



## Addressing women's agency on international mobility



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### SYNOPSIS

Women have been linked to lack of agency in making decisions on mobility; however, young highly-skilled women do take initiative impelled by the dynamics of the global market and the institutional culture of career progression. The aim of this paper is to explore the agency of women (individual motivation goal-oriented) and the influences of structural forces (labour market dynamics, patriarchal contexts and family commitments) that may motivate women's mobility. The study uses the life stories of 34 women from Spain who move within the EU and third country nationals who come to the EU. We consider how they make decisions along their life course, turning points in their lives and consequences of their choices. The results reveal that their decisions are closely linked to not only social circumstances, such as job opportunities and family, but also the agency of women depending on their age, feeling of fulfilment and ideas about emancipation.

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### Introduction

Invisible stereotypes tend to sketch migrants as male workers. This affects both regulations and scholarly studies on migration alike. However, as a consequence of global mobilisation throughout the world, mobility patterns have transformed the profiles and the causes why men and women move (Castles & Miller, 1993; Favell, 2008; Mahroum, 2000; Sassen, 2000). People from different countries, ethnicities and social classes migrate for study, adventure, love, work and, sometimes, simply seeking new experiences somewhere else. An increasing number of scholars have claimed a place for women in research (Morokvasic, 1984; Phizacklea, 1983). Yet, as a consequence of the subordination of women to the spheres of family and care, women have been relegated to the background in migration studies (Kofman, 2000, 2013; Morokvasic, 2007; Pedraza, 1991). When empirical works focus on women

moving abroad, they are generally referred to as half of the male breadwinner household (Iredale, 2001; Raghuram, 2004) or, in the case of highly skilled professionals, their vulnerable positions are stressed due to the balance of personal and professional goals (Ackers, 2004, 2008; Adler, 1984; González & Vergés, 2013). There are very few empirical works that focus on women in migration processes as independent agents.

But migration is a gendered process. Statistical data provide evidence about the numerical importance of female migration. According to these figures, educated women (completed secondary studies or above) move more than educated men (with similar degree studies) (Docquier, Lowell, & Marfouk, 2009; Dumont, Martin, & Spielvogel, 2007). This suggests that skilled women are highly motivated to move abroad, although the causes and impacts are unclear. There is no evidence on whether or not women's external conditions or agency are a greater impetus for them than for skilled men. Also work, studies and family affect women in a different order than men. For example, women may be impelled to work in the global market to achieve milestones in career development in a similar way as men, but will have to deal with a different

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problem set (Ackers, 2004). Women may be impelled by gender bias in the labour market or lack of freedom in a patriarchal family. The reconciliation of children and career appears as an important impediment for pursuing successful careers in international assignments (Abraham, Auspurg, & Hinz, 2010; Bielby & Bielby, 1992; Green, 1997; Shauman, 2010). Therefore, the migration of women would seem to involve complex situations, which provide grounds for the need to conduct further research.

This paper aims to explore women on the move, taking into account structural forces (dynamics of the labour market or family commitments) and the agency of women (individual motivation that is goal oriented). Thus, this work attempts to contribute to the literature on mobility from a gender perspective, since it will examine the role of women's agency and the degree to which women's decisions are dependent on social, economic and cultural constraints. We will adopt a life course approach (Blosfeld, Mills, Klijzing, & Kurz, 2005; Bucholz et al., 2009; Elder, 1994; González & Vergés, 2013; Kou, Bailey, & van Wissen, 2009; Xie & Shauman, 2003) that considers the decisions of women migrants and the impact of specific events that take place during different life stages. We also consider the consequences of their choices and the turning points in women's lives. Our starting premise considers that mobility decisions are highly dependent on age and family issues, particularly in the case of women who rely on family structures, raising children and carrying out their careers at crucial times in their lives. Women perform different roles along their life courses depending on family structure (for example, if they are single or married, if they have young children or teenagers) and job circumstances (for example, if they are looking for a job or they already hold a permanent position).

### Women's agency in a patriarchal society

A mainstream idea in migration studies centres scholars' attention on male workers who appear as the sole type of migrant (Kofman, 2000; Morokvasic, 1984; Pedraza, 1991; Phizacklea, 1983). It dismisses female profiles and their motivations for moving to other countries, despite evidence suggesting the great complexity related to the different contexts and problems that are faced by women. Women's increasing visibility in society, as students, workers and active agents, has led to their inclusion in empirical studies. Data emphasise the high number of women in higher education, their employment rates, and participation in political positions. On the other hand, figures underline the persistence of discrimination against women in senior positions in workplaces, the pay gap, difficulties in career progression and low recognition of their contributions (EC [European Commission], 2006, 2009, 2012). Patriarchal structure continues to shape women's opportunities because of the persistent values that influence male and female decisions. However, according to Fraser (1992), women may develop different strategies for personal fulfilment and gaining autonomy. Thus, despite gender constraints, women are able to accommodate the power of social forces and the capacity to act decidedly against them.

Sen (1985: 203) establishes that agency allows a person to be 'free to do and achieve their own goals or values that he or

she regards as important'. And, according to Charrad (2010: 517), agency is the capacity for individualised choice and action, not acting for general interests. However, she also points out that structural constraints limit women's agency. Maitra (2013) also states that agency is mainly located within women's individualism and self-consciousness, although a set of preconceived ideas might influence their performance. For example, the feminist associations in patriarchal societies open up a space for the empowerment of women's action. This means that women are able to act in particular situations by planning decisions centred on their own goals.

Moreover, agency does not mean that women's actions always involve social changes. Although agency entails women taking up a stance to resist oppressive situations, women's performance is not necessarily transformative. Over time women have opposed male dominance structures, even if they do not actually develop an action oriented to change (Gutafsson-Larsson, Thurén, Dahlgren, & Westman, 2007). Women's agency shows up through women's volition, although their decisions rely on traditional roles. Beyond the subversion and redefinition of gender roles, women's agency may contribute to the continuity and repetition of gender roles. Gutafsson-Larsson et al. (2007: 57) explain that 'even as the participants break with and challenge dominant norms that govern their lives, they also reproduce them'. Thus, our research also attempts to find evidence about the extent to which women's actions reproduce or transform traditional roles associated with gender.

### *Skilled women in the lens of migration studies*

Regarding international migration, Morokvasic (2007) asks to what degree migration strategies challenge or stabilise gender roles. According to her, despite the dependent roles of migrant women, mobility is able to create emancipative effects on women as a consequence of living outside of patriarchal cultures and oppressive family orders. But the roles of women in international assignments may reproduce the same schemes, where they hold jobs doing traditional housekeeping or low prestige jobs in care services and domestic work. According to Kofman (2012: 148), a labour market segmented by sex and race assigns low ranking occupations to women and concentrates them in care occupations, such as nursing and caretaking. Even highly skilled women face different handicaps in new assignments as a result of balancing work and family (Ackers, 2008) life in an environment where they lack both networks and experience (Liversage, 2009). Some studies emphasise the legal problems related to women's statuses because of their subordinated position in the family structure, only being granted temporary visas and permits and their jobless situation, which all limit the autonomy of women migrants (Creese, Dyck, & McLaren, 2011; Creese & Wiebe, 2009; Iredale, 1999). Racial exclusion and the origin of female migrants was also mentioned by Riaño (2003) and Riaño and Wastl-Walter (2006) as an additional handicap for creating new opportunities in the receiving countries, since stereotypes are associated with multiple types of discrimination.

Regarding the influence of the dynamics of the labour market in promoting migration, literature suggests that unemployment rates in sending countries may increase

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