

Research on International Child Migrants is a Women's Thing

Estudiar niñas, niños y adolescentes migrantes internacionales es cosa de mujeres

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To Norma and Marjorie, from whom I have learned so much.

In the context of the last session of the Seminar on Migrant Children and Adolescents in the Americas (January-October 2021), organized by UNAM's Institute of Anthropological Research, the CIDE and UNAM-Boston's Center for Mexican Studies, a rich and emotive spontaneous exchange took place towards the closing of the works, a sign that the around forty most regular participants already belonged to a virtual community with common goals. The main goal we all share is precisely the issue addressed in this critical note: the study of international migrant children and adolescents (MCA).

Almost at the end of the course's last session, a participant took the floor and made an observation—bordering on complaint—. She said something to this effect: in this course on childhood and migration, it was almost only women who participated; it would have been of great value to have more involvement from men. This statement matches perfectly a piece of information that Norma González—an admirable anthropologist of education and distinguished professor at the University of Arizona—published in her book on language and the sense of belonging (González, 2001):

The voices of women and children are often muted in discussions of social theory. At a large professional conference that I attended in 1998, a popular session on research on children was remarkable for the absence of men in the audience. The often-conjured images of anthropologist Margaret Mead playing with children somehow implicates research on children as belonging within the province of female researchers and, hence, often marginalized (Behar, 1993). Yet it is through the affirmation and accommodation as well as the resistance and opposition of women and children that central anthropological issues of space and place, transformation, and identity can be located.

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This study did not start out with a focus on women. However, in the transcription of discourse and in the interviewing process, it became increasingly obvious that women—in their multiple roles as mothers, aunts, *nanas* [grandmothers], *comadres* [close friends], and godmothers—are the keepers of the keys that unlock child-life (p. 15).

These observations suggest a very valuable approach that could be the subject of a more detailed analysis and specialized discussion, since it deals with a gender imprint on the selection, treatment, and consolidation of fields of scientific interest. Surely there are serious studies on the subject, however, the hypotheses that I intend to share is the application of this premise to a particular field—precisely the subject matter of the seminar referred to at the beginning—, which is the study of international MCA.

As a hypothesis, it can be stated that there are fields in migration studies that are “masculine” proper. Most evidently so, the field of labor, with studies on wages, unemployment, the labor market, training, job skills, remittances, economic development linked to migration, savings, and investment. If I mentally review some of the main authors who address these issues in Mexico and the United States, it becomes clear that they are mainly men (examples of this are Jesús Arroyo, Rodolfo García Zamora, Jean Papail, Philip Martin, Roger Waldinger).

Another masculine field of study is that of immigration policies, border controls, government support for migrants, actions for or against undocumented migration, immigration police, prisons, detentions, and the mortality rates of irregular migrants (Agustín Escobar, Douglas Massey, Jorge Durand, David FitzGerarld, Wayne Cornelius). The component of violence, risk and death stands out within this field of study (Néstor Rodríguez).

A third specifically masculine field is that of legislative studies on immigration, where the count of federal, state and local decrees to control, persecute, legalize and, if possible, deport migrants is investigated. Although there are also sophisticated analyzes on the defense, rights and legal opportunities that can be taken advantage of by migrants and their families. Among my readings on migration law, it is mostly men that I remember studying the legal and political provisions that frame and try to tame migration (for example Michael Jones-Correa, Fernando Saúl Alanís, Nicholas DeGenova, Alexander Aleinikoff, Hiroshi Motomura); although we must also acknowledge the valuable contributions of women to this field (Velia C. Bobes, Adriana Ortega, to give just two examples).

These three “masculinized” fields bring together three dimensions of social life perceived as distinctively masculine: money, power and reason. The inclusion of this third dimension is justified so given that the application of the law is a matter of power, but also a matter of rationality because the law is, after all is said and done, the seat of legitimacy and, therefore, of collective reason. The anti-immigrant discourse is based on this argument: they must be

deported—they say—because they are illegal, and because they are illegal they are undesirable; those that are outside the law should not exist (Jones-Correa & Graauw, 2013).

A fourth field that seems to be less predominantly masculine is that of migration industries: groups of lawyers who make a living defending migrants, prison owners, migrant transporters, hotel owners who shelter migrants, money-hungry taxi drivers who transport migrants at abusive rates, restaurant owners, coyotes, caravan operators; all in all, the orchestrators of migration are studied by men (by way of example we can name Rubén Hernández-León and Efrén Sandoval), although the outstanding contributions of women such as Ninna Nyberg Sorensen and Brenda S. A. Yeoh, to name but two, must be acknowledged.

Then we have three fields in which the gender composition seems to be more balanced.² One of them is the study of migration infrastructures, which focuses not on migration patterns or on migrants as actors, but rather on the broad technological, institutional, and social transformations that make mobility possible. This emerging field no longer emphasizes the role of state policies, nor that of labor markets, not even that of migrant networks, but rather focuses on the processes that *produce* regular and irregular migrants (Sigona, Kato, & Kuznetsova, 2021).

The second field in which a certain balance can be found is the study of transnationalism. An interesting phenomenon occurred in this case: women approached first (Nina Glick Shiller, Peggy Levitt, Linda Basch, Cristina Szanton-Blanc) and then men jumped on the bandwagon, both to defend their perspective and to criticize it (Alejandro Portes, Roger Waldinger, Luis E. Guarnizo, Michael Kearney).

A third field is that of quantification. In this field of migration studies, mobilities are estimated based on knowing how many migrants are in transit and how many are established. The categories linked to this demographic drive are many, such as the net migratory balance or the migration volume. In this field we can find female demographers who have made outstanding contributions, such as Silvia Giorguli, Claudia Masferrer, Carla Pederzini, Ana González-Barrera, Andrea Bautista, and Susan Gonzalez-Baker, to name a few.

In accordance with the statement that serves as the title of this critical note, I now analyze the fields of study that are usually not approached by men. These phenomena are commonly seen as secondary or peripheral to migration, or considered by some as family issues. Let us begin with one that seems to me paradigmatic of this division of academic work by gender: that of migrant families separated by borders. Some family members remain in one country while the rest in another, often unable to meet each other because some are trapped by legal issues impeding cross-border mobility. And so mothers have to come up with otherwise unthinkable forms of motherhood, so as to show their love to their children. That, in

² I would like to thank Rubén Hernández-León for alerting me to these three fields of study.

migration studies, is a women's thing. The works by Joanna Dreby (Dreby, 2010; Dreby, 2012; Dreby, 2015) stand out in this regard. I want to highlight just one subject matter that caused great admiration in me due to the mastery with which the author addresses it: the role of Oaxacan grandmothers (middlewomen) in the care and education of children and adolescents whose parents work in New Jersey.

Let us move on to another field that I discovered when I was fortunate to work with labor and migration sociologist Djaouidah Séhili, a professor at the University of Reims; thanks to her, I discovered the field of deep reasons for migration (Séhili, Cossée, Ouali, & Miranda, 2012; Séhili, 2014; Séhili & Zúñiga, 2014). In masculinized studies—some of them I read when I was very young—it is asserted that the driving forces of migration are the wage differential, the economic reasoning, the search for profit. The rational motivation is to minimize costs and maximize benefits. But Djaouidah, a careful connoisseur of migration from the Maghreb to Europe, was aware that, quite often, the driving force of migration is rather emotions, moreover the most powerful of all: love (or heartbreak, which for that matter is the flip side of the same coin). This makes me think of the heartbreak story lived by Javier,³ a remarkable man from Jalisco (Mexico) who has had outright business success in Georgia. When Javier was 15 years old, he had a few drinks and went out with his friends for a ride in his father's truck to *go cruising around* in his hometown. When he returned home, his father was waiting for him and beat him up in front of his friends. This humiliation triggered him to migrate without documents to Chicago, where one of his sisters lived. The rest of the story is also quite interesting, but I will only add one very important detail: 20 years passed before Javier received the news that his father had passed away. It was devastating for him because he did not have a chance to apologize, or maybe he wanted his father to apologize. The point to note in this story is that it illustrates Professor Séhili's astute perspective: Javier migrated to the United States out of relentless and unforgettable emotion, not because of a cost/benefit calculation.

A "feminine" field of study closely linked to the one described above consists of a particular manner of studying return migration. Masculinized studies tell us that migrants state that they return to their countries of origin for *family reasons*, but then these studies warn us: what happens is that migrants do not have a "clear understanding of history", they return because of "a great financial crisis" that caused jobs in the sector to fall precipitously, but of course, these migrants don't know about these things, that's what "we the specialists" are here for, to reveal to them their true reasons for returning to their countries of origin. Masculinized studies are obsessed with making a binary classification of return migration: it was either planned or not. And then they discover obvious truths: if it is planned, then things turn out better; if it is not planned, then things do not turn out as well as they would like. Then they want to find out if migrants bring savings with them; if these savings are invested

³ Pseudonym.

in establishing a business (instead of spending them on alcohol) or if they acquire assets (instead of going about falling in love).

All in all, what I want to highlight here is that these studies do not take seriously the blunt answer provided by migrants:⁴ *family* reasons are the driving forces behind the return to their country of origin. It happens so, that if instead of speculating on them one would listen to returnees, as researchers such as Betsabé Román González are currently doing (Román González, Carrillo Cantú, & Hernández-León, 2016), one would discover that migrants tell us about their stories in which the desire to reunite and stay with their families, or the desire to see again a sick father or mother before they die, is the driving force of their return. They also return because of divorces, family disputes, and many other painful stories. Some women, like those accounted for in the studies by María Vivas Romero (2020), return from Belgium to the Andean countries to see their children, to assert their maternity rights, to highlight that love is the only and most important motivation to migrate. This is precisely the hallmark of the study by Deborah Boehm (2016) who elaborated an ethnography of removal and developed a multifaceted anthropology of “return by deportation”, in which the subjective dimensions of forced mobility are addressed:

Deportation touches many lives and includes multiple forms of return: being returned, returning, “returning” for the first time. The return of deportation can be removal, forced migration, return migration, exile, displacement, or homecoming. Although states enact deportations as supposed returns, the very notion of “return” is problematic. Is return a revocation? A regression? A reinvention? As I demonstrate, deportation by the state reverses, or undoes, several processes. Removals, and the multiple forms of return that follow, upset the geographic direction of transnational migrations, confuse temporal narratives, strip communities of a sense of security and well-being, deunify families, separate couples, disorient young people, and problematize—and in the end, erode—citizenship and de facto membership in the nation (p. 2).

I close this critical note with one last field of study, the one that occupied us as participants of the seminar from January to October 2021: international MCA. This is really a women’s thing. The pioneers in the study of this migrant population are all women: Marjorie Faulstich Orellana, Deborah Boehm, Cati Coe, Ní Laoire, Rhacel Parreñas Salazar, and, in matters of methodology, the geographer Madeleine E. Dobson.

Summarizing, Norma González’s observation is not a minor thing. Science is crossed-through by gender. Boys and girls migrate, male researchers *like it or not*. Who cares, right? This migrant population is not made up of workers, nor of union leaders, nor of businessmen; it does not integrate into the labor market, they do not become members of political parties; there are no legislators in it; in short, it is a population that has no power. Why would you

⁴ Cross check all the surveys on the reasons for return.

study that, right? They matter when they are victims, when they are vulnerable, when they travel in caravans suffering cold or hunger. They matter then because they are the object of adult care and custody. They also matter when they travel unaccompanied and so become a source of anxiety for adults. What matters there and then are the complaints of adults, not the voice of MCA, as shown in Aída Silva's Ph. D. dissertation (Silva Hernández, 2014). These adult-centric perspectives (those taking interest in children and adolescents as victims, or as sources of anxiety for adults) should rather give way to the proposal of Marjorie Faulstich Orellana (Orellana, 2016):

Listening to youth perspectives is important not just for teach kids, socialize them, of prepare them for the future, though it may inform all those goals. It is also important to learn from young people, about what's possible, and how we might learn to see differently (p. 4).

In short, the course that we finished on October 11 was a call to take MCA seriously, to acknowledge they are important as migrants, because they are so just the same as adults. And if this is a subject-matter for women, then I hope those female anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, historians, psychologists, demographers, pedagogues who do understand this problem, continue addressing it so masterfully as the pioneers already did.

Translation: Fernando Llanas.

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