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Ronit Lentin

Department of Sociology, Trinity College, Dublin



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Migrant women's networks and intercultural Ireland

Ronit Lentin
Department of Sociology, TCD
rlentin@tcd.ie

Introduction: Migrant women's network in Ireland, what is the question?

Theories of transnationalism (e.g. Portes et al, 1999; Vertovec, 1999) and more specifically 'immigrant transnationalism' (e.g., Portes, 2001) assume a category of migrants who not only 'live dual lives' in the sense of living in more than one country (Portes et al, 1999), but who also engage in long-distance, cross-border activities including migrant labour, 'back and forth movements', and trans-border entrepreneurship. In this paper, based on initial field research with members of networks of women migrants in Ireland by Carla De Tona and me, I explore another approach to researching transnational networks of women migrants. Saskia Sassen (2000) argues that key dynamics of the globalised circuits of capital interlink with survival strategies of migrant women, which transgress international law and treaties, yet are connected to conditions created by the global economy. Sassen argues that migrant women are key actors in 'counter circuits of globalisation', in that their earnings are a vital contribution to the survival of their families, their communities, and sending states.

Immigration has become a key site of articulating Irishness and otherness since the mid-1990s (Lentin and McVeigh, forthcoming). According to Central Statistics Office (CSO) figures, between 1995 and 2004 there were some 489,000 immigrants (Ruhs, 2005a: Table A2, 109). Analysis shows that in-migration figures are mostly made up of returned Irish emigrants (whose number peaked at 27,000 in 2002), high-skill workers, 'counter culture' immigrants, and retirees (Mac Éinri, 2003). In 1996, Ireland reached its 'migration turning point' and has been a country of in-migration ever since: net migration went from minus 1,900 in 1995 to 31,600 in 2004, peaking in 2002 at 41,300 (Ruhs, 2005: 109). Of these in-migrants, the proportion of non-Irish migrants from outside the EU-15 increased from 13 per cent in 1987-9 to 36 per cent in 2002-4. Non-EU-15 immigrants constituted 57 per cent of all non-Irish immigrants arriving in Ireland in 2002-4, up from 36 per cent in the late 1980s. According to the 2002 census, there were 88,500 non-EU-15 nationals usually resident in Ireland, about 2 per cent of the total population (Ruhs, 2005: 9).

The CSO also provides a gender breakdown, according to which between 2000 and 2005, the numbers of men and women migrants are more or less equal, even though there are differences in specific categories as you can see from Table 1.

TABLE 1

Estimated migration classified by sex and country of origin, 2000-2005 / in 000

Year	UK	Rest of EU15	EU10	USA	Rest of world	Total	Net migration
M 2000	10.4	4.9	-	2.8	8.1	26.2	13.1
2001	10.2	5.0	-	2.7	12.2	30.1	17.5
2002	9.3	4.6	-	2.9	14.4	31.3	18.6
2003	7.6	5.0	-	2.4	10.9	25.9	14.8
2004	6.7	6.3	-	2.6	10.5	26.1	17.0
2005	7.3	4.0	17.6	1.6	8.7	39.1	30.5
F 2000	10.5	6.8	-	2.7	6.4	26.4	12.9

2001	10.4	5.4	-	4.0	9.3	29.0	15.3
2002	9.8	6.7	-	3.7	15.5	35.6	22.7
2003	6.0	4.7	-	2.3	11.7	24.6	15.0
2004	6.3	6.3	-	2.2	9.2	24.0	14.6
2005	6.4	5.0	8.6	2.8	8.2	30.9	22.9

Source: CSO, Population and migration estimates, 2005.

Women are clearly present among the new wave of migration to Ireland. It is also clear that migrant women increasingly employ a variety of resistance strategies to their racialisation by state and society, and that one resistance strategy is the formation of migrant networks. As Salome Mgubua, AkiDwA national director, the main purpose of establishing networks is to make the issue of migrant women more visible in the Irish system: ‘Because at the moment, it’s still very invisible’...

This paper is foregrounded by four key questions. The first asks what is ‘transnational’ and ‘global’ about the networks of migrant women in Ireland. ¹ I argue, after Phizacklea (2000), that theories of transnationalism often neglect class, gender and other hierarchies within migration networks. Adding the diaspora link helps to reconceptualise transnationalism – an ultimately unsatisfactory theoretical framework. Guarnizo and Smith (1998) distinguish between ‘transnationalism from above’ and ‘transnationalism from below’ (describing immigrant and grassroots organisations). Holton (2005: 77) cites Braithwaite and Drahos (2000) who develop the ‘web’ metaphor and distinguish between ‘webs of power’ and ‘webs of dialogue’, leading to thinking about migrant women’s networks as ‘bottom up’ webs of dialogue.

The second question is whether the groups studied can be described as ‘networks’ rather than ‘groups’ or ‘coalitions’ – two terms interchangeably used in describing collective migrant activities in the recent Irish context. ² Zygmunt Bauman offers a clear distinction between ‘relations’, ‘partnerships’ and other forms of mutual engagement, and ‘network’, which stands for a ‘matrix for simultaneously connecting and disconnecting... Network suggests moments of “being in touch” interspersed with periods of free roaming’ (Bauman, 2004: xii). The ethnographic data is viewed in light of this fluidity: interviewees speak of deliberately conceptualising their activities as *networking* and of willingly entering into more than one network, creating a field of overlapping networks, both global and local. Interestingly, initial research also found that migrant women’s networking activities tend to centre around one key individual, also creating a concentric networking model. More of this later.

The third question relates to the gendered nature of the networks studied. Endendering, Marsha Meskimmon (1997: 1) argues, ‘is the ideal signifier of making space meaningful through social structures in which gender difference is always and already present’. While it has been argued that the global is masculine and the local feminine (Freeman, 2001), this study begins to discern, in this local Irish context, a new ‘global femininity’ which challenges and reconfigures the notion of mobility as masculine (Freeman, 2001). Field observations suggest that though new technologies enable women migrants to connect globally across geographical distance – with their ‘home country’ but also with other women migrants in their ‘new country’ and in ‘other countries’ – migrant women’s connectivity remains focused on face-to-face interaction.

A gendered understanding of globalisation is not one in which women’s stories or feminist movements can be ‘stirred into’ the macropicture; rather it challenges the very constitution of that macropicture (Freeman, 2001). Thus, narrative becomes central to our analysis: as women migrants develop new networks in their diasporic location, we observe how they connect narratively, with other women from ‘home’ and with women from ‘other homes’, subverting notions of ‘national’, ‘local’ and ‘global’.

The fourth question is the specificities of migrant women’s networks in the Irish context, where the analysis of migrants organising, let alone networking, is relatively novel.

Following Robbie McVeigh's (1996) theorisation of the specificities of Irish racism as related to the 'warmth of community', Alana Lentin (2004) suggests that anti-racism Irish-style also derives from the very same 'warmth of community' and therefore tends to be solidaristic, and organised by white settled Irish people rather than being migrant- or minority-led. Lentin and McVeigh (forthcoming) develop this to critique top-down, state-inspired anti-racism initiatives as emanating from 'racism without racism', where the state both denies racism and enacts racist immigration controls. In this light, theorising migrant-led transnational networks is a novel way of understanding resistance to the racial state in this Irish context.

After a briefly outlining the theoretical underpinning of the study, I want to take two lines of enquiry in this paper. The first has to do with the networks themselves. By outlining the trajectory of AkiDwA – the African Women's Network – through narratives of members of its executive, I suggest that migrant women's networks often come as a direct response to the women's perceived needs – particularly the wish to forge links to assuage isolation and counter racism and discrimination. Furthermore, in highlighting the role of Salome Mgubua, AkiDwA's national director, I contend that migrant women's networks are both concentric – deriving from tenacious and continuous activities of one individual, and overlapping – as is evident from members' co-temporal participation in many networks, nationally and internationally.

My second argument relates to the specificities of Irish multicultural, or 'intercultural' policies. By inserting, after Bhabha (1994), the hyphen into trans-nationalism, the paper proposes that networking activities of migrant women constitute a counter-narrated space in contemporary global Ireland. Rather than conceive of migrant women's *networks* as ideal type *objects*, this paper theorises migrant women *networking* as heterogeneous *processes*, and asks whether they construct a subversive trans-national space, or rather – through the focus on integration – consolidate Ireland's nascent state-inspired 'interculturalism industry'.

What is 'transnational' and 'global' about the networks of migrant women in Ireland?

Portes et al (1999: 219) argue that as a theoretical field, migrant transnationalism, which analyses the linking of immigrant groups in the advanced countries with their sending nations and hometowns, lacked analytical rigour.

Global network theory is another theoretical intervention in studying contemporary migratory activities. Factors theorised as impinging on global networks include the ease of travel and technological networking, the increasing role played by migrants in their countries of origin through remittances and family maintenance, and the increasing marginalisation of migrants in their receiving countries (Levitt, 1999: 4). Global migration networks are often built on existing family and community networks of people living and working in different countries, and are intensified by processes of globalisation.

However, against Portes et al's (1999: 224) argument that new technologies enable transnational activities without face-to-face contact (and *pace* Castell, 2004), Robert Holton suggests that as most on-line activity is not strongly networked beyond 'mundane interpersonal emails', the central question must be how 'self interest or some other social orientation... leads to the development of networks' (Holton, 2005a: 213-4). Holton posits networks as both an analytical tool and an empirical entity: 'empirically networks are also assemblages of people, institutions, social practices, interactions and bodies of knowledge oriented to "problems"' (Holton, 2005a: 212).

Our study has focused on the ways globalisation theories shift their focus from systems and structures to 'instances of networks of connectivity' (Holton, 2005a: 209). What is attractive about the metaphor of global networks, Holton further argues, is that they are 'multi-centred rather than being organised around a single controlling source' (Holton, forthcoming). Bauman's suggestion, that 'in a network, connections are entered on demand,

and can be broken at will' (2004: xii), is useful in re-inserting agency into the field of gendered migration.

The diasporic link: Inserting the hyphen into trans-nationalism

Prior to the dominance of transnationalism in theorising migrant networks, the language of diaspora – bridging geography and genealogy (Gilroy, 1997) and denoting both 'roots' and 'routes' (Hall, 1900) – was used to conceptualise globalisation. Freeman (2001) argues that transnationalism is as much a macro-concept as globalisation, lacking 'the gendered and often racial matrices in which these processes are embedded'.

Jayne Ifekwunigwe theorises diasporic spaces and journeys not only as the outcome of global mobility and fluidity, but also as a lived continuity in the 'dynamic, interlocking and independent global networks of geopolitical spheres', which in turn have 'localised constituencies' (Ifekwunigwe, 2003: 58).³

But it is theorists such as Paul Gilroy who insist that diasporic interconnectedness has extra-national, trans-cultural and intercultural qualities which create alternative or oppositional forms and codes of modern belonging and citizenship, not allowed by theories of globalisation because of their 'totalising immodesty and ambition' (Gilroy, 1997: 339).

Diasporas *within* Ireland should be understood, against articulations of the *Irish* diaspora, as disrupting the (Irish) nation in new and exciting ways. In view of Kiberd's (2001) argument that Irish racism is about fearing the hybridity of the Irish national, diasporicity – Irish and 'other' – is not about dismantling national culture, but rather – through fear of the other – reinforcing it, while realising that there is no such thing as 'authentic Irish culture', which is far from being 'mono-cultural' (Lentin, 2002).

Bhabha's reading of the hybrid, as she who resists the Euro-centre and engages in a constant search for what he calls 'the third space,' a truly inter-*hyphen-* national space, a new creative space in the border zone, corresponds to Bauman's stranger, modernity's 'ambivalent third' (Bauman, 1991). Our initial research begins to point in the direction of migrant women's networks creating a hyphenated space of trans-hyphen-nationalism in Ireland, drawing links between and across home country and diasporic country.

The gendering of global/diasporic networks

Feminist critiques challenge binary models of locality as female versus mobility as male (Freeman, 2001) in accounts of globalisation. However, gendering global networks is not merely about 'adding women where they are missing' (Erel et al, 2003: 1), but implies understanding how connectivity is shaped by gender roles, how it becomes a gender resource and bears gendered implications.⁴

Social networks which mediate between individual migrants and larger structural contexts are deeply implicated in gendered ideologies and redistribution of power (Phizacklea, 2000: 12). According to Hondagneu-Sotelo, men and women have different networks, even when they belong to the same families. While previous network analysis assumed that women automatically benefited from their husbands' networks (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994: 7), 'resources are not always equally shared and automatically pooled within the household or family unit', and this is especially true of immigration social networks (1994: 187).

The influence is two-directional: while gender relations within the family influence migration processes, the process of migration often realigns patriarchy in the family, 'as the women, out of necessity, act autonomously and assertively in managing household affairs'. In the migration process there are differences between single and married women's networks, the latter allowing women to circumvent or contest domestic patriarchal authority (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994: 188-9). In the settlement process women are often not waiting to be organised, but rather organise to 'address problems specific to their class, gender, ethnic and citizenship status' (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994: 197). According to Sassen, one element of

the counter-geography of globalisation is the ‘feminisation of survival... because it is increasingly women who make a living, create a profit and secure government revenue’ (Sassen, 2003: 61). Migration may also bring about stricter regulation of sexuality and marriage,⁵ particularly bearing in mind that women are the signifiers of their collectives’ cultural boundaries (as argued by Yuval-Davis and Anthias, 1989). Women connect more often with loved ones stayed behind (Al Ali, 2004) and often compensate for the absence of family support networks by creating alternative networks in their countries of settlement (Al Ali, 2004).

A crucial factor in theorising economic and social activities of migrant women is the entry of western middle class women into paid labour, enabled by globalisation. The ensuing ‘care deficit’ provides an alternative narrative of globalisation which, inter alia, involves the transfer of the ‘domestic burden’ from western woman to poor world woman across continental divides (e.g., Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2003; Andall, 2003; Conroy, 2003).

Another important factor is the racialisation of migrants, often homogenised as undifferentiated by gender, class and education levels, despite their obvious heterogeneity, and the resentment, by the white majority, of the issue of racism being raised (c.f. Balibar, 1991). Women often appear less threatening than men to the receiving country, although this reasoning is not sustained in relation to the Irish state putting migrant mothers at the centre of the immigration debate in relation to the June 2004 Citizenship Referendum (Lentin, 2004).

‘The networking started to be like put up roots’? Initial thoughts about migrant women’s networks in the Irish context

Our initial research suggests that new migrant women’s networks in the Irish context do not follow one ideal migrant network type but rather represent heterogeneous networking processes – as papers by Carla De Tona, Jane Pillinger and others demonstrate.

While what seems to unify older migrants is a common origin, AkiDwA is a network of African women originating from different African national contexts, whose networking activity constructs a common ‘African’ origin. According to Salome Mgbua:

...at that stage we said we restrict the group to only African women, because we knew Africa is a big continent, and if we open it to all women it may not work. That was actually my experience from working with groups with people from different tribes in Kenya and Uganda, so we said maybe we restrict the group to African women. And if it works we can open it to other women.

Quinlan (2002) argues that although AkiDwA mobilises difference in a strategically essentialist way in response to macro concerns, on a local level the network’s activities challenge myths of both Irish and African homogeneity: ‘AkiDwA executive members have constructed a common context of struggle out of a myriad subject positionings that vary depending on their location of articulation’. Quinlan shows how AkiDwA build alliances with diverse groups of women to mobilise on particular issues. Gender and race form the *raison d’être* for coming together: they state clearly that they do not want to be spoken for by either white women or African men (AkiDwA mission statement).

Holton views networks as assemblages of people and social practices oriented to ‘problems’, yet does not fully develop his call to privilege ‘self interest or some other social orientation as leading to the development of networks’ (Holton, 2005a: 212-4). According to AkiDwA executive member Alwiye Xuseyn the networking emanates from individual executive members’ experiences of isolation as part of the migration process, and their wish to help newer African women migrants with the ‘problem’ of isolation:

Isolation was the main reason, but at the same time, we found ourselves fortunate, of having the language ... [and] we wanted to be their interpreter, or the mediator between them and the Irish. That’s how the network started. And most of the members of the networking, at that time, had free time. When I started with the networking... I said, yeah, I could use some of my free time to help other women...

Migrant women's networking activities are often based on 'older' gendered practices of face-to-face interaction, creating bottom-up 'webs of dialogue' aimed at alleviating the pain of migration. Alwiye Xuseyn stresses the importance of face-to-face networking when she speaks about the training offered by the network:

We will be there in the training, so *it's the face of AkiDwA at the time*, so it's not like you come and talk to our representative now, *it's exactly an AkiDwA person* who you would be meeting and talking to...

Such face-to-face networking is not so different from 'older' forms of women networking through narratives and practices of mutual assistance, evident in the networking activities of Jewish women organising in Zionist-oriented and/or community oriented network activities in Ireland (Landy, forthcoming), or of Italian migrant women in Ireland (De Tona, 2004), who, as De Tona argues, have a major role in keeping alive family relations in the diaspora.

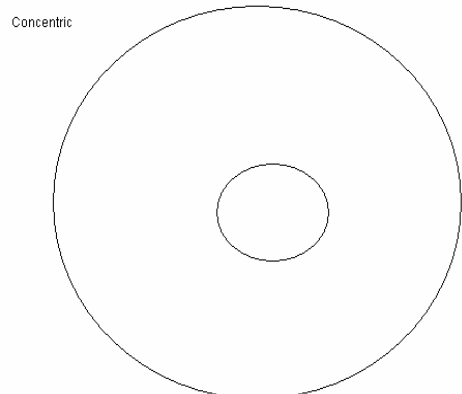
I move now to discussing AkiDwA as an example of a migrant women's network operating in Ireland, along three main stages, denoting its nature as both a concentric network and a multi-centred overlapping network. Stage one – founding the network – was initiated by its current national director Salome Mgubua. Stage two – consolidating the network – was undertaken by a group of seven members of AkiDwA executive, who set out to create a 'network of networks', helping to establish many local networks of African women throughout Ireland. In stage three – AkiDwA is networking with many groups of indigenous Irish people, establishing it as a feature of intercultural Ireland.

Stage one: Concentrically networking

The case of AkiDwA demonstrates that migrant women's networks are often centred around one individual. Salome Mgubua came to Ireland with her Irish husband. In 1999 she met several women from different African countries. Her impetus to network was her own sense of isolation, but although she was meeting regularly with a group of African women from different countries, it was not until 2001 when Mgubua was able to enlist the support of the Sisters of Mercy who gave the network space that the network got going:

'... in the first meeting we shared again our experience. And we realised that racism was a big issue in this country as well as discrimination. And we said we have to do something, we have to speak out... after that we said, what about the other women, if we are experiencing (racism and violence), what about other women...but at that stage we said we'd restrict the group to only African women, because we knew Africa is a big continent, and if we open it to all women it may not work' (Salome Mgubua, director, AkiDwA).

Earlier this year, Salome Mgubua received funding from the One Foundation social entrepreneur scheme on a personal basis which pays her a salary for two years, enabling her to devote all her time to AkiDwA. At the end of her two years, she hopes to bring the issue of migrant women – hitherto invisible – to the attention of the Irish public so that they are listened to, consulted and included in all public policies.



Stage two: Multicentred network of networks

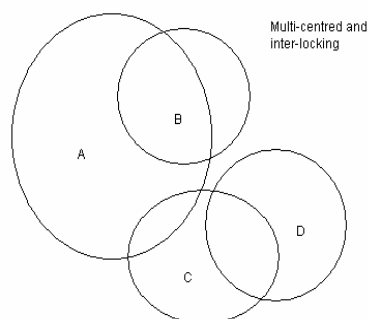
A needs analysis conducted by AkiDwA revealed African women experiencing isolation and racism as asylum seekers in direct provision hostels, or as pregnant women around the time of the 2004 Citizenship Referendum. Mgubua and AkiDwA executive members decided that

because not all of the (women) were able to speak out, we would actually speak, we will be a network that will speak on behalf of African women. And we'll try and bring the issues that are happening in everything we do.

Having identified the issues confronting African women in Ireland, including Isolation, domestic violence, FGM among others, AkiDwA aimed to help women form themselves into small groups around the country, or establish a network of African women's networks, which often break into ethnicity-based smaller groups, such as Nigerian, or even Yoruba groups. The aim, according to Mgubua, is not to go into each group, but rather strengthen the formation of these local groups of 'women coming together despite their differences of ethnic groups,

to go into the network of the networks, what we want to strengthen is the formation of these small groups, of women coming together despite their differences of ethnic groups, that if they choose to do that they can do that outside AkiDwA, but still for them to meet altogether to share their experience and work out their problems which are there and how they can be worked out, you know, as women.

AkiDwA's work includes meeting with local African women's groups, offering training and creating space for women to talk of their issues. By constructing a narrative space, the network acts as both a conduit and a representative.



Stage three: overlapping networking

AkiDwA, despite being under funded, has gained visibility as part of Ireland's intercultural industry, thanks to small extent to Salome Mgubua's acting as public spokesperson for the network and for African, and migrant women in general. Members talk of their multiple membership in overlapping networks, both formal and informal:

'...the networking started to be, like put up roots... there would be kind of two directions of the networking. One networking through AkiDwA and you would do one networking through your own family, who would have maybe come also from near your country, as asylum seekers, and you would keep in touch with them, and you build friendship. Like the Muslim community... And you meet them if there is a wedding, or a birthday... Some times they would inter(sect)... the paths of these people crosses, from the AkiDwA women to your friends, or community, kind of where you come from' (Alwiye Xuseyn, AkiDwA).

More formally, apart from working with local networks of African women, AkiDwA executive members also participate in various Irish organisations, some issue-based, such as Women's Aid, others concerned with general migration issues such as the Immigrant Council of Ireland, often referring African women to relevant NGOs for assistance. Salome Mgubua herself is involved with several Irish organisations, including Women in Crisis, dealing with violence against women, the Offaly Child Care Committee on Equality and Diversity; she has been selected by the Minister for Health to sit on the Crisis Pregnancy Consultative Committee and is involved with national curriculum development. AkiDwA has an office in Cairde, an organisation dealing with challenging ethnic minorities health inequalities, with Banulacht – Women in Ireland for Development; is a member of the judging panel for the Metro Eireann Multicultural Awards and has been a founding member of the Coalition against Deportation of Irish Children (CADIC) which has worked to reverse deportation orders against 18,000 migrant parents of Irish citizen children. Internationally, she has been involved with Grassroots Women Operating Together in Sisterhood (GROWTS) – a global women's movement working on environment issues affecting women.

Conclusion: Women migrant networks in 'intercultural Ireland'

This brief survey of AkiDwA demonstrates networking processes beyond and across the home country / new country trajectory, as new trans-national spaces of cross-national boundary alliances. The networking activities of women migrants in Ireland owes to 21st century Ireland's increasing globalisation, where new forms of migration – labour, asylum and other – are shaping the re-racialisation of Irishness in new ways.

We also have a 'racial state' (Goldberg, 2002) determined to declare its 'intercultural' intentions and at the same time limit immigration. The Irish 'interculturalism industry' has spawned new spaces for migrant-led organisations and networks, which, although seriously under-funded and under-represented, are beginning to take part in new conversations on needs, discrimination, rights and entitlements. Thus, 'old' informal networking processes, like those engaged in by more established groups of migrants such as the Italians and the Jews, have not become part of the intercultural conversation, while 'new', perforce more formal networking processes, by networks of domestic women migrants, or African women migrants, are supported by the 'intercultural industry' through state, church and NGOs, bringing them into the intercultural conversation about, *inter alia*, citizenship status and labour entitlements, but also about arguably more 'female' concerns such as violence against women, FGM, sexual discrimination, and family reunification.

Through their involvement with the actual networking process, but also through becoming increasingly integrated into coalitions, alliances and organisations in Ireland and beyond, key organisers such as Salome Mgubua are helping their network mature, while at the same time assist in their cooption into 'intercultural Ireland'.

Finally, the fact that the narratives of network members speak of their belonging to a series of overlapping networks, in Ireland, in their home countries, in Europe and internationally contributes to theorising these gendered networks as global in new and interesting ways. Are these networks global because members use networking metaphors, or because they are networking across national boundaries to form truly trans-national networks, beyond the home country / new country connection in Ireland?

¹ We have initially been studying AkidwA, and a network of domestic workers, based in the Migrant Rights Centre Ireland. Carla De Tona and I have conducted several individual and group interviews with members of AkiDwA in the past year. I have also been closely associated with AkiDwA's work over the past four years in a variety of ways.

² See, e.g., NGOs such as the Migrants Rights Centre Ireland, Integrating Ireland and the Immigrant Council of Ireland, which support groups and networks as part of their work. See also Feldman et al, 2002, and work in progress by Fidéle Mutwarasibo (2005).

³ Avtar Brah deconstructs the binary 'diaspora' and 'home', asking whether 'home' is a place of desire in the diasporic imagination, a place of return, a place of 'origin' or a place of pain and pleasure, terror and contentment. The concept of diaspora places the discourse of 'home' and 'dispersion' in creative tension, 'inscribing a *homing desire* while simultaneously critiquing discourses of fixed origins' (Brah, 1996: 193).

⁴ Despite Castle and Miller's (2003) claim regarding the *feminisation* of contemporary migration, feminist migration scholars (e.g., Phizacklea, 2001, 2003; Kofman et al, 2000; Anthias and Lazaridis, 2000) argue that this feminisation is not entirely new (e.g. Phizacklea, 2003; Walter, 2004).

⁵ See for example, in relation to Greek diasporic women not fully embodying Greek ideals of womanly virtue, Panagakos, 2001: 309; or to analyses of Sikh marriages in India and Tanzania, Kanwal Mand, 2001; or the positioning of Turkish migrant women as carrying the collective's honour and shame in Akpinar, 2003.

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Institute for International Integration Studies

The Sutherland Centre, Trinity College Dublin, Dublin 2, Ireland

