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TRANSNATIONAL FAMILY TIES. A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF
MOROCCAN WOMEN

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Abstract

The article sets out the results of a research study into transnational family ties from the point of view of women of Moroccan origin living in Spain and Belgium. The experiences of women located in women living in either of them differ. The approaches that have been used have been mostly qualitative studies based on detailed interviews of various women of first and second generation migration. The analysis of the transnational ties of these women has been structured around three basic pillars: remittances, transnational citizenship and transnational motherhood. The results of the research reveal that women of Moroccan origin are involved in a complex network of transnational relations which brings about a significant change in their lives and in their personal life projects. In addition, the analysis of the impact of transnationalism on successive generations of immigrants shows that some members of these generations maintain a heterogeneous, open and permeable cultural identities, which makes strong transcultural relationships emerge.

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1. Introduction

During the two decades of the 1960s and the 1970s, various European countries such as France, Belgium and Holland recruited tens of thousands of unskilled workers from Morocco in order to solve the problem of a local shortage of these workers. This migratory flow fitted perfectly with the strategy of the Moroccan authorities in their attempt to deal with the high level of unemployment and profit from the remittances that the migrants sent back, sums of money that were essential to reduce the balance of payments deficit. The contracting of these workers slowed down considerably around 1973, but this did not put an end to the migratory flow from Morocco (or similar countries) to Europe. The migration in search of work was followed by family migration, first in the form of family regrouping and later, through the formation of a family (especially through marriage). In the countries which received immigrants, the restrictive policies paid no attention to family links as a legitimate reason for immigration. From the point of view of the countries of origin of the migrants, in this case Morocco, the intention to emigrate abroad was also influenced by factors other than family ties. In recent years, it has been recognised more and more that the role of men and women in migration is quite different from their role in family migration and in the family networks within migration. In fact, there is a need to take into account the element of gender in studying international migration. The decade of the 1990s is marked as a period characterized by the incorporation of the point of view of gender in Women's Studies, and thus, female displacement is analysed as a force for women in the international workplace. Immigrant women began to be considered "social actresses" with the capacity of their own agency. In fact, Woo Morales (2007) has shown that women's voices on the subject of migration have opened up power conflicts in the gender relations within families, sometimes to the point of generating changes in gender roles. In the same way, a study by Gu (2010) of Taiwanese women in the United States maintains that the women frequently replace the Taiwanese cultural practices with American ones in order to apply an effective pattern of conduct and justify their new interactions with their husbands, children and in-laws. The author uses the term "emotional transnationalism" to describe the psychological experience associated with transnational cultural practices. The struggle with feelings of ambivalence and the contradictions they face in their search for a cultural identity can be traumatic for these women.

For Solé, Parella, & Cavalcanti (2008), the novelty of the transnational theory is that it attempts to look into and discover the reasons for the migratory movements and the links that are established, both in the societies that send out emigrants and the host societies, also in between the two, once the flows have become more dynamic and universal. In fact, the authors consider that "the transnational is defined through the perception and analysis of the ties, networks and interconnections that the emigrants set up or maintain, both in the place of origin and in the place of destination, also between the two, relations which are not just in one direction, but which are frequently maintained with the place from which the migrant departed. It is a return journey which can be temporary or permanent, but which starts from a specific place and heads for a specific place for well-defined reasons". By analysing the transnational family links of the women of Moroccan origin in Spain and Belgium, the history/story of female Moroccan immigration can be told from various perspectives: women as mothers, as wives and as daughters, women from here and there.

The quantity and the quality of the family links which are maintained with the place of origin differ from one generation to another. For Brah (2011), within transnationalism, the relationship set up by the

first generation with its place of origin is different from that of successive generations, as it is mediated by the memory of what has been left behind recently and by the experiences of separation and displacement, as the migrant attempts at the same time to find a new orientation, form new social networks and learn to negotiate new economic, cultural and political situations. In addition, Brah (2011) insists that within each generation, the experiences of men and women will also be moulded in a different way on account of gender relations. The reconfigurations of these social relations will not be a matter of direct imposition of the patriarchal norms deriving from the country of origin over and above those of the host country. In fact, both elements will undergo transformations while they are articulated in and through specific policies, institutions and meaning systems. Furthermore, both the first emigrants and their descendants may encourage rejection in the place where they reside, on the one hand, and on the other, residing abroad, with the tastes, habits and preferences generated by living abroad, weaken the desires of the migrants to belong to the national community in the place where they no longer reside (Waldinger, 2017).

2. Research Methods

2.1. Techniques of data collection

In this research study, a qualitative approach is applied from the point of view of interpretation. A detailed interview was chosen as the tool to develop the study. The reason for the choice of the interview is based on the need to find out in minute detail about the life experiences of women of Moroccan origin. Aguirre (1995, p. 17) points out that the interview allows the researcher to extract testimony on the actions, representation and perceptions that the subjects have of the different social situation. This study focuses upon women of Moroccan origin resident in Spain and Belgium and the questions have been left open in order to widen the narrative discourse to the maximum. Furthermore, the sample has been chosen bearing in mind the objectives of this study. Interviews were carried out with women of Moroccan origin aged between 24 and 56. The interviews were held with participants who resided in cities of the greatest concentration of members of the Moroccan community: Brussels, Antwerp, Almería and Granada.

2.2. Analysis of the information

The analysis of the content of the interviews was carried out in two stages: in the first stage, each interview was analysed separately and then they were related. This allowed us to respect the individuality of the women interviewed and evaluate the experience of migration of each one of them, framing the interview and interpreting it in itself. In the second stage, the similarities and differences between the interviews were analysed, which enabled us to establish some explanations relative to the diversity revealed amongst the women interviewed. It is important to point out that the interpretative analysis has been ordered into thematic nuclei which cover the main areas of interest about which we wish to collect information and thus facilitate its study: the socio-demographic data about the women interviewed, their class, family status, motive for immigration, the legal histories of the women, their work history, their strategies for mobility, participation in organisations, and the last nucleus covers their experience of migration and how they evaluate it themselves.

3. Findings

The results obtained in this research study bring up a series of questions with regard to the transnational experience of the Moroccan women and their descendants in Europe.

3.1. Women of Moroccan origin and the context of migration

The presence of close family members in a host country influences the direct and indirect conditions of the trajectory of migration. Malika, for example, although she arrived alone, she enjoyed the support of an elder sister who had already immigrated. The ties of family are seen as the safest, since the stronger the ties of blood relations, the stronger the network will be. In this sense, the ties between parents and children, siblings, aunts and uncles and nephews and nieces are stronger. Thus, relations are generated which are not measured in monetary terms, but in family links. For Arango (2000) “the networks have taken on great relevance, especially now that migration to certain countries is very restricted. This situation can be explained basically by two factors: first because in many countries family reunification constitutes a considerable proportion of the flows of immigration and, on the other hand, because the importance of the social networks is destined to grow as it becomes more difficult to enter host countries, on account of the means of family networks to reduce the costs and risks of displacement” (p. 42).

“My sister came first and then I came [...] both my sister and I are here.” (Malika, 1st generation Spain)

The essential and central cause for the change undertaken by Moroccan women in the host countries is their access to paid work. This social phenomenon has acted as a tool to break the established moulds and allow the women to see themselves as social agents that are more active and able to control social change, thus contradicting the stereotype of women as merely accompanying their husbands. For these reasons, female Moroccan immigrants represent, in the strictest sense, everything that transnationality means. For some, it means economic rewards for work in accordance with their education and potential; others are working for the first time; yet others have to accept a lower level in their occupational status, below what they might expect in return for their input in education and professional qualifications.

Furthermore, sometimes the situation of judicial and social inequality in the country of origin turns the migration into a “strategy of social mobility developed to enhance various complex projects of seeking autonomy” (Borderías, 1991, p. 112). For Malika and Najwa, migration abroad is converted into an opportunity to improve the conditions of their lives, a search for a more favourable context to achieve their aspirations that would be impossible to find in their country of origin. Also, the social pressure of the situation may encourage single women to choose to migrate, although they know that the openings for work abroad are difficult. Malika is unmarried and alone after the death of her parents, and she found in immigration the only solution for a better future and a way to face the lack of social prestige and the fear of loneliness.

“My father died and my mother too. My brothers looked after themselves, their wives and children. And my sisters are married and live with their husbands.” (Malika, 1st generation Spain).

Successive generations of descendants of Moroccan immigrants acquire specific characteristics that do not correspond with those of the country of origin, nor with those of the first migrants, or with those of the society of the host country. Various degrees of the culture and religion of the first generation are maintained, but a notable development of basic values and cultural structure is in evidence. In the experiences of the second-generation women, we have noticed that the immediate environment of these young women encourages in them the existence of double cultural ties.

“I can’t see my daughter living anywhere else but here, it is our country and we are perfectly integrated. The second and third generations have little or no connection with their country of origin. The only tie we have with our country of origin is the family [...]” (Farida, 2nd generation Belgium).

“I would like them to be aware that before being Belgian, we are above all Moroccan. They should be aware of this on all levels: social, economic, cultural[...]” (Warda, 2nd generation Belgium).

When the ties with the family back home are lost, the idea of a return home becomes complicated and difficult.

“In Belgium we have our house and we are not short of money. Before, I used to miss my family, especially my parents, but now that they are dead, not any more, also, I’ve lost four brothers and my husband died last year. To tell the truth, I don’t have the same desire as before to return to my country” (Safia, 1st generation Belgium).

3.2. Remittances

Transnational families maintain complex interrelations between the children and their parents, the host society and the society of the country of origin. They set up constant ties and links between the two societies and cultures. And without a doubt, remittances constitute the most important aspect of transnationalism, since they form the principal resource for investment in the communities of the country of origin. In many homes, the remittances sent by family members who left and live abroad constitute the only income, upon which the rest of the members of the family who remained in the country of origin depend.

“[...] I have a large family and when I finished my degree and started work, it coincided with my father being laid off, and my elder brother, who I also wanted to help, couldn’t find work, he was off work for many years [...]at that time my sister was studying, all my brothers and sisters were studying, there was no money coming in. I helped every month, most of my earnings were for my family until all my brothers and sisters got work [...]” (Manar, 1st generation Spain).

Manar feels quite proud of becoming responsible for her family, for carrying out a role which in Moroccan society mostly belongs to men. Thanks to the remittances she sent back to Morocco she was able to help her family pull through: she took on the cost of bringing her brother to Spain and she also took responsibility for paying for her other two brothers to study until they were able to find work. As Georges (1990, p. 235) states, remittances play a central role in raising the living standards of the families of migrants.

“[...] I did what the men in my family did not do. I helped the men in my family, I enabled my older brother to come here and begin his life [...] I paid for his journey and I helped him here to get going, for more than a year. I helped my other brothers: my sister, who is a teacher and another brother, also a teacher, to continue with their studies [...]” (Manar, 1st generation Spain).

3.3. Transcultural citizenship

Please replace this text with context of your paper. The practice of transnational citizenship that Moroccans undertake can be classified into five categories: electoral participation, party political activity, participation in associations, consultation of organisations of formal bilateral cooperation and finally, participation in them. Furthermore, participation by women immigrants in socio-political life is largely determined by their incorporation in the socio-economic and political structures and by the opportunities available to them in the host society, by the duration and stability of their residence, by their position within their own community and by the ties of these communities to the societies of their country of origin (Unzueta and Vicente, 2011).

“The participation of women is considerable. They belong to associations, they join political parties, they vote in elections, they occupy very important posts...” (Safia, 1st generation Belgium)

The immigrant Moroccan women do not really structure their participations within feminine movements. Rather, they are present either as individual members of the associations of women, or, more often, as users of the services offered by the movements of associations in general, and particularly women's associations (literacy programmes, cultural activities, work advice, professional placement, etc.). Although recently, we have seen the appearance of organizations or associations linked to the needs these women have with regard to their sense of identity (religion, origin, etc.). In the diaspora, feelings of identity are reinforced, allowing positive examples of solidarity and mutual support to emerge (social remittances, for example). Some associations of women of Moroccan origin in Spain and Belgium run transnational activities that are often quite well developed. These are humanitarian activities, concerned with care and human development.

“Yes, I belong to an association of family solidarity.” (Najlae, 1st generation Belgium).

3.4. Transnational motherhood

Amongst the examples of female Moroccan immigration, we also find the case of women who have decided to leave Morocco for various reasons, basically on account of economic pressure. They are usually divorced women who have to support their family on their own. These women decide to emigrate first without their children, whom they leave in the care of family members. Their main objective is to be able to find paid work as soon as possible so that they can send money to their family. It is important to point out that in the new context of immigration, these female immigrants take on new roles and acquire a certain degree of autonomy with respect to the society of their country of origin. In general, it involves a process that carries with it significant changes.

For these women, bringing to fruition the migratory project is complex if only for the fact of them having to leave their children in the country of origin; quite frequently the sense of the migratory project is questioned. These women have ambivalent feelings. They personally undergo the contradiction of migration: on the one hand, they emigrate in order to offer greater wellbeing to their children, but, on the other, they all pay the price associated with the physical absence of the maternal figure, all the people involved are negatively affected (Ariza, 2011).

“No, I’m not going back to Morocco. I have my house here and I’m settled here. I have a daughter in Morocco, I’m attempting to arrange family regrouping and I hope she will come to Spain soon. I want her to study, to help me with the paperwork, go to the doctor with me. I hope to settle down here with her and with my sister. But of course, we cannot forget our home country, we’ll go there and spend a month, 15 or 20 days and then we’ll come back” (Hayat, 1st generation Spain).

The lack of protection and discrimination suffered by divorced women in their country of origin lie behind the causes that motivate these women to decide to emigrate: in search of work, a better quality of life and a better future for their children. Also, most of these women come at their own initiative; they have no support network in the host society and often have greater difficulty during the migratory process since they only have themselves to rely on.

“[...] the Moroccan woman that usually suffers very difficult conditions. That is, she is usually divorced or comes alone and has no family here, it is very difficult for her to get the basic necessities” (Najma, 1st generation Spain).

It is worth mentioning, coinciding with Mancilla, Villalobos, Saavedra, & Soto (2016, p. 14), that in spite of the distance, and also through it, transnational motherhood is evidence that the ties and the relations are maintained and not broken, on the contrary, a different type of motherhood is put into practice: transnational motherhood.

4. Conclusion

The great development in the new technologies in transport, communications or information serves to support the Moroccan diaspora and maintain transnational family ties. Apart from the remittances, it allows ideas, practices and resources to be exchanged and transformed.

The identities of the female immigrants of Moroccan origin as social constructions are the result of the interaction with the immediate environment and the widest transnational context. It involves assuming a new way of belonging, the product of roles acquired which facilitate the negotiation of the gender roles.

For these women of Moroccan origin in Belgium and Spain, the degree of cultural integration is inversely related to the quality and quantity of the transnational relations and dynamic networks.

The transnational relations of the first-generation migrants with their country of origin are more extensive than those of the successive second and third generations, whose contacts and ties are established

with other places, according to their new identity. In spite of this, from our study it is clear that the analysis of the impact of transnationalism over the successive generations of immigrants shows that some members of these generations are able to keep up a sense of belonging to two "homes" and negotiate fluid and contextualized identities.

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