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Gendered mobilities and social change—An introduction to the Special Issue on Gender, Mobility and Social Change

This Special Issue on Gender, Mobility and Social Change examines the relationship between gender and social change in the context of migratory mobilities. Our aim in this introduction is two-fold. Firstly, to refresh the collective memory on the older and more recent literature on gender and migration, and second, to argue that the concept of social change should be brought firmly back onto the agenda of gender and migration studies. It is often taken for granted that migratory movements are frequently the consequence of social transformation, but it is also of equal importance to analyse how migration yields social change. We argue that gender is at the core of both migration and social transformations. As [Hondagneu-Sotelo \(1992, 1994\)](#) argued twenty years ago, migrations are gendered and gendering processes. We would go further in arguing that gendered migration is the result of, and contributes to, generative social change. Whether and to what extent migration movements bring about change in gender relations, values and practices, is a core question for all migration scholars. Yet, in the scholarly literature, this relationship between gender and social change is seldom tackled explicitly, even if it may well be a key motivation for research. In what follows, we offer a short review of older and more contemporary research on gender and migration studies, followed by a discussion on how to conceptualise social change.

Migration and social change from women to gender

One of the few review articles that directly explores the links between gender, migration and social change dates back to 1991 ([Tienda & Booth, 1991](#)). Tienda and Booth argued that 'migration is co-terminous with social change' (1991, p. 51). Whilst their work is widely cited in calls for putting gender onto the agenda of migration scholarship, their effort at connecting social change and gender together in migration research has been somewhat overlooked. Yet, Tienda and Booth's article, as well as many classic texts on female migration (see e.g. [Morokvasic, 1984](#)) and on development ([Boserup, 1970](#)) were explicitly concerned with the question of social change. This was typically formulated into questions on whether migration improved or weakened women's position in society. In most cases, the answer was both yes and no. Migration usually has both good and not-so-good effects on women's position in society (see e.g. [Morokvasic, 1993; Tienda & Booth, 1991](#)).

In lieu of this earlier research, we would like to raise three important points. Firstly, in the earlier studies, gender is typically a code word for research on women, a characteristic which continues to haunt much contemporary scholarship. A key aim of the older research was to change the perception that women migrants are merely the 'baggage of male workers' ([Cohen, 1997](#) cited in [King, 2002: 97](#)) following behind pioneer male migrants through the process of family unification—a perception that was shared by scholars until 1970s. Historians showed, for example, that women migrants were just as likely as their male counterpart to migrate during the transatlantic mass-migration at the turn of the 20th century (e.g. [Gabbaccia, 1996](#)) and demographers demonstrated that women were as likely to migrate in the 1960s as they are today (e.g. [Zlotnik, 2005](#)). Yet, the idea of men as pioneer migrants, followed by women migrants has not completely disappeared as the analysis of contemporary migration policies and points-based migration systems has revealed (e.g. [Kofman, 2013](#)).

Secondly, in the older scholarship social change was often, without interrogation, equated to economic emancipation. The question of how migration impacted upon women was most commonly understood in terms of women's emancipation from housewives to wage earners. Connected to this, was the important critique of early feminist scholarship on the male-biased concept of a unified household with common goals (e.g. [Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1992](#)).

A third question dealt with in the literature on gender, migration and change was whether alterations in the economic situation of women also brought about a redefinition of gender relations in post-migration contexts ([Morokvasic, 1993](#)). In other words, in the earlier literature, the subject matter was typically approached as a question of migration as a means to women's increased labour market participation and the extent to which (if at all) this resulted in a change in existing gender relations. Many of the points raised in this earlier critique are still relevant to contemporary research.

Gender and migration: from an additive to a generative and intersectional approach

However, feminist scholarship on migration¹ has evolved from this earlier literature, also termed as, an *additive approach*².

The additive approach focused on adding a female-specific perspective to migration research, which in practice, led to research on women's roles in migration processes. Since the 1980s, black and postcolonial feminist critique (Collins, 1991; Davis, 1981; Hooks, 1981, 1984) alongside the emergence of the intersectional approach (Brah & Phoenix, 2004; Collins, 1998; Crenshaw, 1994; Yuval-Davis, 2006) has contested the homogeneity and universality of the category of woman. Accordingly, a shift from women-in-migration to gender-in-migration has occurred—a shift which can also be termed as a shift from an *additive* to a *generative* and *intersectional* approach. A move from women and men as sexed categories to gender categories, and to the analysis of various intersectional hierarchies (based on class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, ability and so forth), between women resonates with the broader development of gender theories and is reflective of the paradigm shift associated with intersectionality in gender studies.

Gender is understood as the social meanings, relationships and identities that are based on reproductive differences and the division of people into male and female (Connell, 2002), which are quintessentially about power relationships (Scott, 1986: 1067). Gendered meanings, identities and practices are processual, not fixed (Pessar & Mahler, 2003: 813), yet they are also constitutive of social structures, i.e. institutionalised social relationships which are not reducible to the individual (Ferree, Lorber, & Hess, 1999: xix). Finally, the seemingly binary division male/female is contingent, as Judith Butler reminds us:

'Gender is not exactly what one "is" or precisely what one "has". (...) To assume that gender always and exclusively means the matrix of the "masculine" and "feminine" is precisely to miss the critical point that the production of that coherent binary is contingent, that it comes at a cost, and that those permutations of gender which do not fit the binary are as much a part of gender as its most normative instance' (Butler, 2004: 42).

Drawing attention to how the masculine/feminine gender and male/female sex binary is laboured and performed at cost, Butler's definition successfully illuminates what is meant by the statement that gender is socially constructed. It shows how these concepts are always relational: one is always 'doing' with or for another, even if the other is only imaginary (Butler, 2004: 1). Central to this approach is the idea that meanings and practices of 'doing-gender' vary not only across cultures and historical periods, but also within local 'cultures'. It also emphasises that sex/gender is embedded in regulative power/knowledge practices. The need to 'do' one's gender is required not only from those who subvert the normative order, but also from those who are positioned as 'hegemonic'. As Williams (1977: 112) reminds, 'lived hegemony' is not passive but 'a process (...) [that] has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified. It is also continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged by pressures not at all its own'. These different definitions highlight the various dimensions of gender: as more or less institutionalised social structures, which nevertheless are not stable, but processual and changeable through variations in the *doing of gender*.

What are the consequences of such an approach to the analysis of migration? Firstly, we need to go beyond studies *on women* and for analyse gender as a *central organising principle in migration* (Levitt, DeWind, & Vertovec, 2003: 568). Understanding gender as an organising principle acknowledges the fact that gender 'is not simply a variable to be measured, but a

set of social relations that organise immigration patterns' (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994: 3), and, which subsequently can be affected by the migration process within migrant communities and the societies which they enter into and leave behind. Secondly, it means acknowledging gender as a *generative* principle in migration, not only as an organising principle but as a dynamic one. Migration from one locality to another may have genuine implications for the lives of men and women, in families and in communities. This is both in relation to their gender norms, values and expectations, as well as on the constitutive structures of gender, as institutionalised social relationships in the material economic, social and political spheres.

Migration, social change and transformation

While feminist migration scholarship has strived to bring gender to the core of migration studies, this work is still not over. Although empirical studies are increasingly concerned with gender issues, when it comes to mainstream migration theorisation, gender is often signalled out, or handled as a specific case—not integrated to the 'general theories of migration'. A case in point is the relatively recent and widely cited themed issue of *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* (36:10), on theories of migration and social change. Gender was not integrated into the 'general' theorisation of social change but it was covered in a separate article by Lutz (2010).

In the themed issue, Portes (2010) argued that migration only very seldom truly transforms receiving societies. Taking as an example, migration to US, Portes (2010: 1548) argues—contrary to many contemporary scholars—that migration has not changed the American society, as it has not touched the foundational organisational principles. He builds his argument on a definition of social change, according to which 'truly revolutionary social change requires the transformation of the value system or the remaking of the society's class structure', which he distinguishes from the 'street-level' changes of 'sights and smell' of a city (Portes, 2010: 1548). Revolutionary social change, according to Portes, would require changes in the 'legal/judicial complex, the educational system, the dominance of English, the basic values guiding social interaction, and, above all, the distribution of power arrangements and the class structure' (Portes, 2010: 1548). Other scholars have clarified the distinction between social change and social transformation: where social change is regarded as local, social transformations is, as Kenneth Wiltshire (2001: 8) has defined 'a more radical change, a particularly deep and far-reaching one which within a relatively limited time span modifies the configuration of societies' (cited in Vertovec, 2009: 22).

Global transformationalists such as Held, McGrew, Goldblatt, and Perraton (1999) advocate a 'transformation' view of the long-term changes which are the result of globalisation (as defined as the intensification of interconnections between people through migration, for example). In their classic work, Held et al. contend that various conditions and processes lead to large scale transformation. Especially:

- 1) 'extensiveness of networks of relations and connections' where 'events, decisions and activities in one region of the world can come to have significance for individuals and communities in distant regions of the globe'

- 2) 'the intensity of flows and levels of activity within these networks'—that are regular and patterned
- 3) 'the velocity or speed of interchanges' of resources and information that provide immediate feedback, often in real time

Widening of networks, with more connected activities across distances and speeded up communication, might be important forms of transnationalism in themselves—but they do not necessarily lead to long-lasting, structural changes in global or local societies. It is historically the case that migrants have kept their long distance network ties—any great changes in the structure, purpose or practice within the network cannot be inferred simply because of the changing nature of communication (Vertovec, 2009: 23). In countering the sceptics, nevertheless, Vertovec argues that it is the degree to which such interactions are taking place which makes a difference: that the 'extensiveness, intensity and velocity of networked flows of information and resources may indeed combine to fundamentally alter the way people do things' (2009: 23). So that as Portes (2003: 877) points out 'the combination of a cadre of regular transnational activists with the occasional activities of other migrants adds up to a social process of significant economic and social impact for communities and even nation'.

It remains questionable whether the sociology of contemporary migration could detect revolutionary social changes because drastic social changes seldom occur in a short time span; this would rather be the task for historians. Also, it is questionable whether defining social change as Portes does is in fact useful. The macro-level of the nation-state and its political structure very often overlooks cultural and social change, arenas where change that concerns gender practices and relations very often takes place. In defining social change we need then to account for different scales: the individual and micro-level; the meso-level; and, the macro-level, but it is also important to account for different dimensions of social change: change in norms and values; change in performance and practices; changes in economic and labour relations, and changes in the political and public sphere.

In order to clarify what we mean by possible ways in which questions of gender, migration and social change can be addressed in actual research practice, let us consider some research examples.

Researching migration, social change and gender

In more recent literature looking at non-European migration into Western Europe, and specifically, Pakistani migration to the UK, it has been argued that the gender experiences of urban Pakistani migrants to the UK were very different to those of migrants from more rural areas (Akhtar, 2013). That, immigrants from more provincial areas experience two-tiers of migration (rural to urban and country to country) when they migrate from rural Pakistan to Urban Britain and this has specific implications for gender relations and dynamics. The gender frames of women in rural communities invariably differ from the gender frames of women in urban areas, as indeed, the gender frame of men from urban localities migrating to rural regions. In other words, the type of migration itself may have an impact on how gender frames are altered (if at all) through

the process of migration for men and women, in terms of ideas and attitudes as well as behaviours in differing local contexts. It could be valuable to distinguish between internal migration which takes place within the nation-state, between types of regions (rural to rural, rural to urban, urban to rural, urban to urban) and international migration which takes place across state boundaries, and indeed within this a description of the broad locality (King & Skeldon, 2010). King (2002) for example, argues that we need more sophisticated models to understand contemporary migration, patterns. Writing of women migrants into Western Europe, he shows that the dominant model of viewing women migrants as wives of pioneer men fails to capture the complex reality of the diversity of women's migration to Europe. This is in terms of their social-economic backgrounds, but also their reasons for migration and the lived experiences of the migratory process. Also in relation to European patterns of postwar migration, Kofman argues the need to 'reclaim the heterogeneity of women's past migratory experiences' (1999: 269). Such categories; rural, urban, skilled, unskilled, though on the one hand necessarily crude, could provide a social and cultural context within which empirical studies of migration, gender and social change could inform and strengthen the theoretical framework.

Different forms of mobility—forced, refugee or voluntary migration, temporary or permanent migration—are other important aspects of the social context in which migration takes place. Indeed, as Katy Gardner pointed out nearly two decades ago: 'studies which treat migration as a homogenous process, which means the same things to different groups, and at different stages in the migration process, thus only tell one part of what is really a far more complex story' (Gardner, 1995: 4). A further variable to consider would be social change in gender relations and behaviour which result from non-migration. Levitt (2001) reminds us: 'migrants' continued participation in their home communities transforms the sending-community context to such an extent that non-migrants also adapt many of the values and practices of their migrant counterparts, engage in social relationships that span two settings, and participate in organisations that act across borders'.

In providing a framework through which to conceptualise, study and understand how globalisation and migration interact to affect social change empirically, Favell (2001:397) argues that it is necessary to:

'systematically take the daily structures of everyday life in the old bounded world of nation-state society—one thinks of family structure, structures of professions, social mobility, the life-cycle, etc.—and via the empirical study of individuals whose lives have crossed boundaries, see how and where these structures are being transformed'.

With regards to understanding gender, migration and social change, one could systematically take the gender structures in everyday life in locality one—the family structure, structures of and within professions, social mobility, the life-cycles and empirically chart and study individuals whose lives have crossed boundaries into locality two and see how and where these structures and the accompanying gender norms and values are being transformed or otherwise.

And yet, it is also important to understand the context within which these structures are (or, are not) being transformed and consider how migration impacts upon these

structures. There is of course, also the question of how the policies adopted by migrant receiving societies impact upon gender relations within society more widely. A case in point is that of the policies of multiculturalism adopted by the UK and the Netherlands, for example, which have been criticised by some feminists as being harmful for women since they privilege the rights of the group above the rights of women in the group (Macey, 2009; Okin, 1999).

Amongst migrant communities, the idea of social remittances coined by Levitt (1998, 2001) is one conceptual tool which can be used in empirical research on gender, social change and migration. In her original work, Levitt (2001: 56–63) distinguished between four types of social remittances: norms, practices, identities and social capital. Levitt, moreover, emphasises that social remittances are circular, travelling between the home and host countries. Taking into account, the different dimensions of social remittances: norms and values, practices, identities and finally, social networks and capital, it is not surprising that the empirical findings on the impact of migration on gender vary, depending on context. Studies on South Asian migration have revealed that migration might reinforce traditional gender norms (Gardner, 1995), but also improve education of non-migrant women (Osella & Osella, 2000), or that migration might have both negative and positive effects on gender relations, as demonstrated by Dannecker's (2005) study which revealed that, whilst on the one hand migration strengthened Bangladeshi women's networks, on the other hand, it introduced sexist imagery. In a similar way, Näre's study on the post-Soviet migration from Ukraine to Italy demonstrates that migration strengthened Ukrainian women's social capital and collective social remittances (see Levitt & Lamba-Nieves, 2010), at the same time as they had to struggle with sexualised stigmas of being 'prostitutes' both in the everyday of their work in Italy, as well as in Ukraine (Näre, 2014). Akhtar's work on transnational migration flows between the UK and Pakistan shows that social remittances between the UK and Pakistan have led to an increase in demand for women's education in rural Kashmir, highlighting that such remittances can have very real impacts upon those who are non-migrants (Akhtar, 2012).

Moreover, research on globalisation of care and the global care chains has demonstrated that even though women who migrate for care work often become the main breadwinner's in their families, this does not mean that men necessarily take up more caring roles in their families. Indeed, it has been argued that the caring work done within families is usually transferred to other female relatives (Lutz, 2011: 153; Parreñas, 2005). Gender codes regarding caring can then resist the social changes brought by migration. Moreover, hegemonic masculinities can resist, even in situations in which migrant men are employed in labour sectors which are socially constructed as feminine, such as domestic work (Näre, 2010). Näre's (2010) research demonstrated that Sri Lankan male domestic and care workers in Italy resisted in various ways feminine codes related to their jobs and enforced hegemonic masculinities as breadwinners specifically in relation to their families.

All the papers in this Special Issue deal with asymmetrical migration, that is, migration from low-middle income countries to wealthier ones. A number of the papers engage with the implications of this for care workers and Global Care chains.

Tiina Vaittinen's theoretically rigorous paper demonstrates how migration of care workers from poorer to richer societies results in change for both the home and host society. She argues that a key facet of this migration is the gendered nature of migration, due, in part, to the gendered realm of care. Vaittinen attempts to shift the focus of our understanding away from the structural context of migration to focus on how structures are negotiated and altered by care workers, hence giving recognition to the 'transformative power of care in the global political economy'. Weaving in an empirical case study of a migrant trajectory, Vaittinen demonstrates that the transformative power of the migrant trajectory 'is not imbued in an individual migrants' subjectivity but *in the capacity of the migrant body to tie together different networks of relatedness when navigating through the global space*'. Speranta Dumitru takes up the theoretical engagement in the global care debate with a critique of Arlie Hochschild's (2000) conceptualisation of global care chains. Chains are formed when individuals and groups move from third to first world to provide care work, leaving behind a care deficit. Dumitru argues forcefully that Hochschild's metaphor of 'care drain' as a female parallel to 'brain drain' amounts to methodological sexism, and furthermore, an unintended consequence of such a conceptualisation of 'care drain' de-values (through misrepresentation) the very nature of care work. This point is taken up by Lisa Eckenwiler's paper which examines changes around ethical place-making on skilled and unskilled migrant workers, where ethical place-making involves the creation of work environments that do not impede on the health and freedom of migrants, but instead, enable them to develop and to expand their capabilities as individuals and professionals. Eckenwiler points to the 'gains' for women migrants in terms of income, self-trust and confidence, in the domestic sphere and freedom from restrictive gender norms. Indeed, Lena Näre's paper explores in much detail the notion of agency, and, in particular, the way individuals practice their agency despite structural constraints. She draws upon and expands Amartya Sen's work on the capability approach to rethink agency as capabilities. Migration can, and does, afford the possibility of social mobility and personal emancipation from traditional gender norms. In the new country context both men and women may find may find greater freedom in many areas of social, political and economic life religious life. Akhtar, for example, argues that for Pakistani Muslim migrants to Britain, migration provided a space to negotiate religious identities. Yet, there are also costs of migration, specifically emotional costs to relationships as Aija Lulle points out in her paper. Lulle's paper further suggests that in a gendered Western workplace, the preference for female labour results in a particular version of the neo-liberal mother, a migrant mother who pursues higher income by working abroad to provide 'material things for her children that can be converted into instruments for pursuing a better future life'.

Conclusions

Questions of migration and gendered social change are important for understanding the spaces, possibilities and nodes of gendered subjectivities in contemporary societies where changing patterns of migration can, and often do, result in changing gender discourse, norms and behaviour. The papers

here provide an important starting point for scholars interested in understanding both micro-level changes in the lives of men and women directly or indirectly involved in, or affected by, migration and the wider structural transformations in gendered social conventions.

These papers here demonstrate that context clearly matters, as do the modes and forms of migration, as discussed above. Yet, we can also find some common traits. Women's migration continues to be a question which is more likely to cause moral panic than men's migration. Although social change often occurs at local levels, more 'revolutionary' social transformations are much slower and more difficult to detect. The persistence of hegemonic masculinities (Connell, 2002) and the persistence of hegemonic femininities seem to resist more radical social change caused by migration. Changes in gender codes never occur in a vacuum, but always in relation to other structural changes of economic and political in kind. In building up our knowledge of empirical cases we can begin to construct a better picture of how gender norms and roles are affected by the process of migration. We can chart the changes which occur in the ideas that men and women, as individuals and as communities, have about the lives they can, and do, to lead. We can trace the developments that movements of people can have on the day to day lived experiences of gendered behaviours, whether these are emancipatory or otherwise. And so, the question of social change in the context of gendered migration is necessarily an empirical question, which needs to be answered again and again in different times and in different contexts. It is indeed one of the most important and interesting questions for migration scholars today.

Endnotes

¹ As we cannot do justice to the breadth of the scholarship on gender and migration in the short space available, we can direct the reader for instance to the following reviews (Curran, Shafer, Donato, & Garip, 2006; Pessar & Mahler, 2003).

² In a similar analysis distinguishes between compensatory approach which aimed to make women visible in migration research and contributory approach which focused on women's contribution to migration movements. In this paper, the additive approach is perceived as including an analysis of women's qualitative contribution to migration.

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