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Gender-Based Experiences of Migrant Smuggling at the US-Mexico Border

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Gender-Based Experiences of Migrant Smuggling at the US-Mexico Border

Abstract

The US-Mexico border has been increasing its security measures, which has corresponded with increases in migration. Due to increasing restrictions on who is able to legally migrate, many turn to irregular migration, and the more effective way of achieving irregular migration is through use of a migrant facilitator. Migrant smugglers are individuals who receive compensated for assisting others in crossing a national border through illegal means. In discourses about irregular migration from the media and political, migrant smugglers are typically portrayed as criminalized men who take advantage of vulnerable, victimized women migrants. While the experiences of men and women migrants and migrant facilitators may be highly gender-based and are often fraught with dangers, this conflated view of the migrant smuggling process reproduces dominant narratives of xenophobia and anti-immigration sentiment.

Keywords

migrant smuggling, facilitated migration, US-Mexico border, gender

Disciplines

Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies | Immigration Law | Latin American Studies

Comments

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Research Project Independent Paper:
Gender-based experiences of migrant smuggling at the US-Mexico border

The US-Mexico border has been increasing its security measures, which has corresponded with increases in migration. Due to increasing restrictions on who is able to legally migrate, many turn to irregular migration, and the more effective way of achieving irregular migration is through use of a migrant facilitator. Migrant smugglers are individuals who receive compensated for assisting others in crossing a national border through illegal means. In discourses about irregular migration from the media and political, migrant smugglers are typically portrayed as criminalized men who take advantage of vulnerable, victimized women migrants. While the experiences of men and women migrants and migrant facilitators may be highly gender-based and are often fraught with dangers, this conflated view of the migrant smuggling process reproduces dominant narratives of xenophobia and anti-immigration sentiment.

Dangers on the migrant trail are very real concerns that apply to both men and women, but they are typically constructed as specific to women. “Women and men experience gendered forms of violence along the migrant journey including assault, rape, humiliation and sexual servitude.” (Vogt, 2016, p. 378). Some other non-gender-specific dangers include extortion; drowning at sea; suffocation in back of lorries, trains, and containers; and abandonment of migrants in transit (Sanchez, 2018, p. 29). While both men and women are vulnerable to various forms of violence and degradation on the migrant trail, even to forms of sexual violation and trauma, women are often portrayed as particularly at risk. W. Vogt refers to “ways women’s

bodies and sex are used and abused by gangs, authorities, smugglers and even other migrants in exchange for passage” with the term “*cuerpomatic* (body-matic)” (2016, p.378). However, they point out how the concept of *cuerpomatic* fails to take into account the other roles of female migrants, reducing them to mere victims rather than dynamic social agents often highly active in their own journeys. The *cuerpomatic* also undermines male migrants’ experiences of violence and trauma along their personal journeys. M. Schrover, J. Van der Leun, L. Lucassen, and C. Quispel make this gendered perception of agency in migration apparent when commenting that “Men are often spoken of as being smuggled and women as being trafficked” (2008, p.11). Smuggling and men are associated with voluntary consent and even availability of economic means, while women are seen as powerless victims of non-consensual exploitation of trafficking. The notion of vulnerability around women migrants is problematic because it leads to increases in the monitoring and formation of “protective” policies that actually restricts the movement and agency of women migrants (Schrover et al., 2008).

The exaggerated focus on gender-based migrant victimization in political and media-centric discourse and in academic scholarship ignores the agency migrants often have over their own journeys and the greater equality experienced between migrant genders. There have been studies that found gender-based differences in migration; however, over time these differences are becoming less statistically significant. For example, Ilse van Liempt found that police were less likely to stop women at the US-Mexico border (Schrover et al., 2008, p.92). Women were less likely than men to have been apprehended because they were not as likely to be suspected of irregular migration. However, K. M Donato, B. Wagner, and E. Patterson found that after the 1990s, a decrease in gender gap relative to apprehension of irregular migrants at the US-Mexico border corresponded with increasing securitization. They also found that between the years 1986

and the 1990s, more women were migrating, especially unmarried women and women without documentation (2008). Women migrants were still found to travel with others, showing a certain implicit requirement for “moral correctness” for women (Donato et al., 2008), but were more likely to travel among family members and/or relatives than accompanied by or aiming to reunite with husbands. From her studies interviewing the experience of irregular women migrants, G. Sanchez explains individual decisions and diverse reasonings inform the desire and decision to migrate (2018). For example, women may be escaping domestic abuse, reuniting with their family, seeking education opportunities, or desiring travel (Sanchez, 2018). While the research of Donato et al. is from a relatively outdated study, it indicates an important social change in the irregular immigrant demographic, a trend towards increased mobility for women, which Sanchez’s research affirms continues in modern times.

Migrants traveling with others form complex dynamics, which can be visualized in terms of “social economies.” W. Vogt studied the social dynamics between migrants in terms of economic exchange, through a more positive lens that likens the relationships formed on the migrant trail to kinship structures. They described these social exchanges as “intimate labors” as “a series of exchanges between social actors” involving care and gender roles (Vogt, 2016, p.376). For example, one part of the migrant group, such as the men, acquire food, while the other part, the women, fill domestic tasks such as cleaning and cooking (Vogt, 2016). Vogt describes a more specific type of social interaction they characterize as “protective pairings” (2016, p.377), in which men and women migrants pair up in reciprocal, simulated kin relationships to increase their chances of success in their journeys. Gender roles in these protective pairings are evident: “male migrants exchanged security and protection for female performance of carework such as procuring food, washing clothes, tending wounds and in some

cases, sexual intercourse” (Vogt, 2016, p. 379). In addition to receiving domestic care-work from women migrants, male migrants also are more likely to receive charity and assistance from migrant shelters along the route when in a visually apparent relationship (Vogt, 2016). There is much more skepticism around individual travelers, especially suspicion of male bodies. Women migrants in these pairings gain a certain amount of protection, preventing violence from other migrants, migrant smugglers, or authorities. However, the risk of abandonment or being taken advantage of by their “protective partner” is still a real threat. Migrants might also simulate kin relationships with their smuggler to evade suspicion and avoid smuggling fees (Vogt, 2016). While traditional gender roles are performed in these protective pairings, migrants most accurately take advantage of gender roles in order to avoid suspicion on their journeys.

Traveling with a migrant facilitator offers the safety of traveling with others and increased experience on the migrant trail that gives migrants a strategic advantage on the migrant trail. A study by Donato et al. found that, regarding irregular migration, crossing alone was found to be least likely while crossing with a facilitator was found to be the most common statistic (2008, p. 338). They also found that women were more likely to use a facilitator or travel among groups than men, but the gender-based gap between demographics decreased with increased experience on the migrant trail (Donato et al., 2008, p. 341). Migrants are able to increase their experience on the migrant trail with time and by the nature of the “Cat and Mouse” game at the US-Mexico border. The “Cat and Mouse game” refers to the process of INS officials apprehending and voluntarily sending migrants back across the border, only for them to re-cross again later, which occurs independently from enforcement activities (Donato et al., 2008, p. 331). The renewed dependence on migrant smuggling is not only to avoid the dangers associated with the migrant trail, but also because “illegality reproduces vulnerability” (Vogt, 2016, p. 378).

Irregular migrants are increasingly vulnerable to various forms of manipulation and extortion because their human rights are often not protected, due to their illegal positioning. Migrant facilitators offer certain representations of safeguards, but don't completely undercut the potential dangers. However, migrant facilitators offer a valid option to strategically increase migrants' success along their journeys, which are not necessarily straightforward. Migrants manage their own mobility strategies with more agency than current media and political discourses around irregular migration might indicate.

Common depictions of migrant smugglers in the news, media, and even academics focus on criminalizing human smugglers, which denies the structures in place that create the high traffic of irregular migrants at the US-Mexico border. G. Sanchez says that "Media and law enforcement reports blame [migrant smugglers] for a long list of tragedies" migrants fall to (2018, p.29). These tragedies, of migrants falling to dangers such as sexual assault and/or abandonment, often get attributed exclusively to migrant smugglers. Smugglers are characterized as having "disregard [...] for the lives of migrants" (Sanchez, 2018, p.29), treating them as expendable economic investments. Furthermore, these tragedies often get sensationalized and then applied to the public conception of irregular migration in an over-generalized fashion. The demonization of irregular migration leads to an "escalation of migration restrictions" (Sanchez, 2018, p.30). However, a significant reduction has yet to be seen in the numbers of irregular migrants at the US-Mexico border. Migrants are still attempting to cross from Central and South America, and often turn to illegal means since it is so difficult to get permission to cross the border legally. In a study by Sanchez, she found that irregular women migrants specifically sought out a migrant facilitator to improve their chances of crossing, after they had been denied a US visa (2018). The restrictions at the border, as products of xenophobia and anti-immigration

sentiment, ironically contribute to a heightened reliance on irregular migration and migrant facilitators.

Vogt further argues that blaming migrant smugglers for violence at the border erases the systems at work, that the US policy and propaganda creates:

Yet, by blaming smugglers, we mask the deeper political and economic processes that fuel what has become a highly profitable industry in contexts worldwide. The smuggling industry is embedded within the simultaneous pulls of a global capitalist system that demands the movement of drugs, weapons and people across the Americas and the transnational security regimes mandated to control such flows. (2016, p. 369)

The US cannot condemn irregular migration and violence at the border as its investments in the weapons industry helps support that violence. It also denies the reality of the drug market catering to US customers.

Sanchez also pushes back on the idea that migrant smugglers alone are to blame for these tragedies, by pointing out that violence migrants are avoiding is equally as likely from criminal groups and especially authorities. Vogt points out that rape is a common tool of control and violence used by criminals and officials along the migrant trail, and so migrants form close bonds out of a need for protection and out of shared trauma (2016). Sanchez acknowledges the many dangers present on migrants' journey, including at time from migrants' facilitators themselves, but encourages conducting empirical inquiry into migrant facilitators and their dynamics to avoid reproductions of xenophobia and anti-immigrant sentiment.

One study in particular that Sanchez performed was into the details of female migrant smugglers. She states that "Smugglers, as the facilitators of irregular migration, are most often characterized as young and violent men from the Global South who are responsible for the tragic

journeys of migrants around the world” (Sanchez, 2018, p.29). Because migrant smugglers are often demonized, they tend to be linked with the gender stereotype of the violence and agency of men. However, there is a very real population of women migrant facilitators. Throughout Sanchez’s empirical research into female migrant smugglers based in Arizona, she deconstructs the notion of the nefarious criminality of migrant facilitators and irregular migration. For instance, Sanchez explains that women’s experiences in transit may incentivize them to assist others in their migration journeys and even to help out their migrant facilitators (Sanchez, 2018). Far from being taken advantage of by their facilitators, women migrants recognize the dangers associated with migrant smuggling and take charge of their journeys by helping out any way they can. These experiences may lead women to become migrant smugglers themselves, as motivated by their own journeys and from a desire to help others (Sanchez, 2018).

Sanchez also puts women migrant facilitators forward as economically viable contributors to the community, and that they regard their work as a legitimate form of labor. Some of the roles women facilitators perform include customer recruitment, negotiation of fees and payment plans, withdrawal of smuggling payments from banks and wire transfer stores, care for migrants and guidance of migrants through the desert (Sanchez, 2016, p.387). Many of these actions are highly financial in nature, positioning women smugglers as “entrepreneurial” (Sanchez, 2018, p.36). Involvement in the migrant smuggling industry enables women to provide for themselves independently. However, this money is not creating a corrupt industry around migrant smuggling that simply drives up the price, since money gained from smuggling irregular migrants is often insubstantial, never exceeding a couple hundred dollars within a month (Sanchez, 2018, p.37). Additionally, the facilitators often redirect these funds into their local

economies. Due to the supplementary nature of funds gained from migrant facilitation, these facilitators are also often employed in a main job.

Although women migrant smugglers are able to be more financially independent and have agency in their work, there is some gender-based discrimination that persists in this industry. Sanchez notes that the “majority of the tasks women perform in smuggling are feminized,” and so women smugglers often don’t make as much money as male smugglers (2018, p.37-38). Men are more likely to make dangerous journeys across difficult terrains and to be on the front end of dealing with immigration enforcement, and so their compensation is based on these perceived difficulties. However, women migrant smugglers’ functions in financial management and in hosting way-houses for irregular migrants are equally important in maintaining the integrity of the smuggling ring’s system of operation. Women smugglers may also perform the guidance function that is commonly attributed just to male smugglers. Women migrant smugglers are also as much at risk as men migrant smugglers for reprehension from authorities. Women may be implicated in involvement with a migrant smuggling ring from as small and indirect assistance as providing food and water to a migrant smuggling way house (Sanchez, 2018). Women smugglers are just as vulnerable to dangers associated with violence from authorities, criminals, and other migrants as the migrants themselves, I would argue, which puts them on par with men for the physical and legal dangers male migrant smuggler experience, as well.

In conclusion, among the migrant smuggling industry at the US-Mexico border, there is a trend towards decreasing the gender-based demographic gaps as women experience new forms of mobility and agency. Although gender-specific discrimination still persists for both irregular migrants and migrant facilitators, the most concerning aspect of this sexism is its reproduction on

a massive scale through propaganda, media, and politics in US discourse on irregular migration. These reiterations of gender-codified and problematically criminalizing language influence further restrictionist sentiment and controlling policies at the US-Mexico border that actually increases the pressure to migrate illegally, and thus increases the reliance on migrant facilitators. While gender-based discriminations in reality continue to fluctuate towards greater equality, violence at the border and for migrants on their journeys will only continue to heighten as US policy continues to increase border security and discourses perpetuate stereotypically sexist and criminalized anti-immigration sentiment.

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