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INTERSECTING VULNERABILITIES: GENDER AND MIGRATION RISKS FACED BY WOMEN

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Abstract: The intersection between migration and violence against women remains understudied. Existing research focuses primarily on violence experienced by women and girls throughout their migration journeys, as well as on discrimination in the workplace. This article proposes to analyse how migration trajectories, combined with structural inequalities, exacerbate women's vulnerability to violence. It underscores the need for more in-depth research that fully integrates a gender perspective. As various data and reports show (see IOM, 2024), migration is a key factor in women's vulnerability. In host societies, they often face increased exposure to risks, particularly when they must adapt to new cultural norms and changes in social status. These changes can compromise their autonomy and increase their dependence, thereby increasing their exposure to various forms of violence and inequality. Faced with the constantly increasing number of migrant women, it is becoming essential that public authorities and civil society actors pay increased attention to this issue and put in place policies aimed at better protecting these women and reducing their exposure to violence.

Keywords: vulnerability, intersectionality, migration, women, violence

Résumé : La relation entre migration et violence à l'égard des femmes reste insuffisamment étudiée. Les recherches existantes portent principalement sur les violences subies par les femmes et les filles tout au long de leur parcours migratoire, ainsi que sur la discrimination au travail. Cet article propose d'analyser comment les trajectoires migratoires, combinées à des inégalités structurelles, renforcent la vulnérabilité des femmes face à la violence. Il met en évidence la nécessité de recherches plus approfondies, intégrant pleinement une perspective de genre. Comme le montrent différentes données et rapports (voir IOM, 2024), la migration constitue un facteur déterminant de la vulnérabilité des femmes. Dans les sociétés d'accueil, celles-ci sont souvent confrontées à une exposition accrue aux risques, notamment lorsqu'elles doivent s'adapter à de nouvelles normes culturelles et à des transformations de leur statut social. Ces évolutions peuvent fragiliser leur autonomie et accentuer leur dépendance, augmentant ainsi leur exposition à diverses formes de violence et d'inégalités. Face à l'augmentation continue du nombre de femmes migrantes, il devient essentiel que les pouvoirs publics et les acteurs de la société civile accordent une attention accrue à cette problématique et mettent en place des politiques visant à mieux protéger ces femmes et à réduire leur exposition aux violences.

Mots-clés : vulnérabilité, intersectionnalité, migration, femme, violence

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Rezumat: Relația dintre migrație și violența împotriva femeilor rămâne insuficient studiată. Cercetările existente abordează în principal temele abuzului și violenței la care sunt supuse femeile pe parcursul rutelor migratorii și discriminarea la locul de muncă. Acest articol își propune să analizeze modul în care experiențele migrației și inegalitățile structurale contribuie la o vulnerabilitate sporită la violență, subliniind necesitatea aprofundării studiilor de gen. După cum indică diverse statistici și rapoarte (vezi OIM, 2024), migrația constituie un factor determinant semnificativ al vulnerabilității femeilor. În țara de destinație, femeile se confruntă adesea cu o expunere ridicată la riscuri pe măsură ce se adaptează la noi norme culturale și negociază schimbări în statutul lor social. Aceste transformări le pot submina autonomia și pot consolida condițiile de dependență, crescând astfel probabilitatea de a deveni victime ale diverselor forme de violență și inegalitate. Creșterea constantă a numărului de femei migrante determină pe factorii de decizie și pe societatea civilă să acorde o atenție sporită acestei probleme și să implementeze măsuri care vizează protejarea femeilor migrante în vederea diminuării expunerii lor la situații de violență.

Cuvinte-cheie: vulnerabilitate, intesecționalitate, migrație, femei, violența

Introduction

Social science analyses of current mobilities are increasingly examining the issue of migrant women. At the intersection of gender, migration status, social position, ethnic origin, etc., women's migration experiences expose them to varying degrees or forms of vulnerability, often reinforced by structural factors such as reception policies, administrative precarity, and weak social relations. This vulnerability should be comprehended as the product of social and institutional structures that contribute to increased risks of marginalization, professional deskilling, isolation and violence. Understanding these vulnerabilities will contribute to a better understanding of how migrant women experience discrimination and develop strategies of adaptation and resistance in the face of unknown/hostile environments and, in some cases, to rebuild their identity.

Recent reports have highlighted the persistence of gender-based discrimination, particularly against women, and how gender dynamics shape the nature and severity of the difficulties faced by migrants at each stage of the migration cycle (IOM, 2024). Yet, the significant systemic disparities that exist throughout societies are reflected in the gender differences observed in migration patterns. Throughout every stage of the migration trajectory—from departure and transit to entry and stay in destination countries—gender strongly impacts the experiences of migrants and their families. At the individual, household, and society levels, gender and migration interact conjointly. Taking into consideration the gender factors of migration is a key issue for stakeholders and policymakers in ensuring fair and efficient protection of rights.

This paper will explain how structural inequalities and migration processes, combined, create conditions that make migrant women more vulnerable to violence. We will first describe the current socio-economic situation regarding female migration. Then, we will illustrate some of the factors likely to influence

women's exposure to risks as they adapt to new cultural norms and negotiate changes in their social status after migration. These transformations can undermine their autonomy and reinforce conditions of dependency, thus increasing the likelihood of becoming victims of various forms of violence and inequality.

Context of international women's migration

Nowadays, approximately one in ten individuals is a migrant in developed societies (IOM, 2024, p. 4). At the global level, women represent almost half of all migrants: in 2020, they represented 48.1% compared with 51.9% of men, although their proportion has tended to decrease in recent years (IOM, 2024). Nevertheless, the share of women among migrants varies largely across countries and regions. Recent data indicate that in Europe and North America, women outnumber men among international migrants. In 2024, women accounted for 52% of the international migrant stock in Europe, 51% in North America, and 51% in Oceania (UN DESA, 2025). This pattern is substantially explained by the fact that women have generally higher life expectancy compared to men and they are more represented in older age groups.

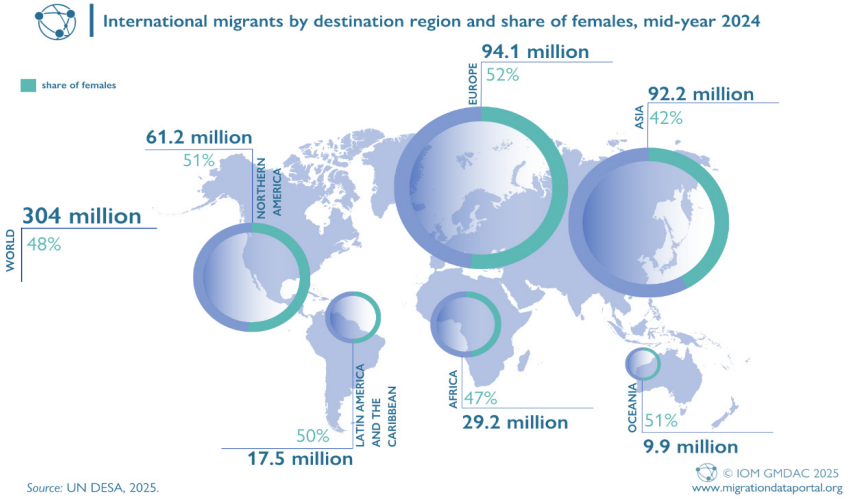


Figure 1: International migrants by destination region and share of females, mid-year 2024
Migration Data Portal, https://www.migrationdataportal.org/infographic/international-migrants-destination-region-and-share-females-mid-year-2024

Although the number of international women migrants has increased, the overall proportion of female migrants worldwide has rather declined during the past two decades, suggesting a tendency toward the masculinization of international migration. According to statistics, the gender gap among

international migrants has intensified — from 1.2 % in 2000 to 3.8 % in 2020 (IOM, 2024, p. 168).

As migrants, women leave their countries in search of better living conditions, generally combined with other security, economic, educational, and family-related reasons. Recent data, still incompletely documented, show that an increasing number of women are migrating independently, whether to pursue employment, education, or as heads of households. In addition, new employment opportunities have emerged for women, particularly in economic sectors facing labour shortages, such as the textile and manufacturing industries and domestic work. In high-income countries, there is also an increasing demand in sectors such as health and social care (ILO, 2022). These drivers of women's migration require an in-depth examination of the structural, economic, and social factors involving gender disparities in global migration patterns.

Migrant women and precarity

Globally, labour market participation among migrants (65.8%) is higher than among non-migrants (60.1%), for both men (77.9% of migrants compared with 72.6% of non-migrants) and women (52.8% of migrants compared with 47.7% of non-migrants) (ILO, 2024). Nevertheless, these differences vary across countries and regions, as well as according to migration attraction and reception policies. This data reflects the magnitude of the migration phenomenon for economic reasons: people emigrate in search of new and better employment opportunities, improved jobs, and higher incomes.

However, according to recent ILO data (2024), among working-age migrants (255.7 million in 2022), only 65.6% were participating in the labour market, and among them, 155.6 million were employed, and 12.1 million were unemployed. Thus, more than one third of working-age migrants (34%) are not in the labour force.

The participation of women in the labour market is a key indicator of their autonomy and their place in society. Economic status and financial gain protect women from external threats, reduce resilience on others and give them independence, a better lifestyle, the possibility to make choices, and, generally, greater decision-making within households and societies. Concerning migrant women, recent evidence indicates that their participation in the labour market is significantly lower than that of men: in 2022, only 64.9 million migrant women (38.7%) were in the labour force, compared with 102.7 million migrant men (61,3), but their number is increasing (ILO, 2024). Moreover, women are above average in informal, unregulated or elementary jobs that do not always correspond with their qualifications and educational level; they often occupy lower-paid positions than male migrants and earn, on average, 20% less than them (ILOSTAT, 2020). These differences can be explained by the difficulties linked to structural barriers, socio-cultural constraints, and discrimination that this category of women face in

accessing employment (Fernández-Reino, Di Stasio and Viet 2023; Lee and Piper 2013).

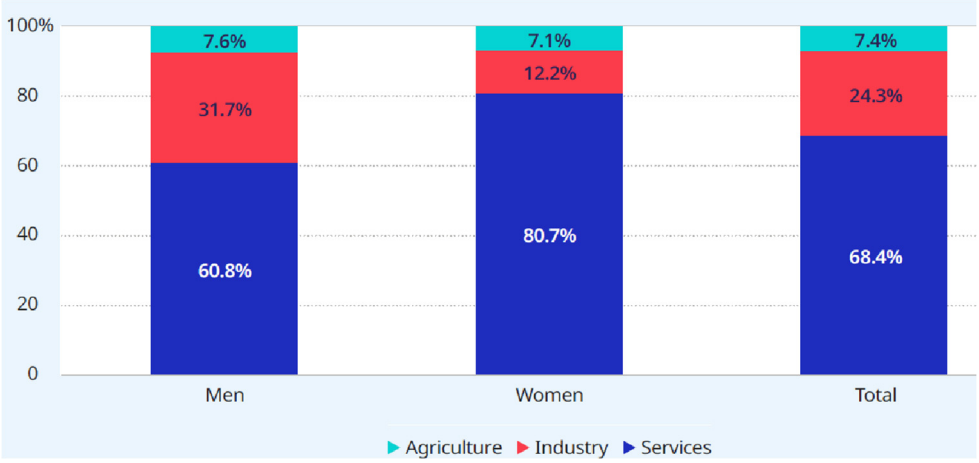


Figure 2: Global distribution of employed international migrants by sex and broad category of economic activity, 2022 (percentage)
Source: ILO Global Estimates on International Migrant Workers, 2024, page 15

The latest ILO report (ILO, 2024) indicates that within the migration context, women face specific risks in the labour market and discrimination in migration policies, which often confine them to precarious jobs such as domestic work or caregiving (CREST). Moreover, unrealistic expectations related to insufficient information about employment opportunities in the destination country expose them to potential exploitative working conditions, no access to legal and social protection, or inequity (access to specific jobs, unethical recruitment practices, ethnicity and race) (UN Women, 2016).

Thus, the migrant women's status on the labour market could be marked by a triple discrimination: as migrant, as woman, and as vulnerable/unprotected worker. At the same time, their weak representation in management positions makes them especially vulnerable during economic downturns and limits their possibility to report cases of violence, sexual abuse, or harassment in the workplace. However, it should be noted that, since 2020, the number of working-age women migrants with an advanced educational level is increasing in many of the OECD countries and outnumbers their male counterparts in more than half of the high-income countries (Rakotonarivo, A., ILO, 2020).

Structural vulnerability of migrants

Vulnerability is a multidimensional social space defined by determinate political, economic, and institutional capabilities of people in specific places and at specific times (Bohle et al., 1994). In sociology, the concept of vulnerability is associated with exposure to risk and is explained by the dynamics of human-

environment interactions (Turner et al.2003). Immigration status is one of the main factors of people's vulnerability, as well as social class, gender, age, ethnic group, or disability.

Migrants are considered a vulnerable population because they face a combination of factors likelihood of their physical and mental health being compromised, as well as their fundamental rights (EMM2.0 Handbook). Their vulnerability results from the structural socioeconomic and political dynamics related to the new contexts of migrants' life experiences. More precisely, the configuration of society, encompassing laws and norms, political systems, economic conditions, social capital, inequalities, etc., could expose them to risk of social exclusion, economic precariousness, and bad conditions of life. (Gilodi, Albert, and Nienaber, 2024). Structural factors constitute the primary cause of vulnerability (Cutter et al., 2003), which intensifies at the intersection with individual attributes – such as age (e.g., children or older adults), gender (e.g., women), health conditions, or disabilities.

The capacity of migrants to mobilize resources to face the difficulties in an unfamiliar environment is related to their weak or absent social ties and networks, which can lead them to isolation in daily life and at work. As studies and reports indicate, migrants often encounter restricted access to social protection, healthcare, institutions, and rights, as well as subordination in labour markets through informal or low-wage employment, alongside pervasive discrimination, which foster their marginalization. According to the IOM (see EMM2.0 Handbook), there are four categories of determinants to take into consideration to explain migrant vulnerability. Firstly, structural factors refer to migration laws and policies, the functioning of the rule of law, social conflicts, and marginalization or discrimination within the host society. Secondly, community factors concern access to healthcare, the educational system, the social protection system, and the broader socio-cultural context. Thirdly, family factors refer to micro-level determinants such as employment, the presence of family and kinship support networks, and the community networks available to the migrants. Fourthly, individual factors imply age, health, gender, educational level, etc. In correspondence, protective factors can mitigate the effects of risk factors.

The intersectional nature of migrant women's vulnerability

As migrants, women are even more vulnerable compared to men; in fact, they are considered by the IOM as *vulnerable migrants.* The experience of women's migration is highly influenced by *gender-specific risks:* gender-related vulnerabilities intersect with other types of vulnerability, as well as legal status, economic condition, ethnicity, and sexual orientation.

Migrant women face specific vulnerabilities throughout the migratory cycle, often exacerbated by gender norms, stereotypes, and structural inequalities. First, gender norms and traditional roles in the country of origin can influence women's ability to engage in migration independently or limit their emigration.

Next, some migration routes expose them to abuse and violence or human trafficking. In the destination country, the new socio-cultural and political context can be particularly violent. Arrival in the host society is generally accompanied by a break with social ties and is emotionally triggered by separation from family and friends. As migrants, women risk quickly finding themselves in circumstances of marginalization and isolation, encountering numerous barriers until they reach their autonomy. Economic integration can be fraught with difficulties: lack of recognition of diplomas and experience, deskilling, lack of qualifications, employment discrimination, etc. Furthermore, administrative obstacles to accessing health or protection services, language difficulties, unfamiliarity with institutional functioning and procedures, lack of information regarding their rights, etc. enhance the psychological distress of these women.

The relationship between gender and migration is multidimensional and interdependent. Gender roles not only structure migration patterns—motivations, decision-making processes, modes of mobility, and chosen destinations—but also determine migrants' vulnerability and exposure to inequalities.

Domestic Violence on Migrant Women in the Host Country

Research has mainly examined the individual-level factors of violence, including „low education, childhood abuse experiences, and problematic alcohol use and some of them may be common to both victims and perpetrators" (Rahmania, Teodorescu, 2024). However, recent frameworks on intimate violence highlight the weight of demographic and societal risk determinants (Varcoe, C. et al., 2011), including culturally prescribed gender norms, women's economic, social, and legal status, behavioural patterns, or community attitudes against violence. The ecological model of IPV examines the dynamic relationship between personal factors and the relationship between individuals and their environments. From a multidimensional perspective, the model proposed by Lori Heise helps to explain the impact of societal and structural conditions on variations in the incidence of physical and sexual abuse. (Heise, 1998, 2011). Other approaches, such as multivariate analysis, show that intimate partner violence results „from a complex interplay of individual, relational, societal, cultural, and environmental" factors (Rahmania, Teodorescu, 2024).

Among all this several factors associated with violence against women, the status of women in society appears as the factor most strongly linked to the use of violence (see Jewkes et al., 2002): in general, a high level of education and a favorable socio-economic status are associated with a reduced risk of domestic violence among women, according to different studies analysing the relationship between empowerment and violence (IOM, 2024).

As explained before, migrant women are particularly vulnerable in the new socioeconomic and political context. Since 2009, the resolution adopted by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe recognizes the heightened risk

of domestic violence faced by immigrant women who lack autonomy (Parliamentary Assembly, Council of Europe, 2009).

Case studies and reports help to highlight specific Vulnerability Factors in cases of violence against migrant women:

- Isolation - a key element: limited social networks, physical distance from family members, lack of emotional support
- Language barriers: limit access to information and support services; „invisible women"
- Economic factors (employment status, income):
  - The incomes of migrant women are lower than those of native women and migrant men
  - Financial dependence on the spouse or, conversely, a reversal of roles — when the woman holds a higher economic status — may be perceived by men as diminishing or devaluing.
- Individual risk factors:
  - Knowledge of rights and access to services in the host country
  - Perception and acceptance of violence in relation to the cultural context of origin (level of tolerance toward violence within the community, cultural norms and codes)
  - Dependence on the spouse (children, socio-economic situation, legal status)

Migrant women become less vulnerable in circumstances such as:

- Involvement in community networks
- Associative and political engagement, actions for the defence of rights
- Professional retraining
- Identity reconstruction

The vulnerability of foreign women depends on their legal status. The most affected women are those who arrive in the host country through marriage and/or who are dependent on a residence permit (UN Women, 2021). Globally, two-thirds of migrants arriving as partners for family reunification reasons are women and girls (Orav, A., 2023). According to Council Directive 2003/86/EC, the legal status of the arriving spouse or unmarried partner is dependent on their inviting partner ("the sponsor") for 5 years; thus, „the partner" does not have an autonomous residence permit and it may be refused in the case of divorce. The situation of EU nationals, though less studied, is no less fragile. In both cases, foreign victims of domestic violence are particularly vulnerable. In situations of power imbalance within the couple, marked by dependence and inequality, mistrust and blackmail could easily appear (Poujoulet, 2015). In addition, economic difficulties are associated with an increased risk of violence by intensifying conflicts, modifying dynamics between partners, and questioning traditional (masculine) roles. In the case of these women, who have a precarious social status, denouncing their partner means assuming the risk of falling into administrative irregularity, leading to serious social consequences: loss of housing, rights, and increased isolation; that's why some of them could choose to maintain a harmful relationship out of fear of

expulsion (Orav, A., 2023). Legal proceedings raise major obstacles - insufficient evidence, late filing of complaints, difficulty in proving psychological abuse. Recent legal provisions stipulate that a migrant woman who is a victim of domestic violence will no longer lose her residence permit if she has suffered violence from her spouse and can prove it. However, to retain their right to remain, they must meet certain conditions related to their financial resources (employment, health insurance, etc.). For many women, it is very difficult to meet all these criteria and, in these circumstances/ that's why the professionals who support them (social workers, lawyers, etc.) tend to direct them towards applications to remain in the country through other reasons such as length of stay, health problems, etc.

Thus, domestic violence situations cause major difficulties for migrant women who must fight a double battle: that of victim and that of a foreign person seeking to preserve her right to remain on the territory. For many of these women, returning to their country of origin is almost impossible. By leaving their country to found a family abroad, they have accepted the separation from their loved ones, have given up their jobs, financial stability, and social standing. If they return, these migrant women may be stigmatized by their community, especially if they have worked abroad in sectors considered demeaning or if they have not achieved their migration goals. Furthermore, they may face difficulties reintegrating into their community or finding a job. The situation is even more complicated when there are children, with mothers finding themselves isolated in a poorly understood socio-cultural context, without employment or financial resources.

Conclusion

The vulnerability of migrant women to hardship is influenced by numerous factors related to the interaction between their gender, their migration status, and social and systemic injustices. This results in a complex system of victimization through violence, exploitation, and discrimination, limited economic opportunities, and restricted access to fundamental rights. The findings show that these vulnerabilities are created and perpetuated by the structural conditions that prevail along the migration journey, rather than being inherent to the individual.

To effectively address these challenges, it is essential to develop targeted, gender-sensitive policies that not only guarantee the protection of individual rights but also tackle the root causes of inequality. While equitable access to safe and decent work, equal pay, and improved representation are certainly important, they must be accompanied by broader measures to combat legal insecurity and social isolation and to improve access to protections.

In the end, viewing migrant women as agents of their own destiny rather than victims will allow for the development of more inclusive and effective responses. Providing them with access to advice, resources, and legal protection is essential not only for their individual well-being but also for building equitable and sustainable societies.

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