

United Nations
Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW)
Consultative Meeting on
“Migration and Mobility and how
this movement affects Women”
Malmö, Sweden
2 to 4 December 2003

**International Labour Migration of Women:
Past, Present and Future Challenges in North America
and Europe**

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Past, Present and Future Challenges in North America and Europe*

by
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I. Introduction:

The title A International Labor Migration of Women[≡] implies the purposive migration of women to find paid employment. Despite the 19th century movements of young women within and between countries who sought domestic employment, this explicit focus is relatively new in migration discourse¹. For much of the twentieth century, researchers and policy analysts alike saw the migration of women as derivative from that of men. Women were assumed to migrate in response to the previous settlement of men, for purposes of marriage or family reunion. Their economic characteristics, contributions, and labor market experiences were given little attention.

This gender stereotypical approach is now disappearing, replaced by the growing recognition that migrant women are active economic participants. But, it would be a mistake to focus only on the experiences of those women who are deemed to be Alabor[≡] migrants. In settlement countries such as Canada and the United States (and Australia and New Zealand) as well as in many European countries, most women have entered as spouses or dependents of male migrants. However, this does not imply that they are any less a supply of labour than men².

Accordingly, this short assessment of the international labor migration of women to North America and Europe has two parts. In the first, I highlight the major issues associated with the labor market integration of migrant women who are mostly permanent residents and migrated in the past, largely under the auspices of family ties. In the second I consider recent developments in the recruitment of women to meet specific labor shortages in receiving countries. Each part of the paper has a tripartite structure: stock taking and problem identification; policy remedies or promising mechanisms of change; and the robustness of information and/or likely sources of information. The overall approach is admittedly general, seeking to identify trends common across different receiving societies despite differences in histories of in-migration, systems of governance, welfare regimes, and race and gender stratification. The time period under consideration is from the 1960s to the present³.

* Prepared for the AConsultative Meeting on Migration and Mobility and How this Movement Affects Women,[≡] organized by the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women and sponsored by the government of Sweden and the World Maritime University, Malmo Swede, December 2-4, 2003. All comments, omissions and errors are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of other individuals or organizations.

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II. Here to Stay

A. The findings

In 1960 female migrants were 49.8 and 48.5 percent of international migrants in North America and Europe respectively, rising to 51.0 and 52.4 percent in 2000 (<http://www.migrationinformation.org/Feature/display.cfm?ID=109>). These numbers occurred alongside the growth of feminism⁴ which emphasized the social construction of gender⁵ and the intersectionality of gender, race and class⁶. Not surprisingly, research conducted during that period moved from being gender oblivious/gender neutral to gender aware to gender sensitive. This recasting has produced several generalizations regarding the labor market integration of migrant women who arrived as, or became, permanent residents:

- ! Precarious employment exists, particularly for those arriving in North America or select European countries some thirty to forty years ago, as well as for migrant women from specific countries and/or race.

Precarious employment refers to employment in jobs with one or more of the following attributes: subject to cyclical boom and busts resulting in high risks of unemployment; low or non-existent social, health, or pension benefits (for societies where such benefits are employment based rather than universal); subject to permanent job loss as a result of economic restructuring; variation in hours or weeks of work available; characterized by low rates of unionization and by personalistic rather than bureaucratic rules governing personnel matters, including hiring, firing, promotions and pay levels. In many firms, workers may not be employees but rather self-employed workers, selling their labor on demand. Precarious employment frequently offers low wages and is found in manufacturing industries, particularly textiles, in clothing industries where homework may be common, in hotel industries, and food service and food processing industries, and in office cleaning. In many, the type of work that women perform follows gender scripts in which women, not men, are considered appropriate for the job (sewing, food preparation, cleaning). Intersectionality exists, in which migrant women of low education and of color are most likely to be experiencing precarious employment

- ! In settings where ethnic economies emerge in response to discrimination and/or structurally induced labor market problems, women are an important source of labor.

The location of immigrant women in these ethnic enterprises is viewed problematic for several reasons. First, employment may be precarious subject to cyclical demand. This has been well documented in the clothing manufacturing industry. Second, as female kin, women may be working within the context of a family project or larger household strategy. Not only does this affect wages, if paid, but also it may reduce mobility opportunities, and imply the existence of gender discrimination within an ethnic economy. Feminist analysts also note that ethnic economies frequently build on patriarchal models of male control and that women often encounter a *Adouble day*≡ where their overall workload actually increases. As well, participation in ethnic enterprises can make migrant women in these sectors

invisible, both because they may not be classified as paid workers and because even if they are paid, they may be part of the hidden or informal economy. Finally, because ethnicity is so closely associated with national origins and skin color, the participation of women in these enterprises further segments them from participation in the larger society.

! The human capital stock of early groups, and for some more recently arrived groups, is low.

Human capital is an economic concept, referring to those investments that people make in themselves that increase their productivity and presumably their wages. The most frequently used indicator is formal education. At higher levels, education includes not only a knowledge component but an analytical capacity to process and refine new information using abstract symbols found in writing, mathematics, and computer based communication. Studies equate low levels of education, such as less than a grade 8 or 10 as equivalent to functional illiteracy. Women migrants are more likely than their male counterpart to have low levels of education in part because the gendered nature of education in home countries and societal expectations regarding the care giving and marital roles of women may favor a longer formal education of boys rather than girls. Low levels of education make it difficult to break out of gendered low skill and low wage work, particularly in post-industrial societies that emphasize economic competitiveness in a knowledge based society.

! Women migrants are less likely than their male counterparts to know the language(s) of the host country, and they appear to face greater barriers in acquiring language skills.

Knowing the language(s) of the host society enhances the capacity to obtain information about the new society - information about schools, health care, social programs, housing, employment opportunities, unemployment benefits, and civic and legal rights. Language also is a form of human capital in that it influences where workers are hired, their job productivity and thus, under the assumptions of neo-classical economics, their wages. With limited or no knowledge of the host country's language(s), workers are likely to find employment only in those settings their own language is used, such as in ethnic enclaves. They also may work where the host country language(s) is not required for job performance (for example, cleaning occupations). Such workers are likely to be employed in low wage jobs.

Women may be less likely to know the language(s) of the receiving country because of lower levels of education, but also for many of the same reasons that limit schooling. Proscribed gender roles and expectations make it difficult to advance to levels of schooling where other languages are taught or to enrol in certain types of curriculum that include language instruction. Once in the country of destination, language programs may be few and/or gender insensitive. Again, gender proscriptions designate women as responsible for domestic and child-rearing activities. Class times may clash with meeting those responsibilities, particularly if alternative forms of child-caring are not available.

! Devaluation and/or non-recognition of educational qualifications and training exists.

Many studies on the labor market integration of immigrant women are informed by the profiles of certain origin groups (Mexicans in the United States, Turkish women in Germany) or more generally by the characteristics of women arriving in the 1960s- 1980s as a result of family reunification. It is these studies that are instrumental in creating the imagery of low human capital stock and precarious employment. While this profile continues to characterize select groups of migrant women, defined by national origins, their class location, and the cause of migration, migrant women also can be high skilled workers. For them, the issue is not the stock of human capital, but rather the recognition of their educational degrees and their professional training. Occupational mis-matching, or down-ward mobility, or exit from the labor force along with lower earnings are the major consequences of non-recognition of educational degrees or professional training.

Several reasons exist for the devaluation of educational credentials of migrant women who received their education outside the host country. First, foreign credentials in fact may differ (i.e. be lower) in productivity enhancing content compared with host country degrees. In this circumstance, while the title of a degree or a program of study would be the same, the worth might be different and less for foreign earned credentials. This argument assumes perfect knowledge by the employer of cross-national variations in the content of credentials, near-perfect indicators of the fit between education and productivity, and obvious indicators of the irrelevancy of foreign credential content for receiving country=s labor market.

The second perspective underlying discussions of foreign credentials reverses the parameters. The content of foreign credentials is assumed to be the same for similarly titled post-secondary educational levels, regardless of the country or university where credentials were earned. However, because imperfect knowledge exists on the part of employers, full recognition is not given to foreign credentials, and the "worth" is under-valued relative to comparable host country levels of education.

Researchers also note two additional possible reasons for the devaluation of education as human capital. In both, education becomes a lightning rod for discriminatory actions. Employers may deliberately devalue foreign credentials in order to lower labor costs and enhance profits or, they may invoke educational devaluation as a means of achieving discriminatory outcomes resting on other criteria such as race.

Difficulties in obtaining educational recognition may be linked to the related difficulties of obtaining recognition for professional training. Although the rationale for licensing requirements of certain trades, para-professionals and professions is public safety, licensing associations also have an interest in restricting the numbers of practitioners since such restrictions ensure monopoly control, may increase wages by reduced supply, and overall enhance the power of the association. In many post-industrial countries, a paradox exists: on the one hand highly educated and high skilled migrants are encouraged to enter as workers, but on the other hand practices of devaluing educational attainments or requiring re-certification may stifle the full utilization of skills and create occupational skidding.

To date, this issue has been discussed selectively, largely within the context of the movement of skill skilled labor within the European Union countries or regarding barriers to certification among physicians or engineers. However, the substantial aging of the populations in North American and European countries within the next twenty-five years will generate unprecedented demand for health care workers, including nurses, most of whom are women. These countries are already recruiting

globally, but their recruitment efforts to attract migrant women to fill these labor shortages can be expected to intensify substantially. It is likely that accreditation issues will move center-stage in discussions over the migration of women. The gendered nature of accreditation barriers and/or educational credentials has not been extensively studied to date, but to the extent that women have responsibilities for domestic, child care and settlement activities, they may be handicapped in taking preparing documentation and taking courses or tests necessary for educational or skill recognition. Refugee women who leave documents behind also will be severely affected.

B. Responses

The starting point for responses to the conditions noted above is that migrant women, like their male counterparts, are important contributors to the societies where they reside. Their paid work contributes to the overall functioning of local and national economies, and their economic well-being in turn influences their old age, and the lives of their family members, including children that form the next generation. In addition, principles of gender equality when present in societies mandate improvements in the status of migrant women as part of larger initiatives.

North American and European countries differ enormously in the extent to which laissez faire principles are assumed, markets are regulated, and if, and how, training programs are funded. In all countries, the existence of non-governmental organizations, often formed out of the networks and common interests of migrant women, are essential for identifying issues requiring action and capturing both public and government attention. But that alone does not guarantee response. The latter seems most likely when enterprises, institutions, and governments understand that the assistance in overcoming obstacles and barriers is mutually beneficial to all. Further, endorsement of mutual interests and benefits and the forming of partnerships between migrants, non-governmental organizations and other institutions require implementation. Here the challenge is substantial, for institutions, including governments can be local, state or provincial, federal or supra-national (the European Union). A large set of potential arrangements exist depending on what actions are taken, at what levels, and through what funding mechanisms and via what institutional arrangements. Adding to the complexity is the need to be both gender aware and gender sensitive - for example designing programs accessible to all may in fact favor men if they are not accompanied by provisions to include childcare or elder care demands placed on women.

Complexity aside, labor market and related programs (such as general language training) that are inclusive of women share several common characteristics:

- ! an informational system that informs all newcomers, including women, of key aspects of the receiving country, and of their rights and entitlements. Availability of information in multiple languages is essential to overcome barriers due to not knowing the receiving countries languages.
- ! a climate (both ideological as well as financial) that facilitates the development of non-governmental associations that encourage the inputs of migrant women and work on their behalf to highlight concerns
- ! the existence of departments within larger educational, financial or governmental institutions that

have gender equality as part of their mandate.

- ! A structure of liasoning that connects Agrass roots \cong activities by individuals and NGOs to the Atop down \cong activities of key institutions
- ! the incorporation of gender based analysis into the policy arenas as part of a gender main streaming strategy.

C. Monitoring Cause and Effect

Identification of the labor contribution of migrant women requires data. Because flow data are collected to satisfy the administrative needs of government agencies, the extent to which migrant women are destined to the labor force may be underestimated. This is particularly likely when women are admitted on the basis of their relationship to a principal applicant or as family migrants. In such cases, their economic relevant characteristics may not be recorded since such information not needed for purposes of admission.

Identification of areas that need intervention also requires data. In North America and Europe, censuses and surveys that provide complete enumeration of migrant and non-migrant populations potentially offer the most comprehensive labor market indicators for migrant women. However, they provide information only from the questions asked. Knowing what the educational levels are for recently arrived migrant women of color, and knowing their earnings cannot be answered if census and survey questions fail to ask about recency of arrival, race or origins; if individuals through their fear of state apparatus and/or fear of being caught in an activity defined as illegal refuse to answer; and if individuals employed in the shadow economy give wrong information about their employment. Further, these Ablanquet \cong inventories rarely ask questions that capture the full range of women=s activities including child and elder care.

Case studies that examine only a few aspects of women=s lives or focus on women employed in a particular site, such as garment workers or in-the-home domestics are invaluable sources of specific information. Such studies are investigative, in-depth and frequently utilize qualitative methods. Often they illuminate processes and barriers that larger surveys cannot or do not tap. However, because of the narrowness of focus, such qualitative case studies may be viewed as less confirmatory by some, and more readily discounted as narratives of episodic events by government agencies in charge of funding budgets.

Both survey and case studies interview individuals, and in most cases they fail to collect information on the enterprises in which individuals work. This can be remedied by survey of firms although a true link between the employee and the enterprise often is not possible. Where employment equity/affirmative action policies on migrant women exist, governments may implement reporting systems regarding employee composition of firms falling under the mandate. However, for migrant women to be identified in these statistics requires that they be a target population. In Canada for example, the federal employment equity policy identifies the disabled, aboriginals, visible minorities (people of color) and women as designated groups. Critics charge that women of color and migrant women are likely to be under-represented in employment equity initiatives, simply because employers may satisfy equity requirements by hiring white Canadian born women and visible minority men.

Monitoring the effect of policy based remedial action has other difficulties. In both Europe and

Canada, accountability often is limited to fiscal and procedural reports filed by NGOs and other groups involved in the delivery of services such as language or literacy classes. In addition to adding administrative burdens and layers to the activities of such groups, this method of accountability fails to include roll-up procedures associated with the centralization of results. Centralization of information is essential for area specific or national identification of how many migrant women received these services and for how long. What are the consequences or results for these women often is neglected in these administrative accounts of services provided.

III. Deliberate Labor Recruitment of Women: Domestic Workers

A. What Do we Know?

In addition to the entertainment and/or sex industries, three major sites for the explicit recruitment of women laborers are in: manufacturing enterprises in free trade zones including the Mexican maquiladoras in Mexico; nursing (see section II) ; and domestic work. While all three sites command considerable attention, the recruitment of migrant women as domestic workers has become a major issue. This centrality of female domestic workers exists for many reasons. First, the phenomenon is very wide spread, with large numbers migrating from South and Southeast Asia and Latin America to the Middle East, Europe and North America. The demand for domestic workers to North America and Europe is likely to increase in the future given low fertility, the presence of the sandwich generation of women whose children are young and whose parents are elderly, and the growth of elderly population requiring care.

Second, because women's remittances are an important source of revenue and foreign exchange, sending countries often are participants in the migratory process, creating procedures that facilitate the out-migration of women as domestics. This has caused critics to charge that women have become commodified as goods to be exported (although it must be realized that this charge also is true for male contract laborers).

Third, the phenomenon reflects the impact of gendered processes in at least three ways: it arises from the expectation that cleaning childcare and elder care are part of women's roles and responsibilities. As well, it represents the gendered way in which women participate in household survival strategies (just as does the migration of men as construction workers). And finally, the devaluation of the work that women performed is reflected in the low status and wages associated with paid housework.

A fourth reason is one advanced by feminists who note that aspects of domestic recruitment both uphold and modify feminist perspectives on gender relations of power. In North American and in Europe, recruitment of domestic migrant women represents a nanny chain in which the labor force entry of women does not alleviate their domestic responsibilities but rather stimulates the hiring of replacements for domestic work. While ultimately, men continue to benefit from labor provided in the home by women, women in receiving countries also benefit and frequently are the employers of migrant domestics. This recasts an orthodox patriarchal script in which men rule over women, younger men and children to one in which women also rule over other women. Further, all these relations of ruling incorporate the intersection of gender, race, and class since domestic workers recruited from other countries usually are of different ethnicities or color than their more wealthy employers.

In addition to these factual and conceptual reasons, the conditions of work and the legal position of domestic migrant women represent two of the most important motivators for the attention to domestics. Both in turn provide the context in which human rights may be violated, resulting in some instances with loss of life. Analysts, and the domestics themselves, concur on the following problematic characteristics of domestic work: a) it is hidden in the household and is invisible; b) contracting problems frequently exist, such as employers increasing work requirements and refusing to pay; c) live-in domestics may not receive adequate food or living space; d) work is not subject to governmental labor laws; e) the capacity of workers to stop abuses may be low or non-existent, either because national laws fail to protect migrant domestic workers or because the temporary or irregular status of these women prevents them from accessing the courts.

In most instances, women migrating for the purposes of employment as housekeepers, child care givers or elder care givers do so either under temporary contracts or under irregular circumstances. In the latter case, these women have either entered a country without legal authorization or have overstayed or altered the conditions under which they were legally admitted. Because temporary status or irregular/undocumented status reduces or abnegates the rights of workers, such statuses have two interrelated consequences for these domestic workers: it creates vulnerability to abuse; and it is often associated with participation in the informal or shadow economy.

B. Responses

Because of the isolated nature of domestic labor, the establishment of and use of contacts with other domestics is an important mechanism for obtaining guidance about problematic situations. This may not be possible in those instances where employers seek to isolate female domestic workers in order to maintain control and worker dependency. However, in many North American and European cities, there are geographical locations where domestics routinely congregate when they are on Aoff-hours≡.

Research shows that the social networks of domestic women workers are important as conduits of information about possible courses of action, and about alternative employers, in those settings where domestics are free to change jobs. However, social networks are micro level, operating at the level of interacting individuals. The creation of associations/NGO groups offers more opportunity to mobilize concerns and present them to audiences broader than any specific employer. As such they form an essential step in elevating grass roots issues from the home to a public forum. Depending on the country, associations may form powerful lobby groups, and under the right conditions, they may stimulate change. The efforts of INTERCEDE in Canada over the seven Jamaican women about to be deported in 1979 forced government response which altered a high temporary situation with no residency rights to one where residency was possible.

However, to be truly effective in remedying wrongs and instigating change, NGOs must work in a climate in which there also is Atopt down≡ engagement of key institutions in the receiving countries. As is true for other issues facing migrant women, proactive organization dealing with minority rights and/or gender equality along with rights based jurisprudence system can provide a supportive platform for effort to provide more protection and rights for domestic workers. However, even within this context, irregular workers remain unprotected and vulnerable to abuse.

C. How Do We Know What We Know?

Data on the migration of domestic workers hypothetically could be obtained from administrative records of sending nations where programs exist to facilitate the movement of domestic workers. However, as is true for other flow statistics, these are administrative records that may not be centralized or maintained over time, and by their very definition they do not include persons who have left a sending country only to enter another as an irregular migrant. As well, countries rarely keep records of returning nationals, making it difficult to estimate net migration of domestic workers.

In receiving countries, censuses and even population registers may not be the most informative source of information about numbers and conditions of work. Most of the research conducted on women migrants who are domestic workers rely on information obtained from one or more of the following sources or methods: a) historical materials consisting of letters, newspaper articles, and government documents, usually in archives; b) information about numbers or policies that are provided by governments, usually those dealing with migration issues; c) interviews with domestics themselves; and d) observation and/or participant-observation methods.

The latter two approaches provide highly informative findings about select groups. However, results from specific studies with specific themes often mean uneven coverage of the situations facing all domestics. This uneven coverage in turn can weaken the representations for change in an evidence based policy arena.

Endnotes:

1. The growing realization that migrant women also were participants in labor flows rests on many factors occurring in the last quarter of the 20th century, including the rise of female employment in receiving countries; the resultant increased gender awareness of researchers and policy makers, particular those associated with status of women issues; the gendered impact of globalization, particularly with creation of gendered production of sex work, domestic labor and export oriented production; and the development of policies by sending countries to export female labor.

2. Flow data collected by receiving countries is collected for administrative purposes and it may not tally the labour force intentions of family members accompanying the principal applicant. As a result, flow data often underestimates the labour force participation rates of immigration women, which frequently are as high or higher than those of the non-immigrant female population. Further, because of the historical devaluation of female labour relative to males, immigrant women represent a source of cheap labour. Far from being Anon-economic \equiv , family based movements in fact can be considered as providing a supply of (cheap) labour, directly if the principal applicant is less skilled, and indirectly if women are part of a migration unit.

3. By the 1960s, family reunification was a growing segment of immigration to the United States and Canada. The recruitment of temporary labor migration was still in effect in select European countries,

virtually stopping with the oil crisis of 1973. Family reunification was under way in many of these countries as well forcing a reluctant recognition that temporary migrants were in fact permanent migrants. Thereafter, migration and the settlement of migrants occurred within the context of three growing similarities between Canada, the United States and European nations. First, the structures of their economies became post-industrial, meaning that the bulk of employment is found in a wide variety of service industries rather than in manufacturing. Second, substantial erosion occurred in the traditional distinction between the migration regimes of permanent settlement in North American and the guest worker or colonial migration regimes of countries such as Germany, Switzerland, France and the Netherlands. The expectation that migrants would leave is replaced by the acknowledge that often they are here to stay. In the policy arena, migration regimes - those sets of rules, regulations and practices that govern entry and continued residence of migrants - are converging. In recent years, North American and many European countries have sought to restrict asylum seekers, to curb family reunification based admissions and to encourage the migration of the highly skilled. They have enacted these regimes within the context of increasing concern about national security and about sovereignty over borders, and on various occasions they have used memorandums of understanding and bilateral and multilateral agreements to further their objectives. Third, North American and European countries face increasing numbers of would-be migrants, with many entering as undocumented migrants or overstaying their permitted residence period.

4. A Feminism \equiv refers to the body of thought on the cause and nature of women's disadvantages and subordinate position in society and to efforts to minimize or eliminate that subordination. However, because many different perspectives exist on the sources of gender inequality, it is more correct to speak of feminisms, or feminist theories.

5. To say that a process or outcome is A gendered \equiv calls attention to the fact that gender is a core organizing principle of social relations, including hierarchical relations. Gender is also socially constructed, resting on societal expectations of the appropriate social roles for women and men, and frequently reinforced by practices as well as beliefs found in economic, political, social and cultural institutions. One implication is that seemingly gender neutral phenomena associated with migration, such as exit, entry and labor force participation, produce different outcomes for women and men.

6. An intersectional approach to gender, race, and class emphasizes that all three dimensions of inequality or domination intersect with the result that how people experience gender inequality depends on their location within class and racially defined structures. This approach informs analyses of migrant women in at least two ways. First, it highlight differences among migrant women in terms of gender inequality. A university educated white woman migrant may experience gender inequality in country A \equiv in a different way than does a university educated black woman migrant from the same country. Second, it points out that women of specific races and in certain class locations are in positions of power and domination over other groups of women. It should be noted that other signifiers of difference can be included in an intersectional approach. Students of female migration refer to the A triple \equiv oppression or disadvantage of being female, foreign born and a woman of color. One also could include

religion in such a matrix.

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