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Book Review: Women Migrant Workers: Ethical, Political and Legal Problems

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***Women Migrant Workers: Ethical, Political and Legal Problems.* Ed. Zahra Meghani. 2016. Routledge. New York. 270 pages, with appendices and index. \$145.00. Hardcover.**

Reviewed by Todd C. Harris¹

They come here to work. They are nobody, they are nothing; they have no rights. So said a Canadian citizen interviewed as part of a research project on Mexican female migrant farmworkers in Canada. *Women Migrant Workers: Ethical, Political and Legal Problems*, the latest addition to Routledge's International Studies of Women and Place series, and deftly edited by Zahra Meghani, leaves the reader with the disturbing realization that these women are somehow both everywhere and nowhere.

The International Studies of Women and Place Series dates from 1993, and now comprises 31 volumes that range widely and internationally over a host of important subjects such as careers, childcare, environmental change, feminism, gender, politics, religion, women's health, work and many others. Meghani's volume takes its rightful place among the others, and makes a compelling, comprehensive and tightly-reasoned case for the fair treatment of female migrant workers from the global South who are employed in liberal, wealthy democracies as care workers, domestic workers, home health workers and farm workers. This 10-chapter volume, with a stirring foreword penned by Maria Jose Alcala, Director of the High-Level Task Force for the International Conference on Population and Development Secretariat, arrives at a particularly opportune time, given our current contentious cultural, political and social debates about immigration. Immigration is an important source of a country's economic growth and competitiveness, and forces such as globalization, income inequality, political unrest and technology, have led to more people on the move than ever before. Based on statistics reported by the United Nations, in 2010, the number of people from the global South living outside their nation of birth was approximately 174 million, accounting for an estimated 75 percent of the global population of migrants. In 2009, women migrants totaled about 83 million, about 48 percent of the total population of international migrants (5). The number of international migrants is expected to significantly increase in the years ahead. This trend is potentially problematic, as the editor and an international, multidisciplinary (e.g. anthropology, economics, gender studies, geography, history, law, philosophy, political science and sociology) group of contributors scrupulously build the case that sending and receiving nations typically do not possess state-based, publically funded social programs equipped to meet the needs of those workers and their dependent family members, including young children.

What accounts for the flow of women workers from poorer nations to richer ones? In the volume's opening chapter, entitled "Women on the Move", Meghani draws a useful distinction between 'pull' factors and 'push' factors. An important pull factor is the increasing number of women in North America, Western Europe and East Asia doing paid work outside of the home. When the men in those households fail to do their fair share of care work and domestic work, and there is a lack of high-quality, publicly funded child and elder care, a gap is created.

Women employees from the global South are being actively recruited to fill this labor vacuum. Chapters Five, Six and Ten provide multi-faceted and fine-grained explorations of this topic. For example, in Chapter Five, economist Amaia Perez Orozco renders visible the

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fundamental unfairness of global care chains via a research project examining migration from Bolivia, Ecuador and Peru to Spain. In this Chapter, the author asks a bracing question – must everything, including the care and very sustenance of the most vulnerable among us, be subject to the capitalist, free-market economy?

When we assess the push side of the global care equation, we observe increasing pressure on poor and middle-class women from the global South to find paying work in more prosperous countries. These women can be pushed by a complex range of factors, such as limited opportunities for social advancement, poverty, low wages and a dearth of attractive employment opportunities. A paucity of high-quality education and health care, corruption and poor governance also compel women to leave home and seek work elsewhere.

Meghani's work builds on earlier research on the feminization of the global labor flow by writers such as Janet Momsen, Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild and Seyla Benhabib and Judith Resnick, and would be a useful addition to the bookshelves of instructors teaching in the fields of business, economics, geography, sociology and women's studies, among other disciplines. Going beyond pure theory, the primary aim of the book, employing a combination of case studies and empirical data, is to provide a nuanced analysis of the problem of the unjust treatment of noncitizens in the global North with a particular focus on class, ethnicity, gender, and race. One of the book's most significant scholarly achievements is to partially rectify the relative absence of detailed and sound data on the international migration of women. Given that the UN reports that since 1960, women migrants have made up approximately half of the total migrant population, this is clearly an under-researched population ripe for additional study.

The book opens with an introductory chapter by the editor, introducing the topic and its importance, and providing a logically-structured 'roadmap' for the book. The volume then unfolds in five sections, with inter-related and overlapping themes. Part one, "Circumstances of Injustice" features two chapters that explore the interaction and discriminatory impact of immigration and employment laws, first in Ireland and then in the US. The next set of chapters provides a critique of the neoliberal model of development utilized by poorer nations that supply care workers to richer ones. Part Three, "Unjust Social Security Systems", criticizes unfair social protection systems that fail to take into account the particular needs of migrant women workers employed in 'low skill' professions. The fourth section of the book, which could have been more fully developed, consists of a single chapter exploring the concept of 'home', and describing the relationship between the Catholic Church and female foreign domestic workers in Singapore. The book's concluding Part five features two chapters identifying new research directions on the feminization of the global labor flow. Each chapter in the book provides copious notes, references, and suggestions for further reading. A minor shortcoming of the book is the absence of a concluding chapter revisiting and re-emphasizing the editor's core arguments, and pulling the strands into a coherent and forceful whole.

Meghani and the majority of her co-authors apportion most of the blame for the unjust treatment of women migrant workers on the theory of neoliberalism, driven by the United States and practiced by international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Neoliberalism emphasizes the value of free-market competition, and seeks to reduce the role of the state. It redefines citizens as consumers. The editor claims that while neoliberal reforms serve the interests of the capital markets, they have worsened the life prospects of the poor and middle class in the Global South that are their debtors. Perhaps this question is beyond the scope of the book, but a central question that goes unanswered is whether neoliberalism can and should be replaced with an alternative system, and if so, what might that system be? This

question takes on added importance in 2016 as the flaws in the neoliberal ideology become more readily apparent to average workers and policy elites alike.

While the volume makes the point that these women often face ‘double discrimination’, and are a particularly vulnerable and marginalized population because they are afforded few, if any, of the same rights and protections received by other workers in receiving nations, it is not an argument against the migration of women workers from poorer countries to richer ones. Rather, the book attempts to construct a persuasive argument for change and to propose a set of plausible solutions. In this, it succeeds.