Victims of the Economic Crisis: Female migrant workers and the growing threat of exploitation, forced labour and trafficking

The term globalisation, though widely contested simultaneously impacts positively and negatively upon the global South; though broadly speaking the theory entails the shrinking of distances through advances in communication and transport alongside the 'ascendancy of global corporations…as they operate in a borderless world' (Potter, 2008: 128/9). Labour migration is a fundamental reaction to the globalised world (Taran, 2000) as people move across national borders in search of employment and a more economically secure existence. To a large extent migration is complex and multi-faceted and it can be examined using different criteria; motivations, benefits, countries of origin and destination, child and adult migrants, etc, to name a select few. A significant divide within the migratory process is found along gender lines; between male and female movement, in addition to their potential differences, as they seek work. Women now comprise a large share of global migrants; 'at no time in human history have as many women been on the move as today, [with] almost 90 million women currently residing outside their countries of origin' (UN, 2005: 1) as a result of economic necessity.

Much academic debate surrounds the idea that female migrant workers, as opposed to their male counterparts, are more vulnerable to the negative aspects of migration. In accordance with anything rooted in economics, a period of recession can exacerbate the vulnerability of labour migrants; the relationship between employer and employee is strained, purchasing power is reduced and more people seek to join the workforce (Roberts, 1991). Demonstrated through examination of the 1980s financial downturn, Chant (2002) illustrates this, 'crisis and restructuring have made ever more visible the interconnectedness of the formal and informal sectors, and…the dependence of the latter on the former for contracts, supplies and economic viability' (Chant, 2002: 210). Previous patterns of risk and livelihood susceptibility such as that shown twenty years ago have every potential to be repeated in the current recession.

Post 1980s, the New International Division of Labour (NIDL), as a product of globalisation, highlights the move of developed nations towards a service-orientated economy and the shift of manufacturing to the developing world as a means of

utilising the cheap subcontracted labour (Cho, 1985) and the creation of Multi National Corporations (MNCs). As the primary basis on which modern migration is founded, 'gender jobs cannot be considered in isolation of these structural arrangements' (Agustin, 1988: 24). The vast inequalities created as a result also allow one to critique the fairness of the global economy and its effects on the incomes of those driving it.

Set in the context of migration, vulnerability refers to one's capacity for emotional and/or physical abuse occurring as a result of being away from home and to what extent an individual is unprotected or without defence against maltreatment and manipulation (Cox, 1997) in the labour market. General consensus points towards women migrants as being at most risk and this essay aims to explore the gendered view of migratory peoples. Unfortunately, vulnerability reaches every facet of the cheap labour economy and the formal and informal sectors, 'unaccountable and unregistered activities' (Potter and Lloyd-Evans, 1998: 172), sector of employment.

The feminisation of migration followed with the associated issues of vulnerability has, up until recently, remained virtually unseen in senior level policy discussion (Kofman, 2000: 194). Elson (1991) discusses the relevance of studying migration in development under the category of gender, saying 'the emphasis…facilitates the posing of questions about the relative power or women and men' (Elson, 1991: 1). Such irregularity in the outcomes of the development process is vital in fully understanding migration, clearly no female or male workers have entirely the same experience when in a new territory and the story portrayed by the lived encounters of both men and women allow a well-rounded analysis of the proposed contention. Further to this, study of the informal economy remains topically relevant as it comprises 'well over half [of urban employment] in Africa and Asia and a quarter in Latin America and the Caribbean' (Chen, 2001: Review). The new found impetus for women to migrate symbolises a partial shift in traditional ways of life and household survival strategies through the inclusion of remittances from abroad.

In addition to alleviating poverty and inequality as an outcome of capitalism and the new mode of production, Momsen and Townsend refer to McLouglin's phrase the 'frustration gap' (Momsen and Townsend, 1987: 236). 'Felt by an individual, family

or even community where exposure to modernizing influences has brought a desire for an increased standard of living but [where] few or no opportunities of satisfying this want [are located in the developing world]' (Momsen and Townsend, 1987: 263); further migration is generated in females as well as males, introducing the transient population to potential vulnerability outside their own country.

However, a total shift in traditional ways of life has not occurred. The unique, and perhaps disadvantaged, role of women initially lies in the culturally normal expectations of them as homemakers, wives and carers for other family members and those in their immediate community; this is especially apparent in the global South. Though exceptions do exist and the attitude that men can contribute equally in the home with additional household-based tasks is slowly gathering pace, it remains widely accepted that women are welfare providers first, income generators second. This is juggled with full-time paid labour and as Kofman et al (2000) points out, 'the gendered nature of welfare provision…is heightened during migration' (Kofman et al, 2000: 2). Their circumstance goes through rapid transformation, large distance is potentially travelled, stress increases and the consequent risk to migrant health is aggravated. I argue that often is the case that women end a day of paid labour only to begin a period of thankless, unpaid labour in the domestic environment; contributing greatly to the levels of exploitation experienced by female migrants. Statistically, in the global South, 'a woman may bear as many as twelve children' (Momsen and Townsend, 1987: 117), exemplifying the extra burden of women at work compared to that of their male equivalents. The patriarchal viewpoint of the family unit within developing societies causes women workers to be more vulnerable to long hours, fatigue and the inability to protest against exploitation simply as it is considered customary. If attitudes are not more balanced after migration and upon arrival in the host nation things can worsen.

This links to the common, though misleading, grouping together of 'womenandchildren [expressed as one word]' (Manzo, 2005: 393) into a single, thus, more vulnerable category. Deceptive assumptions like this reinforce the previously stated idea of the female being linked to the family unit to a greater extent than the male worker. This goes a long way to fuel media hype around the topical and contested issue of child labour as well as female vulnerability.

Fundamentally, men and women do not enter the recession from an equal standpoint; despite recent increase in women's jobs, predominantly occurring over the past thirty years (Rake, 2009: 5), 'the nature of women's employment still remains markedly different from men's [and often goes undervalued]' (Rake, 2009: 5) and the caring nature of female employment upsets traditional male dominated 'career-only' working patterns. Interestingly, the upshot of recession and the effect on vulnerability occurs in the global North as well as South, as shown in Rake's examination of the UK financial market. Not all female labour migrants travel from the developing world, despite the trend of the majority and inequalities are not limited to the less-developed world. In the UK for example, 'the public has seen for themselves who holds power in [the country's] major businesses, and they were the faces of white men' (Rake, 2009: 3). Crucially, vulnerability is reflected in the predominantly male population who essentially caused the recession to the same extent as those who will have to deal with the fallout. To this end, male migrant vulnerability is as keenly felt as female vulnerability. There needs to be a change in the discriminatory attitude towards women among the international community (Huda, 2006: 36) and the unnecessary vulnerability it causes through the exploitation of women.

Returning to the migrant workers' surrounding community, or social network; Evans (1996) insinuate that migrant with more social capital, i.e., capacity to rely and use to their advantage the relationships around them as aid in a crisis, lessen their vulnerability in recession (Evans, 1996: 92). The strain of poverty are made more bearable in such cases, however, protection networks have to be re-established in the receiving nation: this doubled with financial pressures increase vulnerability all-round as male and female migrant workers are exposed similarly. The time at which social resources are most needed is found at this time, but often is least likely to be useable.

Forced labour is another issue faced by migrants and includes debt bonded labour as just one type. Vulnerability to forced labour and exploitation is often related back to the New International Division of Labour (NIDL), associated Export Processing Zones (EPZs) and sweatshops. Highly feminised, this mode of employment was generated with the female labourer in mind (Scholte, 2005: 336). The textile and clothing industry provides an example. Haiti is such a nation and is a manufacturing

giant (Bonacich and Waller, 1994). Hours are habitually long, wages below that expected in the developed world, there is the underlying risk of the footloose industry unpredictably leaving and this makes women migrants vulnerable. Male migrant workers, whilst not necessarily vulnerable to the same extent within the previously named industries, remain vulnerable in the construction sector for example. Shelley's (2007) micro case study of two Polish migrants in the UK demonstrates this, '[they] were badly beaten after being moved from workplace to workplace, closely monitored and not paid' (Shelley, 2007: 81). It can be seen that exploitation comparable to that faced by women migrants has occurred and should not be ignored. With regards to the recession, the construction industry itself is vulnerable to losses, as per capita disposable income is temporarily diminished; creating a double edged cause of vulnerability for some men labourers.

However, not all labouring can be perceived as exploitation or forced, as the benefits of these designated production zones for migrant workers are often forgotten. Positively they create ready-made opportunities for waged work – despite the seasonal and demand based variation for products – as well as giving women the prospect of saving money for educational attainment and the accumulation of monetary assests, breaking the cycle of inappropriate schooling and lack of vulnerability-reducing knowledge. Stereotypical views of the female gender also come back into relevance here, as the community/ group nature of labour conceived in the EPZs (whether in receiver or original nations), can present a social, structured and community orientated atmosphere for women migrants. Whilst extreme exploitation is a definite negative of labour migration, the NIDL moreover reduces vulnerability through tangible employment provision and the construction of previously stated indispensable social capital networks.

Moving on to human trafficking, it is more often than not associated with the sex industry and the worst forms of exploitation faced by migrant workers, including enslavement (Shelley, 2007: 109). As in Huda's study of Lebanon (2006), there is prejudice and confusion of the basic terms of human trafficking and ultimately these culminate to prevent effective policy solutions and increase vulnerability all round. The Lebanese Government, along with many others no doubt, act unaware that persons can be trafficked despite having valid visas for example (Huda, 2006: 36).

Further confusion on the topic is seen as, regularly, the idea that men and children are just as vulnerable to trafficking, and not always into prostitution, is not given the attention it deserves. This is not to take anything away from the exploited females, as they are without doubt at risk just as much during recession as any other period. It is a call for equality in the approach of gender and migration.

One instance in which trafficked women may be more at risk to physical abuse is when they repeatedly change hands from one 'owner' to another; inconsistency in the possession of females arguably increases the 'scope' (Lee, 2007: 16) and possibility for maltreatment. Again it remains the same could be said for a man being trafficked in a similar situation; 'his' potential for greater physical strength and aggression, arguably, being the only means through which to reduce vulnerability in comparison to the women. This corresponds with what Mattilla (2000) calls 'bargaining power' (Mattilla, 2000: 54) and the comparative lack to which women are able to negotiate successfully with employers in the informal sector as a manifestation of their perceived physical appearance. Leading on from this, vulnerability of female migrants in the global economy is undermined by a lack of authoritative protection. The case of Thai prostitutes typifies this as the local police act not as protectors of the public but as enforcers to control the so called 'slaves'. 'Here the brothel owners send the police to beat us…if we flee they go after us' (Bales, 2000: 5). Most disturbing is that globalisation and the quest for modernisation have perpetuated corruption within official bodies. As Thailand is a nation partially dependant on its sex trade, the constabulary are attempting to protect their own livelihoods as they see no alternative to suppressive capitalism as it stands.

Modern slavery, or human trafficking, is focussed to a less extent on ownership and as with many features of the new global economy, allows people to 'get rich…[a]nd when they've finished with their slaves, just throw these people away' (Bales, 2000: 4). The 'disposable' nature of labour markets is a direct cause of reduced job security for migrants and is keenly felt in recession when work scarcity is highest and employers aim for economic efficiency through cutbacks and redundancy. This attitude is not exclusive to female vulnerability, nor to human trafficking and prostitution, but is arguably most apparent in this sector as women labourers are notoriously major participators here.

Contrary to the contention that female migrant workers are more vulnerable to exploitation, forced labour and human trafficking in the current global crisis, Surtees (2008) shows a classic example of how male vulnerability is regularly overlooked globally but most notably in Europe. With particular reference to Belarus and the Ukraine, it is explained 'the generalized notion of female vulnerability [means that] female migrants are conceptualized as trafficked' (Surtees, 2008: 13) but in the same situation, male migrants are viewed as merely irregular migrants. Questionably this lack of male inclusion in the debate over vulnerability can be more damaging, escalating vulnerable potential, as methods of protection are not examined and created in response to academic and/ or state investigation.

Upon examination of this vulnerability, it is essential to keep in mind that there is a severe lack of data, a 'dearth' (UN, 2005: III), on women migrants and this limits the extent to which the effects of migration can be fully assessed in academia. The very nature of migration, with the potentially secretive and unofficial practice of those moving for work, makes statistical data gathering difficult. An all-encompassing picture cannot be achieved and at this present time a complete answer cannot be formulated as a degree of uncertainty will remain no matter how well informed one may be. In their article 'Describing the Unobserved', Tyldum and Brunovskis (2005) propose that future research into human trafficking and exploitation should 'move beyond static descriptions of typical or extreme case [and rather examine] the great variation in forms of exploitation, recruitment, and rehabilitation' (Tyldum and Brunovskis, 2005: 31). Moreover, the current recession is the latest topic under analysis and the time lag between research and publication prevents a large amount of literature from being available immediately.

The issue of passivity versus active agency in women also needs to be considered amongst the debate. Agustin (1988) recognises women as influential in their work practices upon all associated lives, from their partners and close families through direct economic benefit to wider society as they demonstrate independence and forward thinking outside the restricted nature of their previous existence, 'they are contributors to improvements in the lives of both men and women and are instigators of change' (Agustin, 1988: 18). Especially with regard to the sex industry, women

migrants are ‘constructed as passive’ (Agustin, 1988: 11 and Doezema, 1999) and forced to work in ways against their wishes but in my opinion however, any vulnerability should be assessed whilst paying attention to this fact – women, and it cannot be forgotten that men too, are as in charge of their own destiny as their will and circumstance allows them to be.

Returning to the belief that proliferate capitalism is the principle fuel behind forced and unforced migration among the world’s marginalised population, it can naturally be argued that the removal and alteration of the neo-liberal economic system is one of the few ways to combat future vulnerability among all migrants, not just the females. In addition – not as a standalone measure (Kaye, 2003) - government policy makers need to implement legislation banning all forms of trafficking as stated in the UN Trafficking Protocol and ‘ensure that trafficked people have access to the protection and support’ (Kaye, 2003: 24) to facilitate finding an escape route away from trafficking. ‘Seen in this light, promoting transparent legal channels of labour migration, ending the use of traffic labour by employers, and protecting workers’ rights in the context of internal and cross-border migration, may be crucial to tackling the trafficking trade’ (Lee, 2007: 7). Rather, the improvement in the socio-economic status of the population, particularly through the education of girls, is likely to lead to reductions in its worst forms of exploitation (Skeldon, 2000).

To expand, an alternative view to that of globalisation and the imposed capitalist economy is presented in Madeley’s (2003) refreshing examination of viewpoints taken from the global South – i.e., those being exploited in the name of globalisation and Northern development. In turn, Antrobus (2003: 62) Bello (2003: 63) and Tripathi (2003: 72) call for ‘a new social contract that acknowledges the rights of people to be protected from the rapaciousness and greed of unrestrained capitalist exploitation’, ‘a flexible mode whereby countries can relate to one another so that if the global economy goes down, everybody does not go down’ and a people-orientated approach, ‘giving the poorest a voice’. Certainly, an alternative world system, with substituted power holders could be the key to eradicating vulnerability and exploitation on its many levels, for both genders. Reinforced by Mies (1998), who seeks the removal of the underdevelopment and dependency created by the present dualistic (Lewis, 1955) economy – one which features subsistence agriculture alongside the production of

goods for the international market – and for it to be replaced with 'greater autarky' (Mies, 1998: 220) and a self-sufficient economy that does not look beyond the reaches of its own borders.

On the whole, women migrant workers are more vulnerable to exploitation, forced labour and human trafficking; with regard to cultural suppression, multi-level responsibilities and greater exposure to risk as participants in the sex industry for instance. Geographical location and individual circumstance affects such potential for vulnerability but what need to become more central is the realisation that men are also vulnerable to exploitation, forced labour and human trafficking in the recession; though to a lesser extent. Only through effective policy implementation in the vein of the International Labour Organization's (ILO's) 'Special Action Programme to Combat Forced Labour (SAP-FL) [which] has commissioned a dozen studies on trafficking and other forced labour outcomes of migration' (Andrees and Linden, 2005: 55) and a fundamental shift in the global economy in its entirety, can vulnerability, irrespective of gender and circumstance, have a fighting chance of being reduced and eventually eradicated.

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