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The paradox of women migrant workers: agency and vulnerabilities.
Understanding the perspective of women migrant workers in Amman, Jordan

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Abstract

Migration has taken place throughout human history. However, push and pull factors for migration have changed, and some have not been identified during long periods of time. Since 1970, migration studies have paid more attention to the role of women in migration processes, noting that patterns in migration are sometimes similar to men, but many other times differ, this is also known as the feminization of migration. Women, like men, migrate in search for a better future and new opportunities. Moreover, women migrant workers migrate to provide better future for their families back home. However, this migration process leaves great exposure to abuse and exploitation for both men and women. Feminist research argues, however, that this vulnerability is also gendered, affecting women and men differently.

This study aims to contribute to understand the paradox of the agency of women migrant workers on the one hand, and vulnerabilities on the other, from the perspective of migrants themselves. Eleven interviews were conducted with women migrant workers in Amman. Some of the findings of this study show that the interviewees choose to migrate mainly due to economic needs, familial constraints and social structures, which in turn influence their power over their rights and situation, leaving them in vulnerable conditions prone to abuse. Moreover, the alternatives for migration are limited by social and economic structures, in addition to lack of knowledge of rights and obligations.

Key words: women migrant workers, domestic workers, feminization of migration, gender, agency, vulnerability.


**Acronyms**

IOM: International Organization for Migration  
ILO: International Labour Organization  
NGO: Non-Governmental Organization  
POLO: Philippine Overseas Labor and Office  
UN: United Nations  
UNHCR: United Nations High-Commissioner for Refugees
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1. Introduction

Migration is not a new phenomenon. Flows of migrants have moved around the world in all times of history. However, migration trends have been changing along with globalization, urbanization and development factors (Lee, 2015:10). According to the United Nations (UN), in 2017, it is estimated that 244 million women and men crossed borders in search for better opportunities outside their countries of birth or citizenship, of which 63 per cent represent *migrant workers*¹ (UN, 2016; International Labour migration; 2015). Furthermore, trends in migration have also changed in terms of gender. In the past decades, migration, primarily labour migration, has become increasingly feminized; today almost 1 out of 2 migrants are women, this phenomenon is known as the feminization of migration (Moreno-Fontes Chammartin, 2005; UNDESA, 2013:3). Reasons for migration differ. Poverty, family instability, and lack of opportunities in the labour market in the country of origin are the main causes of migration. Moreover, migrant women are often forced to migrate seeking a better future, economic independence and safety (UNHCR, 2009). However, several studies show that women that migrate are more likely to suffer from poor working and living conditions, and discrimination. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO) the discrimination that women migrant workers are exposed to occurs at numerous levels, i.e. based on gender, race, color and ethnicity, leaving them vulnerable to labour exploitation, abuse and human trafficking (ILO, 2010). Migrant women are usually victims of sexual or labour exploitation, due to poverty, family instability, and lack of knowledge, language barriers and cultural differences.

The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan is not an exception to the trends mentioned above. For the past decades, Jordan has seen flows of migrants coming into the country. Today, ten per cent of Jordan’s population is made up by migrants (Amnesty International, 2015). Labour migration to and from the country increase continually and the trends that are possible to see show that migrant

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¹ Migrant workers or labour migration: “(...) movement of people from one country to another for the purpose of employment.” (IOM, 2015)
workers who *leave* Jordan are mainly high-skill workforce, while migrants *coming* to Jordan primarily work in low wage jobs (Tamkeen, 2015:28-29).

Despite growing awareness of the increasing prevalence of women migrant workers, there is insufficient documented research about how women migrant workers’ experiences are different than the experiences of men.

**1.1. The problem of the study**

As it is indicated in the introduction, migration trends have changed, and also women’s role in societies. Worldwide women have taken a more active role as the main provider for their families, however, they are still perceived by the old gender roles that depicts women as caretakers, accompaniers and home stay mothers (Gardiner, 200:399; Agustín 2006:2). In the past 40 years, migration studies began to focus on the role and experiences of women in migration process. These studies showed trends in migration that have not been explained before. The experiences told by women show that women do not migrate for the same reasons as men, neither do they migrate only as a companion. Moreover, the feminization of migration, refers to the gendered migration and recognizes, that women and men experience different aspects of migration in different ways, based on gender (Koffman, 2000:42; Bretell, 2016:83-84,122). Through this qualitative data, it has been possible to recognize that the role of women in migration has changed in the past years. These changes relate to fluctuations in women attitudes towards, mainly, their role in the society and within their family. Several researches indicate that women do not migrante exclusively as companions anymore, rather they now migrate in search of better labour opportunities that will allow them to provide better futures for their families at the country of origin (Agustín, 2006:3-5; Brettell, 2016:172-174).

Women and men who migrate are confronted with similar challenges, such as psychological abused at the work place, withholding of travel documents, extensive working hours and poor working conditions. However, like in migration studies, male migrants dominated sectors are better documented than women. Several studies show that abuses against women migrants are unfrequently spoken about since, especially domestic workers, are not seen by the public eye, and are kept unseen in the workplace. Thus, exploitation and violence on the work place of domestic workers is little known (Piper, 2005: 27; Manalo, 2007:187-193).
Mary Kawar in her study “why are women more vulnerable?” argues that migrant women are usually more vulnerable to suffer exploitation and discrimination, due to poverty, family instability, lack of knowledge, language barriers and cultural differences (Kawar, 2003:73-75). Furthermore, gender discrimination and gender inequalities are also factors that contribute to the vulnerability of women migrant workers in the labour market. (Duong, 2014:797). UN organizations working in the field of labour and migration, ILO and IOM, claim that there is link between the feminization of migration and the increasing number of women migrants in vulnerable situations (Piper, 2005:5; ILO, 2003:9).

In Jordan, one of the largest groups of workers lacking social protection and access to labor laws are women migrant workers, mainly working in domestic service, coming from Sri Lanka, Philippines, Bangladesh and Indonesia (Tamkeen, 2015:7). Numerous women migrant workers that migrate to Jordan in search of a better future and working opportunities suffer from labour exploitation and human trafficking. Globally, human trafficking has been linked mainly with sexual exploitation, but in fact, sexual exploitation is a small part of human trafficking. (Walsh, 2014). Forced labour accounts for the majority of victims of trafficking. According to ILO, 21 million women, men and children work under forced labour conditions, and 44 per cent of the victims are international migrants. Most importantly to remember, this phenomenon affects every region of the world, and both men and women (ILO, 2015). In Jordan, the main reasons for human trafficking are domestic servitude, forced labour, and sexual exploitation, which all three of them are broadly represented by women migrant workers.

Paradoxically migrant domestic workers\(^2\) are both essential actors of their own family’s economic stability (and their countries’ development through remittances), and commodities in the eyes of most employers. However, both of these aspects are seldom considered together, from the

\[^2\]“Domestic work is one of the oldest and most important occupations for millions of women around the world. It is rooted in the global history of slavery, colonialism and other forms of servitude. In contemporary society, care work at home is vital for the economy outside the household to function. In the past two decades demand for care work has been on the rise everywhere. The massive incorporation of women in the labour force, the ageing of societies, the intensification of work and the frequent lack or inadequacy of policy measures to facilitate the reconciliation of family life and work underpin this trend. Today, domestic workers make up a large portion of the workforce, especially in developing countries.” (ILO, 2010b:1).
perspective of migrants themselves. This leaves us unaware of how women migrant workers on the one hand end up in vulnerable employment positions abroad, while on the other they become breadwinners for their families in their home countries and demonstrate considerable agency to improve their families’ living conditions.

1.2. The aim of the study and research questions

This study aims to contribute to understand the paradox of the agency and increased independence of women migrant workers on the one hand, and in terms of vulnerabilities on the other, through a gender lens. Eleven interviews were conducted with women migrant workers in Amman. In order to be able to address the aim of study, the following research questions will be used:

1- Why do women migrant workers in Amman, Jordan choose to migrate in search for labour opportunities?
2- How do women migrant workers in Amman, Jordan experience their situation and perceive their agency?

1.3. Delimitations, limitations and assumptions

The scope of this study is delimited by the scarce qualitative research on women migrant workers experiences in Jordan. Several researches highlight that the majority of labour migration (not considering refugee populations) to Jordan is made out women migrant workers. Moreover, in the process of reviewing the anti-trafficking law in Jordan, several assessments of the demographics of the potential victims of trafficking was made and it shows that many potential victims of labour exploitation are women migrant workers, mainly working in the private households or the garment sector. However, this is a labour sector and a population group that has not been a priority neither for the Government of Jordan nor for the humanitarian and development sectors. Thus, not much research has been done to understand and analyze the situation of women migrant workers in Jordan. Therefore, I choose to focus on women migrant workers in Amman, working as domestic workers.
The main limitations of the study are related to the methodological and contextual aspects. Three main limitations are important to highlight: (1) Interviewing: as this was my first time conducting interviews, I came to notice after the interviews that I could have asked more questions related to one subject or another, or that certain questions were not clear enough and therefore did not get the expected outcome. (2) Interviewees: The nationality and age of the women that have been interviewed for this study are limited to those that have expressed their will to be part of the study only. Their nationalities or age do not indicate any specific trends. (3) Context: I conducted the interviews as an IOM staff and student. This most probably influenced the environment and expectations of the interviewees and thus their answers.

Finally, in the effort to understand women migrant workers experiences of migration it is easy to fall into certain assumptions. One of the assumptions often made in qualitative studies is that the interviewees answer honestly and that the interviewer takes into consideration all aspects of the interview for the result. Moreover, in this particular study, considering the theoretical framework with a strong departure point in gender theory, some reader may assume that the result of the study are not applicable to men’s experiences, or that the eleven interviews conducted for this study represent a broad spectrum of women migrants experiences. Neither does this study assume that men’s experiences in migrating are not affected by gender norms or that men are not exposed to vulnerabilities in the work space, or that a majority of women migrants experience similar situations. This study is limited to the experiences of the eleven women migrant workers, but hopefully gives some insights to a broader picture of women migrant workers’ conditions in Amman, Jordan.

1.4. Disposition

The paper consists of seven chapters. The introductory part, chapter 1, gives a presentation to the study followed by the problem of the study which explains the problematique and gap in research and the contribution of this study to the field. The aim of the study and the research questions follows to that section presenting in short what this paper efforts to answer. Additionally, this first chapter has featured the limitation, delimitations and assumptions of the study, and disposition. Chapter 2 is devoted to the method and material collected for this study. This chapter presents the method that was used to conduct the interviews, the context observations in the field, and how the
content of the interviews will be analyzed. Chapter 3 presents a summary of previous research that has been done in the fields of gender and migration studies. Chapter 4 focuses on the theoretical framework which consists of gender theory and two theoretical concepts, namely, vulnerability and human agency, and a sections on the operationalization of the theories. Furthermore, in chapter 5, the results and analysis of the study are presented as a combination of empirical material, constituted by background of the country where this field study is based and the situation of women migrant workers in Jordan, and the results and observations from the interviews, followed by the analysis which is divided in two sections as per the research questions of this study. Chapter 6 is devoted to the final conclusions and discussion including a section on reflections over the methodology and theoretical framework chosen for the study, in addition to thoughts on possible further research. The last chapter, number 7, presents the list of sources used for this study. The document includes as well one annex with the interview guide used for the interviews.
2. Method and material

This section presents the method that was used to conduct the interviews, the field observation and finally presents the challenges and ethical considerations in the process of conducting semi-structured interviews. The study is based on semi-structured interviews and participatory observations, combined with previous research and migration trends, with focus on the feminization of migration. The observations were made during the interviews, meetings with relevant stakeholders, and informal dialogues with humanitarian actors working with women in vulnerable situations. The semi-structured interviews provided different approaches and views from women during the process of migrating for work purpose and how do they experience their choices.

2.1. Qualitative data collection: migration and gender

Feminist argue that the approaches and methodologies used to understand and categorize migration are not necessarily reflecting the experiences of women migrants. The point of departure that is used for data collection influences the results and analysis. Therefore, several feminist studies mean that what is needed is quantitative data that is disaggregated by gender and gender analysis (Kofman, Phizacklea, Raghuram, Sale; 2000:13). Furthermore, qualitative studies are considered an important contribution to the gender analysis. Kofman, Professor of human geography, argues that “qualitative data often provide a holistic view of women’s experiences” (Kofman and others, 2000:14). Qualitative data illustrates in a more heterogenic way the complexity of the migration process, revealing different aspects of women migration, and the causes and coping mechanisms used by women on the move. In this process of analyzing qualitative data, gender is a key aspect influencing the experiences of women and men. Moreover, Kofman concludes that while quantitative data can be used to monitor and explain general trends of women on the move, women migrants’ experiences and the nuances among women migrants’ stories are better understood by studying qualitative data. (Kofman, 2000:14).

As mentioned earlier in this paper, data shows that women migrants represent almost half of global international migration. Although women migrant workers account for a big part of labour migration there is not enough qualitative data to answer key questions about women’s agency,
accessibility, equality, discrimination, abuse or exploitation among others. Furthermore, feminist researchers argue that migration studies not necessarily address the experiences of women migrants appropriately (Kofman, 2000:13). Qualitative research serves to fill the gaps in the process of developing evidence-based policies that contribute to the improvement of the experiences of women migrant workers in country of origin and destination (Yinger, 2007). Therefore, the method used for this analysis is a series of semi-structured interviews with women migrant workers living in Amman.

2.2. **Fieldwork: the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan**

The study is based on a three months field research in Amman, the capital of Jordan. During my three months in Amman, I did an internship at the International Organization for Migration (IOM) as part of the research unit. IOM is an intergovernmental organization, working on different issues regarding migration, from supporting government in developing migration governance frameworks to assisting migrants with medical assistance, resettlement programs and awareness raising. IOM work extends to the area of labour migration as well, providing capacity building to government officials to improve laws and labour regulations to ensure decent work, in addition to providing workers with information on their rights and obligations. In Jordan, IOM works closely with the Ministry of labour and other counterparts to improve labour migrants’ rights, increase awareness on working conditions for migrants, and to reduce smuggling and human trafficking. It was in the frame of project on counter trafficking that includes a component of assistance to potential victims of trafficking, that I had the chance to interview migrant women.

2.3. **Semi-structured interviews**

Interviews can entail different approach, styles and question structures. Given the nature of this research, and the aim to create a space for the interviewee to share their experiences through the interviews, semi-structured interviews were chosen as the style for the interviews. Semi-structured interviews are positioned in between these two interview styles: unstructured interviews and structured interviews. The first one are mainly use by researchers that have basic knowledge of the subject matter and aim to have an open conversation, while the second one has specific and closed ended questions. Semi-structured interviews are position between this two to be able to through a
questioner guide have guided conversation the interviewee (Leech, 2002:665). Semi-structured interviews means that the same interview guide and questions are used for all the interviews, and the interviews are done under the same time. In addition, following questions may differ from interview to interview depending of the answers given by the interviewee (Gillham, 2008: 103-104). Some researchers argue that semi-structured interviews are the perfect balance between structured and unstructured interviews, since they give space for flexibility in the conversation with the interviewee but at the same time it is done in a structured manner that allows to collect relevant data. (Gillham, 2008:103).

Eleven semi-structured interviews were conducted during three months of fieldwork in Amman between May and July 2016 with migrant women workers living temporary in shelters for women. The interviewees are migrant domestic workers reached through IOM programmes, the questioner efforts to give a space to the interviewee to tell the experiences of migration and working in Amman, Jordan. The sample is drawn from women migrant workers, who have been victims of abuse and searched for help in different local shelters, and/or have been identified by local NGOs, the Jordanian Government or IOM as potential candidates for IOM’s Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration programme (AVRR). These women were identified as potential victims of labour exploitation, and considered stranded migrants when leaving their work place, and contacted IOM seeking assistance to return to the country of origin. In this process, I had the chance to interview eleven women migrant workers about their life in Amman, before coming to Jordan, and what the future brings. The interviews cover three main areas: (1) background, life before migrating and the decision to migrate, (2) experiences during the migration process and at the work place, and (3) future decisions. The purpose here to a large extent is to allow the empirics to speak for itself, and to organize the interviews in such a way as to facilitate the possibility for migrant women to reflect on and express their own perceptions of their situation, and their experiences.

Two of the interviews took place at the shelter for victims of trafficking managed by a government entity, the other five were held at a shelter managed by a non-governmental organization (NGO) call the Jordanian Women Union, and the remaining four were conducted at the Shelter for women at the Philippine Embassy called: Philippine Overseas Labor and Office (POLO) in Amman Jordan. The interviews lasted in between 20 and 30 minutes. The interviews started with a short
presentation of myself and a description of the aim of the interviews. This followed by asking for a verbal consent to conduct the interview and a clarification that the interview could be interrupted and ended at any point if the interviewee wishes so, and if they would like to remain anonymous. None of the eleven interviewees decided to stay anonymous, on the contrary they wish their voice and story to be heard and that people know who they are. However, since this material is used for a master’s thesis, I decided to not share the last names of the interviewees to avoid risking protection problems.

As it is mentioned above, the interviews were conducted in different NGOs or governmental and embassies shelters, this influenced the environment for the interviews and whether the interviewees felt more or less relaxed and in confidence to speak. The two potential victims of trafficking interviewed at the governmental shelter were more reserved in their answers. In the interviewees from the Philippines migrant workers it was sometimes needed to ask for a staff of the Embassy to help with translation, which made the conversation less fluid. The interviews are recorded through note taking during the interviews. After experiencing in the first two interviews that the interviewees did not want to be recorded, I decided to take notes throughout all the interviews in order to have a consistent method for the collection of the data during the interviews.

All these aspects such as language, environment, particular situation of the interviewed among others, influenced the answers and results of the interviews and it is important to take into consideration for the analysis. Moreover, my personal assumptions, experiences and personal interest in the subject may influence the interpretation of the interviews and the results presented in this study.

The interview guide used for the interviews is annexed to this document under annex I.

2.3.1. Challenges

Since the interviews were conducted with migrant women who had suffered some type of abuse by the employer and therefore searched for help in the local shelters, some of the questions that could seem general in other context were sensitive in this context. For example, the questions of children back at home, brought very strong emotions, with some on the interviewees breaking in tears. In two cases I decided to interrupt and finalize before the interview was completed. In other
cases, the interviewee was afraid of sharing information regarding migration status in the country for fear of repercussions. In this case, I made clear once again my role, and what the answers where going to be used for, as well as highlighted the opportunity to talk about those issues and how the interviewee experienced them. During two of the interviews a male colleague working at IOM was present, in this interviews both interviewees did not look at the male colleague though all the interview.

Moreover, in the case of the interviewees from the Philippines, the language was a barrier. Four of the interviews conducted at the shelter for women at the Philippines Embassy were conducted with simultaneous translation provided by a staff of the Embassy.

2.3.2. Ethical considerations

When conducting interviews, it is fundamental to take into consideration the power relationship established between the interviewer and the interviewee, especially in this case in which I represented an organization that would provide the interviewee with direct assistance to return to their home country. Considering this power relationship, the questioner is developed in a sense to not put the interviewee through questions that could be sensitive or personal. (Brinkman, 2007:140). Even if by doing semi-structured interviews, there is a space for the interviewee to express more freely their ideas and experiences, there is a risk for the interviewer to interpret the narratives on favor of the research. The pre-defined research questions, the assumptions about the interviewees’ background and the questionnaire developed for the interviews, can prevent the interviewer from obtaining information relevant to the research (Brinkman, 2007:140). Moreover, the most important point to take into consideration is the protection principle: “do no harm”. The interviewee should at all-times feel and know that the interview is a safe space and that if she wishes so the interview can be interrupted and finished (Gray, 2004:235-236).
3. Summary of previous research

For many years, migration studies paid little attention to the impact of gender on migration. However, in the past decades, a gender approach has been considered in many migration studies to have a better understanding of migration trends and how women and men perceive migration and the impact it has on them. This section presents a brief summary of a number of previous research related to gender and migration, the feminization of migration and migration trends.

With the increasing participation of women on the labour market, and therefore also in international migration, several researchers have noted the importance of bringing a gender approach to the field of migration studies in order to understand new migration trends and to address gaps. As it was presented earlier on in this study, Eleonore Kofman, in her research “Gender and international migration in Europe: employment, welfare and politics”, argues that even if reasons for migration are shared by men and women, e.g. poverty, displacement, lack of opportunities, and other limitations over which they have little control, their impact is always gendered. Kofman means that based on the economic and non-economic factors for women migrants to migrate, the non-economic ones are particularly important causes of migration for women. These causes can be perceived by women as means evading and resisting some forms of oppressive structures they live in. (Kofman; 2000:21-22).

For many decades in which migration studies gave little attention to gender aspects of migration, the role of women in migration was reduced to the merely assumption that women migrate due to family reunification and as companions. Since 1970, this has changed and gender disaggregated data has been taking into account in quantitative research as well as gender approaches for qualitative studies (Pessar, 2005:2). In her study about women, gender and international migration across and beyond the Americas, Patricia Pessar finds that women migrants in Latin-America represent the majority of international migration as a result of a gendered transformation on agriculture, craft production and urban workers. She argues that many of these women migrants choose to migrate due to increasing poverty and lack of labour opportunities in their home town. Migration gives them the chance to continue taking care of their families through private remittances.
For example, in Latin-American and the Caribbean, trends in migration evolved quickly among women since 1960’s, going from women mainly migrating internally in the country, to women going into international migration in order to be able to provide financial support for their families in their home country (Pessar, 2005:2). Domestic workers, the majority of whom are women, constitute a large portion of today's migrant worker population. In Latin America, they constitute as many as 60 percent of all internal and international migration. The feminization of migration, a trend that began in the early 1980s, has resulted in an increased number of women who migrate alone (Pesar, 2005:3).

In the Gulf States, Jordan and Lebanon, domestic work is the most common labour category among women migrants. Of all women migrant workers, 81 percent of those from Sri Lanka, and 39 percent those from the Philippines the ones participate in this large domestic labour market. Studies show that the majority of middle-income countries in the Middle East receive thousands of women migrants as domestic workers every year, many of them high skilled and well-educated women (Moreno-Fontes Chammartin, 2005). Previous research on the subject of domestic labour has been made in Jordan. One example is a field study made by United Nations Development Found for Women (UNIFEM) in Jordan in 2007 to identify the challenges faced by women migrant workers. This study finds that some of the most common challenges and human right violations faced by these women in Jordan are: culture shock, employer or recruitment agency withholding worker’s passport, movement restrictions, inhumane living conditions (lack of privacy, insufficient food, being forced to sleep in bathrooms, kitchens, etc), excessive working hours (average working hours for domestic workers was 15 hours a day at the time the study was done), verbal and psychological abuse, sexual and physical abuse, non-payment. According to the results, UNIFEM concluded that women migrant workers faced a great risk of being victims of trafficking (UNIFEM, 2007:14-18).

Furthermore, several studies show that the feminization of migration is a clear trend in asylum migration as well. This tendency comes in times when asylum policies are getting more restrictive, showing increasing restrictions on the social rights of asylum seekers putting further strain on their living conditions (Freedman, 2013:211-212). Therefore, it is possible to say that these policies have a gender impact leading to particular vulnerabilities for women migrant workers who become
victims of some type of abuse. Allowing women migrants to speak for themselves is key in the process of protecting their rights. (Freedman, 2013:225).

Many of these women migrant workers are vulnerable to human trafficking based on gender. Kim Anh Duong’s research on human trafficking called “Human Trafficking in a Globalized world: Gender aspects of the issue and anti-trafficking politics”, argues that human trafficking is not only an issue of human rights but also it relies on socio-economic and gender discrimination structures. She means that women and men experience socio-economical or gender discrimination in different ways, giving three gender dimensions to human trafficking: the feminization of poverty, the feminization of migration and the feminization of victims of sexual exploitation. The feminization of poverty means that women have less access to resources and land, and lower pay, making them more vulnerable to human trafficking. The feminization of migration, which is used as theoretical framework in this study, argues that the growing demand for labour has created a growing flow of women in migration with a great risk to get trafficked. Finally, the “feminization of victims of sexual exploitation” (Duong, 2014:798) refers to the notion that human trafficking mainly refers to women being trafficked for sexual exploitation, excluding males and other kinds of human trafficking aspects e.g. child marriage, and forced labour. This creates a lack of knowledge in societies not being able to recognize human trafficking related to labour exploitation and identify both male and women victims (Duong, 2014:797-798).

Finally, the brief summary of previous research presented in this chapter gives a clear picture of the significance in continuing studying migration from a gender approach. Furthermore, it is possible to conclude that there is a lack of empirical qualitative data on labour migration targeting migration groups separately: refugee women, refugee men, migrant women, migrant men, and so on. All these groups are affected in different ways, based on their gender, migration status and the context they migrate to. Therefore, this study tries to give a voice to a small group of people from one of the groups named above, namely women migrant workers in Jordan.
4. Theoretical framework

Understanding women migrants’ struggles in the work space that can lead to severe abuse alongside with an increase in the spectrum of choices in women’s life, is a complex analysis. Considering the aim of the study, gender theory and two central theoretical concepts were selected to analyze the empirical material collected for this study. Gender theory constitutes the framework in which the study is developed, considering gender as socially constructed, and that the experiences of the migrant women interviewed is influenced by this notion. In addition, two theoretical concepts are presented in order to be able to narrow the analysis down to the issues of agency and vulnerability put side by side to explore how or if they have an influence on each other. Moreover, the interviewees that collaborated with this study have all suffered from some kind of abuse, in parallel to the trends presented above on increasing in female migrating as a breadwinner, presents a paradox between the human agency of migrant women and the vulnerabilities they are exposed to through this journey.

4.1. Gender Theory

There are several scholars that have developed different approaches for the use of gender theory e.g. anthropological, sociological, and ethnical (Coltrane, 2010:794). Gender theory is influenced by its context and therefore has a strong intersectional approach. Furthermore, it is possible to say that gender theory has its base, but not exclusively, in the concept of social constructivism. Social constructivism is the assumption that the individuals’ understanding of a particular process or phenomena is influenced by the individual socio-cultural context and time and place (Lock, 2010:7). The gender theory is fundamental departure point for this study to be able to consider women migrant workers as part of norms and stereotypes that are socially constructed and create the female and masculine roles we know today.

This study used the following definition of gender:

“Refers to the roles and responsibilities of men and women that are created in our families, our societies and our cultures. The concept of gender also includes the expectations held about the characteristics, aptitudes and likely behaviors of both women and men (femininity and
Gender roles and expectations are learned. They can change over time and they vary within and between cultures. Systems of social differentiation such as political status, class, ethnicity, physical and mental disability, age and more, modify gender roles. The concept of gender is vital because, applied to social analysis, it reveals how women’s subordination (or men’s domination) is socially constructed. As such, the subordination can be changed or ended. It is not biologically predetermined nor is it fixed forever.” (UNESCO’s Gender Mainstreaming Implementation Framework)

By recognizing this, it is now key to present the contextual aspects that influence gender. The first important distinction to be made is between sex and gender. Linda Lindsey, Professor of Sociology at Maryville University of St. Louis, explains that sex is the biological aspect that distinguishes female and male. These distinctions are made based on anatomy, hormones and reproductive systems among other (Lindsey, 2015:4). Gender, however, can be defined through social constructions. The well recognized French philosopher, feminist and social theorist, Simone de Beauvoir, once said: "One is not born a woman, one becomes one." (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2015; De Beauvoir, 2012) to explain how women gender roles are determined by the society and culture that surrounds them. Simone de Beauvoir, in her famous book “The second sex”, argues that, what it means and implies to be a women is socially constructed. Furthermore, she means that this construction of the role of a women in society is constructed by men in the same society, Beauvoir concludes then that this construction is the main cause for women objectification and oppression in a patriarchal society (De Beauvoir, 2012). The view on gender and the role of the women in society presented by Beauvoir, suggests that the term “gender” should be used as the concept that summarizes in one world the meaning of cultural and social constructions of femininities and masculinities (Behara, 2015:55)

Several researchers come to the conclusion that gender are the responsibilities, roles and attitudes that women and men have, influenced mainly by the cultural, social and family environment they grow up in. Moreover, with those roles and responsibilities comes expectations about the behaviors and skills that both men and women in the role of masculinity and femininity have. Like gender roles, expectations are also learned, or constructed. These expectations, roles and occupations may also influence the possibilities (agency) and potential vulnerabilities of men and women. Assuming that gender is socially constructed, gender can change through time and varies depending on the
socio-cultural context. Moreover, factors of social cultural character such as social class, age, ethnicity, political orientation influence gender roles (March, Smith and Mukhopadhy; 1999: 17-21).

Finally, it is possible to see a link between gender theory and migration studies. More recent research on the feminization of migration, indicates that growing female migration flows, leads to substantial transformations in the structures of gender roles in the international division of labour. Hofmann, Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Social Work, and Anthropology, Utah State University, and Buckley, Professor of Sociology at University of Illinois, argue that one of the reasons for these transformations relies on “changing social attitudes about migration and migrants” (Hofmann, Buckley; 2013:509).

4.2. Why a gender based analysis?

This study has presented the gaps in earlier migration studies for which the reasons for migrations were understood and explained through the experiences of male migrants. Since 1970’s migration studies have focused more on women’s experiences as well. Despite women being included in migration studies and researches, by not paying special attention to the needs and experiences of women, Kofman argues that women are essentially left of the theoretical thinking (Kofman and others, 2000:22). Moreover, Kofman means that researches focusing on women’s migration patterns, analyses their experiences as companions of the male rather than as individuals separate from the male figure. This type of research leads mainly to explain male’s migration patterns and experiences and not the ones of women, assuming that women have the same reasons as men to migrate (Kofman and others, 2000:22-23). Kofman argues that:

“Agency in these accounts was never viewed within the context of resisting oppressive and exploitative structures. They assumed that men and women would act in exactly the same way and have the same relationship to those structures” (Kofman and others, 2000:23).

Thus, based on the notion that migration and gender studies claim that there is a gap in addressing women experiences on migration separately to the experiences of men, this study will consist of semi-structured interviews with eleven women migrant workers in Amman, and use gender theory as a departing point for the analysis.
4.3. Vulnerability

All the women interviewed for this study were women in a situation of vulnerability as they were exposed to some type of violence in the work place and were in a shelter for protection at the time of the interview. In order to understand and analyze the experiences of the interviewees this section efforts to introduce the concept of vulnerability that will serve for the analysis.

The concept of vulnerability has been used in different ways depending on the focus of the debate. Moral philosophers, ethical researcher, and feminist academics have adopted a concept of vulnerability that serves their area of study. This study reviews the definitions given by Mackenzie, which in its turn looks into a variety of approaches to vulnerability and divides them into two categories. Catriona Mackenzie, Professor of Philosophy at Macquarie University, argues that there are two broad approaches to vulnerability, the first one links the concept of vulnerability to the capacity to suffer that is integral part of humans, and the second one emphasizes the social character of vulnerability (Mackenzie, 2013:4-5). The concept of vulnerability as the capacity to suffer and be fragile is an ontological condition of humanity, according to Mackenzie. Moreover, she argues that human physical vulnerability is directly influenced by “the actions of others and dependent on the care and support of other people” (Mackenzie, 2013:5). In addition, Mackenzie reviews the concept of vulnerability in its social character in relation to specific kinds of harm or threat by others (Mackenzie, 2013: 6). She argues that “vulnerable persons are those with reduced capacity, power, or control to protect their interests relative to other agents.” (Mackenzie, 2013:6). Moreover, Judith Butler, philosopher and gender theorist, claims on vulnerability that:

“…bodies are formed and sustained in relation to infrastructural supports (or their absence), (...) we cannot extract the body from its constituting relations-and those relations are always economically and historically specific” (Butler, 2014:114).

Thus, it is possible to conclude that vulnerability is a general condition of every person’s life and existence, and not just something occurring at certain points of life. However, context and living conditions/possibilities also have an impact on levels of vulnerability and vulnerability is also created in relation to conditions “that are outside, yet part of, the body itself.” (Butler, 2014:114). In other words, a female migrant worker can arguably be considered vulnerable on several levels related to both “outside conditions” (economic development, unemployment, pressure to migrate
etc.) but also related to gender and the fact of being a women (family roles/expectations, stereotypes, child caring and child carrying, etc.). These “gendered aspects of vulnerability” can therefore arguably be considered both internal (the body and biology of women) and external in the sense that the roles, expectations, obligations and discrimination of being a women are socially constructed by the outside.

As global migration patterns and labour markets change so do employment opportunities and the pressure to migrate for men and women around the world. According to Piper, political sociologist and migration scholar, their labour market participation and experiences in countries of origin as well as countries of destination should be analyzed with regards to gender segregated labour markets, where women and men dominate in different sectors of employment (Piper, 2005: 5). As this paper also has argued, the increasing feminization of migration also calls for the need to study their work conditions and experiences separately through both quantitative disaggregated data and qualitative studies. Piper argues that the feminization of migration is sometimes linked to “an over-representation of women migrants in extremely vulnerable positions” (Piper, 2005: 5) and therefore also implies a feminization of poverty (Piper, 2005: 5).

4.4. Women’s agency

The questions of women’s agency began to get more attention along with feminist studies and the notion of women’s empowerment. In order to understand women’s agency it is important to understand the notion of empowerment. There is not one universal definition of women’s empowerment; in the effort to discuss women’s empowerment, Naila Kabeer, Professor of Gender and Development at the Gender Institute, London School of Economics and Political Science, means that empowerment is directed related to power, which in its order is directly connected to the ability of making choices. Kabeer means that:

“The notion of empowerment is that it is inescapably bound up with the condition of disempowerment and refers to the processes by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such an ability.” (Kabeer, 2001:19).

Furthermore, Kabeer argues that the ability to make choices is based on two variables: alternatives and resources (material, social or human). This means that to be able to exercise the ability to
choose, it is necessary to have a variety of alternatives to choose among, along with the available resources that serve as a tool to choose among the alternatives presented. Regarding different alternatives, Kabeer makes a distinction between first and second types of alternatives. The first ones relates to life choices (marriage, work/profession, place to live, number of children, freedom of movement), and the second one refers to alternatives that have less impact in our lives, such as household budget, children’s health and care, house chores, etc. (Kabeer, 2001: 18-19; Erwer, 2003:60-61). Moreover, resources are not exclusively financial resources, but knowledge, relationships, skills, networks, etc. are also considered resources that serve as tools for having the ability of making a choice. These resources are consequently obtained through institutions, social economic belonging, familial norms and rules (Kabeer, 2001:20).

Considering the definitions of choice-making presented here, and the influence that alternatives and resources have upon the ability to make choice it is now possible to address the role of agency. Kabeer argues that agency is much more than the mere act of making a decision, she means that it a more complex action that requires negotiation, resistance, reflection and analysis. Furthermore, she explains that agency together with resources constitute the success or failure of the decision taken (Kabeer, 2001:21-22).

Moreover, as it is the case of empowerment, the concept of agency has been defined by several philosophers, economist, and sociologists, conditioned to the subject matter. Amartya Sen, professor of Economics and Philosophy at Harvard University, defines agency in relation to freedom of choice, and argues that “agency allows a person to be free to do and achieve their own goals or values that he or she regards as important” (Sen, 1985: 203). Mustafa Emirbayer, Professor of sociology at University of Wisconsin-Madison, and Anne Mische, Professor of Peace Studies at the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, define agency by analyzing the structural context variables that influence a human’s choice. Moreover they they focus on temporary immerse process influenced by past, present and future experiences (Emirbayer and Mische: 1998:962). Finally, feminist researchers argue that women’s agency might contribute to the reiteration of gender stereotypes and roles (Gomez; Torrado, 2015:2; Gardiner, 2000:401).
4.5. **Operationalization of the theories**

Gender theory and two main concepts were presented in this chapter as the theoretical framework that will serve for the analysis.

Gender-based analysis is an approach that looks into the different impact of existing policies, legal frameworks, social structures, etc. on women and men. This kind of analysis makes it possible to identify gaps and address those gaps through policies, programmes and regulation with a consideration of gender differences. Gender-based theory challenges the assumption that men and women are affected by is affected in the same way by social context, familial situations, economic resources, policy and legal frameworks. Moreover, the concept of vulnerability is a complex one that needs to be studied as well in relation to its context. For this study the concepts presented above will help to identify the external conditions can contribute to women vulnerability.

Finally, the concept presented on women’s agency will facilitate the analysis of alternatives, resources and actions enabling decision making in the stories told in the interviews. In this study, agency is not considered only as “*the ability to make choices*” (Kabeer, 2001:18), rather looks deeper into the elements that also enable power and empowerment, namely alternatives, resources and agency.
5. Result and analysis

This chapter presents the results of the study that will serve for the analysis. The main key elements to be presented in this section are the context in which the field study is conducted, namely the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan; the migration labour trends present in this context; followed by the outcomes of the semi-structured interviews conducted with eleven women migrant workers in Amman, Jordan. Finally, the analysis of the material will be presented considering the theoretical framework and the results presents below, guided by the aim of the study and the research questions. The analysis presents the two main focused of this study, the genderized aspect of migration, and the paradox between increasing women’s agency and also vulnerability. For this purpose, the analysis is divided into two sections, the first one is efforts to explore the whole aspect of reasons for migrations for the interviewees through a gender lens, and the second section aims to look into the paradox of agency vs. vulnerability by exploring the experiences of the eleven interviewees.

5.1. Background

5.1.1. The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan

The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan is a monarchy situated in the Middle East. The country limits with Saudi Arabia, Syria, Iraq and Israel. With a population of 10,000,000, Jordan is known for hosting a last large number of refugee population mainly from Palestine, Iraq and Syria, which reaches up to one third of the population. According to a study conducted by ILO, there are approximately 1,200,000 migrant workers in Jordan, mainly working in the agricultural sector, construction, domestic work and manufacturing (ILO, 2017:21-23). The current Syrian crisis, and the agreement connived by the European Union and Jordan, also known as the Jordan Compact, which agrees on the provision of 200,000 work permits to Syrian refugees, has had an impact on the labour market as a whole. Under this agreement, Syrian refugees are allowed to work in the same sector than migrant workers, under the same quotas. Therefore, entering into the labour market has become more competitive, putting all workers in vulnerable situations due to fear of losing their jobs or not getting one. In a market that was already challenging this situation affects
all three main groups represented in the labour market, namely, Jordanians, migrant workers and refugees (ILO, 2017:6).

The current situation, with the rapid increase in the population, implies a burden on the country’s main resources such as water, health care and education (Migration Policy Center – MPC 2018). In an effort to reduce this burden, the government of Jordan has recently passed an initiative in which they will try to reduce by 25% the number of foreign workers (both refugees and migrant workers) in the labour market, in order to decrees unemployment in the country.

5.1.2. Women migrant workers in Jordan

Labour migration trends have not changed considerably in the past 50 years. Since 1970, highly skilled Jordanians left to work in the Gulf countries, and migrant workers mainly from Egypt and South East Asia countries came to Jordan to work. According to a study conducted by ILO in 2017, since 2000, the number of migrant workers in Jordan has tripled (ILO, 2017:6). Furthermore, since the 1980s, the number of domestic workers migrating to Jordan in search for better labor opportunities has steadily increased. Originating from South-East Asia and (more recently) Sub-Saharan Africa, they arrive to Jordan through the controversial sponsorship (kafala) system attracted by recruitment agencies in their home country with the promise of prosperous work opportunities, and can work legally if their work permits is renewed by their employers, or irregular if they stay in the country without a valid work permit. According to the Jordanian Ministry of Labor (MoL), the number of legal registered migrant domestic workers reached 63,000 in 2015, representing approximately 92% of employees in the sector of domestic services, and 18% of legal migrant workers in total. Estimates of the number of domestic workers staying and working in the country irregular illegally vary, but they reach approximately 30,000 women.

As in other Middle-Eastern countries, the Jordanian domestic sector appears to female migrant workers as a promising working opportunity to provide for their families back home and/or to build a capital to pursue a better future. They may thus become the main breadwinner of their households, or at least a major part of the household’s income. Some sending countries, such as the Philippines, have also realized the positive impact of migrant workers’ remittances on the country’s economic development, and developed programs to facilitate migration and improve their living conditions both at country of origin and destination. Meanwhile, they are faced with
wide-spread stereotyping and lack of consideration, which can evolve into mistreatment and abuse, in their host country, in this case Jordan. Studies have shown that discourses and behaviors about domestic workers in Jordan tend to objectify them (Hennebry, J., 2017:2-4).

In Jordan, one of the largest groups of workers lacking social protection and access to labor laws are women migrant workers, mainly working in domestic service, coming from Sri Lanka, Philippines, Bangladesh and Indonesia (Tamkeen, 2015:7). Numerous women migrant workers that migrated to Jordan in search of a better future and working opportunities suffered labour exploitation and human trafficking. Globally, human trafficking has been linked mainly with sexual exploitation, but in fact, sexual exploitation is a small part of human trafficking. (Walsh, 2014). Forced labour accounts for the majority of victims of trafficking. According to ILO, 21 million women, men and children work under forced labour conditions, and 44 per cent of the victims are international migrants. Most importantly to remember, this phenomenon affects every region of the world, and both men and women (ILO, 2015). In Jordan, the main reasons for human trafficking are domestic servitude, forced labour, and sexual exploitation, which all three of them are broadly represented by women migrant workers.

5.2. **Experiences told by women migrants in Amman, Jordan**

This study has shown that women’s and men’s reasons for migration vary, sometimes they are similar, other times opposite, on occasions women migrate as companion of the male, and in others as the head of household to provide for their families at home. Migration studies highlight that is important to analyze the factors for migration separately through qualitative data, not only through quantitative data disaggregated by gender. This segment presents the results of the interviews conducted in Amman, Jordan with eleven women migrant workers, working as domestic workers.

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3 Forced labour: “…forced or compulsory labour shall mean all work or service which is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which they said person has not offered himself voluntarily.” (Article 2, ILO Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29))
5.2.1. Why women migrate?

The first part of the interview guide addresses the reasons for why the interviewees decided to migrate for work. The answers are presented here. I am not intending to generalize trends, but rather to present the experiences from the interviewees told by themselves.

Out of the three sections that the interview guide is divided in, this section was the easiest and smoothest to discuss with the interviewees and provided the most homogeneous answers. Most of the interviewees spoke about the reasons to migrate with a sense of accomplishment over being one of the family members providing financial support for their families. Christine is divorced and has two children in Kenya, one boy and one girl. She is the provider of the household, and always sends all her salary back to her family to be able to send her children to school in Kenya and give them the basic needs.

In most of the interviews the interviewee spoke about the reasons for leaving their home country being based on their financial and family situation. Half of the women that were interviewed said that they are the only financial support for their families. Jacinta decided to move to Jordan for work, she said at the interview when talking about why she decided to move to Jordan:

“Before going to Saudi Arabia I was working in Kenya selling milk, the salary was too little and a friend told me about working in Arab countries and that the salary are good, so I contact the recruitment agency and ask for a job. My mother is sick. She had a car accident and broke her arm. I need to work to provide for her and my dotter and my brothers.”  (Jacinta, 26 May 2016)

Jacinta’s brothers go to high school in Kenya, the other brother works part time, and her sister is working as a domestic worker in Saudi Arabia. In the case of Cecilia, she decided to look for work opportunities abroad when she separated and needed to provide financial support to her daughter. A friend told her about working as a domestic worker in Jordan, and then she decided to contact a recruitment agency since the salaries abroad are higher. Cecilia has a daughter, 2 years old and is divorced.

Catherine has a similar experience as Cecilia, and therefore the choice to migrate for work was made on the same bases. When I asked her why she decided to come to Jordan to work she
explained that she got divorced and therefore she needs money to provide for her two year old son. She continues and tells me that her mother is taking care of her son and that she sends all the salary to her. I asked if she was working in Kenya before going to Jordan to provide for her son she said: “No, I was married.”

Most of the women interviewed send their salaries to their mothers, or sisters. When I asked why not to their husband or brother, they answered that they did not trust they would use the money to take care of the children. Two of the interviewees send the salary to their husband and another interviewee keeps the salary.

The interviews show a clear feature in the interviewees need to provide for their families left behind at home.

5.2.2. Experiences: “I am cursed because I am poor.”

This section narrates the stories and experiences of the eleven migrant workers interviewed for this study while working in Amman, Jordan. It is important to mention one more time that all eleven women interviewed were victims of some type of violation in the work place and therefore searched for help in different human right entities (governmental and none governmental). Therefore, this section revolves around the violations suffered at the work place and the actions taken by the women migrant. This is not a representation of women migrant workers experiences in Jordan, but only a reflection of the experiences of women migrant workers that suffered from violence.

Several studies conducted by Jordanian NGOs, presented earlier in this study, addressed the issue of domestic workers labour exploitation in Jordan and some of the causalities. Some of the reasons are lack of knowledge of the labour law from both the employer and the employee, discrimination based on gender and race, and lack of prosecution of employers and recruitment agencies that break the law. After interviewing six Kenyan women migrant workers at the Jordanian Women Union shelter, some similarities among the interviewees were possible to identify. All interviewees show a deep understanding of their rights (despite the general perception of lack of knowledge of the workers rights), and have clear boundaries for how much they can take at the work place. When speaking about a common day at work, these are some of the experiences shared by the interviewees:
“I work from 7am to 2 am. Sleep in a storage room.” (Mery, 18 of May, 2016)

“When they were not there it was okay (she is referring to the daughter of the employer who does not leave in the household). But on Fridays and Saturdays they would come and tell my employer to make me work more. They would insult me and call me words, and say that is not good to have Kenyan domestic workers. (Jacinta, 26 of May, 2016)

“…she (referring to the employer) told me that I was cursed. I told her that yes, I am cursed because I am poor. Then she told me that I will never again look at her in her eyes. So every time I served them I had to be looking at the floor instead. Then, when I said I want to go back home, she told me that when my contract end, she will kill me and send me back home in pieces. One day I could not take it anymore and runaway. I thought that it was better to die on the street than going back to the house.”(Cecilia, 26 of May 2016)

Several of the women interviewed shared the experience of working long hours, not being allowed to take breaks, sleeping in the floor or a chair and being deprived of food. All the interviewees were denied to leave the house, and their passport was withheld by the employer.

Deligen apologizes during the interview for running away from her employee, and says that it is acceptable for her to not get much food or sleep in the basement, but she cannot stay in a house if she does not get her salary to send home to her family. Deligen left the house where she was working because she did not get her salary during four months. She explains that the only reason for her to come to Jordan is to be able to provide a better future for her six children in the Philippines.

At the same time, some of the interviewees stressed that they have not told their family back home about the abuses they have suffered at the work place in Jordan, since they do not want to worry them.

5.2.3. Making choices: “my family count on me to survive”

This segment of the interview was aimed at spoking about the future, future opportunities, decision making and the perspective the interviewees have over those subjects. It was surprisingly struggling to speak about this. One reason could be due to that at the time of the interviews, the
interviewees were in a situation of misbelief and disappointment since they had recently ended their contracts in Jordan and were then waiting to return to their home countries. One of the questions is “what is your dream for the future?” Most of the interviewees look at me intrigued by my naive questions, as if dreaming is not a possibility. Then we spoke a little more in details about which kind of work they would like to do, or in which country. Some referred to the family life instead and said that they would like to get married, or have more kids. Cecilia told me that she wants to go back to Kenya as soon as possible and get a job to be able to support her kids. She said: “This is my number one priority.” She could consider to go abroad again for a similar job if she is treated well. When I asked Christine about the future, she said: “For the future if they offer me better conditions I maybe do it again.” Evelyne gives a similar answer.

While most of the interviewees answer the question based on if they would migrate for work again or not, some look confused, as if not understanding that they actually have a choice. Others answer to this question with what they do not want to do, in this case one of them expressed herself very clearly and decided “I will never work as a cleaner again”. And others, like Cecilia said:

“I need to go back to Kenya, for every day I am here (in the shelter), it is one more day my family is starving in Kenya. They do not have anything and they count on me to survive. I have to go back and help them.” (Cecilia, 26 of May 2016)

When I asked about the future in Kenya she seems not to be able to dream about a future. She only wants to work and provide for her family. She is very worried since her daughter is sick and it is not receiving money from her. She does not want to go back to the Middle East to work. But if she has to go abroad again, she will.

The question of migrating again seems like an easier question to answer. Most of the interviewees say that they would consider to migrate again, others they want to go abroad again. Mary said that when she goes back to Kenya she wants to get a degree in hotelier. She said she will never go back to the Middle East to work as a domestic worker. Her dream is to work in a hotel in Switzerland.

5.3. Migration through a gender lens

This study is developed on the basis that gender is socially constructed and that in its turn this influences choices in life, thus migration may be influenced by the social context and gender norms
we are raised into. Moreover, the feminization of migration mainly focuses on the notion that women, like men, choose to move for different reasons, yet these reasons are not well documented and analyses rather tend to categorize them under the same reasons for why men migrate. This was the case until the 60’ and 70’ when migration studies started to look more into women’s reasons to migrate.

Some of the answers provided by the interviewees in the interviews conducted for this study, show that some of the reasons for migration were mainly based on economic situation and familial constraints (Kofman; 2000:21-32). In the case of the interviewees that narrated the family structure in her home country, explaining that the salary sent back home will be received by her mother and used to take care of the interviewee’s children and brothers. She explained that her brothers wanted to go to high school, when I asked her if she went to high school she answered that the boys are the priority, the girls need to take care of the children and the house. But in her case, the adult males left the house for different reasons, and therefore it was her responsibility to provide financial support to her family. The socially structured and gender norms that the interviewees are exposed to may be one of the factors defining the interviewee’s decision to migrate. As it is the argument of gender theory in migration studies, the decision to migrate should not be studied in isolation from the social structures that in turn generate gender stereotypes, norms and expectations. Moreover, this can be explained based on Simon de Beauvoir thesis which argues that the role of a women in society is defined and determined by men in the same society (Beauvoir, 2012)

Most of the interviewees explain that in order to be able to provide financial support to their families at the country or origin, they needed to travel abroad to work. Several interviewees connected their decision to migrate to their marital status, one of them stated that she did not need to work or support the family financially before since she was married, but since her divorce, her role in the family has changed and therefore the decision to migrate came into place. This is perhaps an example of how marriage as an institution in some societies limits women’s independence. In other words we can see here how a change in marital status can create a need to migrate. The question is if we see the same need to migrate if a man gets divorced from his wife in the same country.
Another aspect that was possible to identify in the interviews that shows strong influences on female and male roles in society, was the use of the remittances sent by the women migrants to their families. Several migration and gender studies show that women tend to send remittances to their home countries to provide access to education and health to family members, especially if they have children in the country of origins (Hennebry, J., 2017:2-4). This was not an exception among the interviews. Moreover, most of the interviewees highlighted that they prefer to send the remittances to a female figure in the family rather than a male, for example to the mother or sister rather than the husband.

In addition, considering the approach of gender theory and the effect it has on society’s norms and behaviors, it is possible to identify as well some of the influence of this aspect on the choice of the profession by the interviewees. When I asked them about the future, the answers vary from getting married again, going back home to take care of the children, going abroad again and work as a domestic workers. Delinge told me: “I want to get married again, and not work for a while, just stay home and take care of the children.” Delinge is divorced and has six children in the Philippines. Mary answers that she would like to go to Switzerland to work as a domestic worker in order to earn a higher salary to support her family back at home, “I believe that I will go there to work one day”. All these answers reflect a strong influence by the gender roles women have traditionally in society. Like gender roles; expectations, roles and occupations are also learned (March and others; 1999: 17-21). Thus, these roles and occupations may also influence the ability to choose and potential vulnerabilities of the women. Cecilia when speaking about her role in the family after her divorce and thus the decision to apply for a job in Jordan, she told me: “I have to be the mother and the father”, I asked her to explain to me what she meant about that and she told me: “I have to take care of my children, feed them, send them to school, and now I have to also work outside of the home to bring money.” Therefore, even if this study efforts into looking into individuals experiences, these experiences are heavily influenced by the context, economical an familial situation, thus it is possible to say that these decisions are not of individual character, and that this these construction may be one of the causes for women’s vulnerabilities.
5.4. The agency-vulnerability nexus

Women migrant workers have exponentially increased migrating alone in search for better opportunities abroad. Currently, women migrants account for half of the labour migrant population in the world. This shows a clear increase as well in women’s agency and ability to choose. However, women are in risk of exploitation and abuse. The eleven women migrants that collaborated for the interviews are not an exception to this trend. As it was highlighted previously, all the women migrant workers interviewed were in situations of vulnerability. All eleven interviewees found themselves in shelters for women after had suffered from exploitation in the workplace. Therefore, this analysis departs from the notion of knowing that the interviewees were in a vulnerable situation at that point of time. Thus, this study is not analyzing if the interviewees were in a vulnerable situations, but rather to understand why and how.

If I based my analysis exclusively in the definition given by Kabeer of choice>power>empowerment, it could be possible to conclude that some of the interviewees, based on their experiences in Jordan, and the context in which the decisions are made, are not empowered, thus more likely to suffer from violence or be in a position of vulnerability (Kabeer, 2001: 18-20). While all eleven interviewee expressed that the choice to migrate for work is taken independently, this decision is made in a specific context in which most of the time is influenced by knowledge, skills economical and familial constrains, and gender roles and norms, all of these refer to resources one person has to be able to make choices and take decisions. In this sense it is possible to see the difference between power and empowerment. The interviewees have to some extent power over their decisions, hence agency, but in these particular cases this decisions are heavily impacted by familial and economical situations, leaving little impact in the women’s private life and options for decision making. By looking at the answers of what they would like to do in the future it is possible to identify how the context may influence strongly women’s agency in two ways: limiting the alternatives and by the predetermined gender roles and position in society which determines their ability to choice.

There is an illusion of empowerment and being able to make choices that in reality is limited by several external factors narrated by the interviewees in the interviews. The lack of alternatives when discussing the possibilities for the future. In addition to the unspoken lack of alternatives that is related to the right of movement that is attached to the nationalities of the interviewees.
Empowerment is directed related to the power a person has to take decisions and influence their private life. Consequently, Kabeer argues that a person that has been denied of that power over decision making, then is possible to say that this person is disempowered (Kabeer, 2001:19). Thus, it may be able to conclude that some of the women migrant interviewed for this study, were in a position of disempowerment due to the lack of power over the decisions affecting their private life, and over the power to take themselves out of the situation of abused until extreme abused takes place.

If making choices as it is explain by Kabeer is influence by the alternatives and resources, it is possible to identify throughout the interviews a clear presence of alternatives but a lack of resources. In its turn, these resources gain through institutions, social economic context, familial norms and rules (Kabeer, 2001: 18-19). The majority of the interviewees said that they could have stayed in their home country but that the salaries are better in the Middle East, however when we spoke about the choice of employment, some explained to me that the recruitment agency tells them where to go and what to do at the destination country. Due to lack of access to education in addition to the financial and familial constraints, there is a sense of women having little control over the decisions made on destination country, employment and administration of the salary obtained.

When it comes to resources, as it is mentioned, the decision to migrate is impacted by familial and economical situations, leaving little impact in the women’s private life. Most of the interviewees described the reasons to migrate with a sense of entitlement over being the breadwinner for their families, and being able to contribute to other family members’ future. Most of the interviewees tell me that the full salary is send back home in the full amount, and therefore now they do not have savings to buy a ticket back home.

By looking at the impact of other resources, such as knowledge, skills and gender roles, it is possible to identify the aspects that may influence the exposure to vulnerabilities. One of the most prominent vulnerabilities that this study found affected the women was a lack of being able to exercise their rights, due to several reasons. The lack of knowledge of the local law, of the details of the contract offered by the recruitment agency, and lack of knowledge on which resources are available in case of suffering abused at the work place. All the interviewees mentioned that the employer kept their travel documents and several were denied to leave the houses at any given
time. Even if Jordan has in place a labour law that protect workers, both nationals and internationals, from being exposed to such violations such as deprivation of freedom of movement, of travel documents, women migrant workers, especially domestic workers are more prone to lack awareness of their rights due to the reasons mentioned above, and therefore exposed to the violations narrated by the eleven women migrants interviewed. In other words, despite having formal rights, these women are very limited in accessing and exercising those rights because of their lack of freedom of movement and mistreatment by the employers.

Three of the interviewees said that in the future they will look at the contract in details before signing. Evelyne will look for jobs abroad again, but she said: “I will look at the contract very carefully before.” This can be explained as well through the notion of vulnerability presented in the theoretical framework, which argues that people with reduced resources or power to control their interest, are more vulnerable (Mackenzie, 2013:6). This was also reflected in the decision to leave the workplace, in which they were exposed to physical or psychological abused. In this situation, the interviewees did not have space for negotiation or power over their rights and situation. Some even were able to tolerate this situation in order to be able to provide for their families. Christine says: “I am okay with not having free days or breaks. I could be for years in the same house without going out if they treat me well.”

If we add to this, that vulnerability also is contextual and socially constructed we can perhaps explain the paradox that female migrant workers are perceived as vulnerable in one context (for example in foreign domestic work), but as strong agents in their home context, where they become breadwinners for their families back home. This is arguably also an example of how these women are vulnerable, despite being the main breadwinners for their families back home, because the women are not able to build up any capital (consider again the importance of resources) as they are sending all their salary back to their families.
6. Final discussion and conclusions

Looking back to the aim of the study and the research questions, the two questions that this study efforts to answer are: (1) *why do women migrant workers in Amman, Jordan choose to migrate in search for labour opportunities?* And (2) *how do women migrant worker in Amman, Jordan experience their situation and perceive their agency?* This study addressed the complexity of women's migrant workers experiences through exploring agency and vulnerability, from the perspective of migrants themselves, and answer to the questions based on the elven interviewees’ narrations.

The choice to migrate in search for labour opportunities it shows being shape by several factors: economical, family and community context, role and norms in society. The role of women in society is changing. Now she is the house holder, the provider, the mother, and the father. The responsibility that comes with these changes is not reflected in the rights and agency of women. Women are still mothers, and supposed to take care of the family and the house, but to that responsibility is added the financial one. This factor is shown to be the breaking point for women to decide to migrate in search for a better future. A better future not for them, but rather for their family.

All the strong women I had the privilege to interview are ready to do whatever is needed and take to provide for their families back home. This factor makes them vulnerable to the eye of the employer that sees them as a commodity, violating their rights, and disempowering them. However, they all have a limit. For these women, to sleep on the floor, being deprived food, denied free movement, and working more than 14 hours a day are things that they have to accept in order to be able to provide their families. Yet, the physical and psychological abuse was accepted for some and unacceptable for other. But the breaking point to take the decision to leave the work place was the denying the payment of their salaries. These was an number one priority, to be able to send the full amount of the salary back to their home to provide a better future, health, food and educations to their families. This is how the interviewees experience their situation.

From a gender theory point of view, I look into the interviewees’ decision to migrate analyzing the different aspects of this decisions based on economic situation, family context, social pressures
among others. These factors were possible to identify in the conversations in addition to other aspects like the use of remittances, which is also clearly influenced by gender norms and stereotypes. Decisions to migrate are clear and not breaking point in this study. However, the link to women’s agency and vulnerability, and understanding this through qualitative data can contribute to improve policies and regulations that may decrease the risk for vulnerability of women migrants.

Furthermore, this study shows how different context also affect women agency and vulnerabilities. The intersectional aspect influence women agency and vulnerability as well. Age, ethnicity, nationality, gender are all factors that are interconnected and that together have influence the elven women migrants vulnerabilities and agencies. The issue of citizenship and freedom of movement is not treated in this study, but it is possible to say that the limitations of freedom of movement pose a limitation in women’s agency. For some, there seems to be an illusion of having choices and being empowered, but in reality the risk for vulnerability has expanded beyond borders instead of only within the their household.

Some of the finding of this study show that the women migrant that collaborated for the interviews choose to migrate mainly due to economic and familial constraints, and social and cultural norms and structures. This have in its turn influence on their power and control over their rights, exposing them to vulnerable conditions and situation prone to abuse.

To sum up it is possible to conclude that more research is needed with focus on women migrant workers that gives women on the move a voice and a space to use the agency, but mitigate the vulnerabilities. By focusing on the roots of the vulnerabilities and violence suffered by women that migrate in search of work opportunities it could be possible to reduce the negative impact that women migrating are exposed to and exacerbate the positive impact of this process that can allowed women to provide for their families back home and influence their lives.

Most importantly is to see how the qualitative research fits into the policy making and law frameworks. In order to decrease the risk for vulnerability for both men and women, the gap in resources and decision making power should be addressed through policies, laws, programming and awareness raising. These vulnerabilities urge for a political action. Creating access to those
resources that have major impact on the agency of women is a clear area for policy and programing intervention.

6.1. Reflections on the methodology and theoretical framework

The methodology chosen for this study, namely semi-structured interviews, has shown the importance of qualitative research in the field of migration and gender. However, some reflections are possible to be presented in terms of improvement. Conducting interviews and being a good interviewer is key in order to collect “good” data, meaning creating the right environment and trust for the interviewee to be able to share their experiences freely. For this particular study, the narrations collected from the interviews could have been enhanced if the context had been different, which was influenced by the presence of other people in the room. The analysis has in its turn been influenced by this fact and by the results from the interviews, given that all the information collected was not as in depth as expected and therefore left some loose ends. I considered complementing the results from the interviews with previous research and studies conducted with domestic workers, but since this study efforts to give the perspective of migrants themselves, I decided to limit the result to the results of the interviews.

According to the gender theory and the concepts of vulnerability and agency, several factors in the nexus of women’s agency and vulnerability could be identified. Therefore, it is possible to say, that the chosen theory has proven to be relevant for the study. Understanding women migrants’ decision to migrate through a gender lens has given a variety of insights into women’s decision making. Furthermore, the concept of vulnerability is directly linked to the study since all eleven interviewees at the time of the interviews were in a situation of vulnerability, therefore this notion of vulnerability presented in the study, allowed the analysis to define the potential causes of those vulnerabilities. Moreover, the notion of agency and its link to power and empowerment, can lead to the notion of that the lack of agency leads to vulnerability, therefore, the contribution that this concept gives to the analysis identifies the aspects in decision making and choice that, or the lack of it, that can lead to a vulnerable situation.
6.2. Future research

Finally, some questions that can be researched in the future, and that were not studied in this paper could be divided in two streams: (1) policy and (2) perceptions or discourses. Throughout this research I came across other issues that prevent women migrants to work in a safer environment, one was, in the case of Jordan, the lack of implementation of the labour law, and the other is the negative discourses on migrant workers in general in Jordan. Both these streams are possible to be identify in many other countries too. Thus, future research could look into the role that policy and programming has in reducing risk for women migrant to be vulnerable to abuses and exploitations. Furthermore, in this regard, to perceptions and discourses, future research could look into examples from countries that have haft strong campaigns to enhance a positive discourse on migrations, and to look into what was the impact in society and at the labour market.

Other questions that were partly discussed in this paper but need to be researched deeper, is once again to study female migration but through the theory of genderized labour force and feminization of poverty.
7. Resources


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Annex I: Interview guide

Introduction:

Hi. My name is Mercedes Lopez, I am currently student at a Swedish university and intern at IOM Jordan. I am doing a research for my master thesis concerning the situation of domestic workers in Jordan, therefore I am interviewing women that came to Jordan to work as domestic workers. I want to thank you for your time and for meeting me.

The interview has questions related to your background, your choice of going abroad for work reasons, and your future. Please, feel free to discontinue the interview at any giving time, or to not answer a question if it feels too personal or uncomfortable.

I will use the material from the interview for my master thesis, if you wish, you can remain anonymous. If this is okay with you, we can proceed with the questions. I will take notes throughout the interview if this is okay with you.

(The following questioner serves as a guide for the conversation)

Basic information:
- Name, nationality, age

Part I: Before coming to Jordan:
- What did you work with before?
- What did your mother/sisters work with? And your father/brothers?
- How old were you when you start working? What did you work with back then?
- Why did you decide to come to Jordan? What did you left behind? (job, family – housebound, children- studies)
- Can you describe the processes from when you left your home country till you started working?
- Role as family member at home: How often are you in contact your family back home? If she is a mother, how is your role as a mother? How does she perceive her role? Do your send money home?
- What do your dream for your children growing up (boy/girls expectations)?

Part II in Jordan:
- Is it your first time in Jordan?
- For how long have you been in the country?
- What did you work with in Jordan? For how long?
- Did you fulfill the expectations you had before coming?

At work:
- What was your role at work?
- Were there any rules that you had to follow?
- Was it anything at the house that you could not do?
- What can you say about your employers?
- How can you describe your relationship to your employers (ask her to describe the relationship to both the male and female)?
- How was that experience?
- Do the job correspond to your expectations before coming?
- What do you do on your free days?

**Part III: Expectations going back to the home country**
- What would you like to work/do with when you go back to your home country?
- Would you go back to Jordan for a similar job opportunity?
- If you could choose any job, what would that be?
  - What is your dream?