

Gender, migration and development: an analysis of the current discussion on female migrants as development agents

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Introduction: ‘Discovering’ Female Migration

So far gender has not been a prominent issue on the agenda of migration research and policy. Only recently female migration has been ‘discovered’ and increasingly the term *feminisation of migration* is used to describe this ‘new’ phenomenon. The public debate about the increase in international migration in general and the growing political interest in the connection between international migration and development in particular have led to the realisation that also female migrants are or can be important development agents. However, the discussion about female migration and female migrants as development agents suffers from some shortcomings, especially concerning the policy-related aspects of the debate. The main drawback is that female migrants are nearly exclusively regarded as the new target group to initiate development processes in the sending countries but without considering them as active agents of change. Thus the current debates contribute to the well known (re-)production of stereotyped images of women. From victims of global economic restructuring and, as such, a vulnerable group among the growing streams of poor migrants from the global South, to heroines accountable for development processes in their countries of origin.

In this article we will analyse the current discourses on gender, migration and development, with a special focus on the much discussed topic of remittances and with reference to empirical research in different migration settings. We point to the significance of gender in the structuring of migration and development processes, and to the contested nature of gender orders in the processes of social transformations, which are clearly articulated in the perspectives of migrants themselves, but rarely taken into account in public discourse on development and migration. The popular rhetoric formula of a “discovery” highlights the apparent newness of the phenomenon of female migration. This implicitly calls for policy responses on a global scale, which then tend to be produced without taking into account the historicity and local embedded nature of the migration processes concerned let alone the perspectives of the actors involved. Because this shortcoming is related to a specific kind of knowledge production, we argue for a critical understanding of the discursive stereotypes (re-)produced in the transmission of knowledge about the links between development, migration and development and its translation into political strategies and its framing of our understanding of female migration and female migrants (Cornwall et al. 2008, 2). Thereby we want to stress the need of a context-sensitive analysis of women’s position in a given migration and/or development context in order to understand how gender influences their interrelated dynamics.

Gender and Development: Women's Position on the Policy Agenda

In recent decades gender and development has become a distinctive field of development policy and research. Different strategies and policies concerning gender issues within mainstream development discourses can be identified. Whereas the aim of the Women in Development approach (WID) in the 1970s was to integrate women in development processes, the Gender and Development approach (GAD) came over a decade later, focussing on gender relations as an essential dimension of development processes. Strategies such as women's empowerment or gender mainstreaming were taken up by national as well as international development actors and became institutionalized. The Women in Development as well as the Gender and Development discourses constituted frameworks for narratives by national and international actors about women as development agents. These discourses, in spite of their achievements, have produced stereotyped representations of women desperately struggling against gender disadvantages or heroically fighting for autonomy within their respective society. Thereby women are constructed either as victims or as winners of for example global neo-liberal restructurations. Thereby and in both scenarios, a general discursive pattern can be observed, where the term feminization is used to indicate the 'discovery' of women as being part of a particular social process. An increased interest in the respective 'new' phenomenon follows, producing a specific kind of knowledge that becomes translated into political strategies and projects targeting (most often exclusively) women.

The notions of the feminization of poverty and the feminization of labour did play a significant role for these construction processes, leading to a simplification of gender ideas as compared to the complex ways the concept of gender is discussed in feminist research (see for example Lachenmann 1998, Kabeer 1994 or more recently the IDS Bulletin 2004). In the discourse on the feminization of poverty for example women have been presented as the main victims of underdevelopment, structural adjustment programmes and the changes in agriculture or market systems. With the global economic restructuring from the 1980s onwards, going along with liberalisation policies and macroeconomic reforms a new term entered the debate: the feminization of labour, depicting women at the centre of these processes since they constitute the new labour force especially in the export-oriented sectors worldwide. In academia as well as on political levels it was either argued that the new income opportunities for women do lead to empowerment, thus seeing women on the victors' side, or they were considered as suffering from the economic restructuring due to the working conditions in the new sectors, the low salaries and the increased responsibility for the survival of their families.

Feminist critics dealing with the representation of women in development discourses and within development policies have highlighted that the discourses and politics are embedded in certain images and representations of women, which are depicting them as a specific target group, that qualifies particularly well for development programmes because of its supposed innate characteristics: the responsible caring mother, the docile and hard working woman, the woman close to nature, the less corrupt female politician, the prudent entrepreneur or the better credit taker (see Cornwall et al. 2008). These images still influence the strategies designed to improve women's lives and influence our understanding of gender and gender relations – especially, but not exclusively, with respect to women in the global South. The fact that women's agency as well as the development interventions are producing and reproducing these images is hardly ever mentioned.

Certainly development is a contested terrain. But even though there are many different visions of development, a mainstream and dominant development discourse exists, focussing on economic development and market growth as the most important means to initiate development and transformation processes in less developed countries. The framing of the problems as well as the framing of the solutions is embedded in this discourse. In this discursive context the transformation of gender relations as well as the 'empowerment' of women tends to be considered of interest only if the strategies do support the mainstream development interests. Societal transformations in general and the transformation of gender relations in particular are pushed forward by the development enterprise insofar as this helps to achieve the general goal of economic development. Thus it is not hard to understand the prominence of the actual debate on the migration-development nexus and the recent interest in the feminization of migration in view of the fact that the quantitative increase in international migration came along with a sharp increase of migrants' remittances, estimated as twice as much as the ODEC's annual Overseas Development Assistance budget 2004 (World Bank 2005).

Remittances: Conceptualising Female Migrants as Development Agents

The notion of feminization of migration has raised awareness of the sheer quantitative growth and relevance of female migrants constituting nowadays nearly 50% of international migrants reported globally (Zlotnik 2002). This has challenged the popular understanding of international migration, associated with the image of young male migrants crossing borders, which has dominated the mainstream migration research and policy for a long time. Female migrants used to be mentioned only as members of family migrations, representing the bearers of the 'traditional' culture of the respective migrant or diaspora group. A special concern was

given to women as (passive and innocent) victims of a growing global sex industry. Only recently, with an increased awareness of 'independent' female migration, women's autonomy and subjectivity in the migration process has been considered. The complexity of women's migration trajectories, however, their lives abroad and after return have not occupied much space on the agenda of mainstream migration research.

The 'discovery' of the feminisation of migration happened, as mentioned already, within the context of the growing attention given to mobility worldwide due to globalisation processes. The term "the age of migration" (Massey et al. 1998) has been coined to describe the increase in mobility and mentioned the feminization of migration as a new migration pattern, focusing thereby mainly on the quantitative increase in women's mobility worldwide. Doubtless the number of women moving, especially but not exclusively as temporary labour migrants, increased particularly within Asia, Europe and Latin America. Female migration is, however, by no means a new phenomenon as feminist studies and a closer look at the available data and historical research reveals. The 'discovery' is thus due to a growing interest in international migration in general, where women appear as transnational actors contributing to the global flows of money and knowledge. In the eyes of international institutions and organizations these flows can have a positive effect on what is called development in the sending countries. Following this vision, remittances and the ways they (may) foster development processes in migrants' sending countries are of crucial importance. Even though within development and migration research the question whether or not migration in general and remittances in particular will have a positive effect on development processes is still being debated, policy makers and international organisations are not tiring of emphasizing the crucial role of migrants' remittances for developing and transforming their countries of origin.

Especially as remitters, female migrants have entered the scene of international and national policy and research debates in the role of 'new' development actors. The final Report of the Global Commission on International Migration (2005) for example states that female migrants not only send back remittances in higher amounts and more regularly but also use the remittances more efficiently for local development processes than their male counterparts. The statement is strengthened by images dominating the gender and development discourse, namely that women are more responsible towards their families and communities. Therefore it is argued that special programs and projects should be developed to support female migration and allow female migrants a greater control of the use of the remittances back home. In case they are not the sender but the receiver of remittances, which is increasingly the case as well, projects are designed to train them for example in 'financial literacy' (Piper 2005, 13). These propositions are accompanied by the assumption that remittances are a productive

input into the respective economies. They are strengthened by the well known arguments that remittances can directly enhance development processes and can contribute to poverty reduction on different scales.

Nevertheless, most of the studies on remittances so far do not distinguish between remittances transferred by male or female migrants. Not enough empirical research has been conducted which would allow for a systematic analysis of female migrants' remittances and its development 'impact'. INSTRAW has come up with some case studies revealing that women send money more regularly and do react more positively to calls from the country of origin. They also seem to be more reliable managers of remittances and send back higher percentages of their generally lower salaries than male migrants (Ramirez et al 2005; Piper 2005). Yet the results of the existing studies are very ambivalent with respect to the influence remittances sent back by female migrants have on development processes in the sending countries and communities, and they furthermore point to very different effects of remittances concerning existing gender relations.

Nonetheless female migrants, who for decades have tended to be seen by international and national development organisations and policy makers on the losing side of globalisation processes, seem to merge more and more into important development actors, transnational entrepreneurs conscientious of the development of their families and communities. The increase in female temporary labour migration and the realization that temporary migration results in higher flows of remittances than permanent migration and the indications that unskilled migrants, again particularly female migrants, tend to generate more remittances has amplified the debate on migration, gender and development. This has not been without effects in the realm of policies, as can be seen by the example of banking services that have been developed to be geared towards women for a safer transfer of money. Likewise, national governments of sending countries are increasingly trying not only to motivate women to migrate but also decrease the possible restrictions.

Yet, questions about the agency of the female migrants, their visions of development or the context specific explanations why female migrants from certain countries or regions are better remitters than others are still unknown. Conceptions of power, authority and knowledge which do shape migration decisions as well as the development activities of migrants and migrant groups and their possible responses to development and transformation have not entered the debates yet, neither in general discourse on migration and development, nor the newer debates surrounding migration, gender and development. A deeper understanding of the complex and interrelated dynamics between gender, migration and development depends on whether the gendered nature of migrants' agencies as well as their context specific

understandings of development and remittances will be taken into consideration. This means first of all that the definition of development as economic growth has to be critically scrutinized.

Whose Development?

Measuring development as economic growth on a national scale cannot account for social transformations in the migrant sending countries or communities. This is why some authors introduced the term “social remittances” to indicate that also ideas, practices and social capital flow from receiving to sending countries (Levitt and Nyberg-Sorenson 2004). At the same time they point to the fact that migrants’ activities transcend the sending as well as the receiving frame of nation states (Faist 2008, Levitt 2001, Glick-Schiller et al. 2003) but often without looking at the gendered nature of transnational activities or identities. Yet, the latter is essential for relating migrants’ practices to their development visions. Empirical research on the gendered dynamics of migration processes and on the correlation between migration and development from the point of view of the actors shows how visions of development change due to the migration processes. Ideas of an ideal gender order are an essential part of these visions, which are stretching the boundaries between the fulfilment of personal ambitions and wider social transformations. Likewise migrants’ strive for change has to be understood with respect to social spaces that are transgressing national boundaries. This shifts the focus of the debate from economic development of the sending countries to migrants’ own increasingly transnational life-worlds, prospects and expectations.

Empirical data from research on female temporary labour migrants from Bangladesh working in Malaysia, for example, shows that economic development for them and their families did play a decisive role during the decision phase (Dannecker 2005; 2009). Nevertheless the change of gender relations and notions of equality between men and women became an increasingly important development issue for the female migrants during the migration and after return. Thus female temporary labour migrants’ visions of development are more and more encompassing the idea of changing structural elements of Bangladeshi society, especially the locally defined Islamic gender order. But the negotiation of this vision is difficult since it is not easily reconcilable with the visions of other actors representing the state or Islamic organisations, and in particular with those of male migrants, who can rely on much stronger organisations and networks.

Despite diverging development visions, female migrants continue to send money back to legitimise their movements or due to social responsibility. But neither migration which may allow women to escape untenable situations nor remittances per se change gender relations. The use of the money back home depends on the power structures within families, households and communities. Most female Bangladeshi migrants do not have the power to influence the use of the remittances, which still flow through male hands and thus form part of the reproduction of gender relations in Bangladesh. Therefore, the question arises whether the focus on remittances and the strategies which are currently discussed in the literature to allow female migrants a greater control over the money transferred are the right starting points for a critical reflection on the relationship between migration, development and gender. Without context specific analysis of the gender orders, the strategies will fail or, as the experiences from the gender and development activities show, will not necessarily lead to structural changes but to an additional instrumentalisation of women.

This is not to say that remittances cannot lead to a negotiation of gender relations and structural changes. Returned Bangladeshi female migrants have certainly started to contest local practices and gender relations directly and indirectly, and remittances can indeed be an important means. But without organisational support female migrants will hardly be able to negotiate their development vision in the contested terrain of development – neither on a local nor on a national level. Instead individual battles will prevail as returned female migrants try to negotiate acceptable gender relations in a changing social and cultural environment. As long as NGOs and other civil society actors do not listen to and support female migrants development visions, even if they might not correspond with their own visions of development and gender relations, societal transformations are difficult to initiate or negotiate.

On the other side, supporting and promoting female migrants' visions of development is not so easily put into practice, let alone translated into concrete policies, as research on African migrants living in the federal state of North-Rhine-Westphalia (Germany) has shown (Sieveking, Fauser, Faist 2008). Here, the federal state government has recently started to support African migrants' engagement for development in their countries of origin. The overall framework of the corresponding policy initiatives follows the line of globalised development concepts, oriented towards the MDGs, including notions of women's empowerment and gender equality. But whereas this orientation clearly welcomes projects targeting women, it does not automatically lead to an active participation of African migrant women in the planning of such projects. African female migrants in Germany tend to be under-represented on the level of formally constituted migrant organisations, NGOs or solidarity organisations of various kind, that are promoting development initiatives in Africa. Instead they organise in-

formally in gender segregated spaces, apart from the German public sphere and are therefore not easily accessed by German policy makers. Moreover, African women's groups often have an agenda which does not fit in mainstream Western development discourses. Many of them won't agree to the norm of gender equality (Sieveking 2007) nor would they concentrate their efforts on the development of their countries of origin, as their major concerns are problems of social integration in the context of reception, and the uncertain future of their children born or raised in Germany.

Additionally, there is a problem on the level of reconciling on the one side the social or moral agenda and on the other the economic logic of what is conceived as development activities. Many African migrants in Germany are not only remitting to their families but also contribute (with rather high amounts of money as compared to their often very low salaries) to charitable projects, often organised and implemented by churches or other religious organisations, and directed towards poor and needy groups of people in the South. Research on female Ghanaian migrants in North-Rhine-Westphalia has shown that they conceive charity as typical development activity (corresponding to their idea of development aid), whereas remittance-sending or running a transnational enterprise (which creates jobs and income for people 'back home') are rather considered as their own, private business. From the point of view of sustainable development on the receiving side, charitable projects are much less effective than the many (mainly small scale) transnational businesses established by Ghanaian migrants. Yet, in spite of their significance for local development processes in Ghana, female migrants' family centred and profit-oriented entrepreneurial strategies are difficult to integrate in the framework of the new 'development through the diaspora' funding schemes.

Outlook: Where to Go?

The brief discussion of the state of current debates about gender, migration and development has shown that, as in the general discourses on gender and development, an essentialised notion of gender dominates. In international and national policy and research debates on gender and migration, stereotyped images and representations of women prevail and get reproduced. Women's image of being the harder workers, better remitters and more responsible towards their families and communities puts female migrants at a high risk of instrumentalisation, especially since migration in general and remittances in particular are conceived as a major opportunity for a new kind of development policies. What is needed in the current discussion on gender, migration and development is a more nuanced conceptualization of the interrelation between migration and development, taking into account the various migra-

tion patterns and forms as well as the differences between male and female migration trajectories, development visions and the existing power structures shaping their transnational lifeworlds. Thereby female migrants' agencies as well as their context specific understanding of development and its transformation throughout the migration process should come into the focus. Generalized gender strategies tend to produce and reproduce simplified ideas about women in general and female migrants in particular. In order to avoid the failing of development strategies, the negotiation of context specific transformation processes, as initiated by female migrants all over the world, and their visions of fair and equitable social relations should be the starting point for a discussion of migration, gender and development.

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