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Invisible, vulnerable, heroic and criminal: a gendered history of migration labelling

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Citation

Schrover, M. L. J. C. (2023). Invisible, vulnerable, heroic and criminal: a gendered history of migration labelling. In I. van Liempt, J. Schapendonk, & A. Campos-Delgado (Eds.), *Elgar Handbooks in Migration* (pp. 25-35). Northampton: Edward Elgar Publishing. doi:10.4337/9781800377509

Version: Publisher's Version

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

2. Invisible, vulnerable, heroic and criminal: a gendered history of migration labelling

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This chapter is based on a literature search (from the 1950s to now) using ‘women’, ‘gender’, ‘intersectionality’, ‘(im)migration’, ‘illegal’, ‘irregular’, ‘clandestine’ and ‘undocumented’ (and equivalents in Dutch, German and French). Three points stand out which will be addressed in more detail below. In the first place, the terms that are used to describe ‘illegal’ migrations change over time. Some illegal migrations are seldom included, such as the escape of enslaved people from the US to Mexico and Canada, which was labelled illegal at the time (Mareite 2020, Kennedy 2021). Secondly, in the literature there is a strong emphasis on the vulnerability of migrant women, especially if they migrate illegally. The number of publications sharply increased after the 1990s, but there still is more attention for the migration of men than of women. Over time the literature has moved from using ‘women’ to ‘gender’, and later ‘intersectionality’. Lastly, there is more attention to migrations to, from and within the West than in the rest of the world. This chapter remedies that last point only a little.

1. ILLEGAL MIGRATION?

There is a lively debate about the terms ‘illegals’ and ‘illegal migrants’, and to a lesser extent also about ‘illegal migration’ (De Genova 2002, Schrover et al. 2008, Sajjad 2018). Critics say that people should not be labelled ‘illegal’, because it is not an identity but a legal category. The departure, entry or stay of people can be illegal, but calling people ‘illegals’ is dehumanizing. Moreover, ‘illegal’ criminalizes migration, especially when it is routinely mentioned in the same context as working without a permit, or smuggling drugs or weapons (Brouwer, Van der Woude and Van der Leun 2017).

Migrants can stay in a country ‘legally’, but after entering with forged papers or via scam marriages and false adoptions. This problematizes the use of the term ‘illegal’. ‘Illegal(s)’ is frequently used for people who are not in the country illegally, but who are waiting for a decision regarding their application for refugee status, or who are in holding facilities awaiting deportation.

The literature on illegal migration focuses on those who enter or stay, and less on those who leave, although bans on departure are important. Ethiopia, for instance, closed its borders between 1974 and 1991, and labelled all departures illegal (Ketema 2014). Morocco forbade the emigration of Moroccan Jews after the country gained independence in 1956, because authorities feared economic decline if they left. Between 1956 and 1961, the Israeli Mossad, helped by Spanish authorities, smuggled 18,000 Jews out of Morocco, until a ship carrying Jews sank and 44 people drowned. After that, the Israeli government paid the Moroccan government a lump sum of 500,000 dollars, plus 100 dollars for every Jew that was allowed to leave (Moreno 2020). Similarly, between 1948 and 1989, Israel paid Romania compensation

to enable the departure of 280,000 Romanian Jews. Prices differed between \$3,300 to \$6,000 per person and changed over time, and depended on age, education, profession, employment and family status (Ioanid 2005). During the Cold War, ‘escapees’ from communist countries paid for forged papers and to be smuggled out of the country (Carruthers 2005). West German authorities paid to facilitate the migration of people from East Germany, Poland or Romania, with prices per head ranging between 5000 and 11,000 Deutsche Marks. East Germany labelled these payments compensation for damages and the costs for education (Marshall 2000). In East Germany, people bribed officials to get forged papers, but in the West this was not seen as illegal migration.

Alternatives for the word ‘illegal’ have been introduced, but they are ambiguous. It is strange to label migrants who do have documents, and whose arrival has been registered, ‘undocumented’ or *sans papier*, as happens now. ‘Clandestine’ has a ring of crime to it, and it is as dehumanizing as the term ‘illegal’. ‘Irregular’ means ‘improper’ and ‘wrong’, and it is the opposite of ‘regular’, which refers to migration at set intervals (Ngai 2004). In the first case, the word has a negative connotation, and in the second case it is confusing.

The introduction of new terms is not only the outcome of a search for the best word, it is also a so-called critical intervention, meant to change the debate (Schrover and Schinkel 2014). New terms are introduced because an old label has become (too) politicized. However, because the debate is politicized, new terms are likely to also gain a negative connotation after a while.

In French-speaking African countries an interesting verb has been introduced – ‘*clandestiner*’ – which is used to describe not only the illegal migration, but also all the preparations in advance, including dreams about leaving (Kohlhagen 2006). In Tunis the word ‘*harraga*’ is used, which means ‘putting the border on fire’ (M’charek 2020).

Throughout the 20th century, ‘illegal migration’ was the dominant term, until it was rather recently pushed out by ‘undocumented migration’ and ‘irregular migration’. From a historical perspective there is merit in using the term that was dominant most of the time.

2. VULNERABLE?

At the end of the 19th century, authorities, the media and organizations started to worry more than ever about women on the move, especially when they were young and single. The number of relevant publications increased, emphasizing domestic work, prostitution and trafficking (Schrover and Moloney 2013). Personalized approaches were favored: a highly dramatic story of suffering and deceit was told with one woman as the protagonist. This strategy continued in the decades that followed. As a rule, migrant men were and are seen as *a* risk (to the labor market, to social cohesion, to non-migrant women) and migrant women were seen as *at* risk (of trafficking) (Van Liempt 2011). The potential risk to women was used to argue for more restrictions on migration. Women continued to migrate despite restrictions, but now did so illegally. Attention to trafficking of women dominated the literature on gender and illegal migration throughout the 20th and 21st centuries (Marsh 2017, Moujoud 2018). What was new was that women could legalize their stay if they testified against pimps and traffickers (Chapkis 2003). Recently, authors also pointed towards Senegalese women, usually referred to as mothers, who organize to advocate against young men who try to migrate illegally (and die while trying) (Bouilly 2008, Melly 2011).

In the literature on gender and illegal migration, the vulnerability of women is mentioned frequently (Auclair 2017). Some authors have pointed out that ideas regarding vulnerability, especially that of pregnant women or women with children, have helped women to get support more easily than men; for instance, during their travel along illegal routes. As such, vulnerability is not the opposite of agency (Bosworth, Fili and Pickering 2018, Grotti et al. 2018).

3. WOMEN, GENDER AND INTERSECTIONALITY

In the last few decades, attention to the migration of women has increased (Schrover and Moloney 2013). In the 1990s, women were discussed separately from men to compensate for a literature that had for decades focused on men. Although there is now more literature on the migration of women, they are still mostly mentioned in passing, unless the publication is explicitly about women. Over time, the emphasis has shifted from ‘women’ to ‘gender’, and more recently to ‘intersectionality’, which draws attention to the intersection between categories of identity and power such as gender, class, race/ethnicity, religion, age, (dis)ability, sexuality, education/skill/occupation, skin color, life cycle, legal status, residence rights and nationality/citizenship (Schrover 2014). In recent literature, ‘intersectionality’ is used frequently and with ease (Buckel 2012, Sanchez 2017, Moujoud 2018, Teng and Mat Yasin 2019, Miles et al. 2019).

Gender intersects with nationality in the case of derivative citizenship. In many countries, women who married a foreigner automatically lost their own nationality and gained that of their husbands, regardless of where the couple lived. Many countries introduced laws on derivative citizenship around 1900 (Schrover 2010). Women became foreigners in their country of birth without ever crossing a border. This could lead to the illegalization of their stay. Around 1900, German-born women who had married Polish nationals were deported to Poland, with their husbands, when they were likely to become a public charge (Reinecke 2008). If they stayed despite deportation orders or returned, their stay was labelled illegal. Similarly, after the Second World War, Germans living in the Netherlands were expelled to Germany. Dutch women who had married German men, and lost Dutch nationality as a result, were to leave with their husbands. If they did not, their stay was considered illegal (Schrover 2015). In the Dutch East Indies, European women who married men who belonged to the legal category of ‘natives’ were categorized as ‘natives’, who did not have Dutch citizenship. When the Dutch East Indies became independent Indonesia in 1949, only people with Dutch nationality could move to the Netherlands. The native population got Indonesian citizenship, and so did Dutch women who had married native men (Rosen Jacobson 2018). Some women decided to divorce their husbands, claim back Dutch citizenship and leave for the Netherlands. Dutch authorities labelled these divorces scams. Under public pressure, Dutch authorities created a category which enabled some of these women to come with their husbands, without going through a divorce. The use of a route that was called illegal – scam divorces – led to the creation of a legal route (Schrover 2010). The stay of women could be illegalized after they lost their nationality. However, marriage was a route towards legalization which was open to women, but not to men.

4. HOW MANY?

Over time, authors, authorities and the media have been very interested in how large the number of people who move illegally is (Donato and Armenta 2011). The further away from the West and the further back in time, the more unreliable data about people on the move are. Data for women are less reliable than those for men (Schrover 2013). The number of people that are counted as moving illegally changes because of relabelling, changing priorities of policy makers and civil servants, and technological change. In 1980, British authorities, for instance, proudly announced the introduction of ‘a computer system to combat illegal immigration’ (*Guardian*, 18 July 1980). The introduction of the computer made it possible to find more people who stayed illegally.

Incidents could increase the visibility of illegal migration. In 1992, for example, a plane crashed into an Amsterdam high-rise building, killing 40 people. Newspapers speculated that the number of deaths was probably higher, but that Ghanaian migrants, who lived in Amsterdam illegally, were afraid to come forward and report missing persons. Authorities in response promised they would not ‘punish’ the Ghanaians who provided information, and might help them legalize their stay. When a large number of Ghanaians did come forward, newspapers inflated the numbers and wrote about 10,000 ‘Ghanaian illegals’ in Amsterdam.

Numbers are influenced by regularizations which took place, for instance, in the 1970s in France, Belgium, Germany and the UK, and later also in Spain and Italy. There were also regularizations in the US, Australia, Argentina, Belarus, Costa Rica, Gabon, Moldova, the Russian Federation, Thailand, the Ukraine and Venezuela (Kraler 2009). These regularizations were commonly combined with attempts to control entry. Work in the formal economy was usually part of the trajectory towards legalization, and therefore women profited less from regularization campaigns. In 2009, the Philippine government announced a regularization, targeting the large number of women who stayed in the country illegally and who worked as domestic servants. Authorities expected that 600,000 illegal migrants would apply, but only 200,000 did because the employers were unwilling to pay the regularization costs (Campani 2011).

5. ILLEGALIZATION

The introduction and enforcement of new laws illegalized some migrations which had not been illegal before. More rules, laws and regulations meant more moves were labelled illegal. After the scramble for Africa, rather random borders were drawn across the African continent. It illegalized some migrations, while it enabled migrations within empires. The end of empires made some of these migrations illegal (De Haas 2007). Legalizations and illegalizations related to colonialism are not discussed much in the literature, while the gendered aspect of it has not been addressed at all.

The term ‘illegal migration’ started to be used more after 1933, when Hitler came to power in Germany (Düvell 2008, Glynn 2012). The term was, however, already used earlier; for instance, in debates on Chinese immigration to the US (*Washington Post*, 9 October 1885). In 1882, the US introduced the Chinese Exclusion Act to restrict Chinese immigration. The immigration of Chinese men was severely restricted, while the immigration of Chinese women became almost impossible. Other countries had similar laws. In 1890, Uruguay, for instance,

restricted the immigration of ‘Africans, Asians and Gypsies’. Chinese migrants who tried to enter despite these restrictions were labelled ‘illegal immigrants’.

In 1921 and 1924, the US introduced quotas, which were meant to reduce the immigration from Eastern and Southern Europe. Migrants tried to evade restrictions by traveling via Canada or Central American countries, and this was labelled illegal (FitzGerald and Cook-Martín 2014). Detroit was a major point of illegal entry for Europeans. In the period 1924–29, Europeans were smuggled across the Canadian–US border at rate of 2000 per month. They followed routes that Chinese migrants had used previously. European men were hidden in boats or cars, or packed between furniture in boxcars. Women were smuggled in in plain sight, dressed in modern American clothes and without shawls and kerchiefs (Bavery 2018).

Migrants came across the Mexican border in similar ways. In the 1930s, US authorities deported 500,000 people or fewer, depending on who was counting. Census data show that, although in debates the emphasis was on men, by the 1930s about half the people of Mexican origin in the US were women (Gratton and Merchant 2013).

The rise to power of fascists in Italy and Nazis in Germany led to new illegal migrations. Mostly men, but also some women and children, took a dangerous route and crossed the Alps on foot from Italy into France or drifted on rafts into French territorial waters (*China Press*, 12 November 1930). Communist organizations tried to help these refugees (Perry 2004, Caestecker 2019).

After the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936, 500,000 people fled. Initially they were not labelled ‘illegal’ by French authorities. After protests in France against ‘undesirable refugees’, authorities started to distinguish between good and bad refugees, labelling the ‘bad’ refugees ‘clandestine foreigners’ and ‘irregular guests’. The sick, the crippled, the old, children and women were categorized as ‘good’ refugees and they were allowed to stay in France. Able-bodied young men were seen as bad and dangerous, and sent back (Soo 2013).

Attempts of German Jews to flee from Germany after 1933 had the most effect on the illegalization of migration (Kimche and Kimche 1954). German Jews trying to flee to France, the Netherlands or Belgium were increasingly labelled illegal migrants. They were stopped and sent back. An exception was made after the *Kristallnacht* in 1938, when some countries showed some leniency, especially towards children (Glynn 2012). In the Netherlands, the 1849 Alien Law, which allowed foreigners to enter if they had means or could work, was temporarily suspended. Dutch authorities did not want to insult a ‘befriended nation’ (Nazi Germany) and were afraid that Germany would deport the many Dutch who worked in Germany, while unemployment numbers were already high in the Netherlands (Van Eijl 2005). In Switzerland, a new order was introduced that said ‘those who only took flight because of their race, Jews, for example, should not be considered political refugees’ and, ‘ought to be refused entry’ (Ludi, Frank and Reinisch 2014, p. 578). During the war, non-Jews tried to help Jews cross borders illegally, using false papers and routes not commonly used for legal travel. The helpers were seen as smugglers during the war – and punished when caught – and as heroes thereafter (Paldiel 2012, Brokken 2021).

German Jews tried to reach Mandate Palestine. The British authorities, however, installed quotas and turned back refugees. People trying to land despite restrictions were labelled ‘illegal’. The British provided temporary refuge in the British Colony of Cyprus. They did see the Jews as refugees, but did not want to give them asylum in Cyprus (Rappas 2019). After the war, British authorities held 50,000 Jews in 12 camps on Cyprus. Before the creation of the state of Israel, 750 people per month were allowed to leave for Palestine, although there

were extra quotas for pregnant women, nursing mothers and the old. Jewish organizations questioned the legality of the Cyprian holding camps (Zertal 1998). From Palestine, 800 Jews (among them 67 women) travelled to Europe to help Holocaust survivors prepare for departure to Palestine. They coordinated contacts, arranged ships and forged papers. Depending on who was asked – the British or the survivors – these helpers were criminals or heroes (Rosenberg-Friedman 2014). The same applies to a small number of Algerian women who travelled illegally to France after the Second World War to fight for Algeria's independence. As women, they were less likely to be apprehended or suspected of what the French regarded as illegal migrations and activities. The women were invisible, but as a result they have also largely been forgotten (MacMaster 2012).

6. HEROES AND CRIMINALS

The dichotomy of heroes or criminals also applies to those who helped people escape from behind the Iron Curtain. People crossing from East to West – commonly labelled in the West 'escapees' rather than illegal migrants – were seen as heroes in the West and as criminals in the East. Most of the 'escapees' from East Germany were young men (90 percent of the 2300 people who managed to get out per year in the first decade after the construction of the Wall). The same is true for the people fleeing Hungary after the 1956 Revolt; they were mostly young men, but the press focused on the few women among them in an attempt to generate empathy. This did work, but the strategy backfired when hardly any women arrived in resettlement countries and journalists asked if they had been left behind on purpose in camps in Austria (Schrover and Walaardt 2017).

Authorities could help (as Western authorities did in the case of the Hungarians) or hinder (as happened in the case of British authorities in Mandate Palestine), or they could simply do nothing. In 1947, for instance, many thousands of 'illegal refugees', '*Heimatvertriebenen*' or '*Ostflüchtlingen*', fled daily from communist countries and the Soviet zone to the British zone. Most were without papers: they lost them, could not take them, destroyed them or discarded them on the way. Authorities informed them that without papers they had to go back, but none of them did. They simply 'melted away', although they were rather visibly hanging around outside railway stations (*Manchester Guardian*, 30 December 1947). Their presence was labelled illegal, but nobody deported them, although authorities did threaten to do so. About a third of the people who fled west ahead of the advancing Soviet forces ended up in the Soviet zone (later East Germany) and the rest in the Western zones (later West Germany). The ones in the West received far more attention in the literature than those in the East. Over half of the migrants were women, and many of them fled because they had been raped by Soviet troops or they feared being raped. They did not get much sympathy (Amos 2009).

In 1951, the drafters of the 1951 Refugee Convention used the male pronoun in their definition of a refugee. This was not by accident. Drafters thought it was unlikely that women could be 'real' refugees. As a result, the academic literature on refugee migration, and on legalizing a stay via getting refugee status, focused on men. Later literature did look into the chances of women getting refugee status (Spijkerboer 2000), but the literature does not say if women who were denied refugee status stayed illegally, or legalized their stay in a different manner (via marriage, for instance).

7. FROM LABOR MIGRATION TO ILLEGAL MIGRATION

From the 1970s onwards, the literature on illegal immigration started to be dominated by the migrations from Mexico to the US. Gender is not central to these publications, although both men and women were part of it. The Bracero Program (started in 1942) legally brought 4 to 5 million workers into the US (Chavez 1994). When the program stopped in 1965, the migration continued, but it was now labelled illegal (Cornelius 2005). Around 500,000 to 1 million people entered the US illegally. Employers preferred these migrants because they ‘work like machines’ (*Washington Post*, 7 August 1978). The immigrants were not invisible: they lived in large camps, which sometimes accommodated over 900 workers. The US immigration department raided camps, and deported the workers who had crossed illegally into the US. Little was done against employers, and raids were largely symbolic (Tienda and Sanchez 2013). Also, outside the US little was done against employers who hired foreigners who entered illegally. Migrants sometimes profited from being in the country illegally; employers in Greece, for instance, were more likely to hire workers who were in the country illegally because they could pay them less and work them harder (Glytsos 2005).

Illegalization also occurred at the end of the guest worker program, which in the period 1958–72 brought 8 million workers with a work permit from mostly Mediterranean countries to North-Western European countries. In addition, an unknown number of workers came ‘spontaneously’ and acquired permits after arrival. Eighty per cent of the guest workers were men, and they were supposed to be single. When their wives did join them, the stay of the women was labelled illegal, until government policies changed and women were allowed to stay (Schrover and Bonjour 2015). After the end of the guest worker migration regime the possibilities for legal labor migration decreased, and ‘spontaneous’ migrations were labelled illegal migrations. The stay of some of the ‘spontaneous’ migrants was regularized, while others were deported.

8. FROM AND TO COMMUNIST COUNTRIES

In the 1970s, attention to migrations from China and Vietnam increased. These migrations were partly labelled illegal by the countries in which the migrants arrived. This was a break with Cold War rhetoric, which had presented those fleeing communism as heroes in the West. In the 1970s, the hero image started to wear off. Attention to women increased, usually in the form of highly personalized stories about the sufferings of women during their flight (*Washington Post*, 10 October 1978; Todaro and Maruszko 1987).

In the 1970s, 1.2 million people fled from Vietnam, of whom 200,000 to 400,000 drowned. In addition, 800,000 Rohingya Muslims fled from Burma to Bangladesh. Both migrations included men, women and children. The Rohingya Muslims, who did not fit into the Cold War frame, got less attention than the Vietnamese. There was some distrust regarding the motives of the Vietnamese, and therefore they were called ‘boat people’, rather than ‘boat refugees’ (McKay, Thomas and Blood 2011). There was some attention to gender, but not much (Anderson 2012). The Vietnamese also fled to China. The Chinese considered this migration, which continued for decades, illegal. In this case, there is some attention to the fact that both men and women fled (Nguyen, Lu and Gardiner 2019).

In 1988, in a late phase of the Cold War, thousands of people sneaked across the border from Romania into Hungary. They fled food shortages and political repression in Romania, and bolted across the ‘Green Line’ from one communist country to another. Most of the ‘escapees’ were ethnic Hungarians, who formed a population of 1.7 to 2 million in Romania (Fox 2003, Galateanu 2017). The ‘escapees’, as a newspaper called them, crept along the forest floor for three hours until they reached the Hungarian side of the border, where they were picked up and cared for by the Hungarian border police (*Washington Post*, 1 April 1988). Both men and women escaped in this manner.

9. CONCLUSION

The literature on gender and illegal migration changed over time because migrations changed, and because of economic and geopolitical changes (including the beginning and end of the Cold War). It changed how migration was labelled (for instance, spontaneous versus illegal), how migrants were portrayed and how their helpers were described (smugglers, criminals or heroes). Processes of legalization and illegalization were the result of new laws and regulations that were put in place. Technological change also played a role. The processes affected men and women differently. In the literature, attention to differences according to gender increased over time, whereby in recent years the focus has shifted from a gendered to an intersectional approach. Some of the imbalances in the literature have been remedied, but many still remain (such as the emphasis on the West).

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