

CROSSING BORDERS

movements and struggles of migration



Crossing Borders! is an initiative of frassainito network that aims to foster migration-related networking and practical struggles. Previous issues have covered conflicts in western and eastern Europe, Africa and the USA. Here we speak about women's migration, and not for the first time: as we believe it is a crucial perspective to understand transnational movements and the organisation of labour (see issues 3 & 4). This issue of Crossing Borders! will be initially distributed at the opening initiative of the transnational chain of action – Fight the Monster! Against Border Regime: Transnationalization now! (February-October 2008) – in Amsterdam, on February 2 (see page 4). support this newsletter project by contributing and distributing! contact: frassainfo@kein.org & www.noborder.org

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Women on the Move!

Women move. Women are key protagonists of globalized movements. To speak of migration starting from the concrete experiences of migrant women is not a question of political correctness. Rather it is a strategic perspective that enables us to understand the general transformation of sexual and racialized labour relationships on a transnational scale. Women's migration is a subjective break from the sexual and family relationships that are left behind in countries of origin. At the same time, it represents a process of withdrawal from models of production which continue to assign women with the role of biological and social reproduction. As such, the globalized movements of women subvert traditional sexual relations.

Yet, migrant women remain caught within a sexual division of labour that is present in Europe and at a transnational level. This sexual stratification is subject to further complexities along racial lines, exacerbated by European migration policies and which coincide with the crisis of welfare and care services and a transformation of social reproduction in Europe. From this perspective, the experience of migrant women working in the care sector (p. 2) tells us something about the externalization of public services and the dismantling of the welfare state in Europe, as well as the recruitment of workers channelled into unregulated and informal sectors by border and visa policies. This is not a migrant women's matter, but involves all women across borders, in so far as border-policies are restating a new form of the sexual division of labour, relations that women have historically fought against.

Care work and sex work (p. 3), are paradigmatic sectors that highlight the political character of women's migration and its ambivalences. Debates which treat sex workers as simply the victims of trafficking forced into prostitution are consistent with those positions which blame migrant women for leaving their countries and families behind to become the servants of foreigners. Both representations overlook the richness and complexity of women's experiences and the potential of transforming the realities that surround

them. It is exactly from these experiences, rather than from abstract theoretical models, that we want to discuss the impact of women's migration on labour and social relations in Europe.

This impact also emerges in sectors which are not usually perceived to be affected by sexual differences and discrimination. The history of precarization through the exploitation of migrant labour, for example, is well known in the agricultural industry in Spain, where migrants from North Africa have been replaced by East European workers who are less organized and paid less. Today, a new chapter of this history concerns the recruitment of migrant women. The employers – supported by government immigration and labour laws (p. 2) – prefer to recruit migrant women who, as mothers with children in their countries of origin and with short-term migratory projects, are more liable to be blackmailed and less likely to struggle for better working conditions. Such a situation is described by the women employed in West European textile factories that have been relocated to Romania (p.3). Their experiences highlight the transnational dimension of industrial chain-production and the gendered dimension of labour across borders.

Whether working in the care, sex, agricultural or industrial sector, women's stories urge us to address the question of the political organization of labour relations and the labour market from a gendered perspective. Often, collective organization is difficult and complex. On the one hand, this is due to migrant women's living and working conditions, legal status, and the double burden of productive and reproductive work that is still experienced by the majority of women. On the other, conflicts and tensions arise due to age, class and race differences. Yet, despite the existing divergences, the challenge is to build coalitions and find a common field of struggle starting from the specificities of migrant women's labour, from an understanding of the gendered and racialised structure of labour relations and the struggles for the freedom of movement and the right to stay.

On migration and care work

Today many migrant women who arrive in Europe are also driven by a process that is both a break and a withdrawal: leaving behind oppressive gender relations, in search of economic independence and autonomy and aspiring to find new possibilities in which to raise children. However, the intersection between migration policies and a transforming (rather than disappearing) of the sexual division of labour does not present migrant women with a “liberating” horizon: once in Europe, they find themselves stuck in increasingly precarious and low paid care and sex service work.

The current crisis of care, and the subsequent openings that this has led to, could have provided an occasion in which to reconsider the social organization of care. However, the crisis encounters a reactionary closure with the creation and continual expansion of an extremely precarious care-services market (made possible on the back of a female migrant workforce); the externalization of public services; the proliferation of personal services; and the increasing recruitment of domestic workers who are trapped between irregularity, quota policies and restrictions on migrant work permits.

As such, the sexual division of labour experiences a re-stratification along ethnic lines. This does not change the fact that the care needs of children, the elderly and sick are still socially considered a largely private matter, generally in the hands of women who have to now reconcile their availability for work with their availability for care. Women resort to the new care-services market as far as their entry and conditions allow, and, in any case, are always found to be guilty whenever something goes wrong. This guilt is in fact twofold: guilty are the native women for “abandoning” their home and leaving their loved ones in the hands of strangers; guilty are also the

migrant women for having left behind children and husbands in their country of origin in order to become suspect carers in new homes where they are perceived as intruders.

So, in this reactionary closure of the crisis of care, we, as migrant and native women, find ourselves both guilty, but separated, segregated and rivals. However, among the cooking, caring and bathing, a rumble is beginning to be heard. This rumble tells us of the anxiety about the lock-in life of domestic work, of the anger at the servant nature of a job that is still regulated across Europe by “special” labour regimes (in other words, lower than supposedly “real” jobs), and of the tension of caring for your own offspring through long-distance phone calls. It is a rumble that reclaims the value of care (whether waged or not), reclaims the affective dimensions that are always at stake, the ties which are created and which represent, at the end of the day, the condition of possibility for society, all of society, to exist. This rumble today revives the politicization of care that feminist struggles initiated in the past but from a new perspective. This is revived with a transnational dimension, because the focus of conflict is not only the conditions, resources, time and recognition of providing and receiving care here, in Europe, but also in the places of origin of the migrant women. Instead of feeling sympathy for these women, we would do well to ally ourselves with this rumble, to draw on it, to connect it to our own discontents and our aspiration that care stops being a female and private burden and is instead turned into a social question. To challenge the policies that force migrant women to occupy the worst positions in the care-services market and among other things to make sure the sexual and reproductive struggles of feminism do not end up with us saying “we won but we lost”.



Dissolving pacts. Women's tales across the factory

"I thought to go to Italy, but I could find a job only in the house of an old person. I always believe that I cannot do that. Everybody knows her own limits". It is paradoxical to speak about women on the move starting from Maria's words, or from the ones of Lionela, who does not want to leave to make *"the job that Romanian women do, prostitution. In one hour, I should earn the same money I earn in the factory. But I am not interested in it"*. These women decided to stay, refusing the "destiny" promised by the transnational sexual division of labor. Of the latter, however, they are protagonists. All of them work in Italian textile factories transferred in the South of Romania, following the profits offered by the incomes differential and by the lack of trade-union organization. *"If there was a union",* Lionela says, *"there would be strikes everyday"*.

In the textile factories migrated to eastern Europe, there are mostly women. 80%, in Lionela's factory, *"younger and older. They are lithe and slim"*, can move quickly among looms. But there is another reason, according to Oana: *"the wage is low, but they are poor women, with many children at home. They need money"*. To be mother, to be poor, means to be liable to blackmails, and violence is a common experience. The masters call you "whore", if you work slowly. Michela says: *"my foreman tried with me everyday, but I told him: 'let me go, I am not what you think I am'. But there are men who do even this kind of things"*.

In the factory is not allowed to speak during working time, and some women says that the relationships with the colleagues are not so easy because *"we all are women there, and envy is bigger among women"*. But this did not impede communication and autonomous experiences of struggle. Maria tells of a strike owed to the missed payment of wages. Women *"were resolute, because we were near holyday time. We agreed to go not on the machinery till they don't pay us. Within three hours we obtained our money! No leader, all the girls were leaders"*. However, organization not always succeeds. Michela recalls a failed strike: *"we have been out and the master said: 'The city is full of girls that I can bring here! If you don't come in, don't be back anymore!' We had not another place to go to, what could we have done?"*

But something is changing. According to Oana, *"many women are leaving their job because wage are not enough. Some of them go abroad, and it worth the while"*. Women are no more available to accept those wage conditions, so that Sonoma, an Italian textile factory migrated to Bacau, "imported" 400 Chinese women to work at a 50% less than Romanian ones. The point is that also Chinese workers started to call for a better wage. The master of Sonoma said that these were not the pacts. But the world starts to move when women dissolve the pacts.

Bitter strawberries**

Hafid Kamal is a happy man. Director of ANAPEC, the Moroccan Agency for Employment, he manages the orders from his comfortable office: "We received an order from citrus fruits and kiwis producers in Haute Corse (France): 400 men from 35 to 50 years" he answers the French daily Libération. "[The] Spanish are so pleased with our work that they have already ordered 10,000 women workers for next year" he declared in 2007.

Morocco is already launching its fourth recruitment campaign and more than 12,000 people will travel to Spain in 2008 to work in the fields. And these travelers are not just anyone: to pick strawberries in Spanish Extremadura, you have to be a woman, to be poor, aged between 18 and 40 years, married and a mother of children under 14. You also have to be obedient, or next year you will not get a contract. The contract lasts from 3 to 6 months, without any guarantee that it will be renewed. The workers are supposed to get a salary from 30 to 35 € a day. The transfer of the money to Morocco is made by Caixa de Catalunya, through an agreement with Banque Populaire in Morocco. This salary, earned over 3 to 6 months, will have to be sufficient for 12 months and feed the children they are forced to leave behind when they left to go work in Spain. The banks, always ready to offer loans, urge them to launch development micro-projects. Who said no one cares about development?

This is how Europe, which claims to be the champion of women's rights in Muslim countries, separates young mothers from their children and contravenes laws on employment non-discrimination. Actions which are financed with the money of tax-payers - Europe has released 1.2M€ in the last three years to ANAPEC and Spanish producers associations for finance recruitment campaigns.

And this is how Morocco gets rid of its poor, by renting them to European slave traders. Even their visas do not specify names any more. Here, the workforce is exported by the ton.

I nearly forgot: if you spot strawberries at the market, bon appétit!!!

** The title comes from a brochure by Andalucian SOC (Sindicato de los Obreros del Campo) on the horrific work conditions of women picking strawberries, The bitter taste of our fruits and vegetables, 2000.

Re-thinking sex trafficking:

Victims of organized crime. Victims of male violence. Sex-slaves. These are the terms commonly used to describe migrant women in the EU's sex industry. Trafficking, in contrast to 'voluntary' migration such as smuggling, is defined as non-consensual form of migration geared towards exploitation of migrants' labour whether in sex or some other kind of industry. This notion of trafficking resulted in NGOs and states' intervention along two main lines: first, establishing of protective schemes for victims of trafficking and second, the tightening of borders and visa regimes to combat organised criminal networks.

Victim protection schemes are not to be discarded as they offer temporary residence permits to migrants. Yet, they are also not to be embraced so easily as they consign the complexity of women's desires and projects to the category of the 'victim', and consequently downplaying women's resistance to structural inequalities and their struggle to transform their lives. Moreover, victim protection schemes lead to anti-prostitution laws as they subsume all migrant sex workers under the category of victims and worsen sex-workers' working conditions and rights. Border and visa's regimes relation to trafficking needs also to be reconsidered. When formal avenues of migration become inaccessible, migrant women turn to irregular channels. Stricter controls and more restrictive immigration regulations aimed at preventing trafficking do not protect women from abuse but, on the contrary, increase migrant women's vulnerability to violence during their travel. In fact they increase the level of control third parties have over migrants, both during the journey and upon arrival at their destinations. Hence, current EU mechanisms of migration control help to produce 'irregular' migration, channel women into trafficking and consequently into prostitution.

Shifting the terms of analysis of trafficking from violence and organised crime to migration and labour creates new political and interpretative possibilities. Analytically, it provides us with a framework to examine the impact of restrictive immigration and labour policies on migrant women's lives and on sex-workers' lives. Politically, it avoids the danger of the collusion with states' anti-immigration agenda which occurs when victimhood is the main frame of reference, and it proposes a political alliance based on freedom of movement and resistance against labour exploitation.

Key policy instruments:

The Victim of Trafficking Directive - introduces a residence permit for victims of trafficking or for third-country nationals who have come to harm during a smuggling operation. Yet, contrary to what it might seem, the Directive's primary aim is not victims' protection but the prosecution of traffickers. Residence permits are only issued to those victims of trafficking who cooperate with the police. See: <http://europa.eu/scadplus/leg/en/lvb/l33187.htm>

The Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings – is a treaty, focusing on the protection of victims and also covering the prosecution of traffickers, preventive measures and establishment of independent monitoring mechanisms. EU countries are slow to ratify the Convention, due to the perception that it undermines national immigration policies, due to its emphasis on protection of victims.

Ongoing struggles:

Los Angeles: The Garment Worker Centre (GWC) is organising migrant workers to fight exploitation and unsafe working conditions. The majority of workers are women and the GWC focuses on developing them as organisers with training and offers political education. Workers fight against sexual harassment in the home and workplace. We are also organising Chinese and Latino workers together across racial divisions that exist in the factories. Info: www.garmentworkercenter.org.

Migrant women fighting back in Holland! The current campaign 'Cleaners for a better future' aims to improve the working conditions of 150,000 cleaners in the Netherlands, of whom 80% are women. They are struggling for real lasting changes in the industry, respect and the right to organize without repression, creating community alliances and taking the street to demand a better life for themselves and their families. Info: <http://www.beteretoekomst.org/>.

The International Committee for the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe brings sex workers and their allies together on an European and international level. Info: <http://www.sexworkeurope.org>

Great Britain: An increasing number of combative women in London, working with trade unions, self-organised migrant communities and Kalayaan – a charity that works with migrant domestic workers – continue to campaign against the government law. The legislation forces women into illegality, making them dependent on one employer to renew their visa and increasing the power of the employers who can take advantage of their irregular status. Kalayaan is creating a network of support among migrants and migrant domestic workers to share women's experience at work, to access public services and exit their status of invisibility. Info: www.kalayaan.org.uk/

NextGENDERation is a transnational European network of students, researchers and activists with an interest in feminist theory and politics, and their intersections with anti-racist, migrant, lesbian, queer and anti-capitalist struggles. Info: <http://nextgenderation.net/>

The Agencia Precaria (Agency of Precarious Affairs) is a space of self-organisation of precarious women, born from "precarias a la deriva", an initiative of militant investigation. We are now, among other things, working hand in hands with a group of migrant women who earn their living as domestic workers, in order to include domestic work in the statute of workers and to fight all the forms of exploitation, racism and violence which are to be found inside the homes. We also establish connections between migrant women and other women working as care workers, whether paid or not. Info: <http://www.sindominio.net/karakola/precarias.htm>

The International Union of Sex Workers is a branch of the GMB, one of the UK's biggest trade unions. We campaign for sex workers' rights at a local, national and international level - to decrease stigma and violence against sex workers, improve working conditions and create a clear and fair sex industry. Info: <http://iusw.org/>.