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WOMEN IN INTERNAL AND INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION, WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO LATIN AMERICA*

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SUMMARY

The recommendations for further action made by the International Conference on Population (Mexico City, 1984) in the area of population distribution and internal and international migration continue to be an accurate reflection of the current state of scientific and political thinking in Latin America, except for the one topic on which they are deficient—female migration. An increasing body of research findings demonstrates the importance of women migrants—especially women as independent migrants. The predominance of women in Latin American rural-to-urban migration flows is well known, but female majorities are found in other important flows (e.g., in some inter-urban and international flows) as well. In general, female migrants tend to be younger than their male counterparts. The kinds of employment most commonly sought by women migrants are related to their traditional roles in the home and in child-rearing. The problems faced by migrant women differ from those confronting men who migrate and vary greatly over a wide range of conditions.

The recommendations formulated at the International Conference on Population, held at Mexico City in 1984, on population distribution and internal and international migration cover a wide spectrum of topics which, in one way or another, reflect the trends of the research and views of politicians on those specific topics in the years preceding the Conference. It may be said, on the basis of a subsequent reading of those recommendations and in the light of the available knowledge accumulated since then¹ in Latin America, that there are no conspicuous changes in either scientific or political findings and that, were the recommendations to be rewritten today, there would not be need to change them greatly, except in the case of one topic: female migration.

*This article has been enriched by the commentary and suggestions of Alfredo E. Lattes. Any errors are the exclusive responsibility of the author.

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Although female migration is a long-standing phenomenon in the world and although its predominance in certain types of movement was already indicated by Ravenstein (1885) in his famous "laws of migration", its magnitude and its specificity, and therefore extreme importance for policies, were ignored for many decades. The issue of migrant women was introduced in the Mexico City recommendations under the topic of internal migration but not in the chapter on international migration, which continued to be as asexual as it had been 10 years earlier at the World Population Conference at Bucharest. But female migration is now beginning to be more seriously and explicitly considered as a critical population issue. The purpose of this article is to stress the importance of taking female migration into account in research and especially in policy formulation.

RESEARCH AND POLICIES

Until very recently research and policies on female migration were affected by two adverse factors. The first is characteristic of the field of migration in general: traditionally it has been viewed as a secondary, or residual, variable. In population research, fertility, mortality and population growth have usually been regarded as key questions while migration has been treated as a dependent variable. As a result of that attitude and of the fact that policies in the field of migration have been considered very costly and of doubtful effectiveness (also *vis-à-vis* the other variables)—and this is unquestionably linked to the tenuousness of knowledge about migration—very few resources were allocated for research. Fortunately, a reversal of that attitude seems to be occurring.²

The second factor is that research and policies on female migration have been affected by the short-sightedness of students of migration, who have tended either to exclude migrant women from their conceptual and theoretical theses or to devise a stereotype of migrant women as dependants, wives or mothers, economically inactive, and, therefore, not worthy of socio-economic analysis (Morokvasic, 1983), in spite of the abundant documentation on the predominance of women in certain types of migration. That generically distorted view of migration seems to be starting to show some faint signs of changing at last, a process helped along by the activities of the United Nations Decade for Women, which culminated at Nairobi in 1985.

The Decade for Women gave rise, *inter alia*, to a large number of studies on women throughout the world: on female labour-force participation and the problems of measuring such participation, its relationship to education and family characteristics, its expansion in recent decades, the status of women and, in general, the relationship between women and development.³ Several of the study topics promoted the perception of women as protagonists of the migration process—for example, the studies on female employment and labour-force participation and the anthropological studies of rural life, the status of women and living conditions in urban working-class sectors.

A good while before the Mexico City Conference, articles and books began to appear on female migration,⁴ and from the early 1980s onwards meetings on the subject⁵ were organized or special meetings⁶ were allocated to it as part of a more general agenda. Those initiatives often originated from studies on women but rarely from studies on population or migration. Specialists in migration did not take up the topic because it was dealt with only partially at the meeting on migration held preparatory to the Mexico City Conference, at which experts in that speciality⁷ naturally predominated. The exceptions, such as the meeting organized by the International Committee for Migration, indicate that the topic was introduced at Mexico City.

In Latin America, a region where women have been predominant in rural-to-urban migration since the early 1960s at least (United Nations, 1962; Elizaga, 1966; Simmons, Diaz-Briguets and Laguian, 1977), the topic of migrant women was conspicuously absent until approximately the second half of the 1970s.⁸ Even today there are topics, such as temporary or seasonal migrations, in which migration continues to be dealt with as either a predominantly male or an asexual phenomenon.⁹ Apparently researchers focusing on seasonal migration—a new subject in the region—have not yet become aware of the role of women in temporary migration because, when questions have been raised by researchers who propose to explain certain patterns of female labour, they have found examples of temporary female migration (Sautu, 1979).

The specificity of female migration is also usually ignored in research on international migrations of past decades. The situation in Latin America appears similar to that described by Morokvasic (1986) for Europe when he speaks of the “created” invisibility of migrants. As a rule, research on the subject deals with men or with the wives of migrants, but not with migrant women as such. Even when the word “migrant” is used, as a general term, without reference to gender, as in the expression “migrants and their families”, it invariably refers to the masculine gender and “family” means dependent women and children. That dependence, whether genuine or applied, has served as a basic guide for statistical compilation and the formulation of policies (Morokvasic, 1986, p. 111). Unsurprisingly, the topic of migration, in the international population conferences of 1974 and 1984, reflected the status of research carried out by specialists in population. The recommendations of 1974 make no mention of women either in the chapter on spatial distribution and internal migration or in the chapter on international migration. The topic was introduced 10 years later, in the first of the above-mentioned chapters, almost exclusively in connection with rural-to-urban migration and the problems confronting women of rural origin (recommendations 43 and 44). In the chapter on international migration, the subject continues to be treated largely without reference to gender, but it acquires a male connotation. However, with regard to refugees, the numerical predominance of women is acknowledged in the introductory paragraph to the topic (United Nations, 1984a, para. 31; see also ACNUR, 1985). The Plan therefore implicitly ignores the numerical importance, characteristics and patterns of female migration, as well as the spe-

cific problems and advantages for development and the status of women deriving from female migration.

TYPES AND MAGNITUDE OF FEMALE MIGRATION

Reference has been made above to the recognized predominance of women in rural-to-urban migration in Latin America. Women would seem also to predominate in certain types of movement that are not necessarily from rural areas to urban. For example, in Argentina women predominated in the positive net migration of several provinces, such as Cordoba and Río Negro in 1970-1980 (Recchini de Lattes, mimeo), and among the interprovincial migrants ages 10-14 years in the period 1975-1980 (Abdala and Elizalde, mimeo). Evidence indicates that women usually also predominate in countries that have reached relatively high levels of urbanization. In order to explain such cases of female selectivity, which appear to be contrary to the common expectation of predominantly male flows of internal migration, at least the following aspects of the migratory process should be reflected: the status of women in the areas of origin; the distance involved; existing occupational opportunities in the place of destination; and cultural patterns of the human settlements (Oliveira and García, 1984).

The numerical importance of women in international migrations in general has been widely recognized in the literature of recent years. For example, Houstoun, Kramer and Barrett (1984) show that women have apparently predominated in international immigration to the United States since 1930, and the chapter on international migration in *World Population Trends and Policies: 1987 Monitoring Report* (United Nations, 1988) indicates that women constitute a large proportion of foreign residents in the majority of countries where the volume of migration is substantial. Schkolnik (1987) points out that, although the masculinity index for the population of Argentina was 97.5, the corresponding index for the foreign population was significantly lower—95.9.

Moreover, in the categories of documented migrant workers and undocumented migrants (and in the refugee category, as already stated) there is sufficient evidence to show that the number and/or proportion of women is high, although it is, of course, impossible to generalize because the composition of each flow depends on factors associated with each particular situation. Thus Sassen-Koob (1984) notes the growing migration of women workers (without distinguishing between the legal or illegal nature thereof) to large urban centres in industrialized countries, independently of male migration, in response to a demand for cheap labour in the United States, but points out that the process is part of a pattern already started in the chiefly Asian and Caribbean countries of emigration which employ women in export industries. In other words, as regards situations at both the origin and the destination of the migrants, he seems to have established the numerical superiority of women in those migratory movements. Safa (1986) also points out that women usually predominate among Hispanic migrants to the United States, especially among

Puerto Ricans, Cubans, South Americans and Central Americans in New York.

It is more difficult to find evidence of the numerical importance of women among undocumented migrants, since the estimates for that category are usually subject to considerable error. Nevertheless, there is some evidence that women constitute a substantial part of such movements. For example, although the percentage of women among Colombians deported from Venezuela amounted to barely 17 per cent from 1968 to 1978 (Pinto, 1981), it has been remarked that it is men who "are more exposed to circumstances that make deportation possible because illegal females generally employed in domestic services live, for the most part, in the houses of their employers and are more protected against the aforesaid risk" (Pellegrino, s.f., p. 21).

A knowledge of the economic and social scenario in the Latin American countries where internal and international migrations take place makes it possible to predict that the geographical movements of women and men will not cease; on the contrary, they will become more complex and possibly increase in the next few years. The implications of the economic crisis created by the heavy external debt of those countries, which already existed in the early 1980s, have become more acute in recent years for the more disadvantaged population sectors. Per capita income fell by 1.8 per cent per year in the period 1980-1985, and the deterioration was more pronounced in urban areas, especially in the cities. The lower-income groups bore the brunt of that decline, especially through rising unemployment and underemployment and the drop in real wages. That situation hastened both the increase in migration from the large metropolitan areas (or return migration, or re-migration) which occurred in several Latin American countries in the 1970s (Lattes, 1984) and its spread to other countries. It is also possible that Latin America's traditional population movements, associated with the urbanization and rural proletarianization processes, and the international movements to developed countries or between Latin American countries at different stages of relative development,¹⁰ will increase. Perhaps—and even more likely—the social crisis will lead to patterns of migration that are more complex or differentiated in terms of formal and informal activities, rural or urban origin, and sex and age (Gómez Jiménez and Díaz, 1987). Women, who already constitute a large proportion or a majority of migrants, will no doubt continue to participate in migration as a strategy for the survival of the families of the region. On the other hand, if they find their traditional opportunities for migration limited, still other patterns of migration are likely to emerge. That seems to have occurred when the migration of young Peruvian women from the mountain areas to Lima declined because of a decrease in demand for domestic service in the Peruvian economic crisis. Moreover, given their different economic situations, Governments of those developing countries are able to react only to the immediate crisis and are unable to address topics requiring medium-term or long-term planning.

CHARACTERISTICS OF MIGRANT WOMEN

Age

The generalization that, as a rule, in both developed and developing countries most migrants are young adults was first expressed in 1938 (Lattes, 1983). A few years ago it began to be noticed that the peak was being reached at slightly younger ages for women than for men (Elton, 1978). In a study presenting comparable data on net migration to 21 large metropolitan areas in developing countries (United Nations, 1986), it was found that children and young people constituted the vast majority of migrants, with net migration rates reaching the maximum in the age group 10-14 for females and 15-19 for males. There is no doubt that such generalizations conceal a variety of different situations, depending on the places of origin and destination;¹¹ an effort must be made to find the economic and social factors that encourage migration and the characteristics of the migrant streams (Arizpe, 1986). It remains the case that the classic age/sex distribution is very frequently found, not only among internal but also among international migrants (United Nations, 1979b; Torrealba, 1986).

Principal occupations

Female labour-force participation rates are usually low in the developing countries, whereas typical rates for adult men are, as in the developed countries, high. While measurements of economic participation are not comparable for men and women, since statistics usually underestimate female participation (Wainerman and Recchini de Lattes, 1981), there are differences between the sexes, even though they may be overestimated. In addition to the differences in participation levels, men and women generally carry out their economic activities in different types of occupations. Men are distributed over a very wide range of activities, most of which are usually closed to women in countries where studies have been made. On the other hand, women are usually concentrated in a small number of occupations, and constitute a majority in occupations that have characteristics related to women's traditional roles in the home and in child-bearing, such as servants, nurses and primary- and secondary-school teachers. Those differences, apparent throughout society, also exist among migrant men and women, but within the framework of the different levels of participation and concentration in occupations other than those typically held by non-migrants.

In Latin America women in low social strata, in general, and young migrant women in urban areas, in particular, are concentrated for the most part in manual jobs and especially domestic service (Silva, Cardozo and Castro, 1981; Jelin, 1976; Marshall, 1980; Young, 1986; Arizpe, 1986). There are some indications that, owing to their employment in domestic service, migrant women of rural origin become socially and culturally integrated into the urban environment. A certain proportion of them move from service employment to other wage-earning jobs, mainly textile work, or to self-employment, thus expanding the informal urban market (Marshall, 1980; Jelin, 1976). Arizpe

(1975) has carefully documented the case of the indigenous migrant "Marias". They are women who usually accompanied their spouses to Mexico City and had to join the labour force as pedlars because, as wives and mothers, they were barred from working as housemaids or in other occupations. The fact that a majority of the very young migrant women entered the labour market as domestic servants (a typically female job) or were engaged in marginal urban activities, in jobs that are also labelled female (the "Marias"), indicates the existence of a very clear specificity of migrant women workers *vis-à-vis* their male counterparts.

It has also been pointed out that, in urban areas, the more skilled migrant women occupy higher rungs on the occupational ladder as technicians and professionals. Herold (1979), in a study of migration in Chile, distinguishes between migration to Santiago and migration to other urban areas, and at the same time between women migrating for the first time and those who are repeat migrants. Among the latter women migrating to other towns (who are usually somewhat older), professionals predominate over housemaids. That discovery is consistent with one of Raczynski (1983), who suggests that "the existence of two types of migrant women—the more numerous type, possibly consisting of the youngest, less educated and at a lower social and economic level, whose only occupational prospect is in personal services, and the less common type, with more favourable social backgrounds, who obtain technical and professional jobs" (p. 42). Once again, those findings indicate that facile generalizations are not possible and that attention must be paid to the factors determining migration in each case and to the characteristics of the areas of origin and destination and of the women themselves.

Most international women migrants are also to be found in a limited range of occupations, depending, in each case, on the characteristics of the migrants and on the conditions prevailing in the labour market where they work. Domestic service is a common occupation for Colombian women in Venezuela (Torrealba, 1986), Jamaicans in Canada (Boyd and Taylor, 1986), Paraguayans in Argentina (Marshall, 1980) and some Hispanics in the United States, especially among undocumented migrant women (Safa, 1986). Seasonal migrant women workers are often found helping their husbands in various harvests in northern Argentina (Sautu, 1979), and Haitian women are seen travelling to Jamaica to sell their agricultural products (Despradel, 1986). A large number of the Hispanic migrants in the United States are also employed in the garment, textile and food industries, and a smaller number in restaurants, health and cleaning services. Those jobs are all characterized by low wages and a low level of trade-union coverage, and many of them are situated in large cities. In recent times there has been a trend towards transferring such industries to the southern states, where the level of trade-union activity is lower than in the large cities (Sassen-Koob, 1984; and Safa, 1986).

However, although the great majority of international and internal migrant women hold unskilled jobs, references are often found in the literature to professional migrant women. The International Committee for Migration, for example, reports that it collaborated in efforts to bring back professional

women from European countries to Latin America (Alexandraki, 1981). Pellegrino (1986) also shows that a substantial proportion of Peruvian, Argentine, Chilean and Uruguayan immigrant women in Venezuela were working as secondary-school teachers in 1981, while large numbers of others from Argentina and Uruguay were working in offices.

SOME SPECIFIC PROBLEMS OF MIGRANT WOMEN

Migrants of both sexes are in search of advantages. Mention has also been made in the literature of the benefits, for the internal cohesion of immigrant communities, deriving from the domestic role of women who do not participate in the economic activity of their place of destination (Andizian and Streiff, 1983).

Migrant women (and men) are confronted in their place of destination with cultural standards and customs different from those of their place of origin, and that often creates problems. They are usually confronted with the need for very complex processes of social and cultural integration into their place of destination and in the workplace and must adjust to new practices. However, migrant women often encounter more problems in the labour force than do migrant men. Their problems are connected with their education, the social benefits of employment and their particular types of work in the place of destination, as Goldscheider (1983) concludes in a comparative analysis of several Asian and Latin American countries.

In addition, migrant women are also confronted with changes in relation to their reproductive function and womanhood. The act of migrating often means a change of status in intra-family relationships. The situation of migrant women workers from Sri Lanka to the Middle East is a case in point (Eelens and Schampers, 1988). First of all, the women are extremely dependent in the place of destination on their employers, in an environment where women traditionally have lower status than in their place of origin. Secondly, they lose control over the money they send to their families because it is spent before they return. Lastly, they suffer from the problems of separation from their families. In a review of a number of African and Latin American cases, Tienda and Booth (1988) conclude that the status of women migrants *vis-à-vis* that of men depends on "(a) the cultural context in which the decisions to migrate are taken; (b) the family and employment situation of the women prior to migration; (c) the points of contact between women's economic and non-economic exchanges; and the class level" (Tienda and Booth, 1988, p. 312).

In the literature on migration and the recommendations of 1984, references are made to the women and children who remain in charge of family farms when the men emigrate. However, an increasing number of examples are to be found of women who leave husband and children, or sometimes only children, in order to emigrate. Lima (1986) reports that 8 per cent of Central American refugee women in Mexico left children behind with relatives. Torrealba (1986) describes the situation of migrant women in Venezuela, many of

whom have apparently been obliged to leave their children in the places of origin. Since the task of bringing up children is usually left to mothers, those facts seem to entail terrible social and psychological costs for the children and for the women themselves. (Husbands would also suffer from such prolonged absences.)

CONCLUSIONS

The above discussion of trends in research and policy on female migration used international recommendations as the guide for policies. It shows that, particularly in Latin America, women constitute a substantial proportion in all types of migration and that it is highly probable that migration in general and female migration in particular are acquiring more complex characteristics and/or increasing in the Latin American region for reasons relating to the economic crisis and problems arising from the heavy external indebtedness of the countries concerned. The specificity of female migration has also been documented in terms of the ages at which the majority of such migrations occur and of the types of occupation preferred by migrant women. Lastly, some of the problems typically encountered by migrant women are enumerated.

It is important to bear in mind both the numerical importance and the specificity of female migration and the problems that usually confront migrant women in order to ensure that, when formulating policies concerning the various aspects of spatial redistribution and migration covered in the Plan of Action, those policies are redefined so as to attain more efficiently the general goals defined in 1974 and reaffirmed in 1984, especially the goals of "advancing human welfare" and of promoting "the status of women and the expansion of their roles, their full participation in the formulation and implementation of socio-economic policy . . ." (United Nations, 1979a, recommendations 15*b* and 15*e*). So long as the question of women is not covered under every demographic topic—and not just in connection with fertility or the role and status of women (section B of the 1984 recommendations)—there will be no real progress towards improving the status of women or towards incorporating them into development.

NOTES

¹ It should be explained that, both in monitoring population trends and in reviewing and appraising recommendations, there is an inevitable time-lag, such as has occurred ever since the United Nations (1979c) undertook the first monitoring exercise, relating to 1977. The lag is due, on the one hand, to the customary delay in supplying demographic information, a very familiar situation for third-world demographers/analysts, and, in the case of migrations, it is accentuated by the chronic shortage of relevant data. On the other hand, some time is needed to assimilate new publications and devise ways of implementing recommendations. For example, the preparatory meetings of experts for the Mexico City Conference were held in 1983 and, in their turn, were based on literature published up to the end of 1982. In its turn that literature referred, at best, to phenomena of the 1970s, although frequent references were made to previous years. That time-

lag—not made explicit in the Plan, which is appraised every five years and monitored every two years—must be taken into account realistically.

² The meagre conceptual development of the topic and the greater lack of basic data on the other demographic topics seem to explain why even organizations such as the United Nations openly avoid the topic, although its treatment is similar to that of others in the Plan. An analysis of trends in internal migration was excluded from the monitoring reports until 1986, whereas fertility and mortality were always suitably represented. The latest report (United Nations, 1988) marks a reversal of that trend.

³ For example, the UNESCO bibliography (1983).

⁴ See the following examples relevant to Latin America: Elton (1978), Jelin (1976), Arizpe (1975), (1978) and (1986), Bustamente (1978), Chaney (1977), Castro and Lopes (1978), Saha (1978), Sautu (1979), Herold (1979), Young (1986), Smith, Khoo and Go (1984).

⁵ For example, the symposium on the role of women in the redistribution of population, organized by the International Geographical Union, held in 1982 (*Population Geography*, 1983); the second Latin American seminar on the topic “Migrant women”, organized by the Regional Office of the International Social Service and its Office in Argentina, held in 1985 (ILDIS-SIS, 1986); the seminar on the adjustment and integration of permanent immigrants, organized by the International Committee for Migration and held at Geneva in 1981, at which the only topic for consideration was “The situation and function of migrant women: their problems of adjustment and integration” (International Committee for Migration, 1981).

⁶ The Conference on Women’s Position and Demographic Change in the Course of Development, organized by the International Union for the Scientific Study of Population, held at Oslo in June 1988.

⁷ Of the 20 or so papers presented at the meeting, it is interesting to note that only those submitted by FAO, Guy Standing (representative of the ILO Department of Employment and Development), WHO, and Oliveira and García (two experts specializing not only in migration but also in female labour-force participation) commented on some noteworthy aspects of female migration (United Nations, 1984b).

⁸ Female migration was virtually absent as a topic of demographic study, even though the low index of male participation in regional rural-to-urban migration was constantly stressed. For example, in the publications that emanated from the six meetings of the Working Group on Internal Migration of the Population and Development Commission of the Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales, which sponsored research on migration and supplied material on the topic in the region in the 1970s, there is not one report that differentiates migrants by gender or deals with female migration. Most of the reports submitted to the meetings were not gender-oriented, whereas there was no lack of articles presenting findings concerning exclusively the male population (see, for example, Muñoz and Oliveira, 1973). At the meeting held in 1977 (and in a publication of 1980), articles distinguishing the characteristics of female migration from those of male migration began to appear (Conroy, 1980; Marshall, 1980).

⁹ See, for example, PISPAL/CIUDAD/CENEP (1986), which presents the results of a 1984 seminar on the topic.

¹⁰ Torrealba (1987, p. 47) distinguishes the following five types of predominant migration patterns for Central America and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean: “(a) migratory movements from rural to urban areas, generally of short and medium distance, consisting of poorly skilled and relatively poorly educated migrants; (b) internal and/or intraregional movements of manual workers and professionals with some, or a high level of, skill; (c) frontier labour movements, more or less permanent, usually consisting of poorly skilled manual workers migrating illegally to the receiving country; (d) seasonal to-and-fro frontier movements, legal or illegal, of agricultural day-labourers; and (e) movements of persons, displaced for reasons of violence and political instability in their regions of origin, seeking to avail themselves of the statute defining them as refugees.”

¹¹ See, for example, the age-differentiation of migrant men and women in Guatemala, according to the various migratory movements discussed in Schroten (1987).

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