Feminisation Processes and Internal Migration in the Latin America Context: A Case Study

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Abstract: *This work examines the feminization of migration, adopting a recent qualitative study perspective which analyses migrant women's active role and agency. The purpose of this study is to highlight the interconnection between the structural process of reorganisation of the global labour market and those individual and collective factors which exert influence on choices, strategies, and practices of migrant women, also given the consequences of migration in terms of gender dynamics.*

The specific context of Chile will be examined, starting from the reconstruction of the modalities with which women actualize their migrant plan, the domestic and intergenerational consequences of their reproductive and productive role, as well as the the incidence that gender, country of origin, and phenotypical and racial characteristics have on the dynamics of production and the reproduction of inequalities.

Keywords: *migrant women; agency; Chile; gender roles; vulnerability; inequalities*

1. INTRODUCTION

The global feminization of migration is one of the dimensions which characterised the so called 'Age of migration,' as defined by Castles and Miller (1998).

The Latin American context has shown an increase of female presence from the 1990s characterised by a steady progression to 50% out of the whole population at the end of the century against 45.3% in 1960 (Zlotnik, 2003). As proof of this growth, in Latin America in 2016, women accounted for 51.4% of international migrants, a figure corroborated by recent estimates which confirm the predominant presence of women within regional migration compared to the men. The gap is even more significant within interregional migration compared to international migration (Monleón, 2019).

However, feminisation implies the recognition of the active role of women in an economic and social dimension, beyond mere percentages. Indeed, the adoption of a gender perspective allows the highlighting of the asymmetry between female and male migration in relation to factors, modalities, and consequences. Thus, this allows us to consider the structural gender differences affecting decisions, directions, and experiences in the country of origin, as well as in transit and host countries.

1.1. The Feminisation of Migration: from the 'Androcentric' to the Gender Perspective

In Latin America, the increasing presence of migrant women is due to the combination of different factors among which are: complementarity within the labour supply, demand between countries of origin and host countries, the role of different networks, and the material opportunity to reconstitute the household in the host country.

In this regard, Peruvian women emigrating to Chile, for example, increasingly decide to permanently settle and take Chilean citizenship resulting in the forfeiture of their original citizenship (Zavala San Martin & Rojas Venegas, 2005).

This trend is reinforced by the concurrent growth of domestic and care workers in the labour supply, and by the crisis hitting the productive sectors traditionally occupied by men.

Unlike other countries in Europe or North Africa where domestic work is entrusted to women who are not related to the family, and as a consequence of the incorporation of women in the labour market, in Chile domestic work has its roots in the historical tradition of the 'hacienda' and, therefore, within the upper social strata. At the present time, this situation is so embedded in society that the houses of the most well-off residential areas provide *dipendencias* or *pieza de servicio* [dedicated maid's room]. In Chile, as in other countries, housework is a female responsibility and the labour market for women is lacking in cultural transformation towards an equal redistribution of such responsibility. Thus many women are given domestic and care work at affordable wages.

Furthermore, in a context of increasing male under- and unemployment, it is commonly assumed that migrant women are in a favoured position as they are less affected by the global crisis compared to men. This assumption does not take into account that women's labour market participation, even if it is precarious and downgraded, had happened before the crisis hit those labour sectors with a strong male presence. Therefore, ''such advantages' should be understood as a demotion of men's working conditions rather than a progress of women's' (Cacopardo, 2005, p. 52).

This attitude brings out women's 'invisibility' within the approach that has characterised migration studies so far, orienting anthropological and socio-demographic literature towards a 'neutral' perspective with respect to gender, or an Androcentric perspective which has actually concealed the peculiarity of female mobility.

Androcentrism, associated with Eurocentrism, has led to the consideration of migrant women as secondary characters within the process of network organisation and socio-economic transformation/reproduction of migration (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002; Gregorio, 2012).

Also, those studies focussed on the significant role of women within the family and the migrant community have restricted their positions in an artificial and isolated domestic space, which is itself isolated from an artificial 'public space,' testifying to the representation of women as 'agents without agency' within the migratory literature. It is only since the 1980s, with the transition to the 21st century, that women have been taken into account within international studies on migration, together with their 'agency' (Herrera, 2012).

Also recent studies on the Latin American context highlight that, even when migration was considered a male-related phenomenon, women frequently accompanied fathers and husbands (in a cooperative model), seizing the opportunity to enter the labour market to improve the economic position of the family. This is against an Androcentric vision which considered them as passive actors compared to the man as the only *breadwinner*. The invisibility of migrant women has caused a legislative and institutional vacuum with respect to limitations of citizenship recognition.

The gender perspective applied to migration helps to analyse the relationships between men and women, as well as the practices of negotiation within gender power hierarchies 'across borders', namely the transnational relationships migrants build between the country of origin and the host country. In this sense, gender would not represent a mere variable to measure, to document, and to attest to the presence of forgotten women, but rather a 'set of social relationships shaping the migration models' (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994, p. 3, 2000).

According to the anthropologists Sarah Mahler and Patricia Pessar (2001), the gender perspective takes into account the most ancient forces that 'shape human life', and highlights how the asymmetries of power are taken as natural, inevitable, and immutable, rather than as an artificial human construction. Adopting the gender perspective also impliesde constructing such myths and power hierarchies. By means of *gendered geographies of power*, the two anthropologists aim to attest to how gender works on manifold social levels and what its connections are to dimensions like identity, class, race, and ethnicity at a transnational level. As will be shown, in the Chilean migratory context, social class and race constitute two significant factors that, combined with a gender dimension, create a gap in terms of the inclusion of migrant women in society.

The growing attention devoted to migrant women's leading role at a global level has led to research on the causes regarding the foundation of the feminisation of migration. According to Saskia Sassen's hypothesis (2003), their increased mobility is connected to the creation of a 'labour transnational market', which is due to the demand for cheap female labour from the global economy. In this way,

migrant women are involved in female transnational networks that drive them to specific sectors, even if they are able to enter more qualified labour sectors.

Regarding the concentration of migrant women in the domestic and care sector, Maher (2003) highlights that the hard work of social reproduction relocates the international division of labour to the private sphere, thus creating a gap in access to citizenship rights between migrant women and other citizens, in consequence increasing inequalities. This transnational gap materialises in the quality difference in child cares between the country of origin and the host country. In fact, migrant women who are involved in social reproduction works improve the care quality of the host country families, at the expense of their own care. The international division of the reproductive work creates transnational chains of *cuidadoras* [carers].Therefore, care tasks are entrusted by more privileged women to less privileged ones, who, in turn, have to entrust domestic and family care to other women in the country of origin (Gonzálvez & Acosta, 2015; Parreñas, 2001; Stefoni, 2008).

The impact of labour market reorganisation on the decision to emigrate has to be considered concurrently with the weight of individual dimensions and other collective factors. All these factors determine the decisions, strategies, and practice of migrant women, recognising their active leading role within employment and mobility, thus contributing to the social transformation in the countries of origin throughout the promotion and the reinforcement of the relationships within international family networks.

Economic strategies and emancipative expectations impact the women's decision to emigrate as these factors are connected, on the one hand, to the position in the productive and reproductive sphere in the country of origin and, on the other, to the labour supply and real (or supposed) better conditions in the host country.

According to Hochschild and Ehrenreich (2004), the aspiration for independence would unite migrant women's destiny to all the other women, irrespective of their social class:

By migrating, a woman may escape the expectation that she cares for elderly family members, relinquish her paycheck to a husband or father, or defer to an abusive husband. Migration may also be a practical response to a failed marriage and to the need to provide for children without male help […] To an extent then, the globalization of child care and housework brings the ambitious and the independent women of the world together: the career-oriented upper-middle-class woman of an affluent nation and the striving woman from a crumbling Third World or post communist economy (Hochschild & Ehrenreich, 2004, p. 17).

Nevertheless, such commonality is a long way from bringing women together, due to the fact that migration does not allow women to stand together as allies fighting for a common and shared purpose. On the contrary, they come together as mistress and maid, employer and employee, who are parted by an overwhelming divide in terms of privilege and opportunity.

2. MIGRANT WOMEN IN CHILE

2.1. Family Reorganisation, Gender Roles, Intergenerational Relationships

The prospect of economic and social emancipation, created by the image of a country characterised by economic and political stability, encourages thousands of Latin American women to emigrate to Chile as a symbolic place of freedom and opportunity.

Also direct migration to Chile, as well as all recent interregional migration in Latin America, seems to show a change with regard to past intercontinental migration, in the plans of migratory women: indeed, women opt for an independent model in place of the associative model mentioned above. This means that a woman emigrates alone without partner and children, becoming the main economic *proveedora* [breadwinner] of the family in place of the husband, according to an accurate strategy for the family to survive and improve the quality of their life.

The transition from a reproductive role to that of a source of livelihood for the family, traditionally a man's prerogative, causes a symbolic transformation of the motherhood/fatherhood relationship and a redefinition of manhood itself.

Transformations of roles and tasks may occur within the family: women may gain a higher decision-making power and independence allowing them not to defer to the husband's or father's authority or their threats of domestic violence.

However, the emancipation of migrant women should be considered in the broader system of inequalities, and this depends on the social and family context of origin and their predisposition to change. Thus, being a *proveedora* for the family does not automatically mean a transformation of roles and gender relationships.

Literature provides a lot of examples showing how in such contexts, above all rural, transnational relationships strengthen patriarchy keeping intact the labour division in terms of gender (Boccagni, 2009; Notarangelo, 2011). Moreover, other studies suggest that when women emigrate to rejoin the family, their partners seems more open to renegotiate relationships and gender roles. Conversely, when the whole family emigrates gender asymmetries tend to be reproduced in the host country (Ong et al. 1996). The anthropologist Carmen Gregorio (2011) highlights that, with the migration of the woman-mother, the reproductive role based on maternity changes, as the woman also takes on a productive role as she enters the labour market. The assumption of both roles fosters the renegotiation of gender relationships.

Parreñas (2005) underlines, instead, the contradictions related to the gender roles within the transnational family. On the one hand, she states that, by emigrating, women gain greater economic power and renegotiate relationships, and, on the other, family renegotiation does not change the gender roles since 'transnational motherhood' is faced by entrusting child care to other women belonging to the family or to the community, therefore reproducing the ideology of female *domesticidad* [domesticity].

This ideology triggers the social blaming of the migrant woman for leaving the family without caring. While male migration is justified by paternal responsibility – thusthe father's absence is not perceived as traumatic for the children – instead the migrant woman is blamed for family abandonment and the potential cause of its disintegration because she does not perform the role of motherhood and, thus, does not meet the social expectations to be 'as [a] guarantee of the social continuity and local memory' (Giuffré, 2014, p. 97).

The reason for social disapproval is as a result of the *denaturalización* [denaturalisation] of the women's reproductive role within the migratory context due to the fact that they also assume the productive role which have traditionally been male-dominated. This transition causes a split in the image of women and men, with the former traditionally restricted to a private, social, and reproductive sphere, and the latter to a public, economic, and productive sphere, thus overcoming the equivalence of'mujeres=madre=cuidadora'[woman=mother=carer] (Gregorio, 2012, p. 586), which has been taken as a natural condition.

It is the elder generation of women, especially, who criticise the migrant mothers. Therefore, the system of values and relationships should be negotiated both at a gender and intergenerational level.

Social censorship increases the duality that migrant women already experience, and which is naturally involved in emigrating. On the one hand, emigrating provides the resources for children's wellbeing, on the other, it is a cost because of the material absence of the mother's figure.

With regard tothis subject, a survey, based on interviews with Peruvian women who emigrated to Santiago (Avaria et al., 2016), highlighted the presence of the above-mentioned duality also within the transnational family, despite the fact that members of the family keep emotional ties and family practice even after the separation, thanks to collective feelings of unity which overcome national borders (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002).

As Boccagni states (2009, p. 240), 'transnational ties stand as an essential channel of mutual affectivity and, hence, a source of shared belonging and future planning'.

The Peruvian migrants that were interviewed felt sad, nervous, and guilty for leaving the family and because of their long-distance motherhood. At the same time, they were proud of improving their children's conditions, even more so, when their wages were the only income for the family. As some

of them have stated, sadness and nostalgia are experienced with the so-called *lejanía del origen*. This is the sense of missing one's own country, culture, everyday life, emotions 'q*ue tenemos todos que hemos venido acá*'['that all the people who came here share'].

Furthermore, the myth of middle-class 'intensive' mothering is deeply present in the imagery of transnational mothers who have emigrated to Chile, specifically those who have come from a predominantly Catholic country (i.e. Peru, Ecuador, Colombia), so that they doubt that they are'good mothers', even when they believe they have carried out their responsibilities through supporting their families through their wages (Solé & Parella, 2004, p. 10). By this meaning, religious practice stresses local morals and, hence, the persistence of obligations that keeps affecting transnational practice.

As Parreñas (2001) states, the *care drain* which affects children adds to the 'transnational parenting grief": children become more vulnerable due to the emotional costs of separation and abandonment which are only partially covered by such strategies of motherhood substitution like earnings or entrusted care.

Camila Léon's survey (2014) highlights other aspects which add to the social stigmatisation, grief, and sorrow emerging from the experience of migrant women in Chile. Indeed, Peruvian women who were interviewed pointed out the esteem gained within the family of origin and their growth as mothers, daughters, and wives who now feel *'que ellas tienen el control de sus vidas'*[that they 'hav[e]…control over their lives'], thanks to the survival strategies carried out in a migratory context, as well as to the renegotiation of their role in the family, where '*la majoría es mach*ista'['the majority is sexistt'].

Latin American women – and men – who emigrated to Chile are affected by the inadequacy of a legislation that cannot manage current migratory flows, by the arbitrariness of civil servants' disinformation, and by socially and institutionally discriminatory attitudes, in addition to an inadequate awareness of rights and duties.

With regard to employment, getting a work visa to obtain the residence permit is a very arduous process so that women fall into illegality, abuse, and have no access to citizenship rights, like all migrants.

In Chilean society, as for Latin America overall, migrant social inequality has its roots in the multiple dimensions of gender and ethno-racial discriminations which affect migrants in the process of inclusion. As Crenshaw suggests (1989), discrimination connects with other structural issues, such as unemployment and poverty, creating a structural 'intersectionality' of inequalities that causes an overwhelming disadvantage for individuals who are discriminated against, in different ways from the results that a single discrimination would cause. Intersectional discrimination concurrently affects several aspects of individual identity, such as gender, race, and social class, thus exposing individuals to multiple forms of discrimination due to such 'combined systems of oppression'.

Thinking about intersectionality necessarily involves 'thinking about the complex, essential, varying and variable effects of the intersection of multiple factors of differentiation – economic, social, political, cultural, psychological, subjective and experiential factors – in specific historical settings which generate modalities of exclusion, hierarchisation and inequality' (Cepal, 2017, p. 19).

2.2. Mechanisms of Differential Inclusion

In light of the above, and in order not to ignore different material and symbolic conditions, directions, and individual experiences of interaction, it would be inappropriate to analyse migrant women as a homogeneous category. Some of them, like Argentinians and Venezuelans, have accomplished economic and physical independence, while others suffer a twofold form of inequality and violence, both as women and migrants. Upper class well-off women, with high educational and professional levels and who physically match the collective imagination's projection of the white, European race, are better placed to achieve a physical and economic independence, as well as a satisfactory level of integration within Chilean society.

Conversely, other women are often hindered and discriminated against because of their social class, country of origin, and physical appearance. They are also stigmatised by their skin colour as being '*negra*'['black'] or '*morena*'['brown'].

In the Chilean collective imagination, country of origin and phenotypical or racial characteristics affect the inclusion/exclusion relationship within the labour market itself, which turns out to be 'segmented' by social identity.

Peruvian women, for example, are associated with housework, and are perceived to be naturally fitted for the role of *nanas* [maid or nannies], even when they are highly skilled workers who could take up more prestigious professions. Chilean women employers commonly prefer Southern women as long as they are not Mapuche, or Peruvian or Ecuadorean rather than Bolivian.

Peruvians are preferred to Chileans because, while the former bear all the conditions of submission, the latter defends their own rights, and do not submit to a 'servile' relationship. In Chile an women's imagination, Peruvians, like Southern women, embody an ideal type of worker with the *actitud de nana* [maid's attitude], that is being submissive without protesting, which they have become accustomed to in the sexist culture where they "belong". Paradoxically, this gives them an 'advantage' in terms of employment.

As Colombo (2003) highlights, these relationships, where female employers exercise power over female domestic workers, 'stress to question the neutrality of a gender category and connect it to cultural and social class dimensions. […] In other words, even the gender is not neutral in terms of power since the power itself is exercised within one gender as well as from a gender to another' (Colombo, 2003, p. 338–339).

With regard to co-residence, this represents a frequent choice that, on the one hand, fosters familiarity between workers and the host family, and on the other, produces the high emotional cost of taking care of the host family's children while facing one's own long-distance motherhood at the same time. Furthermore, co-residence increases dependence on the mistress, and hinders workers' relational life outside the work.

Regarding this subject, Rosalba Todaro highlights the fact that the female worker does not 'sell' either her work or a product of it, but rather her time, often placed at the disposal of her employer and her family. As this author suggests, such a situation rather refers to relationships of domination – not comparable to modern work – based on an evident form of servility which causes migrant women to submit to all conditions (Todaro & Galvez, 1987).

The 'housemaids of globalization', thus, may experience a contradictory social class mobility since the progress of *status* within their own families in the country of origin does not lead to improvement withiin the host society, where they are relegated only to the reproductive and care sectors (Parreñas, 2001; Stefoni, 2008).

Migrant women are affected not just by gender inequalities, but also by ethno-racial discrimination. On the one hand, the sexual division of labour exposes migrants to no remuneration or salary discrimination, domestic and care overload, reproductive and productive uncertainty, and segregation; on the other, racial discrimination banishes *mestizo* [meticce] and Afrodescendent indigenous women to lower levels of the labour market, where white women hold privileged positions.

In recent years, the ethnicity differentiation in Chile has triggered racialisation, especially regarding Afro-Colombian and Afro-Caribbean groups. This process is likely to be ascribed to a colonial matrix that has not changed over the centures, like the hierarchisation and subordination of specific social groups. The ethno-racial dimension, therefore, represents a crucial factor feeding social inequality production and reproduction (Stefoni & Stang, 2017; Rangel, 2020).

The '*negro*' or Afrodescendent population is mostly exposed to racism, and women are affected by specific forms of material and symbolic sexist violence and sexualisation of the body. Public opinion connects them to prostitution, or they become socially '*castigadas*'[punished, stigmatised] by Chilean women for being perceived as a threat to the community.

Skin colour or indigenous origin foster a nationalist discourse which aims at the the construction and '*blanqueada*'['whitening'] of the nation state.

Also Quijano (2007) suggests that this strategy of discrimination, which is as widespread in Chile as it is in Latin American and Caribbean regions in general, even goes back to European colonisation and its hierarchical race-based ideology and relationships (dominators/superior and dominated/inferior) as a way of imposing its domination.

Moreover, the introduction of enslaved human groups from Africa to these territories caused further consequences for women who, even if they were less deported than men, were exploited as workers and sexual objects by both their countrymen and conquerors.

Over time this kind of naturalised discrimination has fostered the Eurocentric and Androcentric model, where a white European man holds a dominant socio-cultural and political position. This supposed universal standard would have implied a hierarchy among peoples where forms that are different from the standard are considered archaic and premodern, hence inferior, in order to preserve the group ideology.

Many people prefer the term 'Afrodescendent', conceptualised at the *Regional Conference of the Americas against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance*, held in Santiago in 2000 [*Conferencia Regional de las Américas contra el Racismo, la Discriminación Racial, la Xenofobia y otras Formas Connexas de Intolerance*].'Afrodescendent' replaces the term 'black man/woman'as it encompasses the heterogeneity of different categories that people of African descent use to identify themselves within different regional contexts (Cepal, 2017). Some scholars state that the category of 'Afrodescendent' deconstructs the colonial term of 'negro/a' to refer to the active role of a political subject who stands up for their rights without being victimised and member of a diaspora community of African descent that transcends national borders (Campoalegre Septien & Bidaseca, 2017).

The culture of diaspora strictly connects to the process of construction of the ethno-racial identity of Afrodescendent women which takes place in Latin America and the Caribbean. On the one hand, this process is fed by a socio-political power that heightens discrimination and, on the other, by the historical black and Afrodescendent people's resistance in the name of their rights, dignity, and freedom.

Afrodescendent women share other situations of discrimination with men, like the statistical 'invisibility' entailed by the problems of identification in census surveys, which is an attempt to deny or hide the blatant contradictions and ethnic-racial inequalities, in order to uphold the myth of an achieved democracy by means of discourse and imagery created in the postcolonial context.

Only recently have the ethnic-racial variables been incorporated into national statistics and administrative records with the introduction of the self-identification criteria, thus offering further categories which 'black' migrant people can choose in order to identify themselves.

3. CONCLUSIONS

In terms of the different dimensions of migrant discrimination, in Chile some measures have been developed to guarantee access to quality health service and education. However, these measures have been partially effective due to the absence of a political continuity able to develop a consistent plan.

In this respect, migrant women are not totally considered as political subjects yet, as gender perspective and migration policies have not been interconnected either by ministerial bodies promoting gender equality, or by the migratory initiatives undertaken by governments. Migrant women still suffer a 'vulnerability' which manifests throughout different forms of physical and psychological violence in private and public spheres: from domestic violence to the insensitivity and disinformation of public servants. In addition, migrant women are victims of human trade carried out by unscrupulous human smugglers profiting from illegality and disadvantage.

Thus, Chile's commitment, even at an international level, against any form of discrimination and intolerance and in favour of the recognition of labour, education, and health for both physical and psychological integrity seems to be only formal, since the real and material opportunities of integration and full access to citizenship still depend on country of origin and migrant population division into ethno-racial categories. As a national survey from 2017 proves, Chilean social hierarchy still divides migrants into '*extranjeras*'[foreigners], including white women, and '*inmigrantes*' [immigrants],which instead includes mestizo, indigenous, or Afrodescendent women. This refers to the myth of *blanquitud* [whiteness]which has shaped the imagery of the Chilean nation since its birth, and which has led to selective migration in order to improve the 'Chilean race' and avoid any kind of menace to the identity, culture, and supposed ethnic 'purity' of the country.

My research experience in Chile, which has now lasted some years, allows me to state that people, even those I shared my research with, firmly believe that, to overcome social mechanisms of labelling and exclusion, Chile cannot just rely on a radical cultural transformation that necessarily involves education, which is itself considered to be an unfair and inequality-generating system.

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