

Title—Gendering Migration: Masculinity, Femininity, and Ethnicity in Post-War Britain
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Year—2008

Categories: Gender, Immigration, (Post)Colonialism

Place: Britain

Time: 1945-2005

Argument Synopsis:

Gendering Migration: Masculinity, Femininity, and Ethnicity in Post-War Britain is an essay collection, which aims to explore the intersection of gender and ethnicity through the context of migration. The use of ‘gender’ refers to both men and women, with many of the authors criticizing the tendency of scholarship on gender to only discuss women’s experiences, obscuring men. This essay collection explores the ways that different migrants in Britain have negotiated gender and ethnicity in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Many of the essays are based primarily on personal narratives collected by interviewers, to both bring in the voices of migrants and demonstrate change over time. This essay collection demonstrates that gender played a significant but variable role in ideas and images of migrants in Britain and in the experiences of migrants. Many of the essays in this collection make use of oral interviews as source material.

The majority of the essay focus on the post-1945 period, as the Second World War has transformative effects on Britain and its history of migration. Wendy Webster’s essay explores the significance of European refugees, who arrived throughout the war and were allowed to stay afterwards, on British national identity. She illuminates that the idea of a suffering Europe, bolstered by the presence of European refugees, positioned Britain as a masculine protector in relation. European refugees were only viewed as fellow-Europeans in the context of recruitment to the British labor market. Dolly Smith Wilson explores the impact of the view that women were economically dependent on men during the period from 1945 to 1975. At the end of World War II, there were significant labor shortages across Britain, and policymakers identified women and migrants as possible sources of labor. However, the cultural perception of an ideal worker in this period was a skilled white British-born man, and policymakers had no interest in recruiting ‘permanent’ workers from abroad. Due to the view of women as economically dependent, Wilson claims that policymakers did not view women as workers, even if they were the main breadwinners for the household. She poses comparisons between British women and migrant workers during this period. Although the two groups shared similarities, Wilson posits that the assumption of women’s dependence kept the groups separate.

Ali Nobil Ahmad examines Pakistani migration through an analysis of the economic activity of successive waves of migrants to Britain, specifically East London. Ahmad reveals how structural change has shaped and reconfigured gender relations over time. He seeks to focus on men’s experience, but in a comparative context, in order to shed light on experiences of women and other groups, as well. He finds that the relative agency of Pakistani women in Britain depends on their position along the life course.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Typical migrant is coded as a male migrant worker in many studies of European immigration
- Gender is a salient factor to consider when studying immigration, especially in the 20th century
- Important to consider the ways migrant’s attitudes are shaped by both current situation and historical relationships