



Gender and migration from invisibility to agency: The routes of Brazilian women from transnational towns to the United States



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SYNOPSIS

In the late twentieth century, thousands of Brazilians left for the United States to “make it in America,” inserting Brazilians into the new international labor flows. Brazilian women, like other Latin American immigrants, became concentrated in housecleaning, a labor market that is segmented by gender, class and ethnicity. Housecleaning became a female emigration strategy that allowed women to circulate through the globalized world and insert themselves in transnational migration. This article analyzes how the configuration of “the housecleaning business” and the organization of domestic labor redefined or problematized gender identities. The data comes from an ethnographic study conducted in Brazil and the New England region of the United States. As housecleaners in the United States, men and women are confronted with redefinitions of identities that may or may not imply changes in gender relations.

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Introduction

This article demonstrates how Brazilian women insert themselves into international labor flows, into a labor market of domestic service, which also includes other immigrant women. The increased participation of women in migratory flows has raised significant questions for research and theories of international migrations, because it reveals that women are active subjects in the migratory process who make decisions and provoke changes within family and gender relations. Moreover, they initiate and undertake their own migratory projects and do not only accompany their husbands or sons, as is often portrayed in migratory studies.

Immigrant women are inserted into the domestic services sector and use informal social networks, the so-called ethnic enclaves of immigrants, working as caretakers for the elderly, nannies, part-time cleaning ladies or full-time maids (Anthias, 2000; Assis, 2004, 2007; Fleischer, 2002; Foner, 2000; Morokvasic, 1984), and in the sex market (Maia, 2009; Margolis, 1994; Piscitelli, 2007). In this context of feminization of migratory flows, women participate in networks of care and sex, in a labor market that is segmented by gender, class and race. Women participate in the transnational flows

that occur in the globalized world as flexible, precarious and often invisible sources of labor, because their work takes place in the private realm. As Saskia Sassen (2003) observes, the feminization of transborder migratory flows must be understood in the context of the expansion of the informal economy that favors the flexibilization and deregulation of the labor force and creates the conditions for absorbing feminine and foreign labor.

Anthias (2000), upon analyzing migrations to southwestern Europe in the late twentieth century, emphasizes that it is not a question of recognizing the proportional importance of women or their economic and social contributions, but of considering the role of the processes, discourse, and gender identities within the processes of migration and establishment in the destination society. This perspective reveals that a gendered approach is important for understanding contemporary migrations, although it does not involve a question of the presence of women in the flows, because even when they were numerically significant, they were not considered in the classic studies of migration. As demonstrated by Houstoun, Kramer, and Barret (1984), since the 1930s, women have constituted the majority of legal flows to the United States, but have nevertheless remained invisible in studies on migration, a

situation that only began to change in the 1970s. Studies by Morokvasic (1984), Gregorio Gil (1996, 2007), Menjivar (2000), Pessar (1999), Foner (2000), Anthias (2000) and Chant and Radcliffe (1992) revealed the theoretical transition that involved using the category of gender to consider migratory processes.

Until the early 1970s, women were not found in the empiric analyses or in the studies conducted, as highlighted by Patricia Pessar (1999), Chant and Radcliffe (1992), because many authors were influenced by neoclassical migration theories. There was a presumption that men were more apt to run risks, while women were the guardians of the community and stability. This image, favored by the push–pull theory, understood migration as a result of rational and individual calculations and relegated women to a secondary place, without recognizing their work as immigrants.

The increased female participation since the 1970s took place in a context of growth of international migrations since the second half of the twentieth century. Contemporary migrants, unlike their antecessors, have access to lower-cost communication and transportation, which has shortened distances and made contacts more frequent between the societies of origin and destination.

An important question that remains is the experiences of women of different national origins in the contemporary flows. As contemporary migration studies demonstrate, there is a significant migration of Latin, Asian, African and Eastern European women that adds new ingredients to the understandings of these movements. These women arrive with different human capital – many of them with a better educational level and higher qualifications than the women who arrived in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Contemporary immigrants benefit from the expansion of educational and employment opportunities, and from more liberal legislation concerning divorce and gender discrimination. Although these differences are significant, there are more similarities than differences in the lives of migrant women from different national origins.

What they have in common is that, like the women who arrived more than 100 years ago, contemporary immigrants are found in labor markets segmented by gender and, despite better schooling and qualification, still steered towards certain traditionally female occupations, which causes a field such as domestic employment for example, which had decreased in the United States and Europe, only to rise once again in the late twentieth century.

Brazilian women, as well as Mexican, Peruvian, Philippine and other immigrant women, have left their countries to do housecleaning in the United States. Hondagneu-Sotelo (2007) observed that theoreticians of globalization have not stopped to consider the importance of domestic labor—neither those who celebrate it nor those who criticize it. In the same way that modernization theories that forecast the disappearance of domestic service in modern society were wrong, because this form of labor has grown and continues to grow, Hondagneu-Sotelo affirms that neither theoreticians of globalization nor those of modernization were able to foresee or understand the role of domestic labor in the era of globalization and post-industrial society. The author observes that a few feminist scholars and theoreticians began to pay attention to the recent expansion and dispersion of these

transnational migrant domestic woman workers in various countries.

Another important factor to be revealed is that this insertion is not distinguished only by gender, but also by national origin. Upon analyzing the representations about women immigrants of different nationalities in recent decades to Europe, Anthias (2000) revealed how they are categorized differently, according to racial standards and national origin. Some would be classified as victims (such as Sri Lankan women), others would be desired for their supposed submission (such as Philippine women), others would be desired for their beauty that conforms to Western standards (such as Eastern European women).

Therefore, the greater visibility of women in recent international migrations has contributed to problematizing the crystallized visions about the insertion of men and women migrants in this process. From the start, the choice of who will migrate, the reasons for migration, a permanence or return, takes place within a network of relations that shape the opportunities of men and women migrants.

This article reconstructs the emigration trajectories of Brazilian women who left for the United States during the second half of the twentieth century. The stories of these women allow us to reconstruct trajectories that began in the 1960s and, in the following decades, established transnational ties between the locations of origin in Brazil – the city of Governador Valadares, in Minas Gerais State and the city of Criciúma, in the southern state of Santa Catarina – and the region of Boston, Massachusetts in the United States. The ethnographic research that provided the data for this study was conducted in two moments between 2001 and 2004 (Assis, 2004) and in 2008 (Assis & Siqueira, 2009) and was conducted in two cities in Brazil and in the region of Boston. In these Brazilian cities, emigration became part of the daily life of many of their residents and is among the life expectations of many youth—to migrate to America. The trajectories of women are presented here to demonstrate how migration became a female strategy for social mobility or a search for a better life, as the migrants themselves say. In this scenario, housecleaning, work that has a low status in Brazil, becomes resignified and offers a possibility to “make it in America” and realize the migratory project.

Following Piscitelli (2008) in her studies of immigrant Brazilian women, I also suggest in this article that “these migrants are affected by the imbrication between notions of sexuality, gender, race, ethnicity and nationality.” According to Piscitelli, these notions imply that whether they are white or brown-skinned, in international flows, they are racialized in the countries of the North as mestizas. She adds that this racialization is sexualized.

The accounts of the women whose trajectories will be reported reveal how this racialization and sexualization of Brazilian women is intertwined and how the women use these markers of difference, which at times generate prejudice and discrimination, to have an advantage in the labor or marriage markets. As we demonstrate in this article, based on the experiences of some of these migrant women, they use attributes of Brazilianness to negotiate their loving relationships.

We emphasize the trajectories of migrant women to demonstrate that, although they have emigrated somewhat

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