Gender and Transnational Migration:
social networks and the forging of alliances

Annie Phizacklea
Department of Sociology, University of Warwick, UK.

Annie Phizacklea: Department of Sociology, University of Warwick, UK.

Gender and Transnational Migration: social networks and the forging of alliances.

In this presentation I want to raise some issues about individual and collective transformatory experience, in particular how the seemingly 'powerless' carve out spaces of control through the forging of social networks and vital political alliances. At the beginning of the 1980's debates within feminism shifted quite markedly towards an acknowledgement of the complex interactions between categories of class, 'race' and gender and the identities that they give rise to. But this recognition of the range of difference and diversity spawned its own problems. Mary Maynard reflected that if we accept that the bases of difference and diversity are endless, then we obscure the possibility of analysing the material inequalities between individuals that this diversity represents and, at the same time, fail to explore what experiences individuals might have in common (Maynard, 1996:20).. In the ensuing years we have moved further away from the material and prioritised issues of identity, memory and the body. This is a necessary part of how we understand how different racialised and gendered identities are constructed and how they shift over time. For instance answering the question 'why is domestic and sex work regarded as work that migrant women do?', lies within a complex sphere of both the material and cultural (mis)representation.
So while I want to suggest that I'm far from being an unreconstructed materialist I also want to suggest how the notion of 'class' continues to have relevance within our now complex understandings of the processes of gender and racialisation.
I'll situate this argument within a specific case study, the work that Bridget Anderson and myself carried out in London five years ago on the regularisation of domestic workers. I want to suggest that the shared experience of being an undocumented migrant domestic worker led to a form of 'class' identity which transcended differences of educational level, nationality , religion and language. Filipinas may be viewed as the 'preferred' nationality for domestic work, but this did not prevent, in the UK instance at least, their identification with other undocumented domestic workers irrespective of their nationality or religion. As we shall see from the case study material, this shared experience constituted the basis of a successful campaign to regularise their visa status, a campaign that overrode diversity and difference in the migrant domestic labour force. In this instance the class dimension that mattered was their status as workers who came into the UK to work for rich transnationals. The UK case may indeed prove to be unique, but it emphasises the role of social networks within the migration setting and how the forging of alliances with disparate players can result in change. For many years I've been a critic of trade union attitude and practice towards migrant workers, so I'm choosing in this presentation to focus on the trade union role within this alliance. It serves as an illustration of the ways in which the labour movement has had to change, particularly in respect of its attitude to marginalised, migrant workers.

Migration, Globalisation and Gender

I want to contextualise the case study within some general observations about the relationship between globalisation and migration.

Much is made of the positive aspects of globalisation, for instance Kevin Robins writes of the: 'dissolution of the old structures and boundaries of national states and communities. It is about the increasing transnationalisation of economic and cultural life, frequently imagined in terms of the creation of a global space and community in which we shall all be global citizens and neighbours' (1997:2)

But who are these beneficiaries of globalisation?, much is made of the mobility of cosmopolitan elites, crossing borders and doing business on their way and those who possess skills that are in short supply in the affluent world.

Set against this is a major counter globalising tendency which is the unwillingness of affluent states to share some of the benefits of globalisation with those who just happen to be born at the wrong geographical address. The latter according to this alternative globalisation scenario must be kept out. Despite an increasing awareness that low birth rates and an increasingly aging population in the affluent countries necessitates some slackening of the stringent immigration controls that govern entry, the continued politicisation of migration operates as a powerful counter force to this happening.

Feeding on cultural racism the Right's essentialist and populist charges set more liberal forces down a route of demonstrating toughness on issues of immigration. Whether we analyse the media and political preoccupation with migration or the academic concern, there continues to be, with some notable exceptions a lack of gender transparency in the conceptual and substantive analysis of past and present migratory processes. This is why conferences of this kind are so important.

From the enslavement of West African men and women to work on plantations in the New World to the neo-liberal retreat from state provision of reproductive services there has always been a gendered demand for migrant labour.

I also want to argue that an often static and essentialist conceptualisation of migrant women reflects an outdated binary of 'First World' and 'Third World' in which changes in gender roles and expectations are not taken into account. For instance, the increasingly high levels of educational attainment of women worldwide and the better job prospects for women as compared to men (even if these are low paid jobs) worldwide. For many women this means at least, a postponement of 'starting a family' and for those who already have children an acknowledgement that they will or have to become the main provider.

Finally I want to argue that we need to ditch the old theoretical divide between structure and agency, only then do gendered actors in the migratory process become active, resourceful agents, not simply victims of a very unequal globalising world. The case study material will illustrate the agency of migrant women workers both individually and collectively. How against prodigious odds they have worked to bring a better life to their families and to seek justice for themselves on a collective basis in regularising their visa position.

Challenging conventional wisdoms

I don't intend to get caught up in the numbers game about the feminisation of migration, suffice it to say here that since the introduction of stringent immigration controls in the affluent states since the early 1970's, we need to supplement official figures with data on the undocumented. As far as women's labour migration within and from south-east Asia is concerned, Lim and Oishi have this to say:

'The important point concerning the above data is that they refer to legal labour migration and only to that part which is officially recorded as overseas employment

migration. ...when undocumented or illegal flows are also considered, both the numbers and proportions of women are likely to be much higher' (1996:87)

While there is a belated recognition of the importance of women's presence in migration in the mainstream literature, there remain certain assumptions about its nature; for instance that women are wives or dependents who are following men; that women defer to patriarchal authority in families in making migratory decisions and that girls are packed off because they are more reliable remittance senders.

For instance Castles and Miller argue:

'In situations of rapid change a family may decide to send one or more members to work in another region or country to maximise income and survival chances. In many cases migration decisions are made by elder (especially men) and younger people and women are expected to obey patriarchal authority. The family may decide to send young women to the city or overseas, because the labour of young men is less dispensable on the farm. Young women are also often seen as more reliable in sending remittances. Such motivations correspond with increasing international demand for female labour as factory workers for precision assembly or as domestic servants contributing to a growing feminisation of migration.' (Castles and Miller, 1998:25)

The problem here is there is a tendency to fall back into the trap of casting migrant women as totally altruistic and passively deferring to patriarchal authority for the benefit of the family.

The empirical data that we collected in London indicated that decision making within households is complex and migrant women may not be deferring to patriarchal authority, they may in fact see migration as a way of escaping from a society that sanctions that authority as well as increasing their economic power within it. Both Mirjana Morokvasic's research on women from former Yugoslavia (Morokvasic, 1983) and Breda Gray's work on Irish women in New York (Gray, 1996) indicate that migration was not simply an enforced response to economic hardship, but also a calculated response to escape a society where patriarchy was an institutionalised force.

All sorts of negotiations go on within households and beyond them, societies and their gender relations are not static and migrant women from less developed countries are not caught in some kind of traditional gender time warp, they do regard themselves as providers, they do act on opportunities to find paid work and as the following case study illustrates they will act to bring individual and collective justice to their lives as migrants.

The politics of belonging

Bridget Anderson and myself carried out research with migrant domestic workers between 1998 and late 2000.

The workers were undergoing a process of regularisation of their visa status. Up until 1980 domestic workers, like any other foreign worker who entered through official channels was granted a temporary work permit. This changed in 1980 when the Tory government in the UK announced that it was introducing a concession which allowed foreign employers and expatriates to bring their domestic workers with them. What is interesting here is that the change was specifically defended by the need to maintain Britain's attractiveness to outside investment in a globalising world. In other words, rich transnationals should be allowed to maintain their comfortable living standards through the provision of domestic services by poor transnationals.

The concession tied the workers irrevocably to their named employer. Not surprisingly the system was widely abused with one agency alone handling over 4,000 cases of imprisonment, physical and sexual abuse as well as widespread non-payment or underpayment of wages. Workers only means of redress was to simply run away from the abusive employer which immediately altered the conditions under which they were admitted under the concession. Due to no fault of their own they became overstayers and joined the ranks of the undocumented labour force.

1979 the Commission for Filipino Migrant workers was set up to support workers. Many other nationalities sought help from the Commission and it became increasingly clear that immigration rules that governed the entry of domestic workers who entered the country with employers needed to be changed. The domestic workers forged alliances with a number of groups including the Transport and General Workers Union, sympathetic MP's, churches etc., to form a campaigning group called Kalayaan.

While the trade union was only one player in the alliance its role constitutes an interesting example of the changing face of trade unionism. The undocumented domestic workers joined the union; their union card was in many cases their only formal identification (in most cases employers held on to the workers passports). Thus we have a trade union demonstrating that it could take up the cause of marginalised undocumented workers and use its political muscle to champion their cause.

A very different picture to that which is painted from the historical record.

The reception towards Irish migrant workers in the nineteenth century was mixed, employers welcoming another source of cheap labour, while their British working class counterparts regarded them as a threat for the same reason. But this was a time when the British labour movement was in its infancy and the response of British workers tended to be negative and often violent, it largely took the form of attacks on Irish workers and their houses (Phizacklea and Miles, 1987: 114). But later that century the trade union response to a new migration, that of Jewish refugees fleeing persecution, took on a political form, support for the Aliens Act of 1904. The Act set out to prevent the arrival of further 'alien' refugees.

Post Second world war migration from what were called Britain's 'New Commonwealth' countries was met with hostility by leading sections of the organised labour movement. Despite the fact that these migrants had the right to live and work in the UK without restriction and that were entering a country with labour shortages, as early as 1954 the General Council of the Trade Union Congress was defining them as a 'problem' whose further entry needed to be controlled. Why?. Robert Miles and myself have posited that this reaction basically reflected a pervasive climate of racism in the UK, which apart from some notable exceptions, was reflected within trade union ranks (Phizacklea and Miles, 1987:116).

Evidence of widespread discrimination in the UK towards black and ethnic minority workers did eventually lead the Labour government in the late 60's to propose that the existing anti-discrimination legislation be extended to cover employment. The General Council was opposed to this, their view remained that the problem was not one of discrimination, but that the migrants, now turned settlers, refused to 'integrate'. Nevertheless at the 1969 Congress there was sufficient oppositional support from the floor to this position that the General Council had to employ procedural means to overcome it.

This was the first serious challenge to the General Council position, but by 1973 it had to concede to rank and file pressure when a motion from the floor of Congress was carried requesting that the next Labour government repeal the racist immigration

legislation introduced in 1971. Rank and file pressure was not the only reason why there was a limited appraisal of TUC policy. Neo fascists were rearing their heads in Britain in the form of the National Front party alongside a number of industrial disputes which demonstrated ethnic minority workers resistance to exploitation in the workplace and trade union racism. What was interesting about these disputes was the real courage that migrant women demonstrated in their resistance to exploitation. They often constituted the backbone of the resistance marshalling local social networks to their cause, (the recent dispute at Gate Gourmet at Heathrow Airport is a contemporary example).

Throughout the 1980's a number of unions pledged themselves to increasing representation of ethnic minority workers in their ranks. Evidence showed that while the post war migrants from Asia and the Caribbean of the 1950s and 1960s were more likely to be members of unions, they remained underrepresented as elected officials. But the 1980s were also the time when the UK experienced the 'mass shake out' of manufacturing workers, with these same migrants being frontline victims of redundancy and unemployment. Measures to curb trade union power were quickly enacted by the Conservative government elected in 1979. A 'profound crisis' had begun to bite within organised labour. Union membership density fell from 55% in 1979 to 29.3% in 2003 and collective bargaining coverage fell from 83% in 1981 to 35.8% in 2003 (Pollert, 2004: 3-4).

Within this context some might look cynically at the union response to the plight of the undocumented migrant domestic workers. But it does reflect a more general concern about the relationship between organised labour and migrant workers generally.

The Transport and General Workers Union allocated a named official who became fully conversant with the situation and through attendance at the Sunday meetings of the workers, the union became more than just a membership card for the workers themselves.

The campaigning work of all those involved in the alliance paid off. By 1997 the Labour Party had pledged in its manifesto that it would abolish the concession and regularise the position of all of those workers who through no fault of their own had become overstayers.

In 1998 the New Labour government implemented the manifesto commitment, illustrating how the seemingly powerless can mobilise resources and carve out spaces of control. Having said that, the whole process of regularisation was lengthy and expensive, many Embassies' insisted that the workers go to the police station to report their passports as missing before they would begin the process of issuing new passports. A visit to the police station is not something any undocumented worker relishes!. Employer references had to be obtained etc., after 18 months some workers were still waiting to hear the outcome of their application for regularisation. Throughout the lengthy process of regularisation the Transport and General Workers Union ensured that its premises were made available to the workers to discuss the future and to forge alliances on an international basis.

Conclusion

In this presentation I've attempted to raise a number of issues about the role of social networks and the forging of political alliances in the migration setting. The case study indicates the importance of social networks within the migration setting in forging a solidarity across ethnicity, religion and nationality amongst a particular group of

migrant women workers. If those differences had not been transcended amongst the workers themselves there would have been little chance of success.

In turn we have considered the importance of forging political alliances and I chose to consider the role of organised labour as one, albeit important player in the campaigning alliance. I have suggested that some may view this role cynically, though my own view is that it does reflect a broader change in attitude towards migrant labour.

Finally the case study material illustrates the agency of migrant women. How against prodigious odds they worked to bring a better life to their families and to seek justice for themselves in regularising their visa position.

Castles, S and M.Miller (2003) **The Age of Migration**, London, Palgrave.

Gray, B (1996) 'The Home of our Mothers and our Birthright for Ages? Nation, Diaspora and Irish Women' in M. Maynard and J. Purvis (eds) **New Frontiers in Women's Studies**, London, Fracnis and Taylor

Lim, L and Oishi, N (1996) 'International Labour Migration of Asian Women: Distinctive Characteristics and Policy Concerns' **Asian and Pacific Migration Journal**, 5 (1):85-116

Maynard, M (1996) 'Challenging the boundaries: towards an anti-racist women's studies' in M.Maynard and J. Purvis (eds**) New Frontiers in Women's studies**, London, Taylor and Francis.

Morokvasic, M (1983) 'Women in Migration' in A. Phizacklea (ed), **One Way Ticket**, London, Routledge.

Phizacklea, A and R. Miles, (1987) 'The British Trade Union Movement and Racism' in Lee, G and R. Loveridge (eds), **The Manufacture of Disadvantage,** Milton Keynes, Open University Press, pp. 112-125.

Pollert, A (2004) 'Individual employment rights: paper tigers, fierce in appearance but missing in tooth and claw', Paper presented at British Universities Industrial Relations Conference, University of Nottingham, 1-3, July 2004.