

# POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT FOR FEMALE MIGRANTS

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FEMALE AGENCY, MOBILITY AND SOCIO-CULTURAL CHANGE

## UNU-GCM

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### *Policy Report 03/10*



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This is a report of the United Nations University Institute on Globalization, Culture and Mobility. It forms part of the series, *Female Agency, Mobility and Socio-cultural Change*. It should be cited as:

Pescinski, Janina. *Political Empowerment for Female Migrants*, Policy Report No. 03/10. Barcelona: United Nations University Institute on Globalization, Culture and Mobility (UNU-GCM), 2016.

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This research programme focuses on the feminization of migration as one of the most significant social patterns to have emerged in the course of the last century. Too often, female migrants occupy vulnerable positions in their host societies, engaging in domestic work, sex work and other unregulated sectors. Despite being so vulnerable and despite established patterns of exploitation, the numbers of women who choose to migrate is rising. This research programme focuses on this phenomenon, in order to better understand why and how migration may offer routes to empowerment to women. A specific area of focus will be the extent to which migration allows women from the global south new sociocultural horizons as they cross over and settle in the global north.

# Political Empowerment for Female Migrants

Janina Pescinski

## Contents

Summary | 1

Introduction | 2

Political Empowerment and Related Challenges | 3

Case Studies: Migrant Women's Associations in Paris and Barcelona | 5

Conclusions and Recommendations | 8

References | 10

## Summary

This policy report identifies strategies to promote political empowerment for female immigrants in the European Union. Migrants lack access to participation in formal government structures; therefore, policies are made for and about them without their input. Although certain forms of political participation are reserved for citizens, immigrants find alternative ways of exercising their political agency by practicing their human rights to freedoms of association, assembly, and expression. Female migrant leaders play a central role in establishing immigrant women's associations, through which migrant women are empowered as political actors. Governments and the local and national levels should promote the political empowerment of female migrants by putting in place policies that facilitate the creation and sustainability of migrant women's associations and establishing platforms for those associations to dialogue with the broader community and government.

# Introduction

Immigrants participate in their countries of residence in various ways to claim their rights and establish themselves as politically active citizens. However, they are routinely excluded from participation in formal government structures to voice their concerns and priorities. The consequence is that policies are made for and about migrants, largely without the involvement of migrants themselves. In order for policies to better serve migrants' needs and promote the benefits of migration, migrants themselves must be empowered as political actors.

At the same time, with the growing feminisation of migration, female migrants are becoming more visible and increasing their role in migrant activism and associations in destination countries. Immigrants in Europe, particularly women, have established a multitude of organizations that enable them to exercise their civil rights in the public political sphere even though they are not granted the right the same political rights as citizens.

Because migrants do not often have access to "formal" modes of political participation, they express their political agency in other ways, particularly through civil society. When encompassing such a diversity of actions, political participation also has the potential to be a critical component of integration strategies. Through political participation, immigrants gain visibility in their communities and are more likely to have a voice in government and structures that will aid their progress towards equality by influencing the policies that concern them.

This policy report focuses on the situation of immigrants in the European Union, considering the central role of female leaders in establishing immigrant women's associations and how their activities can be interpreted as political empowerment at the local level. By analyzing migrant women's associational activities through the lens of political empowerment, this report identifies several gaps in existing policies and makes recommendations for increasing the sphere of political participation for immigrants, particularly women.

# Political Empowerment and Related Challenges

Global political empowerment for women can be defined as “the enhancement of assets, capabilities, and achievements of women to gain equality to men in influencing and exercising political authority worldwide” (Alexander et al, 2016:2). This first section will explore the central concepts of political participation and political empowerment, their importance for immigrant integration, and the specific challenges that migrant women face.

Political participation in a formal sense includes activities through which people directly take part in public affairs through practices such as voting, standing for and holding office, and party membership. Such activities are typically reserved for those with citizenship of a state. Informal participation often goes unrecognized, whereas this is exactly the sphere that is more accessible to immigrants through attendance at community meetings, membership in associations and trade unions, collective action, public demonstrations, and consultative bodies at local and national level. All of these activities are ways of claiming rights and mobilizing to influence policy and public opinion, and confining what is recognized as political participation to a narrow spectrum of formal activity largely ignores the political agency of immigrant populations. It limits political participation to being a privilege of citizenship and ignores the universal human rights that grant access to political participation regardless of migratory status. Immigrants are enacting their human rights to the freedoms of association, assembly, and expression by claiming them in the public sphere, and as such are doing politics at the everyday level. However, when states attempt to limit immigrants’ ability to form associations or demonstrate publically, they are contravening the norms of universal human rights.<sup>1</sup> Reframing the analysis of immigrant participation to include a larger scope of what is recognized as political action valorizes the diverse actions of migrants and empowers them to claim their human rights.

Acknowledging and promoting diverse forms of immigrant political participation is also beneficial for integration. Integration is a collaborative a process of social, cultural, and economic inclusion involving mutual exchange between both immigrants themselves and longer-established members of society. For ethnic minorities, including immigrants, civic engagement within their ethnic community helps them to build social trust in their new community as a whole, which corresponds to increased levels of political par-

**1.** Human rights are guaranteed to all persons regardless of citizenship status. For more details on the rights discussed see the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms.

ticipation and political trust in local institutions (Fennema and Tillie 1999, 2001). European Union member states have recognized the importance of civic participation for integration in the eleven 'Common Basic Principles' for integration drafted in 2004. Common Basic Principle 9 states "The participation of immigrants in the democratic process and in the formulation of integration policies and measures, especially at the local level, supports their integration." Consequently, in order for member states to support this principle, they must put in place appropriate policies to facilitate immigrant participation in democratic processes.

Despite the clear benefits of political participation, immigrants face specific challenges. Structural conditions in countries of origin and destination play a significant role: "immigrants participate to a greater or lesser extent depending on: the context of the country of destination; immigration policy (borders and accommodation of diversity); and the integration of immigrants. Thus, the political participation of immigrants depends on changes in the political opportunity structure that arise in a specific host society" (Zapata et al 2013, 3). Opportunity structures in destination countries include "local policies towards immigrants associations; the openness of public authorities and formal institutions; the configuration of local power; general policies towards immigrants; and prevailing discourses on immigration and immigrants" (Zapata et al 2013, 3). The legal status of migrants themselves also influences the ways in which they are willing to participate in the public sphere, given that those without the necessary documentation may be reluctant to take action for fear of the consequences.

Immigrant women face additional barriers to political participation due to unequal gender relations in both origin and destination states. This is particularly evident in how destination states frame women's migratory status: women who accompany a partner or who come for family reunification are often dependent on men for their legal and economic rights. "Women's activities are also conditioned by a set of normative and cultural regulations based upon hegemonic interpretations of gender roles within both their country of settlement and that of origin. These regulations condition their activities, their identities and their likelihood of either moving across countries or staying put" (Al-Ali 2003, 8). Because of the specific challenges migrant women face, promoting their political empowerment necessitates implementing policies that are designed to mitigate gender biases.

Due to the fact that they lack the political privileges associated with citizenship, migrant women experience political empowerment in specific ways. Generally, three key areas of political influence in which all women must attain equality to men can be identified: "(i)

as elite actors who hold positions for exercising political authority; (ii) as civil society actors who challenge and critically engage with elites and the state through informal channels of influence; and (iii) as citizens who participate in their political system's formal channels of influence" (Alexander et al 2016, 2). Because migrant women are typically excluded from the formal forms of political participation, this report is primarily concerned with the second point, their role as civil society actors.

Despite the existing challenges, there are some dynamic examples of migrant women's associations whose actions can be considered empowering alternative forms of political participation.

## Case Studies: Migrant Women's Associations in Paris and Barcelona

In many communities, immigrants have created networks and associations, starting at the local level and reaching up to the transnational level. Local associations allow immigrants to voice their concerns in the public sphere even if they do not have rights to participate formally. The success of such organizations is highly dependent on support from local governments, because these associations "define their goals, strategies, functions, and level of operation in relation to the existing policies and resources of the host state. They advance demands and set agendas vis-a-vis state policy and discourses in order to seize institutional opportunities and further their claims. In that sense, the expression and organization of migrant collective identity are framed by the institutionalized forms of the state's incorporation regime" (Soysal 1994, 86).

The following case studies consider two migrant women's associations at the city level, one in the Paris metropolitan area and another in the Barcelona metropolitan area. In both cities there is a large immigrant population, but those without national citizenship are not granted formal political rights to vote or hold office. The associations considered are made up of sub-Saharan African women. These two cases are not intended to serve as a representation of all female migrant associations in Europe, but rather serve as illustrations of the various ways in which women have created their own opportunities to participate in civil society.

Action to Support Female Victims of Violence in Guinea (*Action en Faveur des victimes d'exactions en Guinée*, AFAVEG) is an association active in the Paris region with the mission of raising funds for medical care and education for women who have been victims of politically motivated violence in Guinea. Although its goal to help women in Guinea, actions primarily take place in Paris, and thus have brought increased political empowerment to the Guinean women who lead said activities.

Aissatou Bah, a Guinean woman who has been in Paris for 32 years, founded the association in 2010, eager to do something to help the women who had been victims of politically motivated violence and rape in Guinea. The association situates itself within a broad network of Guinean diaspora associations in Paris, and participants primarily include members of the diaspora. Bah stresses that it is easier to take actions in the public sphere in France, which indicates that she and other members of the association do enjoy certain political rights.

The activities of AFAVEG bring increased visibility to Guineans in Paris as they exercise their rights in the public sphere. For example, AFAVEG organized a "day of solidarity" held at a community center in Paris, which Bah organized as a fundraiser for victims of gender-based violence in Guinea. Although the evening was a great success and was intended to become an annual event, the following year personal circumstances prevented Bah herself from doing the organizational work, and no one else stepped up. This illustrates one challenge such organizations have, because they tend to center around "one determined individual who identifies a gap in the support for a specific group of migrants and, after joining a group of like-minded individuals, remains the guiding force of his or her specific network" (De Tona and Lentin 2011, 491). In order to overcome this challenge, migrant associations should diversify their leadership and solidify their organizational structures, which necessitates additional local support.

Although AFAVEG is a registered association legally recognized in France, it has no contact with the local government and receives no external funding. It is entirely funded based on member dues, direct donations, and fundraising. Because AFAVEG receives no consistent monetary support, it lacks the financial and organizational resources to expand its activities. This creates a difficult cycle for the association, because the irregularity of its activities makes it less likely to receive municipal funds, but without such funds it cannot implement more regular actions. Such logistical constraints often mean that these movements may be sporadic and temporary, unless dedicated resources enable them to achieve permanence.



In the Barcelona area, the Association of Subsaharan Women Immigrants (Associació de Dones Immigrants Subsaharianes, ADIS) has the mission to become a meeting point for all African migrant women and secondly to work in the field of human rights and combat harmful traditional practices against women's health, such as female genital mutilation (FGM). It has achieved a permanent status, with regular meetings and activities, and is well known in the immigrant and civil society networks in the area. The association's membership is primarily Senegalese, and it collaborates with other women's associations in Catalonia, Senegal, and elsewhere.

Bombo Ndir, who has lived in Barcelona for 19 years, created the association in 2004. She was initially motivated by the situation of women in Senegal, because she had been involved in feminist organizations there. Women migrants who were previously active in political or women's associations prior to migrating are also more active in creating migrant associations in their new homes (De Tona and Lentin 2011, 490). This is the case of both Ndir, who was active in feminist organizations in Senegal, and Bah, who was active in politics in Guinea.

Ndir notes that there can be a stigma attached to women's associations in destination countries. She is divorced, as are two other founding members of ADIS, therefore husbands of the Senegalese women in the community were at first reluctant to let their wives and participate because they saw the association as endangering "traditional values". But Ndir explains the importance of having a platform: "When we are in a municipality, it is normal that we participate, which leads us to feel like full citizens. Through associations that can work and we are working on it" (Ndir 2014). ADIS has managed to achieve permanence in part through government support and funding. It receives local support and additional funding from the Catalan Agency for Cooperation and Development for a partnership project in a village in Senegal.

As in the previous case study, Ndir illustrates the centrality of a strong leader in creating female migrant's associations. "In the Spanish and in the Catalan contexts, there are not so many stimuli for the development of civil society associations and, as the research shows, most of these rely on the local programmes of "intercultural mediation" organised at the level of municipalities. From this experience, intercultural mediators can consequently become facilitators, and sometimes leaders, of both the creation and the institutionalization of women's diasporas' associations" (Bello 2015: 8-9). This is the case of Ndir, who works as an intercultural mediator and as such is recognized and respected in her community. "Of crucial importance in both service-oriented organizations and groups focusing on

political lobbying – although in reality these boundaries are blurred and many organisations engage in both – are so-called ‘mediators’. Women who are more ‘settled’ or more secure in terms of legal status, language skills and economic conditions often emerge as advocates to the larger community” (Al-Ali 2003, 18). Empowering more female migrants with the prerequisites to assume such leadership roles will strengthen existing associations and facilitate the creation of new ones.

As illustrated by ADIS and AFAVEG, women often form associations separately from men and tend to network around the gendered aspects of their lives. This is especially important to give due attention to at the policymaking level, because of specific gaps concerning women migrants and their access to rights and services.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Promoting the political agency of female migrants begins with opening more spaces for their political empowerment. By enlarging what we see as political to include participation in associations, the political field becomes more open to those without the possibility to participate in formal politics due to their migratory status. In conjunction, it is useful to think of a broad spectrum of political participation outside of the formal/ informal dichotomy, because dividing politics in this way creates a hierarchy that values one form of participation and fails to recognize the value of other political contributions.

The diversity of female immigrants’ experiences is not always acknowledged in policies that address them. The experiences of women migrants cannot simplistically be grouped together by virtue of them being women. Attention must also be paid to other factors that influence their experiences, such as race, social class, level of education, sexuality, and other socioeconomic factors, in order to work on an intersectional approach to the political and associative participation of migrant women.

Therefore, governments are encouraged to take the following actions to promote the political empowerment of female migrants:

- Recognize migrant associations as political actors by establishing spaces for their actions and claims. This can be facilitated by providing support in terms of funding and resources to immi-

grant associations, with special attention for those led by women and targeting women. When governments fund immigrant associations they are more likely to consult with them because they have invested in these groups. Even when direct funding is not possible, governments can support these associations with non-financial resources such as spaces for meetings and events and access to trainings for leaders and members.

- Put into place consultative bodies at the local and national level to engage with immigrant communities and facilitate gender balance in representation in these bodies. These bodies should be immigrant-led, drawing upon representatives who are chosen by immigrant communities and from among civil society leaders. Concerns that migrant women specifically face should have equal consideration in these groups in order to promote policies that will respond to their needs.<sup>2</sup>
- Ensure that the human rights to the freedoms of association, assembly, and expression are fulfilled for female migrants in a non-discriminatory way. This goes beyond a passive respect of these rights to an active fulfilment of them by facilitating ways for migrants to enact these rights in the public sphere, with special attention to the barriers female migrants face.
- Increase opportunities for migrants to participate in formal politics, including by allowing them to vote and stand for office at the local level, with a view to gender balance.

**2.** For further information on consultative bodies in European Union countries, see Council of Europe 1999, Huddleston 2010.

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**ISSN 2412-2173**

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Barcelona 2016

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