Chapter 2

Old Challenges, New Contexts, and Strategies: The Experience of Migrant Women

The marginalization of women worldwide is common knowledge. Such marginalization is so prevalent that it has created women’s movements and spawned critical concepts such as patriarchy and sexism. Today, the struggle for gender equality lives on\(^1\) as improvements in the life and role of women in society, especially in the past few decades, continue to trickle. Globalization has paved the way, for example, for a worldwide increase in the participation of women in the labor force. In particular, the globalization of labor flows, growth of global cities, and patterns of corporate restructuring have not only increased mobility at the high and low ends of the job market for women. They have also provided women increased access to wages and salaries at both the upper and lower ends of the market as well as increased prominence as both visible power-brokers and significant consumers within the global economy. Ann Brooks points out, however, that important questions emerge, as well, for gender analysis and for patterns of inequality as a result of globalization\(^2\) because of the gender and digital divide it brings. In particular, Brooks maintains globalization has led not only to the growing differentiation within the division of labor between and within gender frameworks but also to the growing “feminization” of job supply and of business opportunities.\(^3\)

It cannot be denied, indeed, that the individuals and groups of people marginalized by globalization have a more discernible face: a woman’s face.\(^4\) As economist Maria Arcelia Gonzales-Butron points out, out of every 100 hours worked worldwide, 67 hours are worked
by women, but they receive only 9.4 percent of the income. Women’s multiple roles in production, reproduction, and community management means that they have to cope with the global way of living by working more, risking more, and suffering more.

For many women throughout the world, particularly those from the Third World, coping with the global way of living oftentimes means giving up careers, leaving their families, and risking life and limb by resorting to international migration. Since they often carry the heaviest burden of survival for themselves and their families, many women are also forced to move across borders in dire conditions, that is, as refugees. Not surprisingly, international migration is increasingly taking on a woman’s face, bringing with it some complexities, gifts, and challenges that are unique to women on the basis of their gender as it intersects with their other social identities such as class and race. It is to these distinctive aspects of women’s experience of migration that the ensuing discussion focuses on.

**Gender as a Factor in Migration**

Previously, only the men migrated (mostly for work) and the women and children were either left behind or followed as dependents. Until very recently, it was assumed that migrant workers were also mostly men and most women migrated to re-unify families. Until fairly recently, as well, documents of the International Labor Organization (ILO) described a migrant worker’s family as comprising “his wife and minor children.” The participation of women in international labor migration has then shattered traditional barriers and patterns. As Mirjana Morokvasic illustrates clearly in her essay, women are now migrating independently in significant numbers and are taking on the role as breadwinners.

In fact in certain parts of Asia, especially in the Philippines, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka, women are joining the international workforce in significant numbers, creating the phenomenon of the feminization of migration. Starting in 2002 women migrants from Indonesia, for instance, have exceeded men migrants by as much as four to one. As Nikos Papastergiadis contends, the modern migrant no longer conforms to the stereotypical image of the male urban peasant. Women in manufacturing, electronic assembly line, and domestic work are now at the front line of global migration.

**Gendered Migration**

Female migration in the context of globalization is arguably gendered as many women on the move, especially from the Third World, come