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# THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE ECONOMICS OF MIGRATION

Theoretical  
Articles

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## Keywords

Woman  
Migration  
Family  
Exploitation  
Economy/Economics

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## Abstract

*The phenomenon of migration involves both men and women, and even children.*

*This study is intended to select from this complex phenomenon those elements which facilitate depicting the role of women participating in the migration phenomenon.*

*On the one hand, a positive approach shows that, in the majority of cases, migrant women find themselves actors on the labor market, performing tasks in various fields of activity, from the household economics to sectors pertaining to industries such as agriculture, education, social, medical, technology or research.*

*On the other hand, the analysis of the negative factors relating to women in the process of migration outline the vulnerabilities they are often exposed to, facing exploitation at work, prostitution and sexual exploitation.*

*Nonetheless, there is still a wide area for reflection, for regulation, and specific actions aiming at placing women in the zone of comfort harmonizing their main areas of influence.*

### **Family Dynamics. The Change in the Role of Women in the Family.**

The 20th century, characterized by the emancipation of women, witnessed the acknowledgment of equal rights between women and men, the access of women to higher education, labor market, and economy. When talking about the value of women in society, Edith Stein sustained that women primarily fulfill their feminine vocation when witnessing Jesus Christ and when taking divine love wherever life takes them. Thus, women express their personality and free themselves of their own shortcomings as beings.<sup>i</sup> However, the feminine perspective mentions that the progress of the last century is not remarkable; it rather indicates that women have only “feminine” positions, leaving the important and leading positions to men; moreover, it states that the representatives of male gender have very little changed their role in the family, with respect to household duties, looking after children and education of children.<sup>ii</sup>

Geographical mobility caused by migration is often preceded by economic and social mobility at the place of origin. It is noticed that, if women become mobile as a result of their profession, and men work in the same city or region, we often witness income equalization and a redistribution of (unpaid) household duties. Contrarily, when men accept to commute to a longer distance for a job which is better paid, women generally need to take over the majority of the household duties.

Even in the case of migration, as indicated in the study conducted by some researchers,<sup>iii</sup> women are much more involved in the household duties and in the education of children. We can mention the case of the Polish women who went to work in Western Europe and are in control of family administration by phone.

Economic, social and geographical mobility, supported by the requirements of the demand of labor force, highlight conflicts related to the distribution of work in the family. These are increased by the emancipation trend previously mentioned. The financial power obtained as a result of migration can lead to a change in the forces ratio of the couple. Such phenomena were not familiar to the traditional family. We notice that that change of paradigm also brought about a change of language: “conjugal” is replaced by “partnership”, “family” is replaced by “couple”, “understanding” is replaced by “negotiation”. The concept of “couple” loses its accurate and legal meaning ascribed to family by marriage, and it becomes ambiguous, as it refers both to spouses and to persons outside of marriage. Concomitantly with the economic emancipation of women, migration leads to favoring of temporary

relationships, to the detriment of the permanent ones sanctified by marriage.

According to a study conducted by Caritas Internationalis, “migration leads to a change in the role of women in the family and in the community of origin. As women become more and more independent in the process of migration and less and less dependent on their husbands, they take over a role of providers for the family and of family heads. Moreover, women play an important role in various stages of migration, such as caretakers for the ones left at home, sources of financial resources and emotional support for migrants in various situations. Apart from the remittances and the social capital (ideas, competences, attitudes, knowledge, etc.), they can contribute to the social and economic development, can be promoters of human rights and gender equality. Women transferring money also convey a message on what woman means. This indicates the manner in which families and communities perceive women.”<sup>iv</sup>

According to the same study, “women migration changes not only their role, but also the role they play in the family. Some studies on migration and its consequences admit that migration influences both the migrating person and the ones left behind, as their lives are being shaped in a special manner following the departure of an important member of the family.”<sup>v</sup>

### **The Consequences on Marriage**

The relationships within the migrating family are depicted within the social, cultural and economic context at the general level. At the same time, one cannot leave out the religious education provided to the members of the family, as this influences the family relationships and contributes to the undertaking of responsibilities during the migration period.

“With respect to the always greater number of migrating women of Poland to which we previously referred to, we cannot speak of neglecting family duties, of individualism or emancipation. The reason for migrating is family centered, focused primarily on the interests of children.”<sup>vi</sup>

In the case of a woman migrating, research works<sup>vii</sup> show that men have difficulties in fulfilling the household duties and are often inclined to pathological manifestations (alcohol); furthermore, they turn to relatives (parents) especially for help in taking care of the children. The same research works indicate that women tend to coordinate everything even from a distance. Thus, even in the case of such a separation, families tend to preserve their traditional distribution of household duties: the absent woman is entirely responsible for the household duties, whereas the man, not being able to cope with the

household on his own, turns to the woman's relatives. Moreover, it has been noticed that, as a result of migration, women become more independent, "liberated". According to the abovementioned studies, once mothers are "liberated", children become more involved in the household duties, taking over tasks usually pertaining to mothers.

Studies on women migration also address the issue of divorce and remarriage. "Conjugal relationship is affected by feminine migration. As a result of geographical distance and certain difficult circumstances, many spouses get divorced and remarry in the destination countries. This is obvious in Romania, where the divorce rate in case of women working abroad is 37%, which is four times the national average."<sup>viii</sup>

### **Feminization of Migration The Weighting of Women in the Process of Migration**

This phrase was validated by the extent of the migration phenomenon having women as the main or majority actor. Once women were involved in the economic sector of the country of destination where women's activity was limited to the household, a more and more extensive literature was developed on feminine migration and the consequences of the same.

The massive demand of workforce in the household industry, from the countries in the South of Europe, generated a migration flow for women which led to a feminization of migration in Romania and Ukraine, according to the study conducted by Flavia Piperno. In Romania, such process coincided with the cancellation of visa for short periods of time, starting with 2002. This normative act facilitated departure and financial effort of single women in the quest of luck by migration. Thus, women were no longer leaving to reunite the family, but rather to work "abroad", often leaving behind a hurting family.<sup>ix</sup>

The same is noticed in the research carried out by Caritas Internationalis<sup>x</sup>, where it is stated that, currently, more and more women migrate independently, to look for jobs, rather than to be with their husbands or to join them at the end of the journey.

In order to outline the global character of this phenomenon, it is enough to look at the situation of women of Latin America (South and Central America).<sup>xi</sup>

The reduction of public expenditure in the budgets allocated for education, housing and health generated a series of consequences particularly for single mothers (the so-called single parent families). These have been the most affected by poverty and unemployment. Thus, they were forced to take over the duty to provide for the household

in order to survive. Many of such women became active in industries focused on exports, subsistence agriculture, grey economy, migration and prostitution.

"For a long time, women have been absent from migration studies. Their social and economic contribution, as well as the unique experiences they lived, has not been registered. The theories on migration issued in the 60s and 70s assumed that most migrants were men, whereas women were just the wives or dependant members following their husbands. Consequently, migration was profoundly masculine. Nonetheless, women have always been present in the migration flows as wives, daughters, and dependent on the migrating men. More than ever, the last decades have witnessed an increase in the autonomous feminine migration where women are the main providers of financial support for their families."<sup>xii</sup>

The weighting of women in the process of migration became greater than that of men. Starting with 2005, with the exception of Africa and Asia, women represented a larger percentage as compared to men. In North America, where families outnumbered men in the process of migration as early as 1930, the percentage of women in 2005 reached 50.4% of the total population who migrated. Europe and Oceania also indicate higher percentages for women migration. Here, women outnumbered men starting with 2000 and represent approx. 53.4%, 51.3% respectively, of the total migration. Considering the migrants going to Australia, in the past three decades, the migration flows indicate an increase in the number of married or single women migrating together with other women.<sup>xiii</sup>

According to the data provided by OECD,<sup>xiv</sup> women represent the majority part of the migrating population in almost all OECD countries, with the exception of six countries. However, women are little represented in the migration flows of most countries. This is not a recent phenomenon and indicates that women are less inclined to return to the country of origin.

### **The Consequences on Women**

Migration can contribute to gender equality and to strengthening women's situation through access to both higher income and the acquisition of social status through autonomy, freedom and confidence. Women become more confident when they are offered new opportunities for fulfillment. On the one hand, moving to a new country promotes women's access to new information and social norms and to promoting their rights and, on the other hand, has a positive influence on achieving greater equality in the country of origin. It is noted that women of poor communities, deprived of opportunities for

fulfillment and exposed to violence, are easy targets for traffickers. Traffickers promise them a prosperous future and social benefits abroad, while actually pushing them into forced labor, most often prostitution, and exhausting underpaid work. In such cases, preventive measures are necessary, based on information on the possible risks during travel (transit and countries of destination), as well as on routes to be avoided.<sup>xv</sup>

A consequence on women – even in case of legal migration – is the nature of work, mostly a household work, which exposes them to abuse coming from employers. Such jobs are most often unstable, poorly paid and imply an extended program. This aspect is addressed in the following paragraphs.

It is worth mentioning that migrant women will have to divide their life between family and work. The manner in which these two realities are approached by migrant women is different. One can see, by comparison, the involvement of migrant women in their own family and in the work performed in two cases: the case of women migrating to Italy from the Philippines, and the case of women migrating to Italy from Eastern Europe, especially from Romania.<sup>xvi</sup> Even before the arrival of the flow of migrants from Eastern Europe to Italy, the Filipino community, composed almost exclusively of women, brought to attention the role of women. Men of the same nation stayed at home and, due to the long distance, high travel costs and the high amount of time for the journey, it was very difficult for them to visit their wives even annually. For the Philippine women, life was lived in the host families where they were housed and worked. They spent their spare time (Thursday and Sunday afternoon) with their fellow nationals in contexts not offering them generous social participation. In case of women coming from Eastern Europe, we note a number of differences with respect to the Philippines women. First of all, there is the presence of men which leads to a much better integration. We are referring to integration not only at work but also in the daily life of their families. In many cases, women from Eastern Europe have their husbands and family in Italy, men working mainly in entrepreneurship and even managing to establish ties with the Italians. In numerous cases, children also live with their parents and attend kindergarten or school, and thus offering yet better opportunities to establish new contacts with the people in the country of destination. Even for those having a part of the family in their home country in Europe, contact is fairly tight. With respect to Romanians, family members in Italy return to Romania or those from Romania go to Italy several times a year. Many Eastern European women perform household activities, while those with secondary or higher education and who master Italian and other foreign

languages start to be present in other industries. The general change occurring with the arrival of Romanian women in Italy is represented by the transition from the status of single or married immigrant women, present in the destination country without their spouse and children to immigrant women carrying along the familiar character, not only arriving in Italy with the family but also having other children in the host country. We also need to mention the fact that immigrant women who have family with them must cope with a series of complex psychological and social factors, especially when fulfilling two missions: that of mothers and that of women active in the labor market. They have to accept a change on a personal level, as it is necessary to find a life and work balance. On the one hand, they have to find a balance to best live their life given the double dimension – as mothers and as women –, while on the other hand, they need to be able to properly mediate between the culture of origin and that of the country of destination, especially when it comes to the schools their children attend, and to carry out a series of obligations towards the public services.

## Conclusions

Migration is an economic and social phenomenon affecting a large number of people and has a global character. Migration actors - men, women, and even children - depending on the focus of the research, are approached on an individual basis, as well as at family or group level. Women migration is a reality that cannot be denied. When compared to men migration, we notice a number of similarities, *e.g.* the economic or social reasons. What distinguishes between the two phenomena is the increased risk affecting women during migration. As indicated above, this risk derives from the specific aspect of gender, women being exposed to abuses of the trafficking networks, and characterizes a specific category of women, namely those with a very low income, a minimum education level and, consequently, poorly informed. Such women become victim of false promises of a better job and better salaries in another country.

A certain category of women, that of women facing great social problems, voluntarily choose to practice prostitution in order to be able to provide for dependent children or to legally obtain the immigrant visa in a more developed country.

Nonetheless, most women choose to migrate in order to find a job allowing solving family problems; this choice is made even if access on the labor market is often illegal. Unfortunately, it is more difficult for women to access immigrant networks, as these are controlled predominantly by men.

It has been acknowledged that women show great flexibility in accessing the labor market and are willing to work hard, regardless of their qualifications. A large number of migrant women have higher education, as in the case of women coming from Chile or Peru and working in households, 70% of whom have a university degree.<sup>xvii</sup>

Studying the percentage representing female migration and the financial contribution of women to the family budget may lead to the idea of competition between the two genders. Undoubtedly, this competition exists at several levels. At cultural, ideological, and political level, competition is promoted by feminism, a trend seeking to promote women's emancipation and liberation from a patriarchal culture. This liberation often tends to go beyond family existence boundaries.

At global level, in some cultures and religions, there are cases when patriarchal society flagrantly violates the basic human rights and, implicitly, women's rights, thus significantly limiting freedom of movement and access to education, and jeopardizing existence and physical safety.

Women emancipation in recent decades led to a remodeling of the family. Thus, it is observed that family relationships are reconfigured in terms of forces ratio, the status of spouses is unofficially negotiated, and there are discussions on the money constituting the family budget. In many cases, migrating women end up divorcing and having another relationship or a new marriage in the country of destination.

From an economic and financial perspective, female migration phenomenon is complex and difficult to analyze despite the fact that state public budgets and the banking institutions keep records of cash flows coming from payments of taxes in the country of adoption, as well as of remittances sent in the country of origin. The most qualified to assess women migration, certainly not from economic perspective, are probably the children left back home, in the care of their grandparents or other persons, as well as the husbands left without their wives.

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