

Some Reflections on Female Migration and the Internationalisation of Social Reproduction

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The spectacular, unrelenting increase in the demand for female immigrant workers to perform reproductive work in the Western societies shows another side to the international division of work, making it indelibly clear that a transfer of class and ethnic group inequalities among women is occurring. The present-day feminisation of the migratory flow is basically due to a transfer of the domestic burden from qualified local women – who are entering the labour market en masse and cannot continue to bear the burden of performing and managing the entire domestic and family workload on their own – towards women of immigrant origin. These “other” women need an income to subsist on and are often forced to leave their families in their countries of origin, reluctantly having to neglect their own family responsibilities in order to emigrate alone. Their battle against fate, and their aspiration to offer their children a better future, are the compensations they receive for being uprooted and the trauma of the separation.

Paid domestic work is of course not a new idea. We are all perfectly familiar with the reference point of traditional domestic service, mainly supplied by young women from rural areas. However, the huge current demand for this type of worker very much responds to the socio-demographic, cultural and economic changes that have occurred over the last decades in Western societies. Of all these changes, the most crucial are the ageing of the population and the increase in the number of non-autonomous elderly people living alone, the growing female participation in the labour market and the consequent increase in the number of families where both parents work full-time, the larger number of single-parent homes, the gradual trend towards the geographical dispersion of the family and a new form of time management within the family nucleus, whereby leisure time and “time for oneself” are becoming increasingly important.

In the case of Southern European countries, all of this should be placed in the con-

1. The author has recently published the work *Negocios étnicos: los comercios de los inmigrantes no comunitarios en Cataluña* (Barcelona, CIDOB edicions, 2005), co-written with Carlota Solé.

text of the lack of male co-responsibility in domestic and family work and an insufficiently developed welfare state as regards social rights, held up by a strongly family-orientated tradition in the provision of welfare and with a serious lack of services available for day-to-day living. Consequently, although immigrant women have not actually replaced the receiving country women in this labour segment, the demand has certainly grown spectacularly over the last few years, as a result of the factors mentioned above. The conjunction of these factors also explains why the “internationalisation of reproduction,” in the sense of “recruiting” immigrant women to perform certain social reproduction tasks, is more common in Southern European countries even though it is a generalised phenomenon in Western societies as a whole: it is precisely in these countries where there is a greater demand for live-in domestic workers, in comparison with other European countries (Momsen, 1999; Parella, 2003).

“Recruiting” immigrant women to perform certain social reproduction tasks, is more common in Southern European countries

As a result, in today’s society, employing paid domestic staff is no longer linked to luxury and exclusive to those with the highest purchasing power: it has also extended to the middle classes. It should be borne in mind that a considerable percentage of those requiring this service – pensioners living alone – lack the sufficient resources to pay for private services (an elderly persons’ home, for example). The financial incapacity of the demand, with no public provision of services and resources to cater for dependency situations affecting the elderly, make resorting to the informal economy and an immigrant worker who will provide the service for a lower wage the least

expensive option, and in many cases the only feasible strategy at all.

Most of these “new” occupations currently being generated to cater for these unfulfilled needs, with no public sector involvement, are characterised by their precariousness, lack of social prestige, low wages, deregulation and invisibility. Such occupations are neither attractive nor “desired” by the local women: women who have attained a high level of education in recent years, who have increased their demands regarding the definition of a “desirable” job (the “level of acceptance”), and to whom the labour market generally offers much better employment opportunities.

Immigrant women are perceived as the ideal workforce for performing social reproduction tasks, as these activities are socially undervalued, practically unskilled, regarded as “women’s work” and often carried out within the informal economy. So, in the era of globalisation, the tendency towards female international migration clearly points to an emerging “internationalisation of reproductive work” springing from a growing demand for women workers from other countries to perform a series of tasks which up to now were done by local women within the home, invisibly and without receiving a wage. This phenomenon is a result of the emancipation of the receiving country women with greater economic resources, in response to the difficulty, stress and emotional cost of having to manage and reconcile their family responsibilities with their professional aspirations. All this gives rise to a “racialisation” of paid domestic work, as the British researcher Bridget Anderson affirms (2000), with women from other ethnic groups and without citizenship taking over these tasks from the local “white” women, who delegate the tasks, but who always supervise them.

However, the diagnosis of the “internationalisation of reproduction” has implications that

reach above and beyond our identifying and condemning the situation of discrimination, subordination and vulnerability of women immigrant workers. The patriarchal relationship that exists between men and women, whether they are immigrant or local, is also evident in the dealings between immigrants and nationals. While the working women in the rich countries encounter difficulties in finding a solution for carrying out the domestic and family work in their daily lives and their male counterparts continue to avoid sharing the burden in the reproductive sphere, women from poor countries face serious problems in obtaining sufficient income in their countries of origin to support their families.

With women employing “other” women to carry out reproductive work, the traditional patriarchal family home is being perpetuated

Within this context, it is not at all unreasonable to say that, with women employing “other” women to carry out reproductive work, the traditional patriarchal family home is being perpetuated – and also camouflaged – within the private sphere. As Bridget Anderson affirms in her aforementioned work, women are not prepared to fight with their partner and their children for equal sharing-out of the domestic tasks, but at the same time they feel they cannot create a home that satisfies the needs of all, and as a result, the family finally opts for employing a domestic worker. This avoids conflict between men and women with regard to domestic work, or, as is often the case, the conflict now occurs between the women employers and the women workers (between the receiving country women and the immigrant women, to an increasing extent).

Francesca Bettio *et al.* (2004) use the term “care drain”, an ironic echo of the expression “brain drain”, for describing a new model of

caring centred on the flexible, inexpensive labour force consisting of immigrant women workers, as a gradual alternative to the unwaged family assistance provided up to now by women in the home. We are consequently witnessing a process of transfer of the domestic and family work between women. Many middle-class women in the receiving country improve their own labour situation by resorting to “other” women from countries where there are fewer opportunities. The internationalisation of reproductive work therefore generates a triple system of subordination of the immigrant women, on the basis of gender, ethnic group and social class. The employment of immigrant women as domestic workers means that antagonistic relationships of class and ethnicity are being structured between women. And at the same time, the patriarchal relationships between men and women are being legitimised even outside the institution of marriage. The men are now attending to their reproductive needs not just in the “free” work done by their wives, but also by resorting to a market that allows family units with a high purchasing power to “buy” part of the reproductive work from women of a lower social class and from a different ethnic group.

The contribution made by immigrant women in the homes of the receiving society is also beneficial for the state, as it allows the growing demand for services to be met without this meaning an increase in social expenditure (Heyzer and Wee, 1994). To put it another way, the arrival of immigrant women not only yields a cheaper, more flexible workforce than that of local women, but it also enables the qualified receiving country women to work outside the home without the state needing to provide a sufficient offer of social services to cater for the needs deriving from it, at least for the moment (Momsen, 1999).

This view of things may be disheartening, but there is a message of hope: we should re-

member that it is precisely this need for externalising part of the reproductive work (mainly because it is difficult for women to continue to attend exclusively to both their families and their careers) that has led to the domestic and family tasks actually becoming visible for the first time in both the scientific discourse and in social representations. Even so, at present, the jobs being created to cater for these “new” needs are not quality jobs, but instead generally coincide in their precariousness, exploitation, lack of prestige and a strong menial connotation.

In spite of all this, the fact that reproductive work has entered the public arena and become a social problem – even if this is only due to the pressing need to find someone to do it – is positive in itself and enables us to put forward a few optimistic, although still hesitant, predictions. I am fully convinced that it could be a first step towards the social recognition and valuation of these tasks as the main providers of quality of life for society as a whole, above and beyond rational and economic logic, and personal satisfaction and enrichment for those who carry them out. This would perhaps encourage men to “join in”, to reconsider their traditional, historical lack of involvement and to begin to assume their domestic and family responsibilities, which are common to all human beings. To succeed in making men share the reproductive workload with women in equal conditions, they need to cast off the burden of a gender-differentiated socialisation that has “freed” them from these responsibilities, and also from enjoying them. Men have to understand that they also have a lot to gain by reordering their priorities and becoming involved in reproductive work, particularly that which concerns caring for others.

Similarly, if care was to become more visible and more highly regarded, we could begin to think of the dignification and the

professionalisation of the paid occupations in this field – which are undergoing an unstoppable advance – so that the skills of those who carry them out (for the moment only women, increasingly of immigrant origin) and the actual fact of working in them would confer social prestige, a reasonable wage and non-discriminatory working conditions as compared to other sectors of activity.

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To achieve this, a change of mentality needs to take place to make us consider and demand this type of reproductive-orientated services as a universal right for all citizens, and the public sector therefore needs to become involved in supplying, regulating and funding them. Only by nurturing a solvent demand, with purchasing power to pay for these services, will we be able to structure a dynamic offer that can stimulate the creation of stable, well-paid employment, skilled and valued by society. In the case of Spain, the recent preliminary draft for the Law of Promotion of Personal Autonomy and Attention to Persons in a Situation of Dependency, one of our social policy’s main challenges, involves the universal nature of the provisions being recognised, and this in consequence will enable us to consider the regulation and creation of quality jobs involving caring. Some time will need to pass before we can evaluate its impact.

Until these changes are reflected in our daily lives, women’s participation in the productive sphere will continue to generate unsatisfied needs in the home, which immigrant women from less well-off countries will continue to resolve under conditions of abuse and exploitation. To put it another way, resorting to immigrant women, under the legal and financial circumstances in which it occurs to-

day, means reproductive work will continue to be done by women in the private sphere of the home; it is not shared out between men and women, and neither is there any shared responsibility between the family and the state.

As the employment connected with these activities is inexorably growing, and the recruitment of immigrant women to carry them out seems to be an unstoppable process, we should turn our attention to improving the living conditions of these women workers who are today moving the gears of social welfare and the economy in the absence of a more advanced welfare state to cater for the so-called "fourth pillar". Exploitation of workers from poorer countries by the multinationals of the rich countries is not the only exploitation that exists. What goes on within the home and the private sphere also offers us a harsh panorama of the undercover, almost completely invisible, exploitation of immigrant women.

In short, through the feminisation of international migration we are witnessing a process of transfer of reproductive work to "other" women, and the traditional behaviour patterns of men and women in the private sphere therefore remain practically unchanged. This situation enables us to identify a transfer of class inequalities, and it is occurring within the community of the women themselves, and a growing breach is therefore opening between a minority of qualified women living in central

countries and benefiting from a wide range of labour opportunities, and a majority of proletarianised women workers from peripheral countries and from a different social class and ethnic group, who are their "servants" (Andall, 2003).

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