



# Migrant Mothers from Africa to Europa: Accompanying Mobility

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## Humanity Is on the Move<sup>1</sup>

Because most young Africans who migrate to Europe cannot obtain visas, their travels frequently take place outside of legal channels, with high economic costs, and at great personal risk. The long routes of transit are strewn with migrating victims who have lost their lives in the attempt.<sup>2</sup> Many of those who manage to reach Europe are women, some of them mothers. Not a few of them arrive on the coasts of the Canary Islands with small children who were born in their country of origin or who were conceived during the trip. They constitute a population that is not well known, but they have special characteristics and specific needs.<sup>3</sup>

## Violence Against Women

The prevailing discourse in Spain associates these migrating women with the likelihood that they are victims of human trafficking. Not everything is trafficking, however, and there are other forms of violence against women.

The women who arrive on Spanish shores from sub-Saharan Africa have usually suffered one or more forms of sexual and gender violence (SGV) in their countries of origin or during their migratory journey. They come from very patriarchal contexts where female genital mutilation, forced marriages, and polygamy exist, or where domestic sexual assaults go unpunished. In all these contexts, women are viewed as having

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less worth than men, and their autonomy in decision-making is severely limited. In fact, violence against them or their daughters is one of the main reasons why many women decide to flee their home country. To make matters worse, women are quite vulnerable during the journey to Europe. Abundant literature documents the SGV committed against women in the migratory corridors leading to Europe.

Most of the women who migrate<sup>4</sup> already have sons or daughters, and they sometimes decide to undertake the migratory journey with one or more of their children. It also happens that women become mothers during the trip: sometimes it is by their own choice, and other times it is not.<sup>5</sup> Often it is a consequence of an assault.

## **Boza!**

Boza!: That is the euphoric cry of the migrants who manage to reach Spain. Sometimes they have spent years in Morocco before they find a boat that will take them, and now they have finally succeeded! They have risked their lives and have somehow survived.

As soon as they arrive, the police take a DNA sample from the women who come with children to verify the mother-child relationship. While waiting for the results, the women and the children are referred to humanitarian resources. If women arrive with children who are not their own, they are viewed with suspicion, and there is a high risk that they will be separated from the children without being given the opportunity to show that they are extended family or have other positive bonds with them.

## **Women on the Move**

Unwarranted suspicion that these women are traffickers, as well as general ignorance of their reality, often lead to unfortunate results.<sup>6</sup> Not recognizing that they themselves are victims, even though they are, the women are unaware of the help that can be offered them. They have been traveling for such a long time that they are still in survival mode. Each woman brings with her a dream that has not yet been achieved, and Spain is often just one more stop along the way. The women's resilience plays an important role here as they realize the value of their own culture and the power that comes with being a "survivor." To help them, we insist on asking them about their history, and they tell us what they believe will help them survive. We do not need to know their specific history in order to provide them effective assistance, because our experience and professional specialization make us aware of where they are coming from, where they are going, and how to help them. Once a climate of trust is achieved, the women tend to open up, and they are more likely to tell us their real story instead of a prefabricated tale that they think is what the authorities expect to hear.

## **Transit Countries: Neither Corridors nor Barriers**

The women's wishes are often frustrated by the legal framework and current immigration policy. Both of these target women while discounting or criminalizing their hope of traveling to other countries in the European Union. Spain should not be merely a corridor through

which very vulnerable people transit without having anyone help them, but neither should it use the Canary Islands (or the coasts and islands of Italy and Greece) as buffer zones that retain and penalize migrants, while ignoring their vital projects and their fundamental rights. The process of identifying the migrants' profiles and needs should be made much more agile. Our experience in the Ödos Program has shown that an average stay of three months, with specialized resources in gender and childhood provided, is enough to ensure an adequate adjustment. The more complex cases require transnational protection and a longer stay, but even these cases should be handled deftly and proactively.

What is helpful for these women on the move? Women place a high value on having solid, reliable, and up-to-date information about international protection and about the situation in the European Union (especially in France). Quite useful are the workshops given by the Social Services of the Montilla City Council, where the Ödos Program is located. These workshops explain what social services exist, what role they play in Europe, and how they can help women wherever they live. The women also value programs that teach them about the gender-based violence they have already experienced and that can also provide them with tools to prevent it in the future. In addition, the training offers them access to basic social rights such as 1) registration, which makes them visible; 2) a thorough health check-up; and 3) schooling for their children, even if it is temporary.<sup>7</sup> Finally, they receive a warm and respectful welcome; they experience hospitality that treats them humanely and allows them to recover physically

and emotionally. In this way they can form bonds that will allow them to remain in contact once they have reached their destinations.

### **Victims or Survivors?**

They are not the same thing. Victims need to receive help, but survivors are \capable of deciding and thriving on their own initiative and with their own strength.

As we have pointed out, most African women who migrate to Spain have suffered gender-based violence, but it is also true that almost all of them choose to be more than victims. They want to leave behind the past violations of their rights; they look forward to new life, and they dream with great confidence and unbounded hope that the future will be better.

How can we accompany that hope? First of all, by respecting them and trusting their abilities. The period of time between their arrival and the continuation of their journey can be of great value to them if they are helped to make better informed decisions and if they are provided with useful tools for preventing possible violence in the future.

### **What About the Children?**

Migrant children become a public concern and loom large in the social imagination only when they travel alone; when they travel with adults, they are invisible. They tend to be very young girls (rather than boys) who travel with their mothers and who have often witnessed violence against their mothers.

## *Children Without a Country*

Of particular concern are children who were born in Morocco or Algeria, the main countries where their mothers reside before arriving in Europe. These children are at risk of becoming stateless if they lack birth registration. There is very little talk of statelessness in Spain, and even less of child statelessness, but it is one of the consequences of being born during irregular migratory journeys. Guaranteeing these children their right to an identity once they arrive in Europe is of the utmost importance. There is no greater violation of human rights than not legally existing, but current legislation condemns many to this condition.

### *The Separation of Migrant Families*

Another crucial issue is the precautionary measures of separating children who travel without a parent and of referring them to centers that specialize in child migrants. Spain views unaccompanied minors as being at great risk, but experience has shown that they are not in such great danger. Traveling with an adult who is not their parent corresponds to the dynamics of international migrant families. Each case should be carefully analyzed and assessed.

Unfortunately, the separation of migrant families is common. The journeys

sometimes last for years, in the course of which a parent may die or the family may become separated for any number of reasons. Sometimes the parents emigrate first and then, once settled, send for their children. That is one of the many reasons why adults frequently travel with minors who are not their biological children. Whenever possible, the children's right to live with their family should prevail; the reunification of families should be made a high priority.

## **Conclusion**

Women and children form part of migrations, and migrations form part of humanity. Their mobility makes an appeal to our conscience. The migrants ask us to respect their decision and to provide accompaniment that shows special concern for women and children. When they arrive in Spain, the initial reception can and should be used to identify vulnerable persons so that their needs are met promptly. They should be treated well, provided relevant information, and offered effective protection when they need it.

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- 1 The perspective offered by this paper is that of the [Ödos program](#), which accompanies human mobility with a focus on human rights, gender, and childhood. The Ödos program offers comprehensive reception for sub-Saharan women who arrive on Spanish coasts pregnant or accompanied by young children.
  - 2 In the last decade, 13,173 migrants have lost their lives or disappeared in Africa or in the waters of the Mediterranean or the Atlantic.
  - 3 In 2022, 741 children arrived in Spain by boat in the company of adults who claimed to be their parents (Memoria Fiscalía, 2023).
  - 4 There are no official data. The official report [Inmigración irregular](#), published annually by the Ministry of the Interior, provides only very general arrival figures.
  - 5 There is a lack of research in this area, but ample documentation exists regarding violence against women during irregular migration journeys. See Booklet number 154 by Sonia Herrera, [Trapped in limbo](#).
  - 6 Identification of trafficking victims and requests for international protection at the time of arrival are minimal.
  - 7 See report [Municipios que acogen a mujeres, niños y niñas en movilidad: La mirada de los actores institucionales locales](#), Ödos Program, March 2023.