CHAPTER 7

Women: Facing the Challenge of Migration

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Abstract  Raising awareness of female migration in the different migration processes is the main objective of this work. Women and men do not migrate in the same manner. However, the global data about the migratory phenomenon, which are based on a homogeneous category of migration, do not contribute to this statement. The works based on a gender perspective try to offer a common theoretical framework for female migration, with the purpose of, subsequently, analyzing it with a focus on specific geographical contexts. Finally, this chapter will value the life stories of migrant women, which will be crucial to continue to think and rethink this matter.

Keywords  Women · Migration · Gender · Law · Discrimination · Stories

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THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR FEMALE MIGRATION

To start the theoretical framework of female migration, it is interesting to mention an event that occurred in one of the frontiers that separate Spain from Morocco. It happened in 2018. As soon as the year began, the media surprised us with the image of nearly 300 men running, after jumping the fence in the city of Melilla, to access to Spanish territory. All of them, which had a Sub-Saharan background, pretended to cross to the other side, to access to Spanish territory. I say all of them in masculine, because you could not see any single woman in the picture. Women do not appear in the image because they are not there. Where are the women? We could wonder. They, even though they do not jump over the fence, also want to cross to the other side of the border. And they try, but even consisting on the same route as it is for men, it is not the same for them.

A circumstance that does not respond to an absence of women planned by the informant journalist, but to a true reality that gives us account of the most immediate evidence: the sexual difference in the migratory processes. It is not the same to be male than female when a migratory project is undertaken. However, with female migration we have to draw upon the epiphany of reality, expression that María Zambrano gathers in her book La confesión; género literario, to name the evident that exists in reality, that becomes visible and, yet, has not been contemplated in its singularity. It is the epiphany of reality: “the epiphany is what every reality that accedes to finally become visible has.”

In effect, it is repeated in time and any geographical context the fact that women are not drawn attention to—and, therefore, represented—in the imaginary of migrations. Or, what is the same, the migratory movements are impregnated by the power relationships between men toward women. Men and women do not migrate in the same manner, even though the global data about the migratory phenomenon, in which women are scarcely represented, do not contribute to this statement, as if there only existed a homogeneous category of migration (Silva 2018). The homogenization with which the migratory phenomenon is addressed constitutes a manifestation more of the pretended neutrality of the social sciences when dealing with the matter of the movements of men and women. A neutrality that, however, can be easily abandoned if we look at the numbers, which are something that is taken into account for being a quantitative order—typical of the empirical knowledge—so much that amazes, generates expectation. Following the
most recent report provided by UN Women, women represent almost half of the 244 million of migrants and half of the 19.6 million of refugees in the world. The basic data can be found in the following (UN WOMEN, Migrant and Refugee Women, 2020): Nearly one out of every six domestic workers in the world is an international migrant; women represent the 73.4% of the total of domestic workers that are international migrants. However, only 22 countries have ratified the convention of the ILO about domestic work which recognizes the additional vulnerabilities of female domestic workers and protect the rights and dignity of all the female and male domestic workers.

Another number that powerfully captures the attention is that 50% of the world’s refugees are women and girls, but only 4% of the projects of the so-called inter-institutional from the United Nations were assigned to women and girls in 2014, and only the 0.4% of the funds for what they call “fragile states” were assigned to groups or ministries of women.

However, as the UN WOMEN 2020 report, Migrant and refugee Women states, there is still a more alarming number, that has an impact directly in the woman’s body and her creatures: the 60% of maternal deaths that can be avoided take place in humanitarian environments, and, at least, one out of every 5 refugee or displaced women was victim of sexual violence.

These high numbers of migrant women fully coincide with the reality that I have been finding frequently with the female migrant population that I work with. In the courses to obtain the Spanish nationality, which are required by the Spanish legislation, to which attend both men and women, the 70% of the students are women. They are from different origins—Romania, Morocco, Colombia, Mauritania, Russia, Perú, Lithuania, and Nigeria-, but all of them have common characteristics. My students could not help feeling vulnerable, for being women and migrant. Not only for the difficulty they already found since they decided to start the migratory project, but for the rejection itself they have found once in the chosen destination for the journey. Assimilating and embracing vulnerability eventually has an impact on how migrant women face the construction of a citizenship far away from their origin country. Moreover, the pursuit of a status in which the Law—represented by the immigration administrative laws—ends up being a symbolic barrier firstly, and a great emotional exhaustion latter; to the extent that gaining access to the status of citizen entails a hard battle to go through the requirements of legal—administrative—and in some other circumstances,
penal—procedures. This has to do with what Ruth Lister calls “lived citizenship,” which refers to: how the individuals understand and negotiate the three key elements of citizenship: the rights and responsibilities, the belonging and the participation (Lister 2017).

The study of the way in which women construct a relationship with the status of citizenship when they undertake a migratory process requires necessarily of the theoretical perspective of the epistemology and the thought of the sexual difference, declared as a gender perspective. It is necessary to make a work of hermeneutics which is capable of including to the numbers mentioned before the perspective of the difference. Otherwise, the analysis of the migratory phenomenon remains in the emptiness, in a luck of homogenization incapable of assuming the reality of the new times that continue to be, somehow, the same as it has always been. The title of the notebook about migration of women by Sonia Herrera, from Ciudad de Juárez, named *Atrapadas en el limbo: mujeres, migraciones y violencia sexual* (Herrera 2013). Caught in limbo: women, migrations and sexual violence is specially clarifying to see as an example of what I am talking about. In this text, one can observe the complexity that goes through female migration, the wide range of possibilities, the hard task of redirecting to only one reason, the diversity of reasons. As one can read:

To the curiosity for crossing borders, getting to know new places, cultures and persons, to the civilizing and evangelizing pretension, to the conqueror and colonizing expansion, to the necessity of extending horizons, safeguarding beliefs, ways of life and world views, running away from violence, acquiring and exchanging knowledge, goods, services and merchandises, but also the in the necessity of surviving. (Maisterra 2012)

Precisely, it is in the necessity to survive where we find the main differences between men and women in the migratory process. There, the coercive power that legally and politically conforms the borders gets together with the violence that women suffer inside, in the margins, to the limit and outside of themselves. The female body, an indispensable body, becomes a violable body, and not only in the sexual level. It is a violence that goes “from the extreme conditions of the wars to the everyday life of the domestic sphere” (Ruiz 2004), states Olivia Ruiz, Mexican author, to refer to the case of migrant women in her context. It is applicable in interpretation to a much greater beyond, to the totality in which
women’s bodies have become a battlefield, an expression used for the war by men and not by women. A totality of disastrous economic consequences for the female body, mostly when it is about a foreign woman. In the next paragraph one can observe a reflection in the sense that we are pointing at:

The point is to reflect about this matter: why the exposure to sexual violence or the death as a result of it, are the main tribute that women have to pay for participating in this “arch-named” intercultural festivity of the globalization movement? It seems like playing a great round of global chess between the kings of capitalism, of colonialism and of the patriarchy, in which the pawns or the female figures that depart from their initial squares were tripped up pieces, eaten on their way, or sacrificed. However, feminism and critical thought have to recognize, too, that they are pieces that are crowned as Queens if they reach the eighth square. (Lozano and Botero 2011)

It is necessary to become aware of the reach that sexual violence adopts in female migration, causing such deep negative effects for women that their reach cannot be even named in its total amplitude. However, it is exactly making it visible that we can offer a real analysis. It happens at the same time as sexual violence is present in the statistics that try to reflect with numbers the migrations, as the trigger of the most terrible humiliation and also as the most efficient tool to lessen the self-esteem of the migrant women, to intimidate her and convert her in a victim. Apart from the sexual violence in the migratory process, there are other types of violence that many women and girls suffer from in the refugee camps. It is violence for gender reasons, in which being women increases the vulnerability given mainly by the difficulties, such as access to material means, lack of medical assistance in their gynecological process such as menstrual problems and assistance during pregnancy and birth. Mostly, due to a great invisibility, especially after the Covid-19 pandemic (UN WOMEN, Mujeres refugiadas al frente de la respuesta a la Covid-19, 2020).

Frequently, the sexual exploitation which women suffer is used as a double bargaining chip; passively, through sexual assaults and also as a surviving strategy. Unfortunately, many women are forced to give their own body as the only solution to reach the destination country in exchange for protection, food, help or to avoid police controls, assaults or collective violations. At the other side, very close by, there
is the forced migration of women, which are the cases of women trade with the purpose of sexually exploiting them. An enormous number of networks are denounced every day. Courts know more every time and more frequently of crimes of human trade. “Western” countries see themselves in the situation of having to reform their penal legislation with respect to this issue, as it happened in Spain.

**DISCRIMINATION AND SYMBOLIC BARRIERS OF LAW**

Previously, we could observe the high number of women which currently cross borders, with higher or lower success in the consolidation of their migratory project. From the perspective of ethnography and the feminist critique, the discrimination interpellates to make a categorical distinction between geopolitical areas and discriminatory reasons or criterion. The anthropologist Carmen Gregorio presents in her work *Tensiones conceptuales en la relación entre género y migración* (Gregorio Gill 2012) how most of the works conducted until now have focused on non-European women “of whom they have shown their position of disadvantage or inequality, when trying to reveal the different dimensions or discrimination exes,” and clarifies “discrimination is a concept used to make reference to the different structural dimensions—class, ethnicity, gender or race—which place people in a position of inequality to access the labor market for instance, or in the access to the resources in a large sense.” For this anthropologist, which departs from the category of “immigrant woman,” women are subdued in the migratory process to a double discrimination (Gregorio Gill 2009). The first, refers to the struggle that every migrant undertakes to obtain the legal citizenship in the place where they move to and establishes themselves. The second has to do with the so-called gender borders, which affect exclusively to women, and that often hide behind their authentic edges processes of feminization of poverty, which, on top of the sexual violence they suffer in many cases, make the female migratory experience a hard experience. It is at this point where I cannot omit the most cruel manifestation of these migratory processes, considered as forced migrations, which are being responded to through the international protection or asylum right. For instance, when escaping from practices such as female genital mutilation, forced marriages or women and girl trade with aims of sexual exploitation.

The distinction introduced between female and male migratory experiences in the field of migrations highlights some fundamental factors for
the understatement of the influence of sexual difference in the migratory project, such as the sexual division of labor, the role of women as a carer and house-worker, and the role that occupies in her family. Women assume the risk of going to another place to work to get the economical support for their family; and on another hand, the rejection toward the initiative of the woman to go abroad, which will lead to a loneliness from the origin of the migratory process with the following emotional burden of abandonment in the destination (Gregorio Gill 2009). The author remarks the invisibility of what she calls gender borders to this way give a new sense to the invisibility of the women too, which is at the same time circumstance to make subjects go into the secondary, without a voice, and at the same time, hyper-visible and considered as a danger for the reception society. They will be considered as carriers of customs that alter the social order, and, moreover, entail a burden for the public service system like health and education. However, very few times it is talked about the great emotional effort and the stress that they suffer in the continuous and hard process of adaptation, which in the majority of the cases, involves a risk for the family structure and the affecional bonds with their family, let alone the loss of self-esteem and vulnerability they have to face.

From the juridical point of view, the studied thesis is valid because it provides us with a category “immigrant woman” from which to approach law. The category “immigrant woman” presents its own connotations, but it is also important to point out that gender and migration studies provide anthropological and sociological perspectives that cannot always be collected in legal texts. In other words, the research studies conducted so far are in front of Law and it seems there is not a continuity solution. Therefore, what is known as “gender perspective in the treatment and research of the migratory phenomenon” has been recently incorporated (Hondagneu 1999; Pessar 1999a, 1999b; Tienda and Boothe 1989) (Giorguli and Saucedo 2006). In the same way, Gregorio Gil concludes when collecting a revision of the literature of migration and gender applied to the specific context of Spain; she does not doubt to remark the tensions that exist in the same elaboration of the category of immigrant women, from victim to agents. She says:

From the feminist critique in social anthropology and from the ethno-graphic look, it is suggested different problematics that researches have been working on: the transnational maternity, the organization of the cares
at a worldwide level, the multiplicity of discriminations that produce the category “non European immigrant woman”, the change in the relationships or gender systems triggered by the migrations and, finally, the links between immigration, gender inequalities and cultural difference.

Law is in the level of the regulation in the legal body, the channeling through legal documents, on the side of the international law, that afterwards wants to be transposed to the state juridical code. There are numerous documents that occasionally end up bringing to the penal code the solution that is understood as more accurate for the elimination of the discrimination. Legal vulnerability in this case implies a material and symbolic impossibility to be able to understand the legal normativity. An impossibility and difficulty not only to understand the text from the law, but the different legal requisites that are necessary for their legal stay, especially in communitarian countries. Law is also a patriarchal construction about women’s rights; even more when they are migrant women. It can be observed the place it occupies when statements of intent are collected in international texts, like the following:

Migrants can be exposed to a double vulnerability: as migrants and due to their gender. Separating in factors considerations of gender in migratory politics and other politics does not mean re-designing those politics, but looking at how to incorporate gender matters to the process of formulation of the politics and the programs that result of this process. Gender should not be consider as a group of matters that must be applied separately to the migratory politics for men and women. The politics about migration also must take into account the relationships between men and women in the origin and destination countries. (OIM. Migración y Género. Sección 2.10)

Migrant women see the basic citizenship rights violated at every step of the migratory process. Law becomes a symbolic barrier. In an attempt of being protected by it, it ends up disappointing, when becoming an application for the case of conflict and one of the last instance to appeal to.

In this sense, I highlight the words by Clara Jourdan,

A problem that we have to face urgently today in Italy is our relationship with the immigrants that come to live and work in my country, because their presence is every day more numerous and evident. A response to this
problem, maintained mostly the left and by the most welcoming people, is the extension to the immigrants of the rights or of some of the rights that Italians have. In other words, from the point of view of our relationship with them, it consist on making them equal to us in the juridical sphere. I believe it is fair, and I am favorable to the extension of the rights, but I do not think it is the right response to the problem. Because the problem we have to confront is our relationship with them, and considering them equals might distract us. It would be better to know how to see and appreciate the differences. For this reason, giving rights, although it is fair, does not solve the problem. In this sense, focusing the attention on the rights - in discussing whether to extend them or not- can make the rights a barrier that will not allow us to go further. (Jourdan 2007)

An example of the symbolic barrier of law would be the exploitation that migrant women suffer because of the inefficacy of the recruiting agencies in the destination. This agencies work as intermediary to access to the labor market and find a remunerated job. A job is fundamental to access to the regularization of their legal situation in the destination. As a recent report from UN WOMEN states about human rights of the migrants in many parts of the world, the recruitment agencies and the private intermediaries administrate the employment programs abroad and the acquisition of work permits. The supervision and state surveillance of these agencies are not efficient normally. This worsens with the important influence of the intermediaries, who take advantage of the insufficient knowledge and information of the migrant women. This lack of knowledge can be due to the discrimination for gender reasons in the origin countries, which make them much more vulnerable (UN WOMEN, Informe del Relator Especial sobre Derechos Humanos, 2019a).

**Local and Relational Contexts in Female Migration**

My participation in the IV Cumbre de Género de las agendas locales in Ecuador, that took place last year, 2018, with the presentation titled “Migraciones y género: nuevos retos para las ciudades” [Migrations and gender: new challenges for the cities] tried to make visible the absence of a differentiated treatment of the participation of men and women in the migratory movement in the scope of the scientific research. All of if, to
evidence that this has been one of the biggest impediments for the elaboration of public policies that are accurate for the reality of the migratory processes. Migration is not a matter that is exclusively of men, this is clear, as we have been saying in the previous paragraphs. Consequently, there cannot be formulated political responses that do not take into account the sexual difference. And precisely, the process to recognize women as protagonist of the migratory initiative must be accompanied with a support that starts in the local scale, in which women will start their first contact with the new social reality they will start living. In this sense, the municipality appears as a territorial instance in which there must be projected solutions and changes in the municipal policies that are sensitive with the arrival of the new neighbors who are the women who have arrived to the city after finishing their migratory project.

Local governments must make the symbolic turn to comprise themselves as indispensable scenarios for the development of effective public politics that wager for efficient solutions for the integration of migrant women. For this, migration flows have to be understood as new challenges for the local governments, that must assume the reality of more complex societies, with plural social and cultural contexts in constant change. Responses that depart from the undeniable consideration of the sexual difference, that take into account the disadvantaged situation of the migrant woman, specially in the moment of her labor insertion.

Nowadays, the local agendas are specially doomed to the inclusion of the migratory phenomenon among their priorities, if we consider that the Global Sustainable Development Goals state in the Object 11, to “achieve that the cities and the human settlements are inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.” And truly, the inclusion to which this objective refers cannot be reached if it is not through the consideration of the migration in the sense before noted, as an opportunity of change for the cities. These are ideal scenarios to open debate and direction of understatement, and, also, are channels for new contributions and possibilities of development through the work of the women and men who came from other places.

The importance that acquire the local governments is something that in some way is explained in the literature about transnationalism, whose contributions can be incorporated to the local scopes for a better understatement of the experienced process by every migrant woman. The “lineal transnationalism” (Giorguli and Itzigsohn 2006) which fights for not breaking the bond with the origin place and remains connected with
life, for instance, by keeping spiritual bonds and founding ethnic institutions in the reception countries. In my experience working with foreign women, I have observed that many of them have taken refuge in interpretations, for instance, reformists of the Koran to prove in the city of origin or arrival that their faith can be useful for the society that they are inserted because they share common values: the respect toward women’s body, the equality of rights, the empathy, love, the respect toward difference.

Another practice with different aspects is that one which has relation with the resources. As Silvia E. Giorguli Saucedo and José Itzigsohn note:

> Despite immigrant people have interest in maintaining the bonds with the origin society, the possibility of conducting specific actions with this aim depends on the access to the resources. In this logic, it is probable, for instance, that in their arrival to the reception country the migrants have no possibility to participate in transnational practices. From this perspective, the transnationalism appears in a slow way, as the migrants become established in their new context and have access to enough resources to be able to participate in philanthropic or financial projects in the origin country.

These authors think that the participation in the transnational practices has what they called as a “gender dimension.” This consideration reinforces the idea that men and women channel in different ways the experience of the migratory fact. While men are usually more worried about the loss of their status in the origin country, women are more preoccupied about the comprehension of the participation in transnational practices related with the availability of resources.

If the local scope is important, there is still a sphere much more fecund that offers an effective space in the normalization of female migration: the sphere of the personal relationships. From the feminism of the sexual difference, the practice of the relation has been understood as a space of true female freedom. For Lia Cigarini, freedom is an idea and an experience non reducible to an ensemble of constitutional civil and political rights given to an individual (Cigarini 2004), beyond the crystallization of the rights that ends up being an obstacle for the experience and infinite process of freedom, for the infinity of freedom. In those spaces of freedom, the inequality does not exist, but the enrichment from the difference. For this, we understand that the relation between women and men bring the ideal space for the understatement and the connection
between different individuals, from respect, the common discussion and the exchange. A challenge in the reach of every men and women, without the necessity of using the politicization of public initiatives, because for being of civilizing order, they reach further than the strictly institutional. Because the practice of the relation transcends the established schemes for which the female foreigners have to be accepted from below, from a subalterm place, instead of doing it from their own nobility and enriching difference. The thinker and researcher María-Milagros Rivera notes in respect to this that “tolerance is not enough for living humanly, nor from who tolerates, nor from who is object of tolerance” (Rivera 1997).

**Each Woman, a Story**

Sure enough, the women who migrate are somehow women that change the world. We do not come to solve anything; we do not come to make miracles; but we come to change the world given that which we contemplate, given that which we want to pursue, and by virtue of the fact that, in effect, one day we will be able to say: We made it. Beatriz Vahos, Asociación de Servicio Doméstico Activo (SEDOAC), Spain.

The main objective of this work has been presenting a general theoretical frame about migrations and women, or the response of women toward the migratory fact. However, the consideration of female migration in a global way cannot make us forget about the singularity that resides in each story. Nowadays, the numbers of movements of women inside and outside of the political borders have increased significantly. In those movements considered en masse, each woman carries her own story, which will or will not be told, but it will always be reflected in the channeling of her migratory project. In the hopes, in the frustrations, in the possibilities of personal growth, that in many cases is focused on sending resources to their family, or obtaining economical resources for the food of her daughters and sons.

The story of each woman reflects the big capacity of reaction learnt toward the adversities, something the Moroccan sociologist Fátima Mernissi contemplates in her book *Sueños en el umbral*, when she collects the knowledge of her female genealogy. One of the most important points is the “isti’dad,” understood as the capacity of reaction of each woman: “Yasmina, you have to cultivate the isti’dad, the capacity of reaction (...). The more precious value of a foreigner is their difference.
If you focus on the divergent, in the difference, you capture something new” (Mernissi 2013). It is precisely the difference of each one of the stories where we have to direct our attention, since each woman brings in their movement a lot to offer, and a lot to receive. But, mostly, the chance to bring closer her fruits and knowledge to the new society where she will be accepted.

My experience with migrant women has been developed mainly with women from the Maghreb and Sub-Saharan Africa. The singularity of the story of each one of them is an element to take into account in the study of the female migration. Because only when it is possible to come to know the true and real story of each woman, we acquire consciousness of the true reach of the migratory problem. The stories are very different with each other, but they encompass common episodes of violence and exploitation that they lived in their own bodies, risking their health and their own physical integrity. From all of them, I broach the case of the temporary worker women from Huelva. Women from Morocco that were victims of aggression and sexual abuse by the side of the men which contracted them for harvesting strawberries in Huelva. The situation of the “temporeras20” (temporary workers) have been tremendously hard to treat. Mainly because the government in Spain failed to carry out the treaties with the government of Morocco of providing them with a decent housing and protection during the time that the work stay in the countryside lasted for all the Moroccan women who arrived to Spanish territory to be employed as agriculture workers in the province of Huelva. Many of them suffered sexual abuse by their bosses, and finally the case ended up in the court of law. It is a clear example of female migration subject to sexual violence in emergency and scarcity state that finally has been redirected to the place of the conflict, the discord, where the Human Rights are reclaimed when public politics have failed: the courts of law.

**Conclusion**

The conclusion I offered in the IV *Cumbre de Género de las agendas locales* celebrated en Cuenca (Ecuador) in 2018 was directed to reinforce the idea of the necessity of enacting policies, laws, measures, documents and solutions that protect and encourage migrant women, their rights and dignity. Our cities are the most accurate scenario of protection, but also of acknowledgment. The true approach to female migration starts
with the acknowledgment of their essential contribution to the destination countries. They provide with the look of the outside, without which our vision of the multiple and changing reality of our days would remain reduced. But also, and, mostly, they are true foundations of our society: they offer their services in benefit of our families, they contribute to the development of the scientific research and, above all, they bring great lessons of effort, integration, and humanity. The migratory flows of women are a great opportunity to rethink the established models, both in the social and political scope.

This was the conclusion because I intuited somehow that the categories of the social sciences are necessary for the analysis and the reflection. However, they end up limiting the people who are subject of study to a sort of virtuality that on occasions has nothing to do with the real problem that migrations result in: It is a problem of recognition and aspiration to a status of citizenship truncated in the majority of the cases by the great difficulty that Law itself results in. It becomes necessary to revise the concepts and categories. “Women,” “migrant,” “African,” “immigrant,” categories that we use indiscriminately both in research and the daily juridical practice that lead on many occasions to an invisibility of the other that is, of the alterity and of its multiple possibilities.

Two years later, after continuing the research about female migration, I consider that it is convenient to revise in the same way the instrumentality of Law as a material barrier, that however, is to a greater extent, a symbolic one. A crucial barrier that goes from the aspiration to the defense of the rights in the courts, without mid-terms as if the bodies of the migrant women were battlefields, places for the malfunction of the economy, the legal procedures and the sexual and labor exploitation. But, mostly, I conclude that there is no place to do it anymore if it is not by the contemplation of the sexual difference and its own epistemology, that offers us fundamental tools for the life in common, independently of the place where we were born. That is my hope.

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