

WOMEN MIGRANTS TODAY: NEW DIRECTIONS, NO PAPERS, OLD BARRIERS

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The article explores the changing nature of female migration, showing how the composition of the migrant population has altered, with women migrants now comprising a majority of the recent migrant populations. Drawing on data from interviews with undocumented migrant women in London, the article looks at the consequence of undocumented status for women, explores how they look for work, their jobs, pay, and terms and conditions, how they express their relationships within the workplace, what they identify as the supportive characteristics of coworkers, and how they manage when not in work.

Women Migrants: Changing Composition and Variable Experiences

Women now constitute at least half of the world's migrants, and within Europe they form a majority of its migrant population. In every region of the world, the proportion of the migrant population that is female grew between 1960 and 2005, with an average growth rate of around 3 percent.¹ In 2005, in its last major report on female migration, the United Nations calculated that 95 million of the 191 million, or around half, of the world's migrants were women (UNFPA 2006). In relation specifically to the UK, in 2012, 49 percent of all those who migrated were female. Women migrants are younger than males. In the under 24-year-old group, there were 124,000 newly arrived women, compared with 110,000 males (Office of National Statistics²). Furthermore, these figures underestimate the size of the female migrant population as they do not take account of all migrants including, for example, the undocumented female population. The changing nature of work available to migrants suggests that there are larger numbers of women who are working without documents. As a report from the International Labour Organization (ILO 2006, 3):

While the share of females in total migration has shown only a marginal rise since 1960 or so, the global numbers do not reveal the important changes in the character of female migration. Data systems are still gender-blind . . . Traditionally, women migrated to unite with their families. Today, more women and girls, of all skill levels, are migrating for work, often on their own—as sole breadwinners.

Women migrant workers can face additional hurdles in their migration, and the ILO report highlights a number of factors that place women migrants in a less favorable position, including their greater likelihood of working in occupations where they are not formally considered as workers (e.g., in domestic households) or where their status is undocumented. London, the location of our study, is a global city with a long and rich history of migration, and is a unique site of study of recent migration patterns.

While there have been a few studies of earlier movements of female migrants, for example Vecchio's (2006) study of Italian migrant midwives, that identified women as independent migration actors, such studies were a disruption from the norm of how migration has traditionally been investigated, particularly in relation to employment. With some important exceptions (Askola 2012; Kofman et al. 2000), women migrants have generally been investigated in relation to their contribution to the development of stable ethnic communities, rather than in relation to their independent migration trajectory. Yet the migration experiences of men and women are not concomitant; women and men do not migrate in the same way, nor do they face the same barriers in relation to migration, and this applies regardless of whether or not they arrive with documents permitting residence and work (Anthias 2007; Kofman et al. 2000). It is for this reason that a focus on women migrants is important. Furthermore, specifically in relation to their undocumented status, Schrover et al. (2008, 29–30) noted that:

Illegality is constructed differently for men and women across both time and space . . . The “costs” of illegal migration are not the same for men and women. Men engage in more high-risk, expensive migrations, but the profits from these endeavours are likewise assessed to be high. Women engage in low-risk migrations that are less costly; while their low visibility and smaller chance of deportation reduce these costs even further.

This acknowledgment of the need to interrogate the migration experiences of undocumented women, as differing from those of men, is also expressed in a resolution of the European Parliament, adopted in early 2014.³ Although dealing mainly with undocumented women's access to accommodation and healthcare, the resolution also called on the member states of the European Union to make available mechanisms that enabled undocumented women migrants to make claims against employers for wages due, while supporting the adoption of awareness campaigns to ensure that women migrants know they have this right. Furthermore, the resolution calls for a new mechanism “through which migrants can lodge formal, but anonymous complaints, against abusive employers, through civil society organisations or labour unions.” This indicates official recognition of the problems faced by undocumented women migrants (European Parliament 2014). In the UK, however, recent legislative changes in relation to migrant domestic work have placed undocumented mainly women workers in a position of even greater precarity by removing their right to change employer, no matter how poor their working conditions might be (Human Rights Watch 2014).

The arrival of migrant women may have a specific impact on existing migrant communities. Zhou and Logan, in their study of female Chinese migrants in New York, found that their arrival promoted a “family centred society,” expanding a market in Chinese goods and services. Unlike the case of male Chinese migrants, they found that for women workers, there was “a total absence of human capital effects, neither education, nor English language skills nor citizenship has any significant effects” (1989, 817). While male migrant workers experienced a return on their social capital, female migrants within ethnic enclaves did not, implying that the positive advantages experienced by male migrants might have been derived from the subordinate position of their female counterparts (Zhou and Logan 1989). Allen (2009) similarly found that for refugees, while there were positive social capital outcomes for men, for women these were negative. Women in co-ethnic employment earned less than men, and co-ethnic social capital negatively affected female earnings. Gilberton (1995), examining the labor market experiences of Dominican and Colombian women in ethnic enclave employment in New York, found that the ethnic enclave provided women with low wages, minimal benefits, and few opportunities for advancement. Warman (2007) also found a negative consequence, in relation to pay, for women in ethnic enclaves, although this was mitigated by the women’s age on arrival. These outcomes are, however, diverse and may depend, argue Zhou and Logan (1989, 818),

... on the structure of the enclave economy and its relationship to the larger economy; what kinds of industries can prosper, with what labour requirements and at what wages. It may also depend upon the values and motives of the immigrants themselves.

Nevertheless, research in recent decades has consistently found that for women, migration can also have a transformational effect, providing opportunities that would not be available, in the absence of migration (see, e.g., Boyd 1989; Indra 1999; Jamarani 2012). The effects of migration on women may be dependent on the degree to which women migrants break away from minority ethnic communities; Bonifacio (2012) agrees that through migration, women may find ways to challenge both their work and gender identity. Siara (2013), in the context of the recent migration of Polish women to the UK, following the Accession to the European Union of the A8 countries in 2004, similarly notes that migration creates a potential for change in gender construction but that this is mediated by state, religious, and women’s movements in both the origin and destination countries.

Women, Migration, and Work

In the UK, while the difference in employment rates between migrant and UK-born males has narrowed, this has not occurred for female migrants, who continue to experience higher labor market exclusion rates, although there are variations by country of origin (Rienzo 2013). Recently arrived female migrants

have higher educational qualifications than in the past and are now more likely than male migrants (at 60.1 percent) to have obtained a higher level of education, compared with males (59.2 percent) (Rienzo 2013). In addition, migrant women are now more than twice as likely to have further education qualifications, compared with UK-born women, with just 26.4 percent in the latter category. In relation to earnings, those of migrant women are generally lower than for migrant men. Mara and Landesmann (2013) suggest that for women, in particular, life satisfaction is a “good predictor of migration preferences”; in other words, women migrants remain where they assess their life satisfaction favorably. Thus, unfavorable working conditions are likely to lead to a higher likelihood of return for migrant women, although this will be mediated by requirements to send remittances or to provide for family members left behind.

As the composition of the labor market changes within Europe, there has been a shifting of gendered employment opportunities (Andall 2013) from men to women, with jobs in female-dominated sectors like care and hospitality increasing, and jobs in traditional male-dominated sectors like manufacturing declining. Nevertheless, there remains a prevalence of gendered division and gender stereotypes, with males working in a far more diverse range of roles than women (Lewis et al. 2013). Although women are generally conceptualized as working in “semi-private spaces,” such as in hotels as chambermaids, in care work, or in the houses of clients (McIlwaine et al. 2006), the intersection of gender, class, and race has pushed some male migrant workers into jobs traditionally seen as female, such as cleaning and care work (see McGregor 2007; McIlwaine et al. 2006), and has transferred some female migrants from private to public spaces. In our study, particularly in relation to work in the catering sector, gender had determined the hiring of females to work in public spaces, for example in front jobs in restaurants, while men worked in the “private spaces” of kitchens. This does not imply that female migration has been positioned to challenge gender segregation; rather, it has been utilized by a labor market with a growing need for new forms of low-paid work, where conditions are poor and where the opportunities to challenge them collectively are limited.

The Research Approach

Qualitative interviews with fifteen undocumented female migrants from Bangladesh, China, and Turkey (including Kurds from Turkey and Northern Cypriots) in London, carried out as part of a larger project, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ES/1037490/2), of 55 undocumented migrants and 24 minority ethnic employers from the same groups, form the empirical basis of this article. The three groups were selected to obtain variance in terms of migration history, initial motives for migration, and migration routes to the UK, and indicative quotas were set to ensure a diverse range of experiences by key explanatory variables.

There is no existing sampling frame available for undocumented migrants, who constitute a hard to reach group and have very particular vulnerabilities due

to their “deportability” (De Genova 2002). The consequence is that undocumented migrants can often be hidden and difficult to locate for the purposes of social research. Trust is an important component of access to the study population. To build up trust, we worked closely with community interviewers and the organizations they were likely to trust, such as nongovernment organizations and faith groups. Snowball sampling techniques were also used with undocumented migrants acting as gatekeepers to each other.

Community interviewers carried out the interviews in first languages. To ensure sample diversity, the interviewers used multiple entry points that included community organizations, faith groups, cold calling, interviewer contracts, and snowballing. There were more difficulties accessing women who, among some communities, were more hidden within domestic settings than their male counterparts. Among the fifteen female interviewees, seven were from China, two identified as Turkish—three as Kurds and one from Northern Cyprus—while three were from Bangladesh. Length of time in Britain ranged from two years to more than fifteen. Of the fifteen women interviewees, all had been undocumented workers at some stage since their arrival, and ten were employed at the time of the interview; four were not working because they were caring for young children, while another was unemployed at the time of the interview. Of those in work, four worked in restaurants, two were in the hair and beauty sector, and two were in manufacturing (see Table 1).

In the following sections, we explore, using our empirical data, the ways in which status impacts on work decisions, job-seeking strategies, types of jobs, terms and conditions at work, relationships in the workplace, and transnational engagement among undocumented migrant women. Although the dataset we are drawing from is small, we nevertheless attempt to take an intersectional approach to examine the ways in which ethnicity, family, networks, language, and education may affect experiences.

How Status Impacts on Work Decisions and Job-Seeking Strategies

In this section, we examine how the work experiences of undocumented migrant women are shaped by their immigration status. The condition of “‘illegality,’ is socially, culturally and politically constructed” (Chavez 2007, 192), and fear of deportation or deportability (De Genova 2002) permeated experiences and strategies, and was the lens through which decisions about work were made. In the following quote, Fang, who had been in the UK for six years, describes her early experiences, including a number of short-term jobs:

You know, for the first two years or so I hardly had any fixed job. I had no fixed abode either . . . It was rough living for me. I was constantly scared . . . I was always in a state when I constantly feel worried. There was a lot of pressure . . . I frequently had nightmares . . . I often dreamed of being arrested by the authorities . . . I was so scared that I might be taken by the police before I was even able to earn any money to pay the debts . . . I feel a little better these days . . . (Fang from China).

Table 1. Current or Most Recent Job

Pseudonym	Country of origin	Sector	Job	Whether job in enclave
Chow ^a (has baby)	China	Restaurant	Waitress	Yes
An	China	Manufacturing	Factory packing dried fruit	Yes
Bik ^a (has baby)	China	Takeaway	Kitchen laborer and oil work	Yes
Fung ^a (one baby one toddler)	China	Restaurant/takeaway (not clear)	Kitchen worker	Yes
Al ^a (has baby)	China	Restaurant	Food preparation	Yes
Fang	China	Hair and beauty	Nail technician	No
Chun	China	Other	Cleaning (domestic)	No
Meher	Bangladesh	Retail and services	Accessories department, large retail chain	No
Isha	Bangladesh	Other	Child minder	Yes
Nafisa	Bangladesh	Manufacturing	Sewing machinist	Yes
Zilan ^a	Kurd from Northern Cyprus	Other	Advisor, community center	Yes
Rojda	Kurd from Turkey	Restaurant	Cooking (in front of customers) and washing up	Yes
Arijin	Kurd from Turkey	Restaurant	Waitress	Yes
Reyhan	Turkey	Restaurant	Waitress (and some cooking)	Yes
Bahar	Turkey	Hair and beauty	Hairdresser	Yes

^aIndicates not currently working.

Many of the women interviewed expressed the importance of maintaining good relationships for fear of being reported to the authorities. In the workplace in particular, this translated into not challenging employers, not provoking arguments, or not appearing to be a better worker than others, as articulated in the following quotes:

When I was working for the first nail-shop . . . I often had to put up with the boss. Many a times even though it wasn't my mistake, I still had to swallow it the insult . . . I had to put up with them because I feared that if I didn't do that, they may report me to the police . . . that I had no status . . . (Fang from China).

But I will tell you truth, because you are scared of being reported, you always keep your relationships in good terms . . . I do not compete with my colleagues . . . I do not try to be the best one in the workplace . . . I try not to attract any attention . . . You never know . . . Someone in the workplace might become irritated by my behaviours and complain about me to the Home Office . . . (Bahar from Turkey).

Being undocumented also affected job search strategies, and of the ten women who were working at the time of the interview seven had found their current work through word of mouth from informal contacts within existing social networks. This is similar to methods of job seeking among undocumented migrants more generally, as trust and ways of circumventing formal procedures, where documents are requested, are central to strategies (Bloch 2013). Other ways into work included the use of a middle person who acted as a job agent, cold calling at businesses, or through the Internet or newspapers. Chow, from China, used a job agent to find her work once her student visa expired and she became undocumented. She was aware of the risks involved, as job agents had been known to cheat people by taking money and not finding them suitable work.

One of the advantages of finding work through trusted contacts was that they usually offered prior knowledge of the workplace and of the trustworthiness of the employer. However, some preferred the anonymity and lack of obligation associated with using the Internet, newspapers, or cold calling. The following quotes demonstrate the varied considerations that the migrants had when trying to access work:

. . . if a job is recommended to you by a friend, for example if the person who recommends a job to you is your friend and is also working in the same restaurant, you may feel a sense of togetherness as colleagues there; and that might keep you working there longer . . . It's good to be able to work in the same place with friends (Chow from China).

I would go out on my own and then see others I knew. I mean others who are Bengali. I would trust them and ask them if they had any work or if they knew anybody who could give me work. They would encourage me to continue looking and I may get some work . . . After searching this way, I found this work. I have been there ever since (Nafisa from Bangladesh).

On the internet you don't know anyone; you don't know the boss; if you are interested in a certain advert, you just contact the person who advertises the job

. . . if it's the kind of job you had been looking for, or leave it if it's not what you had mind. So there is no question of friendship or loyalty involved there (Chow from China).

For most undocumented migrants, work is crucial in the absence of welfare support. However, job opportunities are limited, as a consequence of status, and terms and conditions are often very poor as we explore in the following section.

Working Lives: Current and Most Recent Jobs

The focus of this section is on jobs, sectors, terms and conditions of work, and pay. The pattern of work was most often horizontal movement between jobs with similar duties, pay, and conditions. A small minority had both acquired and been able to use new skills making small and incremental improvements to their working lives. However, the commonality of experience was low pay, long hours, and precarious work.

Table 1 shows that at the time of the interview ten women were working while five were not. Four of the five not working were from China, had babies and partners whom they had met in the UK who were, with the exception of one, also undocumented although they supported them financially. Zilan also had family members, including sisters, who were refugees and they helped her financially.

Table 1 shows the current job, and among the five not working their most recent job. Nearly half were working or had worked, most recently in a restaurant or takeaway shop, of which three had worked in the kitchens, which was similar to the profile of employment among the men in our study. Nearly everyone (twelve out of fifteen) was currently working or had worked within ethnic enclave businesses, which are businesses located within the ethnic enclave where the employer is from the same ethnic group as his or her employees (Light et al. 1994; Portes 1981). Working environments were often ethnically homogeneous, and for some, the customer base was also almost exclusively from the same ethnic group as the workers. In the following quotes, the women talk about their coworkers and, in the case of Arjin, the customer base as well.

Two waitresses, two bakers, one cook, two cleaners, seven-eight people; they are all from Turkey . . . The customers are also usually Turkish (Arjin from Kurd from Turkey).

Three in the kitchen, five in total; they are all from Turkey (Reyhan from Turkey).

Now there are six workers . . . They are from China too . . . We get on OK. Our relationships are fine. Maybe because we are all Chinese from Mainland China, so we understand each other's feelings (An from China).

Those not in enclave businesses were either working on their own—Chun as a cleaner for a non-Chinese family; Fang as a nail technician in a salon, with one non-Chinese hairdresser. Only Meher was working in an ethnically mixed environment with coworkers from many different countries of origin.

English-language skills affected jobs, and those without English were more limited in their opportunities, and restricted to mainly kitchen work, sewing, packaging, and cleaning. In the following quotes, Fung, Bik, and Chun all reflect on how in their view language had affected their working opportunities and acted as a barrier to work.

I didn't deliver meals because I can't speak English. You need to be able to speak English with the customers for delivery duties (Fung from China).

I found a *daza* [labourer] job in the restaurant kitchen. I didn't speak English so I couldn't find anything else (Bik from China).

You don't need to speak a lot of English there. They show you around the house and tell you what you need to clean. Then you kind of understand what to do, like where and where needs to be cleaned and so on . . . All you need is that . . . Cleaning jobs are roughly the same everywhere (Chun from China).

Those with English language had more options, although the jobs available were still almost exclusively within the ethnic enclave. However, having English did facilitate work in the front of the house, as waitresses or dealing with customers in takeaway shops. Arjin was very aware of the role of English but also the gendered nature of the workplace. In the following quote, she describes her understanding of what her employer prioritized:

. . . my physical appearance, my being experienced as waitress and my English level was enough for him to ignore my status . . . They do not care about the status. They think you know the job, you can speak English and you are beautiful and that's it . . . (Arjin, Kurd from Turkey).

For most, hours were long and pay was low; moreover, work was often precarious. Workers were paid cash in hand, and the absence of formal contracts left them devoid of rights, although within this seemingly unregulated working environment there seemed to be different rates of pay for different jobs, and this was acknowledged and understood (Bloch and McKay 2014). In the following quotes, the interviewees express not only their lack of job security but also variable pay.

Not much . . . £30 a day . . . so £180 weekly . . . I also get some tips which also depends on the day . . . It is not regular . . . Turkish places always rely on the tips, that is why they keep the wage quite low (Arjin, Kurd from Turkey).

They pay me cash . . . It's not a fixed job. They may cancel it anytime. You never know if they'll ask me not to go next week. It's not a secure job (Chun from China).

I have worked 10 hours or sometimes 12 hours, from 9.30am . . . until 8.30, 9pm or 9.30pm. After all this work, I get only £20. I noticed that if I left after 8 hours I get the same wages as working 10, 11 or 12 hours. The wages remain the same—£20 (Nafisa from Bangladesh).

Hours could be unpredictable; in the following quote, Rojda describes her job and highlights the variability of her duties and hours.

I do not [have fixed hours]. It depends on how busy we are . . . I bake gozleme [traditional pastry] over there [she points a corner] in the morning. Then I go to the kitchen to help the cook in the afternoon. I cook some specific traditional dishes like kombe [pastry], icli kofte [stuffed meat balls] . . . I wash the dishes during the day . . . I make the preparations for the next day . . . You start at 4pm and you stay until it is closed down . . . I do not know it can be 2 am or 1 am, on Saturdays I was staying until 4 am (Rojda).

This level of precarity accentuates the already insecure lives women lead as undocumented migrants making their lives even less stable.

There is nothing you can do without status. You can't just dream of something that may never come. I don't even know what would happen to me tomorrow, how can I be worried too much about what to do in the future? It's a waste of time to think of this right now. For me, it's important to live the moment. It's important to make sure that I can survive each single day without trouble (Fang from China).

The women we interviewed were clustered in ethnic enclave employment within a limited number of sectors. This pattern of employment was similar to that found among men without documents, although the nature of the jobs carried out could and did differ. Men were more likely to be working in kitchens and construction, while women were more able to find front-of-the-house roles in restaurants or takeaway shops but only if they had sufficiently good English. Both men and women shared insecure working lives, low pay, and an absence of rights.

Relationships in the Workplace

McIlwaine et al. (2006), in their study of migrants in London, state that those whom they interviewed had found it easier to make friends with migrants from other groups than with UK-born workers, and saw this as the opportunity to learn about other ethnic groups. Wills et al. (2010, 77) noted that:

While there have been clear patterns of ethnic and gender segmentation in the labour market, contemporary circumstances are recasting divisions and two new axis. The first is immigration itself, particularly as it divides those who are able to claim benefits from those who must find alternative means of support, and the second is legality, which divides regular from irregular migration.

This suggests that cleavages between migrants are derived primarily from status. However, our research suggests that migration identity and status by themselves are insufficient determinants of workplace relationships. Workplace friendships were important in relation to the women interviewees, and for some such friendships had encouraged them to stay in their job. Chow, a 27-year-old, who had been in the UK for eleven years and who was working in a restaurant, explained how friends helped at work:

It was OK to stay for over a year because my friends were working at that place. For example when you encounter something that you don't know how to deal with, your friends may come to your aid. Or when there's some task that you don't know how to perform, they may teach you or show you the way to solve the problem.

Ai, a 28-year-old woman from China, who had been in the UK for three years and had worked in the restaurant sector, talked about how friends offered advice as well as material help.

The friends I had had come to the UK before me so they were more familiar with the surroundings . . . Sometimes they would give me a hand in this and that . . . Some would give advice on how to go about business in the country; some would give me tips on the things to be watched out; some would even buy my baby clothes . . . You know, I didn't have a lot of clothes when I first came . . . so they gave me some clothes. You see, this jacket [*worn by interviewee*] was a gift from one of them . . .

However, in relation to the women we interviewed, where individuals came from was an important determinant of the nature of their relationships, with indications that trust and friendship emanated through originating from the same locality. As Ai from China commented in relation to coworkers:

We are all from the same backgrounds; we are from the same country, so we are quite close to each other.

The place of origin, therefore, was a precondition for this level of trust. It was not always the case that this was the same as an identity of citizenship. Fang, a 40-year-old woman from China, who had been in the UK for six years, described her relationships at work as positive because:

. . . some [workers] were from Mainland China like me. We got on ok. There was no big problem among the staff.

Here, it was the emphasis on where they came from in China that was important. In contrast for Chow the fact that coworkers were from a different area meant that relationships were less trusting:

Largely speaking, we got on well with each other. But some Malaysian girls might not have liked us [people from Mainland China] so much . . . You can tell from their facial expressions . . . There were gossips going on most of the time and some of the words were not always so kind to people from Mainland China.

Chinese origin workers also differentiated between Mainland China and non-Mainland China (Hong Kong) in expressing their degree of trust. Thus, while Chow spoke of good relationships with other workers from the mainland, she described her relationships with her employers as negative, by explaining that "they were people from Hong Kong." Of course this may just have been a method of articulating difficulties in the relationship with her employer and a reluctance to define this as simply a product of class relations. Thus, Chow

specifically attributed her difficulties with her employer to tensions between the husband and wife partnership. Chow experienced these tensions as being directed toward her, and this also may be an expression of the complexity of gender roles in the workplace in locating the origins of her difficulties at work not with her employer, but with her employer's wife, implying a tension between them that went beyond the employer/employee relationship:

The restaurant owner and his wife argued a lot . . . Whenever the two had an argument, the wife always put the blame on me . . . Since I was the one who started early each morning, I'd normally go home before the others. I'd go home each day as soon as I had done my job. I was supposed to leave early because I started the day earlier than all the others. But the owner's wife wasn't happy about it; she wanted me to stay working with the others . . . I said to her that that wasn't fair; I said you can't keep me there as I'd done my share of work. I said that because I was the one starting earlier in the morning, I should be allowed to leave for home earlier as well . . . One evening, after I had left the restaurant, there suddenly came a big crowd of late customers. The kitchen was like hectic; the owner's wife was very angry so she had a go at her husband, blaming him for letting me go home early. So when I went to work the next morning, the boss told me to go home and not to come back again. I felt it was unfair to me.

There was a similar story from Reyhan, a 32-year-old Turkish woman in the UK for four years and again working in a restaurant. Here, the tension was not between a husband and wife team, but between two brother owners where again the worker found herself liked by one, but not the other:

Two brothers were the shareholders of the place . . . Erm . . . I was getting along well with the younger one . . . The elder one was a bit tough to me . . . He was always very serious . . .

Similarly, in relation to workplace relationships, where these were seen as poor they were identified as being the consequence of particular traits or personalities. Two women referred to gossiping about others at work as a problem they had experienced. None of the male interviewees identified this as an issue. For example, Zilan, a 33-year-old Cypriot woman of Kurdish identity who had been in the UK for seven years working as an advisor in a community center, described her relationships with colleagues as poor.

They [co-workers] always seemed to be ready to report me to the committee . . . There was a competition within the staffs . . . We are only three or four people . . . But still . . . Somehow I was feeling they hated me . . . Although I was kind of supervisor of some of them . . . Erm . . . I was more experienced than any of them . . . But they never gave me the supervisor title . . .

Part of her explanation for this treatment was her undocumented status, which she felt also contributed to her losing her job. In the next section, we explore how people manage when out of work given there is no state-based welfare safety in place in undocumented migrants.

Managing When Not Working

As indicated above, much of the early literature on female migrants had conceptualized them as followers and as dependent on male figures. However, the data we have collected question this positioning and can best be explored by examining what the women did in periods when they had no income. Only a minority described their strategy as one of dependence on male figures, and even in these cases it was made clear that this was viewed as a temporary solution and that their aim was to return to at least a measure of financial independence. In some cases, women would have to rely on relatives during periods of unemployment, but these networks of support also limited their opportunities, as described by Bik, a 23-year-old Chinese woman in the UK for four years, who could not work as she was caring for her young child, and as a result:

I have not met anyone . . . I have been staying at home since I stopped working. So over the past period I hardly left home . . . I don't meet many people recently. That's the main reason why I don't have [Cantonese speaking] friends. Occasionally I go out but I have not been able to make friends with anyone speaking Cantonese.

Zilan had to live with her sisters as she was unemployed and describes being given "pocket money" in return for carrying out small jobs, clearly expressing this as an unsatisfactory solution.

Although the majority of the fifteen women were working at the time of the interview, all of them had, at some time, experienced unemployment and set out their strategies in relation to this. In some cases, unemployment occurred on first arrival, but in other cases it was part of a continuing pattern, of being in and out of work. Two of the fifteen women indicated that on first arrival, they had survived because they had brought money with them, which had been sufficient for a short period, indicating that they had planned for this before arrival. Meher, a 24-year-old Bangladeshi who had been in the UK for two years, spoke of having brought enough money for the first two months. Ai from China had also arrived in the UK with some money to tide her over. In Ai's case, on arrival she had been assisted by friends, and her case is interesting because on arrival Ai had been held in a detention center. On release, the friends whom she moved in with until she found work were people whom she had met in detention. She describes their support in the following way:

They were the friends I met the detention centre. They were let out before me and then went to work . . . They supported me when later I myself came out too. They helped me because they knew I needed it. They had been in difficulties before, so they understand the plight I was in . . . That's why they gave me support. You know, people like us, who are from the same place (Fujian), would understand each other's plights and therefore have more sympathy for each other . . . We are more willing to give each other a hand, in particular when we are a foreign land . . .

Even after a period in the UK women still regularly experienced unemployment, and where they could they used savings put aside during periods of work. Ai always made sure to put some money aside when in work, stressing “You must rely on yourself. I have two hands and two feet . . . I should expect to support myself.” Fung, a 27-year-old who had been in the UK for over seven years, had also gone to stay with relatives when out of work after her first job, but made the point that she had “left them again as soon as I found my second job.” For women like her, the need to demonstrate economic independence was paramount. Chow explained how she had experienced gaps in employment, but “I always tried to find short-term work to do.” Additionally, she too always had some money saved from periods of work and would use this to tide her over during periods of unemployment. Fang similarly said that earnings from one job were used during periods of unemployment:

I had to reach deep in my pockets . . . I'd have to spend whatever I had been able to save earlier . . . And I had to spend each and every penny very carefully . . . I ate only the very cheap stuff . . . I did my shopping in the bargain sections of the local market . . . I tried not to eat meat . . . I ate mostly vegetables . . .

A minority of the women relied on family, husbands, or partners to support them economically. Isha, a 53-year-old Bengali who had been in the UK for nine years, said that whenever she had no work she was helped by other Bengalis, whom she described as “relatives.” Chun, a 40-year-old Chinese woman in the UK for five years, during one period of unemployment was financially supported by her boyfriend, but she also indicated that this at least in part was due to the fact that the boyfriend “didn't want me to go to work.” There were a larger number of examples, like that of An, who regardless of having a partner still expressed the need to have her own earnings. She stressed:

I have been working since coming to the UK . . . I didn't stay outside work for too long . . . I stayed with my husband and he has been working on the construction site . . . so I have always had a shoulder to lean on if and when I don't have an income . . .

Conclusion

This article adds to the existing literature on the changing nature of female migration, the position of women in the labor market, and their role and relationships in the workplace by addressing the specifics of recent female migration and by focusing on the experiences of women migrants who are undocumented, about which less is known and who are often excluded in the general discussion of undocumented migration and employment. Drawing on migration and the work histories of undocumented migrant women workers in London, we have explored the impact of immigration status, gender, ethnicity, and class on work, pay and conditions, and workplace relations among undocumented migrant women. Analyzing the interviews through the framework of

gender enabled us to interrogate the differences of experiences in different jobs and different sectors of work. The women saw work as central to their survival, emerging as independent migrants, not dependents in the migration process, and making choices and decisions that maximized their economic and social potential within the constraints of their status.

Being undocumented affected all aspects of their lives, and the fear of deportation was prominent in the narratives in relation to work and workplace relations. The commonality of experience in terms of the jobs that the women had was of low pay, long hours, and precarity. The women interviewed were clustered mainly within the ethnic enclave in a narrow set of sectors; however, having English-language skills appeared to offer a wider range of options, although these were still limited by status. Working lives were insecure, and in addition to their immigration status, their gender, ethnicity, and class affected their access to work and access to any rights at work. In this article, we have specifically questioned the conceptualization of female migrant employment as always hidden or operating in private spaces, and have shown that, particularly in relation to workers without documents, it may be males who are more hidden than women. Employers may feel that they are less at risk of sanction in having female undocumented migrants in public spaces than in having males.

In the absence of any other support network or the ability to access state support, workplace friendships were important routes to material help and accessing knowledge about the new place of residence and local labor markets, and women made particular references to friendships and relationships that supported them at work. Trust was a necessary part of these relationships. Shared experiences based on similar migration histories, similar places of origin, or shared language helped build relationships of trust. Tensions in relationships were seen with employers or coworkers as a result of differences in class, although these were often articulated in terms of personality traits or temperaments. Good workplace relations were an important factor in encouraging workers to stay in a job longer, acquiring new skills through training from coworkers and finding new jobs.

The women's position as independent migrants and workers (Kofman et al. 2000; Vecchio 2006) was best evidenced through their situations when not in work. In the absence of state benefits, paid work was necessary for their own, or where applicable, their children's survival. While in work, they prepared for periods of unemployment by putting aside part of their earnings. Some women relied on friends, relatives, or partners to help them get through periods without work, although at the time of the interview it was almost only women with young children who were not working and financially dependent on partners. Women like their male counterparts weigh up their decision making in relation to their undocumented status and strategize accordingly. In short, undocumented migrant women are not passive dependents of male figures but are independent, self-motivated global migrants who are most often resilient in the face of their difficult and precarious circumstances.

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Notes

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2. Migration Statistics Quarterly Report for November 2013, http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171778_335330.pdf.
3. <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=REPORT&mode=XML&reference=A7-2014-0001&language=EN#title2>.

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