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Migrant South Asian Women in the Basque Country, Spain: Processes of Empowerment

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Abstract

This work describes the personal and social empowerment of migrant women from South Asia in the Basque Country[1], Spain, through the life history method. Gender roles, cultural identity and the migratory process as a transformative instrument are discussed. Based on in-depth interviews, and individual and group analysis of life histories, the findings indicated that migration had a positive effect on women in terms of self development. Clearly, migration was a tool for transformation and empowerment.

Keywords

South Asian, female migration, Basque Country, life history, empowerment, transformations

Introduction

This study explores the migratory journey of South Asian women to the Basque Country and its relation to their personal and social empowerment, using the life history method. The objective of a study that uses the narrative approach is to allow participants to nárrate the events of their lived life and to express their expectations for the future. ´This approach leads to an evaluation of their past and aspirations for the future. The subjects retrospectively reconstruct their different experiences in the past that have happened to them in certain social, personal or profesional contexts' (Bolívar &Porta, 2010, p, 208). Carrasco (2011) sees in the narrative approach a way for respondents to express their individual subjective reality, and consider their actions in the light of social phenomena.

The first part begins with a discussion of migration from South Asia to the Basque Country. This is followed by an examination through the life history method of the migratory processes of South Asian women arriving there and their subsequent empowerment.

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The growing number of South Asian women who migrate to the Basque Country (Ikuspegi, 2018) and the absence of knowledge about their experiences makes this study relevant particularly as this Asian migration stream to Spain is a new phenomenon (George & Ramkissoon, 1998; Martins & Reid, 2007; Maitra, 2015). Since in recent years, the Basque Country has increasingly become a destination for migrants it is useful to study the phenomenon (Vicente, 2006). Furthermore, studies that address Asian female migration to Spain are few.

South Asian Female Migrants in the Basque Country

Otxoa and Esnaola (2013) notice that although geographically speaking, it is a small territory, the Basque Country is attracting diverse migratory streams. Martin (2013) identifies four major migration flows: from South to South, from South to North, from North to North and from North to South. In this note, we are interested in one migration stream from South to North. The following chart shows the four South Asian countries from where women have been arriving in the Basque Country since 2008:

TABLE 1

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
INDIA	32	43	44	69	78	86	91	154	154	159	169
NEPAL	12	16	18	25	60	68	99	114	129	131	153
BANGLADESH	7	7	10	24	35	32	61	72	85	92	105
PAKISTAN	137	159	246	450	60	763	909	996	1.087	1.214	1.302

Female migrants in the Basque Country from South Asia 2008 – 2018
Source: Ikuspegi (2019), prepared by the author.

The data shows that while the overall migration of South Asian women has been constantly growing since 2008, Pakistani women are the most numerous, followed by the other nationalities.

Female Migration and Empowerment

Empowerment is a fundamental strategy to combat gender inequalities and to promote women's development. We define the concept based on Lizana (2014) as: '[…] the self-affirmation of women's capacities for their participation in decision-making processes and access to power' (p. 9). The aim is to challenge power relations in terms of caste, class, race, gender and to question men's domination and women's subordination through recognition of the patriarchal ideology (Batliwala, 1997). Vibhuti Patel (2016, personal communication),

considers that when women are empowered, their life does not depend anymore on external factors but rather on their own decisions. Shakya and Young (2019) observe that women need to be given attention as a single category in order to gain a subtler perspective on how migration may be positive for them.

Key Features for the Empowerment of Women

Self-esteem is one of the central concepts of women's empowerment. Rowlands (1995) adds self-confidence and agency. Another central concept is the ability to make choices (Kabeer, 1996). When an individual can identify goals, this has a positive impact on her/his personality and influences the belief that she/he has the capacity to achieve that goal (Benett & Chapman, 2010). Another component is self-efficacy which refers to the ability of people to take control over their lives (Bandura, 1994). The penultimate component of empowerment is action through which goals may be achieved. In the empowerment process, action refers to and springs from people's awareness of the power dynamics in their social context, and if there are ways to change them or not (Benett & Chapman, 2010). Women's relations with other women who share a mutual goal lead to the creation of alliances among them. A study on the adaptation of South Asian women in Canadian society shows that solidarity arose when they were introduced to other migrant women who faced similar challenges (Martins & Reid, 2007). Another study, that was interested in soft-skill training of migrant women from South Asia, revealed that friendship and alliances among them arose during the sessions (Maitra, 2015).

Data and Methodology

As many authors claim, qualitative research methods allow the researcher to understand the individuality of people because they study people in their own environment (Berg, 2001; Álvarez-Gayou Jurgenson, 2003; Ruiz Olabuénaga, 2007, 2012). The narrative research approach through the life history method is used for the study as this method is usual in analysing the different dimensions of women's empowerment (George & Ramkissoon, 1998; Slater, 2002; Richie, 2001; Hall, 2003; Kazmierska, 2003). Since the intent was to evaluate and understand the individual empowerment of South Asian women in the Basque Country – descriptions, memories, photographs, short story excerpts and objects from their culture were introduced during the interviews that were analysed inductively. As the aim was to ascertain similarities in the established themes and their dimensions, the collection of data comprised stories and histories, their reconstruction, and participant observation (Creswell, 1998).

Socio-demographic Characteristics of the Sample

Interviews were held with married women from three South Asian countries: India, Nepal and Bangladesh.The women were settled in two provinces of the Basque Country, Bizkaia and Gipuzkoa. The age of the participants was between 28 and 34 and they had migrated to the Basque Country between 2010 and 2016. As the life history method does not require an exhaustive number of participants, I dealt with the personal perceptions and life experiences of five migrant women, the total sample of my thesis; with each of them three or four intensive interviews were done. Rahamah, Bakar and Abdullah (2008) state that large samples might be inappropriate in research with this kind of approach: 'Adequacy is dependant not upon quantity but upon the richness of the data and the nature of the aspect of life being investigated' (p. 4).

Two women said that they came from middle-class families and they migrated as a result of the work opportunity their husbands had in the host country. Three of them stated that

poverty obliged them to migrate and the initiative to migrate was a decision taken by them and their partners jointly. Three of them had been to University with Bachelor of Science and Master of Arts degrees and two women had high school education. None of the high-skilled women worked in a sector related to their expertise. Their jobs at the time of interview were different: one was an English language teacher, the second was in domestic service, another was a care-giver.

For reasons of confidentiality and anonymity, their names used here are fictitious. Interviews were carried out in either Engish or Spanish. They were fluent in either or both languages.

Findings

The women participants in the study are Dhriti and Manasvi from Nepal, Virika and Sakti from India, and Aarin from Bangladesh. The themes identified and subsequently, sub-themes are: values of the culture of origin, the migratory experience, subdivided into obstacles and facilitating factors and inclusion; and the remodeling of values and empowerment.

I elaborate on aspects of the term empowerment as identified through the interviews. These are:
Capacity to express themselves in the local language;
Decision-making capacity;
Self-reliance, self-sufficiency and self-care;
Financial independence;
Freedom of choice;
Self-esteem;
Strength;
Networking among women.

Capacity to express themselves in the local language

The capacity to be able to speak in Spanish made Dhriti feel more confident in everyday situations:

I learnt a little bit but at least I was able to call the ambulance and I was able to go to the supermarket and say what I want. I was able to understand [Spanish] within 5, 6 months. So, after that, I joined the School of Languages and that helped me a lot.

Decision-making capacity

Dhriti and Virika said that in their countries of origin, every decision was supposed to be according to their parents' will. The new responsibilities women encounter in the host country affect their decision-making power positively. For example, Dhriti said:

There, in Nepal, I couldn't take any decision. If I had to do anything, I was not sure if it was wrong or right. I had to ask my parents but here, after migration from Nepal to England and from England to Spain, I can take any decision freely. So, a lot of changes… After I migrated, I really think about how to manage my life, how to run my family, the economic conditions, things like that.

Virika added,

In India, they think that your husband is your God and that you have to listen to your in-laws. They are your God or boss…Here, I don't see that and I got inspired…In India, women don't value themselves. They just get stuck in the family and they follow what other women are doing.

Adding proudly,

Here, I follow my heart. So, I learnt to become more self-dependent. I value myself more. Maybe if I were in India, I wouldn't have valued myself as I value myself now, here.

Self-reliance/ Self-sufficiency/ Self-care

Virika asserted that she had learnt not to be afraid of staying alone. She relied on herself to expand her friendships in the host country. Manasvi had learnt to cope with all difficulties on her own. She felt that if she had not gone through the experience of migration, she would not have learnt to be independent. Aarin too felt that migration had strengthened her. She said:

Now I'm tough. More practical. It's because I've changed places, I've changed decisions, I've changed cultures, the people around me. It's not like in my country.

Manasvi added,

I take care of myself. I see the women here and I want to be like them, not like the women in my country [Nepal], when you are sixty, you feel sick and old. You feel dependent on other people.

Financial independence

Employment was an important contributor to the women's sense of independence and level of self-value and competence. They related self-worth to their capacity to contribute financially to the family. For Dhriti, employment was the path towards independence. Virika related employment to self-accomplishment. In addition, employment expanded her contact network. Dhriti explained:

[…] it is the independence. I don't have to depend upon my family, my parents or husband; I can enjoy and buy things for myself and travel. I'm independent. If I lived in Nepal, I'd live in a joint family. So, you have to work under your parents-in-law, take care of the house, work like a servant…

Virika said,

If you have money, you are happier. I don't know if happier, but free. You can do whatever you want to do, buy anything …We can get in contact with different people, different ideas, different points of view. Now I'm working, we don't have tensions on spending and we can buy anything we want. We are more independent and happier.

Freedom of choice

Dhriti explained that if she were in Nepal, her choices would not have been considered:

My sister, when she was working at the bank, she used to wake upvery early in the morning; clean the house, cook for the family, and then, for the children, maybe drop them at school and then go to work while the rest of the family members slept… Sometimes, I feel that if I go back to Nepal and I have to live a life like that, it would be horrible.

In a similiar vein, Virika feels free enough to express her opinion and to follow her heart in any decision she takes. In India, she was obliged to adapt to the rules set by the family:

What happened to me [is that] now it's my choice. Yes, I'm living by my own choices, on my own terms. First thing, I'm not pressurised because in India for sure I would be presurrised by my in-laws or my own family. So, I would have to do without any choices in all the things they want me to do. In Europe I'm not pressurised. I don't have anybody on top of my head to say: 'don't do this, do that, do this' This has given me the time to realise the real me; what I want and what I don't want and not just listening to and following other people…

Self-esteem

Sakti's perception on migration was that it gave her confidence to adjust and to cope on her own with situations she had never experienced before. It gave her the possibility to discover

herself and to improve herself. She felt confident enough to deal with uncertainties and fears and to learn constantly from the new circumstances:

Another change is definitely the way I carry myself. It's another kind of change because in India I had to dress as I was told. I could not wear the clothes I wanted to wear. I had to be all covered up. After coming to Bilbao, I have learnt to experiment with different kinds of outfits. That has again invited some kind of self-confidence about my body.

Strength

Sakti explained that migration enabled her to evolve. In the host country, she found a place where she could finally be herself:

Migration is a term which I would rather relate to adjustment, coping with uncertanities and evolution of the person you maybe never ever would have discovered before. The different things you never knew about yourself probably. New kind of talents or maybe new kind of abilities that in the past you thought: 'No, I wont't be able to do this'. When destiny throws you into improbable situations, you manage to succeed. Here, the variety of things that we explore about ourselves, about the people around, about life on the whole, are definitely worth learning.

Networking among women

Virikahas in mind to start an association, a network of Asian women in the Basque Country that would assist members to express themselves and to create something together:

Yes, I even thought of starting an association for the rights of Asian women…First, I wanted to make a Whatsapp group, 'Indian women in Bilbao', something like that and then, I wanted to start an association. We can do henna, we can sell Indian scarves in many colours, jewelry and things like that. We can also celebrate our festivals [together].

Sakti who worked as a Human Resources professional in India, joined a professional network of migrant women in Bilbao whose aim was to support women to develop entrepreneurship. She said that women's solidarity and mutual support in the world of entrepreneurship are key factors for success. She also pointed to the fact that even though there has been progress in how women entrepreneurs are perceived, they still encounter many obstacles and prejudice.

Manasvi feels that associations can function as a positive tool to learn the Spanish language and to meet other women:

It's good for learning the language also. You go there and you meet many people. […] I have sent several people there and they are pleased. I don't feel lonely. If I need help, I ask someone [in the association] and they help me. If they need help, they tell me and I do what I can.

The women were members of different kinds of associations ranging from the Nepali women's Association to the Porfessional Women's Network, a local group whose aim is to support high-skilled women workers, orthe Equality Service Centre which offers Spanish language courses for migrant women and gender equality training courses. These networks strengthened ties among migrant women and developed ties between migrant women and the local women's groups and clubs as well.

Conclusion

In this paper, in portraying the empowerment process among South Asian migrant women in the Basque Country, we feel that the first sign of empowerment is the act of migration itself. Migration is an instrument for personal growth and an empowering mechanism. The decision to move from a place where the family bond is as strong as it is in South Asia is courageous.

The empowerment process of Dhriti, Virika, Sakti, Aarin and Manasvi began with the actual journey of relocation from their native countries to the host country.

Factors facilitating empowerment identified by the participants were primarily the capacity to express themselves in the local language, facilitating inclusion and giving them confidence. Fundamentally, language proficiency made possible their employment.Second, their decision-making capacity which is a sign of self development improved vastly,since the new life situation in which they were free from parents and in-laws enabled the women to take decisions on their own. Prior to migration their decisions were always influenced by other people. Third, self-reliance and self-sufficiency are other characteristics initiated by migration. Women faced situations they never experienced before and they were obliged to rely on themselves. Migration improved self-esteem and autonomy. Fourth, work-related experiences empowered the women because these affected their self-value and competence (Erman, Kalaycıoglu, Rittersberger-Tılıc, 2002). The participants stated that employment gave them financial freedom, the capacity to use their own money as they wished. Financial independence is an extremely empowering aspect as was freedom of choice. In their countries of origin, the women were obliged to defer to other people's wishes.

The experience and challenge of migration made the participants stronger, mature and persistent. The ability to endure challenging life situations empowered them and gave them strength to continue. The creation of alliances among women, and working together enable sharing of knowledge and skills, and help in the acquisition of new knowledge and skills (Allah Nikkhah, Redzuan, Abu-Samah, 2010). Involvement in associations of women helped the respondents to meet other women from different backgrounds, expand their networks and to create alliances among themselves.

Women undergo transformation with migration, beginning with the actual decision to migrate. The empowerment process continues in the host country, leading to evolving personal development.

Notes

[1] An autonomous region in the North of Spain comprising three provinces: Bizkaia, Gipuzkoa and Araba. The study is based on data gathered for my doctoral dissertation *Life histories of theempowerment of South Asian migrant women in the Basque Country. Gender roles, culture, identity and transformations*, University of Deusto, Bilbao, 2021.

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