

— SPECIAL SECTION —

# Religion and Gender in Migration to and from Central and Eastern Europe – Introductory Reflections

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Since the beginning of the 1980s, the previously one-dimensional economic approach that was once dominant in migration studies has been critically reviewed and, as a result, migration has become problematised. The incorporation of other dimensions in the analysis of the processes of migration allowed for more complex diagnoses of global inequalities and related socio-cultural phenomena. As a result, gender became one of the key categories providing an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of migration (see Anthias and Lazaridis 2000; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994). The inclusion of this aspect in analyses has revealed the tremendous diversity of experiences of male and female migrants, and uncovered new global phenomena related to migration, such as global import of care or care chains (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003; Parreñas 2001). Furthermore, it has also shown that migration is shaped, at every stage and to the same extent as economic concerns, by diverse socio-cultural dimensions. As a result, since the 1990s, intersectional perspectives on migration have become increasingly popular in research, examining such dimensions as gender, ethnicity, class, race and sexuality. Nowadays, critical and intersectional approaches have even come to represent the paradigmatic core of migration research.

At the same time, it is important to note that other potentially productive analytical categories have not attracted much interest from researchers studying aspects of migration. For a significant period in the development of this field, one such category was religion.<sup>1</sup> As Louise Ryan and Elena Vacchelli point out, contemporary migration studies tend to marginalise the significance of religion in their analyses and interpretations of the daily lives of migrant women and men (Ryan and Vacchelli 2013). They note that the main reason for the absence of references to religion in these studies is the cultural context of secularism, in which contemporary researchers of migration (usually from the Global North) are raised and in which they work. Religion in

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this context acquires a dual meaning – on the one hand, its importance is interpreted as marginal in understanding the experiences of migration, while on the other, it tends to be analysed critically as a source of oppression of migrants (especially women) and of restrictions on human actions, and thus as an important cause of forced migrations. This approach to religion in studies on migration – often reductionist, stereotypical, one-dimensional – is also associated with the analysis of intercultural relations in the context of multiculturalism. Such analyses therefore tend to focus especially on conflicts, tensions and prejudices that are generated within religious fields and of which the actors are religions in the broadest terms (i.e. religious discourses, institutions, or identities) (see: Goździak and Shandy 2002; Krotofil 2013: 53; Urbańska as well as Goździak and Márton, in this volume).

Another important reason for the paucity of references to religion in studies on migration is the fact that such studies largely focus on the macro-dimension of migration policies, systems and institutions, as well as the economic motives of migrants' actions, which are usually secular in nature (see Bonifacio and Angeles 2010: 2). However, even in research into the socio-cultural dimensions of migration, there has only been sporadic interest in the question of how spirituality, religion and the related institutional affiliation and social networks mediate the experience of migration at its various stages. This failure to recognise religion in studies on migration is, according to Sylwia Urbańska, symptomatic and paradoxical, because many scholars conducting fieldwork in migrant communities benefit from the assistance of ethnic religious organisations – churches, mission and diaspora organisations etc. (Urbańska 2016: 53), but treat them more as a source of information in the preparation of their field research and as contact points, rather than as a distinct field worthy of in-depth research.

It appears that only the post-secular turn observed in the social sciences since the early 2000s (cf. Braidotti 2008) and the increasingly strong presence of an intersectional perspective in migration research from the 1990s onwards have permitted the development of research and theoretical perspectives in studies on migration that have attention for gender and religion. As a result, in recent years we have seen attempts by authors of studies on migration to reflect on the ways in which both gender and religion – understood in organisational terms, but also as values, norms and practices – influence and differentiate migration experiences. Such works include those of Glenda Tibe Bonifacio and Vivienne S. M. Angeles (2010) and Charles Hirschman (2004), who stress that religion is one of the key dimensions of migrants' experiences, i.e. that the processes of migration can only be understood within the framework of religion and gender. Women today comprise almost half of the global migrant population (Donato and Gabaccia 2016), and have different social experiences than men, depending on their role, status, and social expectations as well as on religion. Many studies have demonstrated that religion is an important element of women's identity, who tend not only to be more religious than men, but also to be more attached to the religious community and involved in the processes of religious socialisation of the younger generations (see: Francis and Penny 2014; Levitt 2008; Ozorak 1996; Walter and Davie 1998; Traversa 2012). The models of practices within religious structures also vary, although these differences are not dichotomous, but intersectional, and therefore connected to class, age or ethnicity. This diversity becomes particularly significant in research on migration if one takes into account the fact – discussed by Urbańska in this volume – that the majority of migrant women in Western societies originate from the cultures of the Global South and of Central and Eastern Europe, both of which are areas characterised by a greater attachment to religion and statistically greater religiosity than the societies of the Global North. Religion as an important element of the social identity and belonging, value systems, and actions of migrants – and especially women – is subject to a transnational dynamic and transformations. Above all, there exists a relationship between religion and the social environment (including the state, economic institutions, law, other religions, etc.), and, as Talal Asad writes, it is this relationship to the social world that also needs to be analysed (Asad 1993; see also: Bonifacio and Angeles 2010). Migration creates new room for change for 'doing gender', in identity-

related, institutional or structural terms. These transformations are the result of globalisation, differentiation, or the growing complexity of the contemporary world (see: Traversa 2012). The category of religion also reveals previously unexplored new dimensions of motivations for migration, thus expanding the push-pull theory of the causes of migration. As Catharina P. Williams shows (2008: 345–349), religion is an important factor in making the decision to migrate (e.g. legitimising migration decisions, since for one gender it is identified as the space of moral risk), but also a way of coping with the challenges, stress and costs of migration (e.g. prayer as a coping mechanism). Researchers also analyse the way in which religion mediates in the process of integration with the host society (especially where the dominant religion is different from the religion of the migrants). Adding to this the category of gender clearly demonstrates the differences in women's and men's use of both religious meanings and religious organisations in coping with the migration experience (cf. Bonifacio and Angeles 2010). This topic is developed in detail by Urbańska in her article in this issue, *Assessing the Significance of Religion Perspectives in the Gender and Migration Studies: New Avenues for Scholarly Inquiry*. This integration of the categories of gender and religion (also supplemented by other dimensions, such as ethnicity and generation) is especially visible in research in the context of Western Europe and the United States (see e.g. Bonifacio and Angeles 2010; Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000), particularly in migrant Muslim communities (e.g. Bendixen 2010; Chafic 2010; Pristed Nielsen 2010; Stambouli and Ben Soltane 2010), or various churches, denominations and religious movements from the Far East (e.g. Hüwelmeier 2010; Yang 2002).

Studies focusing on the experiences of migrants from/to Central and Eastern Europe examined from a gender perspective and also considering their embeddedness in the religious field are few and far between. Among the few examples are Krystyna Błeszyńska and Marek Szopski's analysis of the gender dimension of the religiosity of Polish migrants in California (2010), and a study of the links between religion and emancipation of female Polish immigrants in Iceland (Koralewska 2016). It is worth noting that religion in these studies is usually understood as one of the dimensions of ethnicity or in relation to ethnicity, rather than autonomously, as a separate cultural space that triggers, directs, enables or determines social actions. The few existing perspectives of this kind can be found in anthropological research (see the studies on the Vietnamese community in Germany by Gertrude Hüwelmeier (2010) and in Poland by Grażyna Szymańska-Matusiewicz (2013), as well as on Macedonians in Italy by Karolina Bielenin-Lenczowska (2015) and Polish women in the Polish Catholic Mission in Italy by Agnieszka Małek (2008)). In this sense, the aim of the articles presented in this section, considering the Central and Eastern European perspective, is at least in part to fill this gap. They examine the mutual relations between various dimensions of religion, gender and migration, identifying the first category as central, and separate from other systems (the aforementioned ethnicity and ideology).

This relationship, taking into account the fluidity and transformations in migration within the scope of the orders of gender and religion, is the subject of the analyses presented in this volume. Aleksandra Kaczmarek-Day's article *'White Dress, Guests and Presents': Polish Migrant Families' Practice of the First Communion and Negotiation of Catholic Identities in Wales* presents the results of research on the religious practices of Polish Catholics in Wales accompanying the rituals of the First Communion, the modifications to these practices and their dependence on the social environment. She particularly emphasises the role of women/mothers in producing new models of actions in religious rituals. The different practices become not only an expression of ethnicity, but especially a form of questioning religious customs. This reflects their liberalisation and simultaneous individualisation in the migration process.

Religions themselves – religious institutions and organisations, which play an important role in the processes of integration and adaptation of migrants – are not neutral in terms of gender, and apply different rules for women and men. The teachings of religions with regard to gender can be understood in reference to two dimensions. The first is the symbolic dimension, encompassing discursive definitions of femininity and masculinity within theology and religious doctrine. The second is the structural dimension, defined by religious

law (e.g. Catholic canonical law) as well as by various informal rules taking into account the place of women and men in organisational structures. Whereas symbolic constructs are relatively constant, as they are usually linked to religious tradition and theology, which in monotheistic religions are slow to change, religious structure and organisation are characterised by significant variability and are dependent on the cultural context – or, more broadly, on the social environment in which they exist. As a result, in religious organisations that operate in new migration contexts, circumstances favourable to the negotiation of gender roles and the constitution of new gendered rules and division of duties often occur. Such mechanisms lie at the basis of the re-definitions of the roles of women and men in Muslim migrant communities in Poland, most of whom migrated to Poland from Arab countries, as discussed by Maria Stojkow in her research report *Polish Ummah? The Action Taken by Muslim Migrants to Set up Their World in Poland*. Grażyna Szymańska-Matusiewicz follows a similar path in her contribution to this special section, *Political Power, Religion and Gender: the Case of the Vietnamese in Poland*. Szymańska-Matusiewicz's article, the result of many years of anthropological observation, illustrates the religious gender practices and power relations that regulate the functioning of the Vietnamese communities at two Buddhist pagodas in Poland. Szymańska-Matusiewicz places her analysis in a wider comparative context, outlining the broader historical-political context and comparing the results with data from other countries, such as the USA and Germany.

In view of the increasingly evident presence of anti-immigrant sentiment in Europe, the significance of such feelings for the social construction of the collective identities of host countries is becoming an important topic in migration research. Reflections on this topic are all the more valuable when the comparison concerns culturally and religiously homogeneous countries like Poland and Hungary. Elżbieta M. Goździak and Péter Márton examine this subject in the article *Where the Wild Things Are: Fear of Islam and the Anti-Refugee Rhetoric in Hungary and in Poland*, which compares the discourses on the refugee crisis in the two countries. The authors show that the discursive construction of the Other, which by definition threatens the existing gender order due to its cultural and religious difference, serves to consolidate strongly gendered articulations of Polish and Hungarian collective identity.

While they by no means constitute an exhaustive study of all the issues concerning migration, religion and gender in Central and Europe, we believe that the articles in this section explore and highlight certain interesting topics. We hope that the section will mark an important contribution to the continuing debate and inspire additional research in this field.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In the USA, research has been conducted on ethnic parishes since the 1950s, examining the role of religious organisations at the level of local communities in the integration (or the lack thereof) of migrants into wider society. However, these studies remain at the level of ethnographic descriptions, and do not engage in theoretical reflection on the connection between these areas.

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