Reproductive Labour and Migration

Bridget Anderson

WPTC-02-01

This paper was given at the Sixth Metropolis Conference, Rotterdam, 26-30 November 2001

Reproductive Labour and Migration

Introduction

Migration processes are not isolated phenomena and migration is only one of an interconnected set of linkages between two or more places. Migration flows are a vital element in an ever changing and mutually affecting pattern of exchange of goods, services, finance and labour. Their real impact can only be understood if other aspects such as development, economic change, trade, social policy matters, cultural exchange, gender relations, security matters etc. are also taken into account.

Under the Transnational Communities Programme[1] I have been conducting research on migrant domestic workers in private households in the UK. This has led me to consider the nature of "reproductive labour", why it should be commodified, and why it is such an important sector for migrant women across the European Union. The reproduction of labour and social relations is a critical, but very underdeveloped notion, and certainly one that is not very much applied to migration theory or policy. But I believe the application of this offers new possibilities for analysing how it is that migration is embedded economically, socially, and politically at local, national, regional and global levels.

As human beings have plundered natural resources without regard to sustainability, assuming that these "goods" have been and will continue to be reproduced with no cost, so it has also often been assumed that productive labour, whether migrant or non-migrant, simply appears and is maintained "free of charge". Critiquing this notion of cost free reproduction is I believe important to developing a just migration policy. Discussions on migration and reproduction have tended to focus on migration as a means of obtaining labour power for which the receiving state has paid none of the "reproductive" costs such as education, health etc., and which may also be returned when no longer productive through old age, ill-health or unemployment n migration theory. But the picture is more complicated than this. I want to explore the

[1] 'Impact of Legal Status and Children on Transnational Household Strategies of Migrant Domestics' project lead by Annie Phizacklea and Bridget Anderson within the ESRC Transnational Communities Programme.

particularities of migrant domestic workers to develop the notion of reproductive labour and its central but unconsidered relation to migration.

Notions of reproduction

"Reproductive labour" at its crudest can be taken to mean the reproduction and maintenance of workers. Feminists developed this notion of reproductive labour, including some who argued that women are central to the capitalist mode of production because, through their unpaid household labour, they produce labour power itself. The raising of children, on the one hand, and the maintenance of workers on the other is largely thanks to the unpaid work of women. As Bennholdt-Thomesen (1981) puts it:

> Within the present capitalist world economy, housewives and peasants (men and women) are the main subsistence producers: in different concrete forms both reproduce labour power for capital without compensation
> Cited in Cohen (1987: 78)

Like the "peasant" the "housewife" is in decline in many advanced economies. It is scarcely surprising then that throughout the EU there has been a substantive increase in demand for private domestic services. Of course, not all these workers are migrant women, but even a cursory glance at migration research reveals the importance of domestic work in private households as a sector of work for immigrant women in the EU. It is singled out in individual country studies (Black 1992; Psimmenos 1996; Leonetti and Levy 1978; Abadan Unat 1984) and also more generally (European Forum of Left Feminists 1993; Anderson 2000), and the importance of domestic work as a sector in legalisation data is notable (Groenendijk, K and Hampsink R 1995; Marie 1984). So if one is considering the market for female migrant labour the questions are, why is there an increase in demand for domestic workers in private households? And, why is this demand being met by migrant women? Beginning to formulate answers to these throws interesting theoretical light on determinants and consequences of migration.

At first sight the increase in demand for domestic workers seems demographically and quantitatively measurable. Demographic factors such as the rise in elderly population, changes in family structures, and social policies including the retrenchment of the welfare state, "care in the community", and intersections of

demography, economics and socio-cultural forces (the changing role of women, feminisation of labour force etc), mean that, to put it crudely, female EU citizens are no longer spending so much time doing caring work within the family. Yet that caring work continues to be necessary – and it is difficult to imagine a society where it will not continue to be so. At a time of massive social, economic and demographic change, no account has been taken of the needs that were fulfilled previously by women's unpaid "family" labour. Here then lies part of the demand for female migrant labour: a cheap form of reproductive labour that, crucially, is very flexible – for one of the difficulties of combining paid work outside the home with caring work is the unexpected sick child, or broken nights before long days of "productive" work. Migrant women, separated from their families, are available to become "part of the family" for the employer, twenty four hours a day if necessary.

Once one commodifies this reproductive labour however, the contradictions inherent within this become clear. The economic cost of reproductive labour is extremely high. According to UK Household Satellite Accounts (The Office for National Statistics) the value of unpaid work ranges from 44% to 104% of GDP (depending on how you value it). For those who are paying for child or elderly care, i.e. a full time worker, if they are using the formal economy, once they have paid tax and National Insurance out of their taxed income even low rates of pay can cost the middle class employer a lot relative to their income. There are attempts to put sticking plaster over this – the au pair system most notably[2], where young women are not characterised as workers but as "part of the family" who "help" in the house, typically picking up children etc. and in return are given "pocket money". UK Home Office guidelines suggest 5 hours a day for 5 days a week plus 2 nights babysitting, for £35 – well below the minimum wage. Live-in domestic workers also help obviate this as one can (often informally) subtract the cost of accommodation and food from their wages.

[2] Numbers of au pairs are increasing. In the UK in the year 2000, 12,900 young people were admitted on au pair visas. Recent research has estimated that an additional 5,000+ will be working illegally as au pairs. For further information contact Rosie Cox, Dept of Geography, University of Coventry r.cox@cov.ac.uk.

So it is apparent that demand for migrant domestic workers results from a variety of social and demographic changes, that seem to have little connection with immigration.

> The foundations are apparently being laid for the effective demand for unrelated caring labour. This will not only affect women, but also, particularly in the context of an EU-wide international labour market and the great migrations of labour and refugees arising out of the break-up of the old Communist regimes, 'outsiders' will inevitably be brought into this pool of unregularised workers. Hence there are issues of race and nationality embedded in these developments as well as gender.
> (Ungerson 1995:48)

The impact of this demand on both sending and receiving countries is extremely complex. But I have not explained the amount of non-caring work performed in private households by migrants. Reproductive labour also produces *consumers.* The servicing of life-styles and consumer goods that would be difficult, if not impossible, to sustain were the other household members to attempt to do the work themselves, and which, had the household members to do it themselves, they would probably not want to sustain, is an important component of paid domestic work.

> "Every day I am cleaning for my madam, one riding shoes, two walking shoes, house shoes, that is every day, just for one person… plus the children, that is one rubber and one shoes for everyday school, that is another two. Fourteen shoes every day. My time is already finished…. You will be wondering why she has so many bathrobes, one silk and two cotton. I say, 'Why madam has so many bathrobe?' Every day you have to hang up. Every day you have to press the back because it is crumpled."
> (Filipina working in Paris)

Here I am reminded of the observation in a published piece of research on migration by the UK Home Office, that the dominance of migrants in low paid, insecure, "unskilled" sectors does not disadvantage "natives" since "if migrants do not fill these jobs they simply go unfilled or uncreated in the first place" (Glover, Gott et al. 2000: 6.33), i.e. there are some jobs that simply would not exist if there were not migrants to do them (though arguably this is not restricted simply to unskilled sectors). Such demand is extremely difficult to quantify, anticipate, or control through immigration measures alone. The confinement of tasks to those merely necessary for survival would enable most productive workers to service themselves, for domestic work is not only about "caring" which is in that sense necessary work. It is also cleaning houses, washing up, ironing etc. We do not HAVE to live in tidy, dusted homes nor

wear ironed clothes. Madam does not have to have so many bathrobes in the same sense in which she maybe has to have her children cared for. Domestic work is reproductive work, and reproductive work is not confined to the maintenance of physical bodies: people are social, cultural and ideological beings, not just unites of labour. Reproductive work, mental, physical and emotional labour creates not simply labour units, but people. It is necessary work in that without domestic work humanity would not continue. We need to accommodate the raising of children, the distribution and preparation of food, basic cleanliness and hygiene, in order to survive individually and as a species. But domestic work is also concerned with the reproduction of life-style, and crucially, of status. Nobody has to have stripped pine floorboards, hand-wash only silk shirts, dust-gathering ornaments, they all create domestic work. But they affirm the status of the household, its class, its access to resources of finance and personnel. These two functions cannot be disentangled. To take the example of clothes washing, even at the most basic level one could argue that this is not really necessary for survival, but most people across cultures would agree that stinking clothes can constitute an offence to human dignity. But then exactly how often they are washed, whether they are ironed etc. can quickly become issues of status. The organisation of our homes and their accoutrements demonstrates our position within wider social relations.

There is no total amount of housework that can be divided up fairly between equal partners and as reproductive work is concerned with the social and cultural reproduction of human beings, the actual doing of the work – who does it, when and where – is a crucial part of its meaning. More than a reflection, it is an expression and reproduction of social relations, of relations between genders, and increasingly it is not only gendered, but "racial"/ethnic identities that are reproduced through household labour. As different meanings are assigned to different jobs, so notions of what is appropriate in terms of gender and race are played out and the identities of workers and employers are confirmed. So the employment of a migrant domestic worker enables the expression and reproduction of the proper role of racialised groups and their proper relations to European households as servers, doers of dirty work that citizens are too important to do. When the worker is charged with looking after children these identities are quite literally reproduced. As a Filipina in Athens described:

> "I heard children playing, they are playing house. The other child said, 'I am a Daddy', the other child said, 'I am a Mummy', and then, 'She is a Filipina'. So what does the child mean, even the child knows or it's already learning, that if you are a Filipina you are a servant inside the house."

Citizens, whether male or female, go out and participate in "society", and behind them are the ghostly, racialised figures of non-citizens, facilitating their participation, but also reproducing their social status.

But centering the notion of human reproduction has implications for migration policy beyond that of recognising the existence and necessity of migrant domestic workers and therefore giving them visas[3]. It requires for example a different approach to "family reunification" usually "wives" joining husbands, assisting in renewing and servicing their labour power, facilitating the home as a place of refuge and recuperation as well as often working themselves in either the formal or the informal labour market. It also requires recognition of the cost of human reproduction. Many women who have not left children, but who came to work abroad in the prime of their lives talk of the sacrifice of never having children because they have never had the chance. And what is the consequence of the loss of such reproductive labour on the sending countries - again we have something very difficult to quantify? While there has been some work done on the multiple connections between migration and development, "brain drain" and remittances, little has been done on "global care chains", and there is a complex loss of reproductive labour when women who are not carers leave: who cleans the homes, cooks the meals, has sex, etc., how is this gap filled or is it not filled at all – and what are the consequences of either? As I have emphasised throughout this piece much of this is not quantifiable, but that does not mean it can be ignored with no economic consequences.

The demand for female migrant labour to work in private households therefore is deeply embedded in social constructions of gender and race as well as social policies

[3] While some states (including Italy and Spain) do have a visa for domestic workers and this is to be welcomed, there are still insufficient numbers of such visas available, most states don't offer them so women must work illegally. Crucially, the renewal of such visas is always dependent on the employer. Given the nature of migrants' work is the reproduction of status, this only bolsters the master/mistress servant relation, and is extremely problematic on the ground.

and demographic pressures. I think that this could equally well be argued for that other major source of female migrant employment, the sex industry. To further understand this is very important, particularly if we are to take seriously the struggle against trafficking in human beings. Traffickers are after all supplying a market – there is work for these women and girls and money to be made out of them, or they wouldn't be being moved in the first place. Understanding how such markets are constructed, and are related to socially tolerated markets and attitudes, is as important as understanding trafficking methods and routes if we are really to stamp out this form of exploitation.

References

Anderson, Bridget (2000) Doing the Dirty Work? The Global Politics of Domestic Labour, London and New York: Zed Books.

Abadan-Unat, N. (1984) 'International Labour Migration and Women's Roles: A Turkish View', in Women on the Move: Contemporary Changes in Family and Society. Paris: UNESCO.

Bennholdt-Thomsen, V. (1981) 'Subsistence production and extended reproduction', in K. Young et al (eds) Of Marriage and the Market: women's subordination in international perspective London CSE Books.

Beveridge, W. (1942) Social Insurance and Allied Services Report by Sir William Beveridge, London: HMSO

Black, Robert (1992) 'Livelihood and Vulnerability of Foreign Refugees in Greece: A Preliminary Report of Research on Iranian and Iraqi Refugees in Greater Athens', unpublished, lodged with the Refugee Studies Centre, Queen Elizabeth House, The University of Oxford

Cohen, Robin (1987) The New Helots: Migrants in the international division of labour London: Gower

European Forum of Left Feminists (1993) Confronting the Fortress: Black and Migrant Women in the European Community, Brussels: European Women's Lobby

Glover, S., Gott C. et al (2001) Migration: an economic and social analysis RDS Occasional Paper No 67, Home Office, London.

Groenendijk, K and Hampsink R (1995) Temporary Employment of Migrants in Europe, Nijemgen, Verta Mae, New York: Doubleday.

Leonetti, I. and Levy, F. (1998) Femmes et Immigres: L'insertion des femmes immigrees en Frances, Paris: La Documentation Francaise.

Marie, C.-V. (1984) 'De la Clandestineité a l'insertation professionelle réguliere, Travail et Emploi 22 (December):21-9.

Psimmenos, Iordanis (1996) 'The Making of Perphractic Spaces: the Case of Albanian Undocumented Immigrants in Athens City', ERCOMER Conference 1996, Utrecht, Netherlands.

Ungerson, Clare (1995) 'Gender, Cash and Informal Care', Journal of Social Policy 24(1): 31-52