

Wielding the Purse-string Power

The Washington post
October 26, 2007

WASHINGTON -- Politicians such as Chilean President Michelle Bachelet and Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner, the all-but-certain next president of Argentina, are making headlines as they shatter glass ceilings. But outside the political spotlight, women of much less prominence are gaining footholds in areas that have been traditionally dominated by men.

These women are succeeding by immigrating to industrialized nations in ever-greater numbers, now accounting for half of all new immigrants. They migrate for many of the same reasons that men do -- to escape hardship, find better opportunities, provide for their families -- but also to do jobs men don't, such as those in the booming personal service sector, including domestic work, child care and other related fields.

Earning more money than they ever did back home, migrant women can contribute more financially to their households back home even if it must come from money transfers, or remittances.

Studies show that the flow of remittances tends to favor women in the simple sense that women are the principal recipients of this steady flow of cash. Initially, this was explained by the fact that more men were working abroad while their wives or partners remained to care for family.

Now with more women abroad, this trend continues to expand because women tend to trust their mothers, sisters or other women to handle the money more responsibly than men. A study last year of women from the Dominican Republic migrating to Spain, primarily to work as domestics, found that most of the women sent money back to their husbands or partners, yet they quickly changed their minds if they weren't happy about the way the money was being spent. In a great number of cases, the report found, the men were squandering the money on drinking, gambling, sexual dalliances and other bad investments.

Experts say that the expansion of earnings among women working in industrialized nations, along with the increase of available funds for women back home, means that women have more economic and decision-making power than ever before. The United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women, which studies remittances along gender lines, has found that migration -- as it did in the Dominican study -- has generated "new opportunities for many women."

This shift, however, has failed to eliminate traditional gender biases, at least so far. One key conclusion of the Dominican study was that while women became more influential in household management, their departure and their remittances did little for equality. Most men who stayed behind, in fact, did not take on new roles of caring for the children or

managing the household, and in some cases even stopped providing for the household once the remittances began arriving.

The choices of working-class Latin American women who migrate compared to white-collar workers (and presidential candidates) who stay behind are obviously quite different, but their struggles are parallel. Both confront traditional structures that favor men. Argentina, for instance, may rank among the world's best performers in the World Economic Forum's gender equality ranking when it comes to health and political participation, yet women there continue to earn a little over a third of the income of men for comparable work.

Measures directly aimed at creating equal opportunity or equal access naturally favor those who are in the best position to capitalize on them: women who already have means and education. Argentina, for instance, was the first country in Latin America to pass a law requiring that a certain number of political candidates be women.

For those who have emigrated, however, a different kind of assistance might have a more lasting effect on changing traditional structures that serve to undermine them. As an economic force with their newfound and unprecedented resources, these women stand at the crux of new opportunity.

In the Dominican study, all the women who returned home attempted to start their own businesses. But their lack of resources, particularly in education, training and financing, led them to pick businesses with low profit margins. Many of these women failed, or eked out a subsistence income. Coupled with the right public or private assistance, however, they might be able to craft a future in line with their desires as well as the broader goals of poverty reduction and equality.