FEMINIZATION AND PROBLEMATIZATION OF MIGRATION: EUROPE IN THE NINETEENTH AND TWENTIETH CENTURIES

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Migration researchers and policy makers endlessly repeat the claim that a feminization of migration has taken place. Authors use phrases like: “women workers form the majority in movements as diverse as those of Cape Verdians to Italy, Filipinos to the Middle East and Thais to Japan.” The countries mentioned are not chosen randomly, although the phrase “as diverse as” might suggest this. These are the cases in which migrant women do outnumber men. Examples of precisely the opposite could as easily be given: immigrant men outnumber immigrant women in Saudi Arabia (70 percent men), Cuba (73), or Bangladesh (86).

In some countries, such as Singapore, the number of documented migrant women has increased. In 1978, Singapore introduced the Foreign Maids Scheme which made it possible for women from the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Burma, Sri Lanka, India, and Bangladesh to enter Singapore as “live-in” domestic workers. The migrant domestic worker population grew from 5000 in 1978 to 150,000 in 2005. These data are to some extent misleading. The Scheme was introduced to fight the exploitation and abuse of foreign domestic workers, and registration was part of that fight. The above data partly reflect an increase in the number of documented

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3 Data refer to 2005. For references see tables.

domestic workers. Before 1978, women also migrated to Singapore as domestic workers, but these older migrations were largely not registered. The current percentage of women among migrants in Singapore is 50 percent. There are no data available that allow us to compare the current percentage of migrant women to that in the past. Examples like these, which refer to an increased demand for domestic workers, an increased number of documented migrant women and increasing complaints about the maltreatment of migrant women, are used to claim worldwide trends of feminization of migration and, at the same time, to turn the migration of women into a problem.

Frequently it is not clear what feminization means. It is used to indicate that women outnumber men in migration and to indicate that the number of women equals the number of men now, but did not in the past. It also refers to (assumed) changes in migration: increased long-distance migration of women (as opposed to mostly short-distance migration in the past), or an increase of the number of women who are pioneers or single migrants (as opposed to the assumption that they were dependent migrants in the past). Authors generally offer no proof for feminization and only observe that women today form about 50 percent of the migrants—then to move on to issues such as migrant women’s health hazards, the problems of care-workers, domestic servants, or mail order brides, or to prostitution, trafficking and illegality. In this way the assumed feminization of migration is paralleled by a problematization.
