment and Planning A* 26, 1177-1194.
- Hirdmann, Yvonne. 1988. "Genussystemet." In *SOU 1990:44, Demokrati och makt i Sverige*, Maktutredningens huvudrapport. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell.
- Hugo, Graham. 1995. "Asia on the Move: Research Challenges for Population Geography." Wiley Guest Lecture, International Conference on Population Geography, University of Dundee, 16 September 1995.
- McDowell, Linda. 1993a. "Space, Place and Gender Relations: Part I. Feminist Empiricism and the Geography of Social Relations." *Progress in Human Geography* 17, no. 2, 157-79.
- . 1993b. "Space, Place and Gender Relations: Part II. Identity, Difference, Feminist Geometries and Geographies." *Progress in Human Geography* 17, no. 3, 305-18.
- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. 1991. "Cartographies of Struggle: Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism." In *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, edited by C. T. Mohanty, A. Russo, and L. Torres. Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press.
- Radcliffe, Sarah A. 1990. "Ethnicity, Patriarchy and Incorporation into the Nation: Female Migrants as Domestic Servants in Peru." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 8, no. 4, 379-93.
- Skeldon, Ronald. 1995. "The Challenge Facing Migration Research: A Case for Greater Awareness." *Progress in Human Geography* 19, no. 1, 91-96.
- Zlotnik, Hania. 1995. "The South-to-North Migration of Women." *International Migration Review* xxix, no. 1. □

## Legitimate and Illegitimate Discrimination: New Issues in Migration

Edited by Howard Adelman

ISBN 1-55014-238-0. 1995.

287 pp., indexed. \$22.95

Freedom of movement: If the members of a state are forced to flee, the legitimacy of that government is questionable. On the other hand, if members cannot or must leave, again the government is not democratically legitimate.

Immigration control: While limiting access and determining who may or may not become members of a sovereign state remains a legitimate prerogative of the state, the criteria, rules and processes for doing so must be compatible with its character as a democratic state.

*Legitimate and Illegitimate Discrimination: New Issues in Migration*, edited by Professor Howard Adelman, deals with the question of legitimacy with case studies from the Developing World, Europe, Australia, the United States, and Canada.

### CONTRIBUTORS:

Rainer Bauböck, Howard Adelman, Gaim Kibreab, A. Essuman-Johnson, Grant M. Farr, Lawrence Lam, Oscar Schiappa-Pietra, Tomas Hammar, Frédéric Tiberghien (in French), Lois Foster, and Arthur C. Helton.

Available from:

Centre for Refugee Studies

Tel.: (416) 736-5843

Fax: (416) 736-5837

Email: [refuge@yorku.ca](mailto:refuge@yorku.ca)

## Breaking Ground:

### The 1956 Hungarian Immigration to Canada

Edited by Robert H. Keyserlingk

Toronto: York Lanes Press, 1993, ISBN 1-55014-232-1, 117 pages, \$6.99

This book is a collection of personal and archival-based memories on the selection, transport and settlement of about 40,000 Hungarian refugees in Canada in one year. It is a source of primary record as well as scholarly reflection on one of the most significant refugee movements to Canada after World War II—the 1956 Hungarian refugee movement.

Based on papers that were presented at a 1990 conference, the authors touch on the unique political, administrative and settlement features of this movement. The resulting work, edited by Professor Keyserlingk, is a unique mix of personal reminiscences and academic scholarship.

Available from:

Centre for Refugee Studies, York University  
Suite 333, York Lanes, 4700 Keele St., North York ON M3J 1P3

Fax: (416) 736-5837 • Email: [refuge@yorku.ca](mailto:refuge@yorku.ca)