

# The Female Face of Migration: towards the Empowerment of Migrant Women

by Faith Maberá\*

The unfolding migrant crisis in Europe, depicted as the worst humanitarian and migrant crisis since World War II, has glaringly exposed a number of crucial issues in the discourse on international migration, especially as it pertains to forced migration. Key among these issues are the rights of refugees and asylum seekers, the responsibilities of transit and destination countries, and even more pertinently, the rights of migrant women. The concept 'migrant women' is an umbrella term that may refer to a range of circumstances relevant to women on the move who are of different ages; vary in terms of legal status (legally resident, undocumented migrants or refugees); and who migrate for a myriad of reasons (voluntary or forced migration).

Women continue to make up a significant portion of international migrants, with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimating that approximately half of the world's 1 billion migrants and half of the estimated 51 million displaced persons are women. A concept which captures the centrality of gender in migration is the 'feminization of migration'.<sup>1</sup> The feminization of migration is premised on three notions. The first idea denotes the quantitative increase in female migration; the second notion entails the visibility of female migration in the migration literature; and the third perspective conceptualizes feminization of migration as an approach which addresses the gendered dimensions of migration, emphasizing the agency of women in the migratory context as well as the potential of migration as an empowerment tool for women. **Up until the 1980's,**

**women were largely 'invisible' in the migratory discourse, translating to the absence of a gendered analysis of how issues such as gender roles, division of labour, equality and gender equity interact with the various forms of migration.**

Prior to the uptake of gendered approaches to migration, women were generally seen as passive subjects of international migration, dependent on male migrants and only moving as part of the household. However, the predominance of women in the care employment sector, in health, nursing, food service, housework, and care for children, elderly and ill people, illuminated the role of women as autonomous agents in the labour market and as breadwinners, thereby shifting notions of traditional gender roles. Feminization of migration has to be understood in the context of the 'age of migration'<sup>2</sup> where, in addition to its engendering, migration has increasingly been characterized by *globalization* (variety of states impacted by migration); *acceleration* (quantitative increase in migrant numbers); *differentiation* (migrants belong to a range of ethnicities and nationalities) and *politicization* (elevation of migration issues to the realm of high politics).

On the positive side, migration is an avenue for the empowerment of women as it provides an opportunity for them to improve their economic situations as income earners and contributors to the upkeep of households. However, at the same time, **migra-**

<sup>1</sup> Notes

Swing, W.L.2015. 'IOM Director General's Message on International Women's Day 2015' <http://weblog.iom.int/iom-director-general%E2%80%99s-message-international-womens-day-2015>

<sup>2</sup> Castles, S. and Miller, M.J. 1998. 'The Age of migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World,' in *The Feminization of Migration: Dreams and Realities of Migrant Women in Four Latin American Countries* edited by C. Lipszyc, p.8



*Women make up a significant portion of international migrants*

*Photo credit: World Bank*

tion can be disempowering as the migrant economy replicates inequalities that discriminate women for being both women and foreigners, hence they are forced to work in low-income sectors. Moreover, women in the labour market are exposed to gender pay gaps, lack of access to pension and social protection services and are highly vulnerable to exploitation and gender-based violence. At the other end of the spectrum, women who have been forced to migrate escaping conflict and instability or who are victims of trafficking are triply vulnerable to gender-based violence in countries of origin, transit countries and destination countries. The perilous journey of crossing borders is filled with harrowing accounts of rape, xenophobia and physical violence at the hands of smugglers, humanitarian workers and immigration authorities.

In the African context, a progressive document as far as women's rights are concerned is the 2003 Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, also known as the Maputo Protocol. In addition to enshrining civil and political rights; economic and social rights; rights to peace and development and reproductive rights; **the Maputo Protocol also speaks to the elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence**

**against women and calls for the full protection of asylum-seeking women, refugees, returnees and internally displaced persons (IDPs),** prohibiting all forms of sexual exploitation in armed conflict situations and in refugee camps and settlements.

Despite the momentous potential of the Maputo Protocol for the promotion of women's rights, issues of non-implementation and non-ratification continue to militate against its use as an effective policy tool for women's empowerment. As of 2015, 36 out of the 54 African states had ratified the Maputo Protocol. However, several of the states that have ratified have displayed reservations around controversial articles particularly those covering early marriage, property rights and reproductive rights, all of which are directly related to women's equality. Therefore, the onus rests on African governments and policy officials to move away from an 'add and stir' approach that has dominated policy discourse around gender equality and the legislation of women's rights. At the international level, policy documents that specifically address the rights of women migrants include the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW); the 1990 International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their

Families (ICRMW); the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action and the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees which specifically covers the rights of refugees and the legal obligations of states.

**The empowerment of migrant women begins by recognizing that migrant women are bearers of rights and advocating for a rights-based approach to female migration.** A rights-based approach to migration examines the gendered hierarchies that impede the full realization of the rights of migrant women with the aim of galvanising states, civil society, non-governmental organisations and other stakeholders to fulfil their obligations in securing the human rights of migrant women and in turn, elevate their capacity for human development. Dovetailing a rights-based approach is the migration-development nexus which emphasizes the view of women as development agents as opposed to passive victims of gendered dimensions of the migration discourse. Instead of instrumentalizing women as victims of the dark side of migration entailing trafficking, political instability and global economic restructuring; **the agency of women should be acknowledged as determinants of the migratory project, remittance**

**managers and beneficiaries of the migration and development agenda.**

The AU's declaration of 2015 as the Year of Women Empowerment and Development towards Africa's Agenda 2063; and 2016 as the Year of Human Rights with Special Focus on the Rights of Women presents a unique opportunity for African leadership to address gender gaps in the policy documents relevant to women's rights as well as to amplify efforts towards the empowerment of women as change agents towards the African Agenda 2063 and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Relevant to migration, progress towards securing the rights of migrant women can be realized by incorporating a rights-based approach towards migration, by focusing less on reactive approaches to migratory crises and more on long-term models and frameworks that tackle structural challenges at the heart of migration governance.

*\*Faith Maberu is a Researcher based at the Institute for Global Dialogue, a foreign policy think-tank in Pretoria, South Africa. Contact her at [faith@igd.org.za](mailto:faith@igd.org.za)*

## Bibliography

- Abramovich, V., Cernadas, P.C. and Morlachetti, A. 2011. 'The Rights of Children, Youth and Women in The Context of Migration: Conceptual Basis and Principles for Effective Policies with a Human Rights and Gender Based Approach' *UNICEF Social and Economic Policy Working Paper April 2011*. New York: UNICEF.
- Boyd, M. and Grieco, E. 2003. 'Women and Migration: Incorporating Gender into International Migration Theory' Migration Policy Institute, 1 March 2003. <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/women-and-migration-incorporating-gender-international-migration-theory>
- Dinbabo M.F. and Carciotto, S. 2015. 'International Migration in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Call for a Global Research Agenda' in *African Human Mobility Review* 1 (2) pp. 155-178.
- Majiwa, M. 2013. 'The Maputo Protocol's potential for a revolution in women's rights,' *Pambazuka*, Issue 647 available at <http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category/features/89008>
- Marinucci, R. 2007. 'The Feminization of Migration' in *Contextualização*, 29 (2007), pp. 5-22.
- Mohamed, F.J. 2014. '11 Years of the African Women's Rights Protocol: Progress and challenges,' in *Development* 57 (1) pp. 71-76.
- Petrozziello, A.J. 2013. *Gender on the Move Working On the Migration-Development Nexus From A Gender Perspective: Training Manual*. Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic: UN Women