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Migration

# Women, Work & Migration

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**Margaret Belafonte fled her home on a small Caribbean island to escape a violent and abusive common-law spouse (her name has been changed to protect her identity). The country she fled is one in which social services, such as they were, have been drastically cut. There is one temporary shelter in the country for women escaping violence, which houses only 15 women. The police are indifferent and sometimes hostile to women seeking protection from their violent partners. As a result, bail conditions and restraining orders that are supposed to protect women are ineffective.**

After years of violence, Margaret made the difficult decision ten years ago to leave her four children with family and seek refuge in Toronto. She obtained work in a sector where workers without “landed immigrant” status [the equivalent of legal residency and right to work in the USA] can find employment fairly easily: caregiving.

She has worked as a nanny to six children and as a caregiver for the elderly. She works under the table in extremely precarious situations. She does not have access to pension plans, health care or drug benefits and does not contribute to the unemployment insurance plan. She earns minimum wage. If she is subject to abuse from her employer, she cannot go to police because she fears deportation.

Margaret may be safe from her abusive husband, but she has traded one vulnerable situation for another.

Margaret’s story can help us expand our understanding of some patterns of migration. When we talk about migrant workers, there is a tendency to think of those who leave their “poor” countries of origin to seek work and opportunity in “rich” countries. But immigrant workers are more likely to come from a middle-income country. They often bring a level of education, a set of skills, and a work record that indicates they held relatively good jobs in their country of origin.

It is more likely that trade liberalization, rather than outright poverty, caused their situation to deteriorate to the point that they decided to migrate. In addition, some women migrate because they demand more egalitarian relationships, and frustrated by their inability to realize them, migrate to find a better life. Margaret demonstrates the situation of a migrant worker who came to Canada not so much to answer labour market needs, but to escape the violence in her own life.

## Feminization of Migration

It is very difficult to generalize about global patterns of migration. In most cases migrants travel to the closest comparatively wealthier country, preferably one characterized by a similar religion, culture and language.

By 2000 the United Nations estimated that about 140 million people and roughly 2% of the world’s population reside in a country in which they were not born. It used to be that young males were the most mobile group, but over the last 15-20 years, there has been a significant increase in the number of women migrating, a phenomenon that some observers have described as the “feminization of migration.”

In the European Union, for example, women immigrants now account for approximately 54% of immigrants. Between

1950 and 1970 men predominated in labor migration to northern Europe from Turkey, Greece, and North Africa. Since then, women have been replacing men. In 1946, women were fewer than 3% of the Algerians and Moroccans living in France; by 1990 they were more than 40%.

Half of the world's immigrants are now believed to be women. In 1984 women migrant workers from outside the European Union were only 6% of all domestic workers. By 1987, they had grown to 52% of all EU domestic workers, with most coming from the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Argentina, Colombia, Brazil, El Salvador and Peru.

Throughout the 1990s women outnumbered men among migrants to the United States, Canada, Sweden, the United Kingdom, Argentina and Israel. In Canada, migrants tend to come largely from the Caribbean, Mexico, Central and South America as well as from the Philippines and Sri Lanka. On the west coast of Canada, Chinese migrants are in the majority.

Regardless of their level of education, women migrants are overwhelmingly funneled into domestic work where there is little social status, little social protection and low pay. They have little bargaining power because they are on temporary work permits, or have no status at all. Mothers who migrate, even when they are able to send remittances back home, are unable to arrange for their children to join them.

Social reproductive labor — caring for children, feeding families, taking care of the household — has traditionally been women's work. It still is women's work, but some women now have enough privilege to be able to pay immigrant women to replace them.

Women migrant workers, whether with or without status, make up the majority of workers involved in caregiving. Yet I doubt this is what the women's movement had in mind when they demanded recognition of their reproductive labor in the home and payment for that work. Hiring other women to carry out reproductive labor in such a devalued and exploitative manner only reinforces gender oppression.

While women in the wealthier countries have gone out of the home to find employment, the gender of those who have replaced them and the working conditions have not changed. Celebrity gossip magazines discuss a so-called "mannie" trend, citing the case of Britney Spears hiring a male nanny. With the greatest of respect to People magazine, this does not qualify as a trend!

## “Pull” and “Push” Factors

There are many complex reasons for migration, some of which are individual. But there are systemic factors behind both the push to migrate and the pull to bring more women to Canada. Capitalism creates several reasons for women to leave their home countries and at the same time produces the circumstances in which women are needed in the “receiving” countries. But this does not hale a new era of independence and equality for women around the world.

In many ways the migration of women reinforces gender inequality — the fight for gender equality requires that this work be valued, and decoupled from gender constraints.

Over the last several decades, women in Western countries have increasingly taken on paid work. With falling relative wages, most families require at least a double income. Women (and men) are working longer hours and therefore have less time for housework, childcare, and providing care to aging parents. Added to this time crunch is the reality that despite the progress made by the women's movement, men have not taken a significantly greater

responsibility for housework and childcare.

Without universal daycare and flexible workplaces, it is difficult to juggle the obligations in the workplace with family responsibilities. In Canada the policies of Steven Harper's Conservative government have only worsened the problem by cancelling a plan to increase funding for daycare.

As a result, there is a greater need for assistance in the home. Hiring maids and nannies is no longer limited to the very wealthy, but are services increasingly sought by the urban middle class. Traditionally "women's work," these positions continue to be "women's work," and, not surprisingly, filled by those most vulnerable and devalued themselves: immigrant women of color.

But why would women travel thousands of kilometers to do this work? Although some migrate as part of a family reunification program, most would prefer to remain in their home countries, with their family and familiar surroundings. People do not migrate on a whim. Over the last 30 years, two factors have stimulated pushing people from their homes, and have had a particularly gendered impact.

First, a series of interlocking economic policies have increased inequality between the richer and poorer nations. Under currently enforced trade treaties "free trade" has come to dominate the global economy. Countries at every stage of economic development are supposed to be "open" to trading with every other country. This, of course, gives the more economically powerful countries a head start to produce and sell their agricultural and industrial products at a cheaper price, and thus reinforce their ability to control the world market.

In addition the IMF and World Bank, controlled by the United States and other G7 countries, finance large infrastructural projects such as roads and dams supposedly to "develop" the country. These put the "developing" country in debt, forcing it onto an economic treadmill of generating foreign exchange in order to repay the ever-expanding debt.

The loans are often laced with conditions, including agreeing to Structural Adjustment Programs (SAP) that devalue their currencies, turning them into "straw" while the hard currencies of the wealthier countries remain gold. The SAPs also demand cutting public services, including health care, education and food subsidies, as well as privatizing "non-competitive industries" such as state electric power.

Both urban and rural women are among the hardest hit by structural adjustment programs, not only as individuals, but even more so as the family member with the traditional responsibility for the children. Free trade and the policies of the IMF and World Bank shift agricultural production from growing food for local consumption to food for export.

Without subsidies for growing corn, beans, sugar and other crops, peasants have been forced to leave their land. Jamaica and Mexico are two examples where this has happened, and where the closest wealthier nations "Canada and the United States" have been impacted. "Development" projects, from dams to mining, have also displaced hundreds of thousands of peasants throughout Latin America and Asia.

The greatest beneficiaries of these economic programs are the multinational corporations and the countries where they based (although the citizens of those countries don't necessarily benefit). The direct impact of such policies is obvious for women in Margaret's situation. Without any social resources to offer them protection, or to assist them to build financially independent and safe lives apart from their abusive partners, they have little option but to flee.

Second, insecurity and armed conflict in many of the world's most economically marginalized countries have

displaced millions of people. This factor arises from the problem of economic inequality and growing ecological disaster. However the overwhelming majority of these refugees don't make it beyond their own internal borders, or into neighboring countries.

# Experiences of Oppression

Upon their arrival in Canada, immigrant women become invisible. Given the individualized nature of their work, they rarely have coworkers with whom they can talk, and this hinders their ability to organize into a union. They are particularly vulnerable because most lack status, and there are always other non-status women available to replace them.

(Given the lack of concern for the impact that their development programs have on women, it is not surprising that some of the high-profile examples of exploitation of women workers have been by senior staff working for the World Bank, the IMF and the United Nations. For example, the media recently reported a senior UN worker who was forcing her non-status maid to work 14-hour days without regular pay and whose only accommodation was a pull-out bed in her employer's living room.).

Two aspects of this dynamic of vulnerability can be directly tied to explicit and purposeful government policy: employment and immigration policies.

In Ontario, workers in classes that are almost exclusively filled by migrant workers, such as live-in caregivers and migrant farmworkers, are excluded from basic employment protections provided in the Employment Standards Act, the legislation that sets out employment rights related to wages, work hours, overtime and vacations.

In order to migrate to Canada to work lawfully as a permanent resident, you can buy your way in as a business immigrant or qualify as a "skilled worker." To be a skilled worker, an applicant must attain a certain number of points in a system that awards them for English or French language skill, educational attainment, and work experience.

The assessment of these points is skewed in favor of men, who are more likely to have the types of education and work experience that the point system rewards. Women are far more likely to come as the "dependent" of a male than on their own.

The only exception is the one program that is geared towards women: the Live in Caregiver Program, which is specifically designed to bring women into the country as live-in domestics. This program has been highly criticized for the vulnerable position it places women in — but that cannot be any surprise. With a system that requires women to live 24-7 in their employer's home, it is entirely predictable that women live in circumstances akin to indentured servitude, at extreme risk of employer abuse.

# Solidarity

The issues raised by the migration of women are both international and local in scope. Unfortunately, for the media and the politicians these pressing social issues are as invisible as the women themselves.

The World Bank and IMF are not solely responsible, of course, for the conditions that force women to leave their

homes. Canada is implicated in the process. The Canadian government and Canadian corporations, often in the extracting industries that are pushing people off the land in countries such as Ecuador and Indonesia, contribute to the conditions that force women to leave their homes and children behind.

The Canadian government and Canadian corporations also create the demand for women workers. Canadian government policy reinforces the inequality and vulnerability of migrant women workers once they are here. This indicates that the fight for gender equality demands that as feminists and socialists, we have a global outlook that is in solidarity with women wherever they may live or work.

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