Transcript: Migration Oxford Podcast

Gendered Migration

Jacqueline Broadhead 00:00
Hello, and welcome to the Migration Oxford podcast. I'm Jacqui Broadhead.

Robert McNeil 00:03
And I'm Rob McNeil.

Jacqueline Broadhead 00:05
Today we're talking about gender and migration. Rob, I want to start off by asking you, you know, do you think that this is a good lens for us to be looking at migration through? It's a very broad, wide topic. Is it helpful for us to look at migration through a gender lens?

Robert McNeil 00:25
I think it's critical to be honest with you, I think that it's really...I mean, that side of our...of our...of our existence is something that commonly is a massive factor in whether or not we...we can migrate, whether or not we choose to migrate, and what the impacts of our migration might be. But it's also something that I think has a massive relationship to policy choices. And one of the reasons that I really wanted to talk about this in the first place was to do with a piece of work that the Migration Observatory did about five or six years ago, which is, which is still to this day, one of the most popular pieces of work that we did, and it's something about family migration to the UK, and specifically about the minimum income threshold for, for people who want to bring a partner to come and live...come and live with them in the UK. And it's something which was put...it was introduced as part of the government's policies back in sort of 2011 / 2012, to reduce the net...to reduce net migration in the tens of thousands. And the idea behind it was that it was a sort of technocratic measure. It was designed specifically not to discriminate on the basis of gender, or ethnicity or anything like that, by just basically saying, no, the only thing that matters is: does somebody basically earn enough money to mean that their partner is not going to be...is not going to be a drain essentially on public finances? Right. And so that...and so this amount of money, this 18,600 pound sort of minimum income was introduced. And, in theory, that technocratic solution...is not a gendered one, but in practice, it's incredibly gendered, because there's a basic reality, which is that men are vastly more likely to earn that amount of money than women. And so back in 2015, when we originally did...when we originally got the data from this, 27% of men would not have been eligible to sponsor a spouse, based on this 18,600 pound threshold, but 55% of women, so the majority of women would not be in a position to bring in a spouse on the basis of that. And the reason for that is that women are much more likely, for example, to...to be doing part-time work, or they're much...or they're more likely to be...to be homemakers, or whatever it may be. And so it does create a gender imbalance. I mean, there's a bunch of other discrimination as well, like region-...regional and ethnic discrimination that are introduced by these...this sort of blunt measure of an

income threshold. But the fact that w-...the fact that the majority of women at that point in time, did not earn enough money to bring a spouse over, whereas only around about a quarter of men were in that situation, suggested to me that if you don't have a gender lens on your migration analysis, then you commonly make very, very significant errors in the way that you introduce those policies or, or if not errors, then you introduce policies that discriminate in a way you may not have thought about.

Jacqueline Broadhead 03:16
I think that's really true. And I also think it's one of those areas that really strikes me kind of from a research perspective, where having both the quantitative analysis and the qualitative can become so important. So you are able to have some forms of kind of generalisation, but you're also not...you also don't get kind of drawn into stereotyping. But I also think that it's...this is one of those areas where the discrimination also then pulls through into policymaking and research itself, right. And so the inclusion of the voices of lived experience becomes so important, because actually being able to tease out some of these differences, both through research findings, but also through kind of direct...direct experience is so important. And we, you know, we know, worldwide, there's still gaps in the number of women in leadership roles within universities, within political organisations, etc. And so, I think that's why I was sort of really interested for us to have this discussion. I'm really looking forward to listening to our two speakers.

Robert McNeil 04:24
Absolutely. And so we're very grateful to be joined today by Professor Dr. Melissa Siegel, who's Professor of Migration Studies at UNU-MERIT, United Nations University at Maastricht University, and by Alphonsine Kabagabo, who is the Director of Women for Refugee Women, an NGO based in the UK. You're both women who have migrated, you're both...you've both been through those processes in one way or another. And it would be quite useful for me to just get a very quick understanding of your experiences and whether or not you think that actually, it was different for you, because you are a woman. Can I start...could I start with you, Melissa?

Melissa Siegel 05:01
Sure. Yeah. So that's right. So I'm an American-born woman who is living in the Netherlands. And I also migrated first, I would say, for reasons of being an international student. So you know, I've really been in a very privileged position from a migration perspective. Definitely the passport that I hold, and the type of migration that I did, allowed me to have very specific rights and abilities. And of course, you know, there are still gendered components. They're just as, you know...by product of being a woman, people sometimes deal with you differently or interact differently. But I would say that I had probably a more privileged migration experience.

Robert McNeil 05:44
Yeah. So Alphonsine, I mean, could you tell us a bit about your experience as well, please?

Alphonsine Kabagabo 05:49
I would not think my experience, the fact that I'm a woman, that didn't impact on the experience I had, because when I was rescued from the genocide in Rwanda, my experience was becoming an asylum

seeker in Belgium, not in the UK. And I went to claim...I was with my dad, my nephew, so we were all treated equally in that sense.

Robert McNeil 06:12
Right. Ok. So, so that's a useful starting point, because it means that we're not coming at this from the perspective that gender is always a fundamental factor in everything, but it clearly makes a big difference a lot of the time. And so Melissa, if I...if I could start really getting into this a little bit more. I mean, you've looked at migration in a load of different situations and loads of different contexts, places. So I mean, how much of a role would you say that gender plays in the dynamics of migration? And in the experiences of migrants and...and the communities they leave and the communities they join?

Melissa Siegel 06:47
Yeah, well, that's a massive question that we could have an entire podcast on, you know, just by itself. Well, let's say, ok, first of all, let's take reasons for migration. Ok? So why people are migrating in the first place. And here we do see some gender differences in reasons for migration. Of course, both men and women can migrate for studying abroad like I did, or for work, or for family reasons, or because they are forced to, because of conflict, persecution, violence, all of these things. But we do actually see women or men more represented in some of these reasons. So for example, when it comes to family reasons or family reunification and family formation, we see women being more highly represented in this reason for migration. So we still see more women populating that category than men. And if we look at labour migration, we still see that, you know, over 60%, of labour migrants are actually men. Now, additionally, like the late Graeme Hugo said once, you know, migration can be both a cause and a consequence of female empowerment, also. So when women are more empowered, they might be also more able to migrate. But also through migration, they also might be more empowered, because, you know, it can allow women to access employment and education, and maybe improve gender equality and norms and strengthen their own agency, and their ability to make independent decisions and, you know, get to certain kind of desired outcomes. But of course, on the other side, we know that migration can also exacerbate vulnerabilities, particularly for women with a, you know, including abuse and trafficking, particularly when migrants are low-skilled or irregular. And we know, obviously, these abuses can happen for both men and women. But women are perhaps a bit more vulnerable to certain types of issues within the migration cycle. And then of course, the treatment of people at destination countries often differs by gender. So let's say, at least in…in Western countries, female migrants are often much more accepted as not being a threat to the host populations, whereas men are sometimes treated as more of a threat and maybe more with some concerns. So there are already quite a lot of differences there. And then if we even think about the effects of that migration, so it can be positive or negative, it also depends on if a man or a woman migrates and maybe who stays behind. So there are a lot of things that we could get into there. So those are just a few of the differences. There's a lot more we can get in there. But I want to try to keep it more brief for the sake of time.

Robert McNeil 09:31
Thanks a lot. That's brilliant. Alphonsine...your organisation Women for Refugee Women is all about making sure that the voices of women...of refugee women in the UK are heard. So could you just tell me a bit about what the particular obstacles that women face in being heard in migration debates might be and what needs to happen for these to be overcome, do you think?

Alphonsine Kabagabo 09:54
Thank you. I think, from what Melissa said, one of the biggest challenges, just being a woman, means some of the women we have [in] our network are here to seek protection, not necessarily for the traditional reason you seek protection (war or genocide). We have a lot of women in our network who are here because they are fleeing gender-based violence. And because of that, sometimes they're not heard. They don't really...able to express all they went through, for many reason, for...because it's taboo, it's...they're not ready, they're traumatised, they're mentally not well, to talk about that they had been violated, that they had been...I mean, they had been raped, they had been trafficked, they had been forced to be married, they have had FGM. So the fact they're a woman, the reason they flee, and they come here means sometimes so difficult for them to be heard, to be believed. Because the traditional way, say you are fleeing a war, you are fleeing, you know, discrimination in a country because of religion and all that, it's not always a coincidence that gender is an issue, and I will not going to go into the political of the...that, but it's the reality we face and the women in our network. So women are sometimes not heard, not understood, because they're just women. And the reason they flee is so more varied, in some cases. Otherwise, they face like everyone else, the understanding of navigating the system here that is so complex. The issue of having to provide evidence, if you have been raped or based on other violence, it's not easy to just be there and provide all the evidence. If you are here because of your sexual orientation to provide those evidence means really, yeah. And the disbelief sometimes that the women are really not. Yeah, they don't believe their stories. As an organisation we think it's absolutely important, is to allow women to first have that confidence. Most of them come from a background where as a woman you don't speak out in public, that you don't share your stories. So giving them the confidence to speak out, giving them the space to feel safe, to feel understood, and providing them now, the skills, the language, everything else they need, so they can overcome those challenges.

Robert McNeil 12:05
That's a...that's a very, very, very interesting answer. And I mean, from my point of view as well, just to think about, to some extent, the fact that the systems designed to protect people have been designed on very much male parameters is quite interesting in itself. Now, Alphonsine, I know that Women for Refugee Women has also been working a lot on the Nationality and Borders Bill. Now, the Borders Bill has changed UK law recently to mean that refugees who are deemed to have arrived in the UK by what the government calls "dangerous routes" are precluded from family reunification. Now, the government's claim is that this is...that the Bill's designed to help to protect women and...women and children, particularly, they focus in on. Do you agree that the Bill will actually achieve that or not?

Alphonsine Kabagabo 12:57
Not. Certainly not. We are very concerned about the impact of the Nationality and Borders Bill on women. As you said...the law now discriminates between refugees based on the way they arrived. Those who have taken irregular routes have less rights, will have less support. And we know 90% of family reunion visas are granted to women and children. So this puts them in even more vulnerable position. Because if they can't get these regular routes, they will have to take a difficult choice of whether they put their lives at risk to join, not thinking they will be saved or they will be supported. So we are absolutely concerned. And as we said before as well, the new law are harmful to women, when

they have to put the claim straightaway when they arrived. And as I said, most of them have been through trauma that don't allow them to be able to speak immediately about what they have been through. So this is not protecting women. They're making them more vulnerable, even than before.

Robert McNeil 13:57
Thank you so much. So Melissa, what...I mean, what are...what are...migration issues that specifically do affect men. And I suppose, also, it's important to recognise that we should think about transgender people as well in this context, as well.

Melissa Siegel 14:11
So I think something that's important to recognise is, well one thing I already talked about is that men are often actually less accepted by host populations because men in general just already often seen as possibly more threatening than...than women are. But men are often carrying a really heavy burden also, from family members back home. There's a huge pressure to send remittances, there's a huge pressure often to also be seen as successful. Particularly, you know, for their families back home, for the reputation also of the families, their own reputation if they are so...looking to get married in the future. So there are a lot of issues there for men too. And then we also have gender-selective demand for labour also with men. So, you know, it's mainly men going, for example, into construction work or...or landscaping work or, you know, a lot of this like very hard factory work, things like that, too. So trans populations. I mean, transgender people are extremely vulnerable. So they're often coming from contexts where being trans is not ok and not allowed. And that might even be part of the reason why they're migrating. You know, more than 70% of trans populations that are...that are trafficked, are trafficked into sex...the sex industry. So there's really a lot of sexual exploitation there. But a lot of other kinds of exploitation, a lot of vulnerabilities. And even, you know, if we think about a very real context to ourselves, right now, with regard to the Ukrainian situation, we have seen big problems with transgender women, for example, trying to get out of Ukraine to cross the border into Poland or into other countries, and actually, Ukrainian border guards not allowing them to cross the border. Because as you probably well know, in Ukraine, there's a rule that men of fighting age are not allowed to leave the country because they're supposed to be defending the country. And even if it says in their passport, even if they're identified as female in their passport (so Ukraine officially has actually recognised them as female), we've heard quite a lot of really bad stories about transgender women not being able to leave the country, being told no, actually, you're really a man, and you need to stay and fight for your country. So I mean, there are all kinds of issues when it comes to the transgender population that's already usually a more vulnerable population, and something that we really probably need to be doing more work on.

Robert McNeil 16:31
Alphonsine, one of the things that you...that I know you guys work on as well is...is the...challenges or issues relating to the detention of refugee women in the UK or asylum-seeking women, rather, in the UK. So could you just tell us a bit about what the issues are, as far as you're concerned there?

Alphonsine Kabagabo 16:47
Our research has shown that the majority of women, as I said before, are survivors of gender-based violence. So they have been subject to all those…and now you lock them in a detention centre than putting them in the community, they are re-traumatised, they are desperate, we have a detention group that we meet every week, they...I can't tell you the trauma, they go through. We launched, a few months ago, a legal challenge to the Home Office to at least make sure the women who are traumatised are accessing services that are face-to-face, that are relevant to the situation they are in. Unfortunately, we lost that challenge. And we are considering re-, you know, doing an...appeal because we think simply detention should be scrapped, because it's re-traumatised the women, it...makes sure they are separated from their family. So the Home Office itself said, detention, immigration detention, is to remove people from the UK who are here because they are not allowed to be here. But their own statistics have shown that only 8% of the people...women detained have been sent back, 92% have settled back in the community and have rebuilt their life and they've contributed, so they... even, they contradict themselves, that the best way to help those women is to detain them. No, no, it's...it is a cause we are so committed because it's just completely ruining the lives of the women.

Robert McNeil 18:11
Ok, that's...that's disturbing. And...and I'm grateful for your...for your...for your views there, Alphonsine. Finally, this is a question...this is a...this is a...moving into a slightly less traumatic view, sort of area of...of discussion. Can I just ask both of you, do you think that a more interconnected world—so a world where there is more mobility, where...I mean, which is happening, I mean, we are seeing more people moving around the world—do you think that is creating a better world for women or a better society for women generally? And, if not, what...what needs to change? So let me start with...Melissa, if I can just start with you, and then Alphonsine, I'll come back to you in a second.

Melissa Siegel 18:56
I would say on...on average, yes, it's making the world better for women. That does not mean that it's making the world better for all women, and in all situations, absolutely not. But I think the fact that we have, you know, more global movement of knowledge, if you think about also social remittances, and all of these other things, and the fact that women can also move to countries where they're more respected, where they have more empowerment, where they have more rights, and all of these things, I think this is extremely beneficial. And the fact that we have new norms and values that can also be transferred between different countries, I think this is also extremely beneficial. But at the same time, obviously, movement isn't only good. Women can also move into vulnerability or be trafficked or have really bad experiences in irregular migration. And, and you know, we still live in a...in a very imperfect world, where most countries are still, you know, patriarchal societies where women are still not equal to men.

Alphonsine Kabagabo 19:54
I can only agree with Melissa, actually, because in my experience, this interconnection, you have the women movement being stronger, women organising...you know, together about climate emergency, gender inequality, migrant rights, all that, strengthening a movement building of women. That's one, but also it's...as Melissa said, moving to another country when your voice can be heard more, sometimes, when you feel empowered more. I sometimes take my own example. I say, yes, I grow in a country

where I could have a voice, but at that time Rwanda was not at the point where women were very empowered, which is different from now. Now, women have it. But when I came to a country where I can use the voice, I used it, to speak out. I used it to access education. Opportunities for education are more available to women, to young girls, who in some countries don't get that. So there is that...really capacity and opportunity to feel more empowered, to access more opportunities, to build a movement for change for women. But, as Melissa said, again, I will totally accept...it's the fact that when you are moving around as a woman, yeah, the fact you are a woman gets some danger, but for sure, the interconnection, the capacity to move around, that's why we fight for allowing more women to be settled in another country when they're fleeing gender-based violence, because that interconnection, that solidarity with other women movement, change their life and give them the power, sometimes, they don't have back home.

Robert McNeil 21:28
Alphonsine, Melissa, thank you so much for speaking to us today. It's been an incredibly enlightening conversation and a privilege for me to hear you both talk about this. Thank you very much.

Jacqueline Broadhead 21:38
You've been listening to the Migration Oxford podcast. I'm Jacqui Broadhead.

Robert McNeil 21:41
And I'm Rob McNeil.