

# Feminist activism and migration

## The feminism–migration nexus

Feminism arises from awareness of the historical oppression experienced by women in their diverse forms,<sup>1</sup> and rejects the idea that unequal gender dynamics are insurmountable. Gender is a cross-cultural construct that plays a fundamental role in the opportunities and social status of individuals. Consequently, gendered roles and duties do not all receive the same social approval and recognition in the family and society.

Migration reflects gender and intersecting inequalities as well as the power asymmetries existing within and between people and territories. In the private sphere, the determination of: (1) which members of the family or society are able to choose to leave and which are expected to remain home; or (2) the kind of work that migrant and non-migrant kin are expected to do – whether it entails earning income and facilitating opportunities for others to leave, or engaging in the caretaking of land, livestock, property and familial dependents back home – is prone to gender conflict and negotiation.

Around the world, societal structures and laws that harm women can be found at the core of many decisions to migrate and settle in a different place, whether these decisions are sudden or have long been meditated on. A decision that defies patriarchal norms is a feminist act that seeks emancipation from intra-familial, social and systemic forms of oppression and violence. In a more politically self-aware way, feminist activism may in some cases even be the cause of migration. On one hand, feminists who are prosecuted in their places of origin because of their political engagement sometimes have to flee due to the risk of injury or imprisonment. On the other hand, some feminists may feel attraction toward regions or countries where they perceive that their rights and dignity will be better respected.

Nonetheless, as migrant women establish themselves in their new communities, they take on new social positions within both the societies they have left and those they have joined. Gender and ethnic hierarchies are universal mechanisms that perpetuate unequal distributions of power and social rewards.

Clearly, migration may not resolve gender inequalities, but it can alleviate specific life circumstances, while it generates new discriminations. For example, many migrant women seek to escape not only suffocating conditions at home, but also insufficient income or work prospects more generally. However, in receiving labour markets they are often stigmatized as racialized and migrant women, and see their opportunities reduced to invisible, poorly paid, low-status and exhausting jobs (such as housework and care work, or farm work). The comparatively poor conditions of many jobs performed by women is a contested terrain of struggle for social recognition and equality policy in which women migrants as well as feminist activists and scholars increasingly get caught up.

## Building alliances and spaces of action

Acts of defying patriarchy can be performed individually or collectively, consciously or not. However, in order for a feminist movement to endure, many people have to repeatedly come together or connect. Participants in feminist public actions are diverse and have different sensibilities and priorities. Certainly, there are feminist groups that present themselves as homogenic and solely focus their efforts on liberating a certain kind of woman, for example, White, hetero or non-migrant women. In contrast, intersectional feminism aims to integrate the experiences of women from more and less privileged backgrounds and conditions within local and translocal activism. In so doing, alliances are built between migrant and anti-racist advocacy groups and broader factions of feminist activism, all supporting the idea that the rights and dignity of women can only advance if all forms of inequality and exploitation are considered. Due to structural barriers, few migrant women participate in collective activism in their new countries in the first years after their arrival. Getting involved in politics is often a practice carried out at more advanced stages of the migration process, because people tend to have other priorities when they have just moved to a new country, such as getting a job, organizing paperwork, and adapting to the new surroundings. In addition, migrant feminists face much greater risks than their non-migrant allies when it comes to openly contesting discriminatory

structures, due to their comparative lack of place-bound resources such as local networks, language skills or citizenship rights.

However, migrant women are key actors in translocal and transnational feminist activism as transmitters of diverse knowledge and social resources within feminist networks and alliances. Digital social media is extremely useful for connecting places and people in real time and rapidly disseminating their messages. In 2019, in the wake of the Me Too movement in the United States and other local protests, a feminist hymn called *Un violador en tu camino* (A rapist in your way) became such a hit in Chile and was soon performed with similar dance movements and translated lyrics in many feminist marches and demonstrations around the world.

The critical and systemic approach of intersectional and transnational feminist activism connects well with the more radical stances of the ecological movement. Women and the nature alike become objects of exploitation under patriarchal capitalism, and it is often women that are most directly affected by climate hardship and ecological loss, which may accelerate their migration. In this intersection, ecofeminism has emerged as a philosophy and praxis which opposes patriarchal domination under neoliberal and andro-anthropocentric conditions. Unfortunately, liberal and institutionalized feminism often overlooks these complex realities, and offers limited solutions to overcome the problems created by policies and laws that affect migrant women in particular. It is fair to say that there is considerable variation among political parties, institutions and authorities in terms of their openness to feminist advocacy; yet most of them do not get involved in migrant women's specific problems, possibly because migrants do not constitute a group of voters.

Extremist right-wing factions, including emerging political parties in numerous nations, are directing their rhetoric, activities and policy choices towards the erosion of feminist advances and the principle of equal treatment for all gender identities. Denying the demands of feminists and migrants is a cornerstone of many right-wing policies.

Intersectional feminist activism manifests itself in comparable ways to other forms of

social justice activism, albeit with an increasing emphasis on embodiment and creative forms of expression. This can be attributed to the inherent nature of art as a domain in which marginalized individuals can express themselves. Similarly, women's bodies have always been contested territory, and in dispute under patriarchy. The articulation of discomfort can be manifested through a diverse range of expressive modalities and participatory practices, encompassing performances, dances, vocalizations, the adornment or alteration of bodily forms, interactive mapping workshops, collective gatherings, protest marches and street art (Figure 33), among others. Additionally, one must acknowledge the significance of effectively conveying and distributing ideas and slogans. By using these tools, feminist activists can make a bigger impact and join forces in order to become a powerful force capable of effecting transformative change on a broad and profound scale.

ÁNGELS ESCRIVÁ AND NORA KOMPOSCH

## Note

1. Intersectional feminism struggles against discrimination towards women as well as queer people.

## Further reading

- Bonifacio, Glenda T. (ed.) (2012) *Feminism and Migration: Cross-Cultural Engagements*. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands.
- Chantler, Khatidja, Erica Burman, Ingrid Palmay and Peace Kiguwa (2010) *Gender and Migration: Feminist Interventions*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Harcourt, Wendy, Rosalba Icaza and Virginia Vargas (2016) Exploring embodiment and intersectionality in transnational feminist activist research. In *Exploring Civic Innovation for Social and Economic Transformation*, edited by Kees Biekart, Wendy Harcourt and Peter Knorringa, 148–167. London: Routledge.
- Puleo, Alicia (2020) *Ser feministas. Pensamiento y acción*. Editorial Cátedra. Madrid: Colección Feminismo.
- Silvey, Rachel (2004) Power, difference and mobility: feminist advances in migration studies. *Progress in Human Geography* 28 (4): 490–506. <https://doi.org/10.1191/0309132504ph490oa>.



*Note:* The mural has been defaced with misogynistic and racist symbols by right-wing extremists several times, and later repainted.

*Source:* Courtesy of the author.

*Figure 33* Mural in Huelva (Spain) by the feminist collective Mujeres 24H (Cynthia Veneno), painted in March 2021