

Inserting Feminism in Transnational Migration Studies¹

Rhacel Salazar Parreñas

Abstract:

This paper addresses the feminist dilemmas posed by the rise in women's migration. It discusses these dilemmas both methodologically and theoretically. First I pose the methodological question: "how do we pursue feminist migration studies," meaning studies directed towards the empowerment of women. Dominant approaches to the study of "gender and migration" describe how gender is a constitutive element of migration that distinguishes the experiences of men and women. As I explain, this approach does not adequately account for the ways gender inequalities delimit the experiences of migrant women. As an alternative approach, I pose the need to focus on the question of how gender inequalities shape experiences of migration. Then, providing an example of how we can account for gender inequalities when speaking of women's migratory experiences, I look at the relations of inequality between women that are engendered by women's migration. I call attention to what I have described earlier as the formation of the international division of reproductive labor or the care chain. This empirically based discussion leads me to a larger theoretical discussion on transnational feminism. Specifically, I address how we can construct a transnational feminist platform amidst the globalization of care. What do we make of the challenge to feminist alliances posed by the increasing dependence of professional women in richer countries on the labor of domestic workers from poorer countries? Can we develop a transnational feminist platform despite this direct relationship of inequality among women?

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Despite the fact that the study of gender and migration is marginalized in the larger field of migration studies, there is surprisingly a dominant paradigm that directs our research inquiries on gender and migration. At least in the United States, this dominant paradigm is the amorphous task of examining the constitution of gender in migration. I say amorphous because in our quest to interrogate the constitution of gender in migration, we have not clearly defined what gender is exactly. How does it operate? How is it constructed precisely? What does it really mean when we are told that we must now establish the constitution of gender in migration? But I think it is difficult to figure out how gender is constituted if we do not know what gender really is. Currently, the literature on gender and migration leaves it as unquestioned that gender is merely the social and cultural differences between masculine men and feminine women. More importantly, what is not emphasized enough in our interrogation of the constitution of gender in migration is the fact that gender is above all a relation of inequality between men and women. By making this claim, what I want to point out is the fact that the study of gender is not necessarily a feminist practice in itself if it does not underscore the fact that gender is a relation of inequality. Gender does not merely point to differences of masculinity and femininity, but it likely indicates relations of inequality in society.

I would like us to revisit what it really means to study the constitution of gender in migration from a feminist perspective. In order to do so, we must underscore the fact that gender inequalities underlie migratory processes. I am going to start my discussion by briefly describing the state of the literature. Then, I will explain what I mean when I say we should examine the constitution of gender in migration from a feminist perspective. Specifically, I will make a case for the need to document the gender inequalities that underlie migratory processes, which is an approach that, I want to emphasize, is not prioritized by the dominant model of studying gender and migration. I will then end by drawing from my previous work. I will provide an empirical example of how we could document the gender inequalities that underlie women's migration.

Theoretical explorations on gender and migration are few and far between. Gender is often applied but not analyzed. Attempting to amend this lack are Pierrette Hondagneu Sotelo (1999), who provides us with a historiography of gender and migration studies, and Sarah Mahler and Patricia Pessar, who insist on the examination of what they call "gendered geographies of power" in the study of migration. Briefly, let me describe these theorizations of gender and migration. Mahler and Pessar (2001) developed a conceptual model that they call "gendered geographies of power". This model situates gender in what they call "spatial and social scales" meaning of the state, body, and family at the same that it underscores the "social location" in hierarchies of race, class, sexuality,

ethnicity, nationality and gender that people occupy. People's ability to act is not only given meaning by their "spatial and social scales" but it is also determined by their "social location." With that being said, I have to be honest that what is precisely "new" in this model is difficult for me to follow as it merely follows long-existing women of color feminist discussions led by the likes of Chandra Mohanty and Lisa Lowe, who describe the social structural location of immigrant women albeit from a labor perspective. Nevertheless, the discussion of Mahler and Pessar is significant as it forces us to trace the constitution of gender in migratory actions and processes. Moreover, for Mahler and Pessar, gender is a process that creates and maintains social differences. This is a point that I will return to later.

Examining the state of the literature on feminism and migration, Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo believes we have reached a third stage in feminist scholarship of migration. According to Hondagneu-Sotelo, feminists during the first stage (occurring in the 70s and early 80s) inserted women's experiences to dominant and male-based narratives of migration. Soon after, they moved from this "add and stir" approach. In the late 80s and early 90s came the second stage, what she calls the "gender and migration" stage. In this stage, studies such as her seminal book *Gendered Transitions* interrogated the question of how gender differentiated the experiences of men and women in migration. Studies were also addressing the question of how do gender relations shift in the process of migration, with many resoundingly concluding that migration results in a supposed "greater gender egalitarianism" between men and women (2000: 116). This is without doubt a troublesome conclusion because of its inadvertent support of modernization views of gender. It suggests that the host society is more gender egalitarian than the sending society that has been left behind by migrants. It connotes the picture of migrant women escaping a developing but still backwards and traditional country. Onto the third stage. We are now supposedly at the third stage, which is the phase in which we document "gender as a constitutive element of migration" (2000: 117). Our central question now is how is gender constituted and how does it constitute processes of migration. As Hondagneu-Sotelo describes, "In this current phase, research is beginning to look at the extent to which gender permeates a variety of practices, identities, and institutions. Here patterns of labor incorporation, ethnic enclave business, citizenship, sexuality, and ethnic identity are interrogated in ways that reveal how gender is incorporated into a myriad of daily operations and institutional political and economic structures" (2000: 117).

Let's try to figure out what it means to interrogate "gender as a constitutive element of migration". In many ways, current examinations of gender merely distinguish men and women's experiences of migration. For instance, Michael Jones-Correa (1998) shows how Latino men in New York are more likely to engage in hometown associations oriented towards the sending country while women engage in local politics oriented

towards the receiving country. In some cases, looking at gender's constitution does allow us to see how patriarchy – gender inequalities – is reinforced in the process of migration. Yen Le Espiritu (2001) for instance shows us how Filipino parents in San Diego enforce a double standard in the raising of their sons and daughters, imposing greater moral control over the latter at the risk of their psychological well-being and education.

To study gender as a constitutive element of migration is important. The question remains on how we do this exactly. According to Hondagneu-Sotelo, we must move away from women-only studies of migration, because by focusing solely on women, we might ghettoize the study of gender and suggest that gender is only pertinent to the experiences of women. We might inadvertently suggest that men are without a gender. As Hondagneu-Sotelo contends, a focus solely on women ultimately marginalizes immigrant women because it retards “our understanding of how gender as a social system contextualizes migration processes for all immigrants” and at the same time stifles our ability to theorize “about the ways in which constructions of masculinities and femininities organize migration and migration outcomes” (1999: 566). This contention of Hondagneu-Sotelo has resulted in the dominant paradigm of studying gender in migration primarily by comparing men's and women's experiences and then examining how gender distinguishes their experiences. When looking at the differences between men and women, scholars then try to see if gender stifles women or not.

This is where my problem with the literature lies: we are now at this stage, to use the genealogy presented by Hondagneu-Sotelo, that to study gender in migration requires comparing men's and women's experiences. As Mahler and Pessar also contend, we must identify those social differences between men and women. This to them is what gender studies is. To focus solely on women would retard our understanding of gender according to Hondagneu-Sotelo. It is said to imply that men have no gender. But I think to claim that a sole focus on women is bad for feminism is dangerous. Equally dangerous is to merely see gender as the social differences between men and women.

As a feminist, I believe that we can still study gender even by solely focusing on women. This is because when we speak about women's gendered experiences, we are always already referring to men. As the historian Thomas Laqueur in his classic book *Making Sex* insightfully comments,

As feminist scholars have made abundantly clear, it is *always* woman's sexuality that is being constituted; woman is the empty category. Woman alone seems to have “gender” since the category itself is defined as that aspect of social relations based on difference between sexes in which the standard has always been man” (1990: 22).

This insightful observation by Laqueur does not only remind us that men if invisible are still omnipresent when we examine women's gendered experiences. What is also key when he states that "the standard has always been man" is the fact that gender refers not only to social differences between men and women but that it refers to a hierarchical and vertical difference between the two.

If gender is indeed not a social difference but instead a social inequality, then I think it is important that feminist projects of migration should focus on the identification not of gender's constitution but instead on the gender inequalities that control the experiences of women (and men) in the process of migration. This truly feminist undertaking, i.e., of identifying gender inequalities in migration, would not be stifled by the need to differentiate men and women's experiences. It would allow us to focus solely on women if we wish to do so. Moreover, it would allow us to account for the intersections of race, class, nation, sexuality, and gender in experiences of migration. Additionally, it would enable us to center on the experiences of women and account for the multiple social relations they maintain in the process of migration, notably not only with men as those who focus on the shifting relations of men and women in the process of migration do. Instead, a focus on women would note the multiple social relations they maintain with not only men but also other women. In other words, we need not engage in a comparative view when we only focus on women but could instead embark on a comprehensive account of gender in the study of migration. We do this by focusing on inequality.

Indeed to map the ways that gender inequalities have shaped women's experiences of migration and the ways that women have negotiated these inequalities have been the focus of all of the studies that I have conducted on Filipino migrant women. I have also accounted for how these gender inequalities exist alongside with and exacerbate other forms of inequality including class and race. For instance, in my study of domestic workers in Rome and Los Angeles *Servants of Globalization* (2001) I sought to illustrate how the movement of women is from one system of gender inequality to another. Migrant domestic workers – I established – escape the gender inequality that afflicts them in the Philippines, as shown for instance by the fact that many escape abusive relationships with husbands, but they leave only to face a different set of gender constraints in the host society. One striking example is the labor market segmentation that limits them to domestic work in a country such as Italy. Then, in the book *Children of Global Migration* (2005), I attempted to show how the ideology of women's domesticity exacerbates the difficulties confronted by the children of migrant women who have been left behind in the Philippines. In this book, I showed how the children of migrant mothers feel abandoned regardless of 1) the extensive kin support provided by their female relatives and 2) the efforts by mothers to constantly communicate with them from a

distance. Abandonment for these children is intrinsically tied to the migration of mothers simply because migration redefines mothering by disaggregating the duties of the primary caregiver from biological mothers. Notably, in this book, I compare the experiences of these children to those of the children of migrant fathers, indicating that I think that gender comparative studies are sometimes a fruitful endeavor. However, my point in this discussion is that gender comparisons should not be our *sole* approach to the study of gender and migration.

In all of my research on gender and migration, or what I should probably describe as “women and migration” (and I proudly say this despite the fact that I know that to study “women and migration” has been dismissed by some leading scholars as stifling to our understanding of gender in migration), I focus not on gender but instead on gender inequalities because I am a feminist, one that has been strongly influenced by Black feminist scholarship of the 1970s. I am highly influenced by our Black feminist foremothers Barbara Smith (2000) and Audre Lorde (2007) and agree with their contention that feminism is the eradication of all forms of inequality in society. The question then is how as feminists do we utilize our research to eradicate inequalities in society. Feminist migration scholars have the responsibility of identifying and documenting the ways that gender inequalities shape people’s experiences of migration, whether men or women. I think doing so is what would truly be a feminist methodology of doing migration.

So let me now give a concrete example of how we do this, that is trace gender inequalities as a way of doing gender and migration studies. I will do this by revisiting my previous discussion of the “international division of reproductive labor” (1998, 2000), which had been rephrased by one of my dissertation readers Arlie Hochschild into the catchier phrase of the “care chain” (2000). I should note that we are talking about the same thing. Without doubt, the migration of domestic workers results in a direct relationship of inequality between women. The “international division of reproductive labor” shows us that women are able to enter the labor market more smoothly because they are purchasing the labor of other women to do their reproductive labor or care work for them. In other words, a professional ‘native’ woman, let us say in Italy or the United States, can conveniently enter the workforce because she can hire a migrant woman to care for her dependents, but this migrant woman in turn can only migrate because other women who she likewise financially compensates are there to take care of her own dependents. This can be her relatives or her own paid domestic worker. In my study on domestic workers, for instance, I learned that a migrant Filipina domestic worker who receives \$1000 a month from her employer in Italy would pay a domestic worker in the Philippines \$40 a month to do the very same labor that she is doing in Italy.

We can talk about this direct relationship of inequality between women in many ways but I would like to address its relevance to our inquiries on transnational migration studies. The international division of labor does not only point to a relationship of inequality between women. It also speaks of gender inequalities that confront domestic workers and their employers. Moreover, it tells us that women confront gender constraints in both the sending country and receiving country of migration. Thus, it tells us that the migration of domestic workers is a movement from one system of gender inequality to another.

To explain my point, let us step back and look at the socio-structural context of the “care chain.” What is the situation of women in sending and receiving countries of migration that engenders this chain? What is the politics of care work in both ends of the migration stream that likewise results in this chain? In globalization, women – in both poor and rich countries or in both receiving and sending nations of migration – share the double burden of a greater workload inside and outside the home (Marchand and Runyan, 2000; Rai, 2002). This double burden emerges from the inadequate response of men to the increase in women’s labor market participation. Studies have continually shown that women still remain primarily responsible for housework. But the double burden confronting women also directly results from the rise of neoliberalism. While structural adjustment policies burden women in the global south, welfare reform in the global north subjects women to significant reductions in public funding and the privatization of social welfare programs (Marchand and Runyan, 2000). The globalization of austerity measures results in the greater work of women inside the home, but this takes place as the economy of globalization increases the work of women outside the home. In both sending and receiving countries of migrant domestic workers, it is this double burden of increasing the need for the work of women outside the home as austerity measures encourage their work inside the home that directly results in the exportation of care. What this indicates to us is that women who participate in the global exportation of care – from each of their own social structural location as givers and receivers of care – share similar burdens of citizenship. This picture that both employers and employees are systematically marginalized as women complicates the idea posed by Mary Romero (1990) that domestic work is simply a “bond of oppression.”

Looking first at gender and citizenship in the sending country of the Philippines, structural adjustment policies systematically deplete state care resources. Inadequate care resources plague families, but not uniformly. Coupled with unstable labor markets, the inadequacies of public assistance push families to meet labor demands in the global north, where low-wage employment would offer greater stability than would many professional jobs in the global south. In the Philippines, servicing the foreign debt depletes the national budget. More than providing welfare, obtaining the International Monetary Fund’s seal of good housekeeping, which is a prerequisite for obtaining more

loans from foreign lending agencies such as the World Bank and Asian Development Bank, has been the government's higher priority (Ibon, 2000: 8). From 1970 to 1998, the Philippines paid \$77.6 billion in interest and principal to foreign creditors (Diokno-Pascual, 2000). Yet, the government is not close to ameliorating its debt.

The instabilities imposed by the political economy of globalization on Filipino households force a great deal of families to send an able bodied member outside of the country. Individuals migrate to give their families the basic care resources depleted by debt servicing, including quality food, schooling, and health care. Although Filipino men and women share the displacements of structural adjustment policies, gender does aggravate the impacts on women. Women in the Philippines have to contend with the wage gap, a sex segmented labor market, and the devaluation of traditional women's work. The poor state of women's labor market opportunities in the Philippines suggests that the depletion of state care resources by austerity measures hurts women much more so than men. This raises the likelihood of women's migration. This is especially true of single mothers, a well-represented group among migrant women from the Philippines. As women have greater incentives to turn their back to the economic instability and depleted welfare system of the Philippines, it is not surprising then that the rate of women's migration has increased steadily in the last decade, surpassing the number of men since 1995 (Kanlungan, 1999). Yet, while gender inequities may push women to flee the impacts of structural adjustment policies in the Philippines, similar gender inequities and austerity measures that burden women in rich countries lead to the opening of borders for them.

Interestingly, a similar structural inequity troubling women in poor countries such as the Philippines impedes the advancements of women in richer countries. Women in richer countries confront the privatization of care work and the "stalled revolution" that still designates most of the household work to employed women in industrialized countries (Hochschild, 1989) and leads to the rejection of housework by men (Orloff, 2006). In various industrialized countries around the world, the number of gainfully employed women has climbed dramatically in the last forty years. For instance, in France, an additional two million women entered the labor force between 1979 and 1993, a 21 percent increase in the number of employed women (Conroy, 2000). Mothers are also more likely to work. For instance, in the United States, three out of four mothers with school-age children are in the paid labor force, the majority working fulltime (Coltrane and Galt, 2000). The gender ideological clash plaguing women in the Philippines seems to mirror the plight of women in industrialized countries. Industrialized countries are pushing women outside the home and pulling them into the labor force as they eliminate support for full-time caregivers and impose serious cutbacks on welfare provisions.

State welfare support for the family has not inadequately responded to the changes brought by the entrance of women, particularly mothers, to the labor force in many industrialized countries. Actually they have ignored the needs created by women's labor market participation. Welfare support in many countries does not provide the new familial needs of single-parents as well as dual-earning or dual-career couples (Heymann, 2000). Examples of which would include long postpartum family leaves, after-school programs and extended school days for children in the year (Conroy, 2000; Heymann, 2000; Tronto, 2002). Without a "public family welfare system," government assistance keeps childcare a private and not public responsibility (Conroy, 2000). For instance, in the United States, government assistance for the childcare needs of dual income households remain restricted to an income tax credit. Notably, the private sector usually does not pick up the slack of the welfare system. In the United States, employers often penalize instead of provide working families with the flexibility to handle their caring needs. For instance, non-managerial employees often do not have the flexibility to take a sick relative to the doctor or to meet with their child's teacher during work hours (Heymann, 2000).

The pressure for women to balance work and care is at a high as their entrance to the workforce has not diminished their responsibility for care. In industrialized countries, the inadequacy of state welfare support is one of the greatest burdens of women in the labor force, but at the same time it instigates care inequalities between women across nations. Inadequate state welfare support creates the need for affordable care workers. Many of these care workers are from poorer countries. This is the case in the United States, which notably has the least welfare provisions among rich nations in the global economy as families are without access to universal health care, paid maternity and parental leave, government-provided childcare, or family caregiving allowances (Cancian and Oliker, 2000: 116). Although generally boasting a more democratic welfare regime than that in the United States, European nations are also not immune to the growing trend of the privatization of care. For example, sociologist Ann Orloff notes, "Support for full-time caregiving, the hallmark of gendered policy regimes is diminishing even in some of its former bastions, such as the United Kingdom and the Netherlands" (2006: 1).

Ruth Milkman and her colleagues note that economic inequities direct the flow of domestic workers: they found that urban centers with the greatest economic inequities in the United States have a higher rate of domestic service employment (Milkman, Reese, and Roth, 1998). I would add to their observation that social patterns of welfare provisions also influence the direction of the migratory flows of foreign domestic workers. Looking at the migration patterns of migrant Filipina domestic workers, the more countries keep the care of the family a private responsibility of women, then the greater the reliance on the low wage work of migrant care workers. This seems to be the

case in the Americas and Europe, where the presence of migrant Filipina domestic workers is more strongly felt in countries with the most inadequate welfare provisions. Nations with very low welfare provisions, i.e. nations that keep the care of the family a private female responsibility, particularly the United States and southern European nations such as Spain, Greece, and Italy have a greater presence of foreign domestic workers (Kofman et al., 2000). We also see their presence in countries where comprehensive publicly funded welfare programs are in threat of being replaced by the use of cash subsidy benefits such as France (Misra, Merz, and Woodring, 2004). In contrast, countries with social democratic regimes such as those in Scandinavia, where the benefit system abides by universalism and provides large-scale institutional support for mothers and families, are less likely to rely on foreign domestic workers.

Let me now conclude my discussion on inserting feminism in transnational migration studies. The mere recognition of gender is not necessarily a feminist practice. To do feminist migration studies, one needs to move from a simple enumeration of the differences between men and women towards an examination of the structural inequalities that underlie experiences of migration. There are many ways we could do this analytically. I only gave one example in this discussion, one in which I did not find it necessary to address the gendered experiences of men. In fact, there is really not one way to study gender or recognize gender inequalities. That is why it is troublesome that the leading scholars in the field of gender and migration studies insist that we must pursue gender comparative studies in order to adequately capture how gender is constituted in the process of migration. In fact, they dismiss those who solely focus on women as theoretically backwards. While I am countering the dominant approach that we have been given to study gender and migration, I am not advocating for the use of an alternative model. This would be counterproductive. Instead, I encourage the use of a comprehensive approach to the study of gender. This approach cannot be captured in any formula; one's research question would shape and accordingly distinguish one's approach.

I think it would be lazy for me to end my discussion with this vague recommendation of studying gender in a comprehensive manner. So let me enumerate possible ways we could do this of which comparing the experiences of men and women is but only one of many approaches. First, our comprehensive examination of gender should focus on the identification of gender inequalities. A truly feminist approach would. Second, we should account for how the constitution of these inequalities occurs not in a vacuum but instead we should document their constitution as they intersect with inequalities of race, class, and sexuality. We clearly see this in the formation of the international division of reproductive labor. This system of inequality indicates that women share similar burdens of reproductive labor across nation-states, but class and race for instance intersects with gender to distinguish their impacts on women. While the use of an intersectional

perspective is significant because it forces us to distinguish the experiences of women, it however does not fully account for the experiences of women. This leads me to my third and final recommendation. Our comprehensive approach should not only look at the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality, but it should also account for the myriad social relations that define the experiences of migrant women. When accounting for social relations, we should not limit our analysis to relations between men and women. We should account for the multiple relations that migrant women maintain in the process of migration. Clearly, the international division of reproductive labor tells us that the experience of migration for these workers is as centrally defined by their relations with female employers and female kin as much as it is by the men in their lives. If we had limited ourselves to the dominant approach of comparing men's and women's experiences of migration, we would not have been able to document the shared and yet at the same time different gendered burdens that women confront as employers and domestic workers. Thus, it is important we utilize a comprehensive approach to the study of gender and migration, one committed to the eradication of social inequalities as well as the identification of feminist alliances across differences.

*Rhacel Salazar Parreñas is Professor of American Civilization and Sociology at Brown University, Rhode Island. She is the author of numerous books and articles on women and migration. Her most recent publication is *The Force of Domesticity: Filipina Migrants and Globalization* (New York University Press).*

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