

# **MIS/REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN MIGRANT WORKERS IN THE MEDIA: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS**



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# Table of Contents

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Introduction .....   | 4  |
| Understanding Representations of Women Migrant Workers ..... | 4  |
| Methodology .....  | 7  |
| Results .....  | 9  |
| The ‘Victim’ .....   | 9  |
| The ‘Hero’ .....   | 10 |
| The ‘Threat’ .....   | 11 |
| <i>Country-specific results</i> .....                        | 12 |
| Canada .....   | 12 |
| Italy .....  | 13 |
| Mexico .....   | 13 |
| Philippines .....  | 14 |
| Discussion.....  | 15 |
| Conclusion/Recommendations.....                              | 16 |
| References .....   | 18 |
| Appendix .....   | 24 |

## Introduction

International recognition and understanding of the role of Women Migrant Workers (WMWs) have been transformed given the feminization of migration and shifting labour migration governance regimes. Gender norms, perceptions, and power relationships influence women's labour migration across borders, as women migrant workers interact with multiple actors including States, employers and citizens in countries of origin, transit and destination. Such norms and perceptions are both reflected in and influenced by media representations. Indeed, media are particularly influential in shaping public perceptions, and therefore represent valuable sites of study of social change.

As part of a UN Women project, funded by the European Union, that aims to strengthen international human rights mechanisms for WMW by including a gender focus<sup>1</sup>, a media content analysis was conducted with the purpose of examining media representations of WMWs, which can both reflect and influence public perceptions. Adopting a comparative case study approach, a qualitative content analysis of the representation of WMWs in newspapers was carried out across a range of migrant sending and receiving countries.

## Understanding Representations of Women Migrant Workers

Dominant representations emerge over time through discursive practices at individual and societal levels, through policies, media production and everyday social communication (Hall, 2007). Representations of women migrant workers are often subject to prevailing systems of knowledge production, which are tied to gender norms (Mohanty, 2008). Depictions of women migrant workers are shaped by discourses pertaining to gender, race, nationality and immigration status. WMWs are represented by an array of terms and categorizations: care worker; mother; sister; supporter; criminal; sex worker; victim; hero, etc.

Whether in origin, transit or destination countries, WMWs face negative and positive stereotypes, reinforced by dominant representations, which feed assumptions about their behaviours or aptitudes based on their ethnicity or origin, and gender. Gendered norms and values can influence migration processes and experiences (and vice versa). For example, *machismo* culture in some Latin American countries feeds a depiction of women as "less than" men and even some *coyotes*<sup>2</sup> in Mexico have stated they prefer *hombres de ranchos* (rural, "rustic" men), because of their perceived toughness, compared to women<sup>3</sup> (Angulo-Pasel 2015).

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<sup>1</sup> The title of the project is entitled 'Promoting and Protecting Women Migrant Workers' Labour and Human Rights: Engaging with international, national human rights mechanisms to enhance accountability'

<sup>2</sup> The term *coyote* refers to people smugglers who charge a fee to bring migrants across the border

<sup>3</sup> This perception is partly associated with the smuggling business on the northern border of Mexico where different service packages are sold to migrants who want to cross the border. If it is agreed between the parties (the coyote and the migrant), a guarantee can be included for the migrants who, in case of detention and deportation, the coyote will guide them back up to three times at no additional cost. For the coyote, it is perceived

In the case of Moldovan women in Italy, families tend to prefer Eastern European women as care workers rather than, for example, Filipina workers due to racialized assumptions about Eastern European women caregivers' "innate" abilities (Miles, 1982; Silverstein, 2005). Yet simultaneously, some media outlets adopt a narrative criticizing WMW caregivers for taking jobs from Italian workers. This process of idealizing or stereotyping workers through gendered and racialized depictions is not unique to care workers; indeed, agricultural workers in Canada face similar representations leading to accompanying gendered and racialized assumptions about their roles, worth and abilities. For example, women farmworkers are more likely to be hired on strawberry farms where employers perceive migrant women to be more docile and gentle workers (McLaughlin, 2010; Preibisch and Binford, 2007; Hennebry, 2006).

In the United States, Latin American women are often closely linked in media to domestic care work, where terms like "cleaning gals" or "baby sitter" are used (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007). Associations with such roles can solidify over time.

Migrant workers of both genders are most often subjects of 'othering' discourses, which identify migrant workers as outsiders, 'us' versus 'them', which is closely related to ideas of inferiority (Sharma, 2001; Hennebry and McLaughlin, 2013; Daley, 2017). Such discourses play a pivotal role in the ideological justification, legitimization and sustainability of the coercive and exploitative practices to which migrant workers are subjected (Bauder and Di Biase, 2005). Further, the process of othering, can be institutionalized through language and discourse, and can substantially affect WMW's exercise of legal and political rights. Notions of who "belongs" and who does not become reinforced through governance frameworks (Sharma, 2001; Jiwani, 2006; Hennebry and McLaughlin, 2013).

In addition to gendered norms and perceptions, colonialism and the inherited assumptions that accompany colonial pasts, greatly influence present-day ideas surrounding WMWs, as articulated by Mohanty's (2008) definition of colonialism as "...a relation of structural domination and a suppression, often violent, of the heterogeneity of the subject or subjects in question". Indeed, colonial pasts and associated racialization of groups can significantly influence representations of WMWs, maintaining unequal social and power relations. The power to represent someone or something within a "regime of representation" is an exercise of symbolic violence (Hall, 1997). In the context of this report, social relations are made visible in the representations of groups to the eyes of a society.

Dominant representations of WMWs have the power to modify understandings and knowledge about migrant women, which in turn can determine how WMWs understand themselves, and even influence their behaviour

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as easier to take a group of men than women because it is believed that women are more likely to get caught by border authorities.

and the behaviour of others towards them. Media framing of subjects can shape discourses, which when repeated, can become the dominant discourse and representation of a given group of people (Hall, 1997), creating fields of truth and knowledge around the subject (Foucault, 1989) – contributing to how groups of people are understood and valued. This has the potential to establish commonly accepted ‘truths’ about a group of people (like women migrant workers) or social processes (like migration).

Media representations of WMWs are especially powerful in shaping the discourses around migrants which can have far reaching consequences for migrant women who are often marginalized, lack political representation and whose voices are rarely heard. For example, the characterization of WMWs as ‘victims’ of trafficking has been actively constructed through both media and State discourses. It is manifested in policies which rationalize enhanced security arrangements at borders and on the fringes of society, such as in the sex industry and in the informal economy (Hennebry et al, 2016b). The discourse surrounding human trafficking highlights the harmful effects that can stem from uninformed or narrowly framed representations (Anderson, 2012). Such framing is problematic because women are rendered invisible through this categorization; the agency of women is ignored and the focus is pulled away from approaches which empower women to assert their rights (Hennebry et al, 2016a). In this narrative, women are seen as ‘victims’ in need of protection from harm, rather than individuals whose rights need to be protected (Anderson, 2012). This representation often relies on the State, NGOs and other actors defining and identifying ‘victims’, ignoring the voices and experiences of WMWs. The logic follows that WMWs necessitate intervention by law enforcement trained in identifying ‘victims’ of trafficking in need of rescue; harm is then reproduced by State control methods (i.e., seizure, interrogation, detention, return); consequently, the logic moves away from a rights-based approach into a risk-based approach (Anderson, 2012). Indeed, such representations (including media and policy discourses around trafficking in persons) are typically characterized by sensationalism, gender stereotypes, and distortions that negatively affect strategies to mitigate the realities of trafficking (Brennan, 2005: 38).

Another popular representation of WMWs is that of ‘hero’. Largely associated with women involved in care work, global discourses represent the heroic endeavours of WMWs, focusing on the benefits of remittances and the positive contributions of care work in countries of destination. Although in this representation WMWs’ contributions to national development are lauded, it reinforces conceptions of remittance-driven development and contributes to additional pressure for WMWs to secure remittances. This representation of women as “heroes/heroines of development” idealizes them and neglects their human rights, and the social costs incurred by women migrant workers in securing remittances (Hennebry et al., 2017). Further, such narratives can exacerbate the precarity of migrant workers, and does not recognize the vulnerabilities they may encounter in migration (such as the threat of deportation as a means of employer control).

Further, the 'hero' representation is closely associated with a discourse of 'self-sacrificial labour'. This representation has a coercive effect, disciplining WMWs labour, such that migrant workers will be less likely to challenge labour conditions and demand their rights. This increases WMWs' vulnerability to exploitation since care work and domestic work are already devalued; this work is often performed in private residences, sometimes through informal arrangements, and without access to social protection (Hennebry, 2014; Yeates, 2009). The invisibility, under-regulation, and general informality of the domestic work and care economy, combined with the 'hero' representation of WMWs, amplifies power imbalances between women migrant workers and their employers, leading to increased precarity and vulnerability to exploitation and abuse.

A third popular representation, which has been applied to many groups of migrants, is that of the migrant as a 'threat'. Such media representations cast migrants in negative terms and cover migrants and migration as social and political problems that must be addressed or solved. Migrants are often represented as engaged in criminal activities with other actors trying to "stop them" (Rasinger, 2010). Crime is also over-attributed to migrants; for example, Geschke *et al* (2010) found that migrant crime is overrepresented in German media when compared to the actual number of crimes committed by migrants. The media often communicates the 'threat' of migration and migrants to citizens using metaphors related to the sea, rivers, and water in general (Rasinger, 2010). For example, during news coverage of the crisis in Central America leading to the migration of women and minors to the United States, the *New York Times* reported that "Obama pressured Central American leaders to stop a wave of migrant children" (July 26, 2014, emphasis of the authors). The *Houston Chronicle* discussed the same event indicating that "while US officials are trying to stop the flow of illegal immigration from Central America that works against them, a rising but less visible tide of money is going the other way" (August 11, 2014). Migrant workers have long been framed as an economic threat as well. In the United Kingdom, Polish migrants have been characterized as "torrents" of workers who come to take away the jobs from local residents and workers of a country (Spigelman, 2013). In addition, WMWs have been associated with social problems in popular and media discourse and as moral or social 'threats' – as women who have left their families, or who perform devalued or socially stigmatized work (e.g. domestic work and sex work) (Lawrence, 2015; Kaspar, 2006). Further, as noted above, trafficking is perceived as a "hidden phenomenon" that disproportionately renders migrant women as 'victims'; since it is conflated with crime, illegality and undocumented women (Hennebry et al., 2017).

## Methodology

This study focused on the representation of WMWs in newspapers selected from a range of migrant sending and receiving countries, with a specific focus on WMWs from or working within the three pilot countries of the UN Women project. The Philippines represents a leading sending country for WMWs worldwide; Italy was selected as a primary receiving country for WMWs within Europe (predominantly from Moldova), and Mexico

represents an important sending *and* receiving country for WMWs. Canada was also selected as an example of a primary receiving country of WMWs in North America, with notably large numbers of WMWs from the Philippines. The design of this project was developed in consultation with teams based in UN Women country offices in Moldova, Mexico and the Philippines who assisted with the identification of popular newspapers, and provided language translation and the selection of country specific key terms.

In the last decade, the relevance of the newspaper industry has been challenged by the growing dominance of an online news presence and social media. Nevertheless, the newspaper industry continues to be a source of reliable and relevant information that is subject to professional journalistic practices (accountability, transparency, minimize harm, etc.) (Society of Professional Journalists, 2014). Newspapers therefore offer a valuable contribution of journalistic rigor standardized across the industry, and are additionally available in an electronic format.

A sampling frame was developed using techniques originally employed by Newbold et al. (2002), in which newspaper issues are selected as the units of analysis. In order to capture variations in article content over time, the analysis was conducted over a two-year time period. A purposive sampling strategy was used by selecting the five most prominent newspapers from each country (Riffe, Aust, and Lacy 1995; Lacy et al. 2001). The prominence of a newspaper was based on having the largest distribution size and widest coverage. A complete sampling frame constructed from these newspapers captured approximately 3120 newspaper issues for each country between May 2013 and May 2015.

After selecting five newspapers from Canada, Italy, Mexico and the Philippines, sampling was completed using the media aggregator, Factiva<sup>4</sup> (Factiva 2015). Specific reference to women migrant workers were then identified in articles for analysis. All relevant articles (which specifically mentioned women migrant workers) were selected through a qualitative scan using four coders who employed consistent keyword searches (see annex). A list of articles was generated using keywords related to women migrant workers. Owing to specific country-based variations – including the use of languages other than English – the keywords were adapted for

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