Introduction: Gender, Migration, and the Media

Mara Mattoscio & Megan C. MacDonald

Published online: 02 Nov 2018.

Submit your article to this journal ☐

Article views: 974

View related articles ☐

View Crossmark data ☐

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

COMMENTARY AND CRITICISM

Check for updates

Introduction: Gender, Migration, and the Media

Mara Mattoscio[a] and Megan C. MacDonald [b,c]

[a]Gabriele D'Annunzio University, Pescara; [b]Koç, University, Istanbul; [c]EURIAS fellow 2018-2019, IMéRA, Université Aix-Marseille

Across the sensationalist media coverage of recent migratory movements, generally labelled as the "refugee crisis," crucial issues of gender, including health-care disparities, differential access to asylum and/or citizenship, and national policies on integration, have received ambiguous treatment. Cases of sexual violence suffered by migrants or visible gender identifications have mostly been framed in stereotypical ways, reinvigorating essentialist oppositions between the West, seen as "progressive and endangered," and the rest of the world, deemed "backward and threatening." Tales of trafficked women have, for instance, ended up constructing almost all forms of female mobility, with the notable exception of domestic work, as "high risk" and morally unadvisable (Felicity Schaeffer-Grabiel 2011; Enrica Rigo 2017). More nuanced understandings of the gendered complexities of migration, border surveillance, and media systems have been often overlooked (Radha Sarma Hegde 2011).

This "Commentary and Criticism" section is in conversation with Kaitlynn Mendes and Kumarini Silva's 2009 "Women, Migration, and the Media" contribution to *Feminist Media Studies*, where we read that "as women's bodies move across borders, discussion about the *representation* of female experiences in the migration process still remains somewhat mute" (243). In the 10 years that have followed Mendes and Silva's focus on women migrants and the media, Western media discourses have accumulated reports of "dramatic peaks" in mass migration across the Mediterranean, the result of the so-called Arab Spring, the outbreak of the Syrian war, climate change, and the desire for better economic conditions, to name but a few reasons. Unstable and contradictory constructions of "deserving" and "undeserving" refugees have been repeatedly produced in this mediatic flow. In the summer of 2015, empathic coverage of entire Syrian families fleeing their country trumped the representation of (always apparently single) African migrants who were moving for similar reasons, in a "hierarchy of deservingness [that] reflects arrangements of race … interpenetrated by US and European political-economic interests" (Heide Castañeda and Seth M. Holmes 2016, 19). Yet, a media backlash emerged against refugees in Europe later that year, after the unrelated Paris terrorist attacks and reports of mass sexual assault in Cologne during the city's New Year's Eve celebrations. Syrians, suddenly identified as predominantly single and male, were then increasingly framed by the media as "bogus refugees," who looked suspiciously different from the stereotypical (non-white) Third World poor that "could never be confused for an image of Europe" (Radhika Gajjala and Jill Walker Rettberg 2016, 179). This was followed by questionable interventions such as Kamel Daoud's (2016) *New York Times*

op-ed, in which "sexual misery" in the Arab world was diagnosed as the cause of sexual violence associated with refugees, drawing a line from sexual harassment in Tahrir Square to Cologne, "bursting onto the scene in Europe." However, at the time of writing, while the supposed "refugee crisis" has turned into a "crisis of responsibility itself" (Lilie Chouliaraki and Tijana Stolic 2017, 1173), European states are fighting one another over redistribution quotas and right-wing movements are gaining momentum in fomenting anti-immigrant sentiments, a situation in which African migrants have been again put centre stage in the hierarchy of "threat" and "excess."[1]

Following Hegde's suggestion that scholarly attention shift from an idea of media as artifactuality to one of media as mediation, this "Commentary and Criticism" section attempts to address the "complex constitutive connection between media forms and practices, mediated environments, and the politics of migration" (Radha Sarma Hegde 2016, 3). In order to account for the complex nature of such mediated migration, we look beyond Mendes and Silva's (2009) exclusive focus on women migrants and call attention to the mediatic and mediated gendering of migration itself. In particular, we look at specific types of "gendered visibility" and at the "absences and invisibilities [that are] produced and sustained through mediated reiterations that cross borders and communities" (Hegde 2011, 2).

Anna Carastathis and Myrto Tsilimpounidi's contribution begins with a provocative claim: "All migration politics are reproductive politics." This opening salvo leads to a discussion about heteronormative expectations projected onto migrants by national states and border officials, as well as by pro-immigration campaigns themselves. Examining the latter's "Refugees Welcome" placard, which travelled from the US–Mexico border in the 1980s to the shores of contemporary southern Europe, the authors show how even progressive activists tend to represent migrants as invariably hetero-sexual families with well-defined gender roles, in order to try to stimulate public identification with them in the West. The authors' critique of such a "methodological heteronormativity" seems crucial at a time when gender and sexuality are mobilized most often to exclude or instrumentalize people on the move.

The stereotypical image of migrants as inherently male and sexually threatening because of a supposed "archaic" background (often a reference to Islam) is the starting point of Giuliana Sorce's commentary on the German right-wing media campaign "120 Dezibel." Tracing the campaign's promotional videos and online presence, Sorce points out how the white male founder and his supporters successfully managed not only to instrumentalize Western feminist discourse through an insistent focus on the "endan-gered daughters of Europe," but even proceeded to appropriate the channels and strategies of the recent #MeToo and Time's Up movements that protest sexual harass-ment worldwide. Here we witness the intersection of the figure of the "rapefugee" and the phenomenon of "femonationalism," whereby the campaign encourages white European women to act in solidarity with one another to combat an "imported" sexual danger. The complete erasure of female migrants from the scene thus seems directly connected to the usurpation of German and European women's voices, as the latter are spoken for and about but never listened to by the #120db anti-immigration campaign.

The final two commentaries work in tandem, excavating media coverage, gender, and agency transnationally, and from different geographical locations, through a discussion of the same migratory tragedy: the death of 26 Nigerian women in a

shipwreck off the coast of Libya in 2017. Krista Lynes examines three images that were widely circulated in European and US media coverage of the event, and shows how the stereotypical casting of female Nigerian migrants as hapless victims of sexual trafficking was mirrored in the women's post-mortem reification as their corpses were repeatedly photographed wrapped in bags, suspended over lines of hearses, or piled up on cargo ships. The media's manner of "giving shape" to the migrants is via necropolitical repetition, "steeped in thickly gendered, racialized and classed imaginaries." Lynes unpacks the term "trafficking," making connections between the twenty-first-century deaths in the Mediterranean, transnational trade, and Christina Sharpe's work on "the mathematics of black life" and the transatlantic slave trade. The ambiguous attitude of arrival nations and official rescue operations further emerges through Lynes' analysis of the gendered naming of rescue ships and their often overlooked implications.

While Lynes' approach to the Mediterranean cemetery is from a Euro-American media perspective, Faith Oloruntoba, Abigail Odozi Ogwezzy-Ndisika, Babatunde Adeshina Faustino, and Kelechi Okechukwu Amakoh's contribution approaches media coverage of the event from a Nigerian media perspective, through an analysis of articles published in two high-circulation national newspapers with a strong online presence. The authors' findings show that the Western media trope of Nigerian women as always forcibly trafficked as potential sex workers is reiterated by Nigerian news outlets, in accordance with the interested national governments' cooperation in discouraging (especially female) migration. In this context, pregnancy is directly associated in the media discourse with a condition of failure, hopelessness, and shame, while both the Nigerian and European governments are cast as heroic saviours. The shifting of the responsibility for death in migration from structural international policies to individual (a)morality is thus highlighted by the authors as one consequence of the sinister ways in which gendered migration is mediated.

Similarly to what happens in Euro-American border policies, in which borders "do not function as linear boundaries [but] hierarchize people's movement according to gender-constructed roles" (Rigo 2017, 11), transnational media discourses about migration produce and reiterate specific configurations of gender for people on the move and sedentary populations alike. These foster hyper-visibilities, erasures, and (mis)alignments in accordance with national governments' interests and international political discourses. With this issue of "Commentary and Criticism," we propose that it is only by taking the media's gendering power into account that the complex entanglements of gender politics and migration policies can be fully understood.

Note

1. There are, of course, exceptions to fear-mongering and irresponsible media representations. To take but one recent example, see Warscapes' *Mediterranean* collection (Bhakti Shringarpure et al. 2018). Sarah Jilani (2018) argues in *The Conversation* that women's testimonies coming out of the Syrian war are increasingly found in books and memoirs rather than in traditional media coverage.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

References

Castañeda, Heide, and Seth M. Holmes. 2016. "Representing the 'European Refugee Crisis' in Germany and Beyond: Deservingness and Difference, Life and Death." *American Ethnologist* 43 (1): 12–24. doi:10.1111/amet.12259.

Chouliaraki, Lilie, and Tijana Stolic. 2017. "Rethinking Media Responsibility in the Refugee 'Crisis': A Visual Topology of European News." *Media, Culture and Society* 39 (8): 1162–1177. doi:10.1177/0163443717726163.

Daoud, Kamel. 2016. "The Sexual Misery of the Arab World." *New York Times*, February 12. Accessed September 4, 2018. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/14/opinion/sunday/the-sexual-misery-of-the-arab-world.html.

Gajjala, Radhika, and Jill Walker Rettberg. 2016. "Terrorists or Cowards: Negative Portrayals of Male Syrian Refugees in Social Media." *Feminist Media Studies* 16 (1): 178–181. doi:10.1080/14680777.2016.1120493.

Hegde, Radha Sarma, ed. 2011. *Circuits of Visibility: Gender and Transnational Media Cultures*. New York: New York University Press.

Hegde, Radha Sarma. 2016. *Mediating Migration*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Jilani, Sarah. 2018. "How Women Are Collaborating to Tell Stories That Break through the Noise on Syria." *The Conversation*. Accessed September 3, 2018. http://theconversation.com/how-women-are-collaborating-to-tell-stories-that-break-through-the-noise-on-syria-93754.

Mendes, Kaitlynn, and Kumarini Silva, eds. 2009. "Commentary and Criticism: Women, Migration, and the Media." *Feminist Media Studies* 9 (2): 243–262.

Rigo, Enrica. 2017. "Re-gendering the Border: Chronicles of Women's Resistance and Unexpected Alliances from the Mediterranean Border." *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies*, Dec. Accessed August 30, 2018. https://www.acme-journal.org/index.php/acme/article/view/1436.

Schaeffer-Grabiel, Felicity. 2011. "Transnational Media Wars over Sex-Trafficking: Abolishing the 'New Slave Trade' or the New Nativism?" In *Circuits of Visibility: Gender and Transnational Media Cultures*, edited by Radha Sarma Hegde, 103–123. New York: New York University Press.

Shringarpure, Bhakti, Michael Bronner, Veruska Cantelli, Michael Busch, Jessica Rohan, Melissa Smyth, Jason Huettner, Gareth Davies, and Noam Scheindlin, eds. 2018. *Mediterranean*. Brooklyn: UpSet Press.

Methodological heteronormativity and the "refugee crisis"

Anna Carastathis[a] and Myrto Tsilimpounidi[b]

[a]Panteion University; [b]Slovak Academy of Sciences

All migration politics is reproductive politics. The nation-state project of controlling migration secures the racialised demographics of the nation, understood as a reproducible fact of the social and human body, determining who is differentially included, who is excluded, and who is exalted. Citizenship, illegality, and asylum are often affirmed or rejected as inheritable transitive properties that adhere to a person by virtue of heteronormative (or, more rarely, homonormative) configurations of kinship. As Eithne Luibhéid (2013, 4) has argued, sexual normativity is crucial to nation-state projects of "biological and social reproduction of the citizenry, but also for the cultivation of particular kinds of social, economic, and affective