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Women, Migration and Activism in Europe

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One of the noted features of contemporary migration has been its « feminisation »¹. Although there has been some debate about the extent of this feminisation with some pointing rather to a continuity of women's migration since the 1960s², it is clear that women now make up a significant proportion of the migrant populations within Europe. Exact figures are difficult (or impossible) to obtain, owing on one hand to the lack of gender-disaggregated statistics produced by national governments and international organisations alike, and on the other hand to the phenomenon of « undocumented » migration which is in its nature impossible to measure. However, estimates suggest that women make up over 50 per cent of migrants to the E.U³, and that in some cases, particular migratory flows are almost entirely female (e.g. figures for Italy show that migrant populations from the Philippines and Somalia are largely composed of women⁴). This feminisation of migration has led to an increasing visibility of women migrants in European societies and a growing place occupied by women in migrant activism. As with other aspects of women's migration, migrant women's activism is difficult to analyse in general terms because of the heterogeneous nature of women's migration, and the varying social positions and experiences of women migrants. Women's migratory experiences are influenced not only by their position as women, but also by their class, race or ethnicity,

¹ See for example, Castles, Stephen and Miller, Mark, *The Age of Migration*, London, Macmillan, 1998.

² Zlotnik, Hania, « The Global Dimensions of Female Migration », *Migration Information Source*, Migration Policy Institute, March 2003.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Andall, Jacqueline, *Gender, Migration and Domestic Service: the Politics of Black Women in Italy*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2000 ; Scrinzi, Francesca, « The Globalisation of Domestic Work: Women Migrants and Neo-Domesticity », *Gender and Insecurity: Migrant Women in Europe*, Freedman, Jane (Ed), Aldershot, Ashgate, 200, pp. 77-91.

their age, their sexual orientation. All of these factors and others will impact on the causes and means of migration for women, and on their experiences when they reach a new country. In addition, their experiences will be structured by the particular legislative and policy-regimes of the countries they have left, those they transit through and those that they finally arrive in. Stratification occurs at all stages of the migration process, caused both by processes of globalisation and by local and national contexts. Faced with all this diversity it is very hard to talk about « migrant women » without making unjustified generalisations. Kofman argues, for example, that much of the literature on women and migration, and especially that which adopts an integrative approach ignores the experiences of skilled migrants⁵. As will be argued in this article, although there are connections to be made between the experiences of different women, we must also be aware of the need to contextualise these experiences and not to create essentialist assumptions on the basis of a common female identity. If we do want to make connections between the varied experiences of women migrants then we need to do this on the basis of an analysis and understanding of the relations of gender which underlie and structure these experiences, and of an examination of the way that these relations of gender interact with other elements of stratification such as class, race and ethnicity.

Migrant's opportunities for collective action and political activism are limited for various reasons. The increasingly restrictive immigration and asylum regimes of European states mean that many migrants now have no « legal » residence status or work permit in their host country. This « illegality » clearly limits activism in that it makes it more difficult and more dangerous for migrants to occupy a visible place in the public sphere. Moreover, employment conditions may also make it more difficult for migrants to organise or to gain support of Trades Unions for any collective action. Even for those migrants who do have residence papers, they may well not benefit from full political rights, and this limited citizenship status can also be seen as a break on their political activism. For migrant women, unequal gender relations may add to these obstacles to activism. Although women have always migrated alone, in dominant conceptions of migration which formed official policies, women migrants were predominantly those who came to join male partners through family reunification. This framing of the place of women meant that in many cases they were dependent on their male partners for both legal and economic rights. The underlying assumption in many immigration policies and in the application of these policies by immigration officials, has been that women would be economically dependent on a man whom they had come to join⁶. This type of assumption and the legal implications that it has meant that immigrant women may be forced into positions of dependency and vulnerability which may in turn limit their abilities to engage in activism in the public sphere. Moreover, women's activism may also be limited by an underlying public/private divide which constructs a primarily domestic role for them and thus limits their opportunities for participation in the public or political sphere. This public/private divide within the host country may reinforce already existing obstacles to women's public or political participation which stem from the gendered inequalities in their country of origin,

⁵ Kofman, Eleonore, « Genre et migration internationale: critique du réductionnisme théorique », *Genre, Travail et Migrations en Europe*, Hersent, Madeleine and Zaidman, Claude (Eds), Paris, Cedref, 2003, pp. 81-94.

⁶ Freedman, Jane, *Gender and Insecurity: Migrant Women in Europe*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2003.

and which may be transferred to a new country within the migratory process. The sectorisation of the labour market adds to and reinforces these barriers by pushing migrant women towards jobs in the domestic service sector, employment which is often unregulated and which contributes towards women's isolation within a domestic arena. However, despite all of these obstacles migrant women have become active in political activity and collective actions within Europe and have gained greater visibility in the public sphere. This activism in turn has acted in some cases to transform gender relations within migrant communities, giving women a larger and more public role than that they had previously experienced.

In the rest of the article we will engage with three types of migrant women's activism (noting that this review does not claim in any way to be exhaustive). In the final section we will then go on to discuss the relationships between migrant women's activism and feminist activism in Europe, and the emergence of a new supra-national migrant women's network.

Employment and Activism

The structure of migrant women's employment in Western Europe is conditioned both by transformations in the global economy and by particular factor in European societies, such as the demand for services of care for the young and elderly. This demand has been fuelled both by a restriction or withdrawal of state services of care, or a basic inadequacy in these services which has not been addressed⁷. Although, as argued above, women's skilled labour migration should not be ignored, it remains true that for many migrant women the types of jobs into which they are recruited are largely unskilled, low-paid and insecure in terms of having little social or legal protection. The fact that many of these women are working « illegally » because they do not have the requisite work permits makes their conditions of work even more insecure and makes it harder for them to mobilise because they may be afraid to make themselves visible in the public space. In addition, the type of work in which migrant women are involved may mean that they remain isolated and cannot access any support either from other migrant women or help from outside sources such as the Trade Unions, for example.

Despite these barriers, however, migrant women have in some circumstances been able to mobilise to claim recognition of their rights within the workplace. Schwenken⁸ describes the experiences of the RESPECT network, a network of migrant domestic workers within the European Union. This network, founded in 1998, brings together self-organized migrant domestic workers organizations, support organizations and trade union organizations from different EU countries to fight against exploitation, violence and sexual harassment of domestic workers. An interesting feature of this network is its insistence on the need for individual empowerment of women, before any wider political mobilization can be successful. The network experienced some difficulties in organizing and in making their case at the European level, but the wider debate about trafficking allowed them to place the issue of migrant domestic workers on the agenda of EU institutions. A positive result in mobilization was achieved in the case of Britain, however, where strong support of a Trade

⁷ Truong, Thanh-Dam, « Gender, international migration and social reproduction : implications for theory, policy, research and networking », *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal*, n° 5,1, 1996, pp. 27-52.

⁸ Schwenken, Helen, « The Challenges of Framing Women Migrants' Rights in the European Union », *Revue européenne des migrations internationales*, n° 21, 1, 2005, pp. 177-194.

Union (the Transport and General Workers Union) led to a regularization procedure for abused migrant domestic workers⁹. As with other forms of regularization campaigns though, the criteria for undocumented women working in precarious jobs were difficult to meet, and as Anderson points out, the number of abuses did not seem to decline following the policy changes¹⁰. This example points to the complicated nature of organizing to protect migrant women's rights within the workplace.

Other examples of more informal organizing and collective action show the ways in which migrant women can help themselves and each other to protect their rights in the workplace. Campani describes the way that in Italy migrant domestic workers meet regularly to provide support to each other and have formed 'friendship groups' which are an important resource for these women¹¹. Despite the value of such informal organizing, it does not however provide a barrier against the increasingly repressive government policies and legislation with which migrant women are faced.

Women « *Sans-Papiers* »

One of the major issues with which migrant activism has been concerned in Europe is that of legal rights to residency in the EU. With the increasingly restrictive policies in place at national and supra-national level in Europe, there is increasingly production of « irregular » or « illegal » migrants. As has been noted, the mobilizations of « illegal immigrants are both unexpected and difficult because of the lack of resources of this population and because of the risks involved in any kind of collective action, with the ultimate risk of possible deportation¹². Despite these risks, Europe has increasingly seen mobilisations of « illegal » migrants, aiming to obtain the legal right to live and work in their host country. The various *sans-papiers* movements have seen an important presence of women activists, even though this women's presence is not always accepted easily by some of their fellow activists.

In France, when the *sans-papiers* started the occupation of the Saint-Ambroise church in 1996 (an occupation which was to lead to a long struggle and the eventual evacuation of the Saint-Bernard church by armed police) women were a very large and visible presence amongst the occupants. Women were also the motor for the occupation of a municipal gymnasium in Cachan in 2006. On this occasion it was women members of the community who refused to board the buses provided by the Police Prefecture to expel the squatters, and thus sparked off the occupation of the gymnasium¹³. Gender relations within the movement have not been unproblematic, however. Madjiguène Cissé who emerged as one of the leading spokespeople of the 1996 collective action recounts that women had to struggle to

⁹ Ariyadasa, Kumi, *Kalaayan ! Justice for Overseas Domestic Workers*, London: Kalaayan, 1998.

¹⁰ Anderson, Bridget, « The Devil is in the Detail : Lessons to be drawn from the UK's recent exercise in regularising undocumented workers », in Levoy, Michèle, Verbruggen, Nele and Wets, Johan (Eds), *Undocumented Migrant Workers in Europe*, Brussels: Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, 2004, pp. 99-101.

¹¹ Campani, Giovanna, « Women and social exclusion : the case of migrant women », paper presented at conference of the International Sociological Association, New York, 1997.

¹² Siméant, Joanna, *La cause des sans-papiers*, Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 1998.

¹³ Mary, Antoine and Schulmann, Lola, « Cachan: diviser pour mieux éloigner? », *Plein Droit*, n° 71, 2006, pp. 10-12.

be heard by male delegates of the Saint-Ambroise occupation and by the representatives of French associations supporting the *sans-papiers*¹⁴.

Asylum and Activism

A category of female migrants which has increased in recent years in Europe is that of female asylum seekers and refugees, and with this « feminisation » of asylum migration has also come particular forms of women's activism related to the problematic of asylum. In effect, the feminisation of asylum migration can be linked to a growing recognition at international level of the existence of gender-related forms of persecution which had not previously been considered as coming within the remit of the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees (or Geneva Convention).

Although some NGOs and associations supporting asylum seekers and refugees have introduced specific actions in support of women¹⁵, others have been slower to respond to their specific needs and demands. In some cases women seeking asylum and women refugees have spontaneously organised their own campaigns and mobilisations, even though the conditions of these mobilisations are sometimes difficult. One of the major barriers to asylum seekers self-organisation and mobilisation is their very precarious legal status which makes it difficult to plan or carry out any long-term projects. Zetter and Pearl comment of Refugee Community Organisations (RCOs) in the UK that:

*With transient membership, limited organisational capacity and very constrained access to funding ... few RCOs survive to become enduring organizations. Reflecting their rather more precarious physical and legal status, it has recently been the case that RCOs seem to appear and disappear rather rapidly.*¹⁶

Similarly, Lesselier points to the way in which various attempts to create autonomous associations for asylum seeking and refugee women in France have led to short-lived mobilisations which have foundered both because of the precarious legal status of the women involved and because a lack of recognition for this type of organisation both from within official government structures and from other NGOs and association¹⁷. In addition, women may find it more difficult to organise because of the subordinate role that they have been assigned in many societies. This means that male asylum seekers may not allow women to take an equal role in associations or political mobilisations.

When it is successful these type of independent mobilisations can be a way of developing a more formal status for those granted some form of protection and a means of integration into the host society, for example, Sales and Gregory refer to the case of Somali women from a local Refugee Organisation who now work with social services in London¹⁸. Perhaps even more importantly, these types of associations can provide an arena where

¹⁴ Freedman, Jane and Tarr, Carrie, *Women, immigration and identities in France*, Oxford: Berg, 2000.

¹⁵ For example in the UK, Asylum Aid, one of the major NGOs in the field has organized a specific project for women asylum seekers and refugees, the Refugee Women's Resources Project.

¹⁶ Zetter, Roger and Pearl, Martyn, « The minority within the minority: refugee community-based organisations in the UK and the impact of restrictionism on asylum-seekers », *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 26, 4, 2000, pp. 675-697.

¹⁷ Lesselier, Claudie, « Femmes, exil et politique: vécu et action de femmes exilées en France depuis 1970 », paper presented at conference : Exhumer l'histoire des femmes exilées politiques, Brussels, May 2007.

¹⁸ Sales, Rosemary and Gregory, Jeanne, « Refugee women in London: the experience of Somali women », *Refugee*, 17, 1, 1998, pp. 16-20.

women asylum seekers or refugees can express their own political agency and escape from the dominant representations of themselves as merely « victims ». As one of the founders of the All African Women's Group in the UK explained:

Being together with other women has really helped us to fight. We know that we can help each other, it's very important for women to come together and share our experiences and help each other. We've managed to change our lives.¹⁹

She described how the group was formed in the wake of protests against the effects of Section 55 of the 2002 Immigration and Asylum Act, which removed the right to welfare support for asylum seekers who failed to make an application « as soon as is reasonably practicable » when arriving in the country. A group of Eritrean women asylum claimants were refused housing by the Refugee Council under the terms of this Act and organised a public protest outside the Refugee Council offices in London. This group was joined by women from other African countries who shared similar experiences. Semret Fesshaye an Eritrean woman who was one of the group's initial members describes the importance of this self-mobilisation:

Traditionally, asylum seekers in this country have remained silent for fear of deportation. We have allowed others to speak on our behalf, but because the situation we find ourselves in here is disastrous we are starting to speak up for ourselves.²⁰

This function of providing a voice for asylum seekers and a way for them to speak for themselves is a vital role of grassroots associations and NGOs. In France a group of Algerian women whose asylum claims had been rejected organised a similar mobilisation to protest against their status as « failed » asylum seekers²¹. The group organised support meetings and demonstrations, and sent a letter to President Chirac, asking him to consider their cases. Although these actions may have had only limited results in terms of changing their status (a few of the women who were living in France with children managed to eventually get some kind of temporary leave to remain but for many of those who were single and without children it proved impossible to have their status « regularised »), one of the group members describes the important psychological impact of their ability to organise and to share their own experiences and speak for themselves²². Unfortunately, as is the case in international humanitarian actions, these small scale mobilisations organised by women themselves have little access to funding or official support, and so are likely to remain temporary and sporadic instances, whilst the larger better-funded NGOs will continue in the main to speak for asylum seekers.

¹⁹ Interview with author January 2007.

²⁰ Fesshaye, Semret, « Rape, hunger and homelessness », *The Guardian*, 1 November 2003.

²¹ For a fuller discussion of the obstacles inherent to the mobilisations of « failed » asylum seekers or « déboutés », see Freedman, Jane, « Mobilising Against Detention and Deportation: Collective Actions Against the Detention and Deportation of « Failed » Asylum Seekers in France », *French Politics*, 2009 (forthcoming).

²² Interview with author December 2006.

Towards a European Migrant Women's Movement ?

The preceding sections have highlighted some of the varying forms of migrant women's activism in Europe, but also some of the obstacles and difficulties to migrant women's collective action and mobilization. This has been especially true at the supra-national European level where the differences between varying groups of women have been exacerbated by the differentiated political situations in European states. As Kofman et al. argue, the European Union has provided a unique opportunity for women's organizations, although these opportunities have not been sufficiently exploited to date²³. However, a new initiative sponsored by the European Women's Lobby (EWL) seems in part to have overcome these difficulties to create a transnational network for migrant women.

The new network grew out of a seminar organized by the EWL in January 2007 which assembled women leaders from migrant communities across Europe²⁴. A representative of the EWL explains that they felt it was necessary to organize such a seminar because of a previous lack of attention to the experiences of migrant women in policy recommendations and lobbying. It was also important that it was migrant women who spoke for themselves, rather than European women speaking for them²⁵. The seminar gave migrant women the opportunity to debate issues concerning legal status, women's human rights, promoting participation in the public sphere, and increased networking. Following this seminar, which produced a list of recommendations²⁶, it was felt by the migrant women that they needed to organize themselves into an independent network in order to better bring to the agenda their specific recommendations and demands. Thus although the EWL has facilitated the organisation of the network and the migrant women's access to the European policy arena, the mobilisation is that of an independent collective of migrant women. The participants in the network have identified three long term objectives which are firstly, to expose issues affecting migrant women's integration to influence national and European policy-making; secondly, to empower migrant women through mutual support and information sharing; and thirdly, to make visible the positive contribution of migrant women to society. These objectives are to be met through the organizations of seminars both at national and European level, publication of national and EU level reports on the situation of migrant women, and efforts at continuing networking to ensure that the maximum number of migrant women's organizations are integrated into the network and receive and exchange a constant flow of information.

The difficulties in such organization are evident, with women of a wide variety of national origins located in many different host countries across Europe. The practical difficulties of organization have to a large extent been overcome by flexible structures and the use of internet to facilitate communication between different groups of women. The EWL representative in charge of helping to organize the new network explains that internet and email communication are a vital means of organizing for these women who are scattered across the EU. However, more fundamental problems arise in relation to the varying interests and objectives of the different groups. One problem that could be pointed

²³ Kofman, Eleonore, Phizacklea, Annie, Raghuram, Parvati and Sales, Rosemary, *Gender and International Migration in Europe*, London, Routledge, 2000.

²⁴ A summary of the discussions that took place at this seminar can be found in the European Women's Lobby publication *Equal Rights, Equal Voices – Migrant Women in the European Union*, Brussels, EWL, 2007.

²⁵ Interview with author March 2008.

²⁶ European Women's Lobby (2007), *op cit*.

out in particular is that of the approach to be taken vis-à-vis to women who are « undocumented » migrants. What European policy that exists on migrant women has prioritized the issue of integration. So clearly in order to best ensure a « fit » with EU policy-frameworks the migrant women's network has to some extent chosen also to focus on this issue of integration which as outlined above has been defined as one of its primary objectives. This focus on integration, however, runs the risk of neglecting other issues which are of greater concern to those women who are « undocumented » migrants to the EU.

Conclusions

This rather brief overview of migrant women's activism within Europe has tried to show both the obstacles to such activism, and the ways in which migrant women have attempted to overcome these obstacles to impose themselves in the political sphere both at national and at European level. Clearly one of the major issues for migrant women's activism in the coming years will be the increasingly restrictive asylum and immigration policies now being imposed within Europe. The challenge will be to try and find commonalities and efficient ways of organizing which will allow migrant women to overcome the differences between them to provide a voice which might have an impact on European policy-making.