

Article

Governance Strategies in a Global Context from a Gender Perspective: Narratives of Migrant Women

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Abstract

In recent decades, migratory processes have experienced growing feminization, with women accounting for about 50% of international migrations. However, they are not always recognized as social actors with the capacity for agency—that is, as subjects in decision-making, the formulation of proposals, and transformation both in their lives and in those of the societies in which they participate. This article, from a critical and gender perspective, analyzes the narratives of migrant women interviewed in Spain within the framework of two research projects carried out during the period between 2021 and 2023. Through a qualitative analysis of their resistance strategies and demands, a series of comprehensive policy recommendations are proposed, which are aimed at providing theoretical and practical tools that would allow us to move towards more just and equitable societies.

Keywords: political participation; female migrations; intersectionality; gender; qualitative methodology



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1. Introduction

International migration has ceased to be conceived as a predominantly male phenomenon, and the active role of women in these processes is increasingly recognized. In recent decades, the so-called “feminization of migration” has been addressed (Barreira et al. 2022; Domínguez et al. 2020; Garrido and Cubero 2019; Marey and Del Pozo 2020; Paiewonsky 2007; Reher et al. 2011) as an analytical category that has made it possible to make visible a historically present but scarcely studied social reality (Solé et al. 2013). The impact that female migration processes have had for a long time has been underestimated (Izaguirre and Walsham 2021); however, in recent decades, the importance and unique contributions of migrant women have begun to be acknowledged, not only in their countries of origin but also in countries of transit and destination (Bastia and Piper 2019; Basu 2016; Bürkner 2012; Donato et al. 2006; Donato 2023; Geist and McManus 2012; Kofman and Raghuram 2011; Solé et al. 2013).

Despite these advances, there are still great unknowns about the political participation of migrant women (Gatti et al. 2024), the redefinition of female subjectivity (Spagnuolo 2019), and the capacity for agency that they develop (Güell et al. 2020), with a certain tendency to revictimize the protagonists. Migrant women are people with the capacity to act and make decisions that transform their lives and the realities of the people and contexts that surround them (Abrams 1998; Afshar 2008; Donato 2023; Garrido and Cubero

2019; King and Zontini 2000; Nazneen 2023; Orsini-Jones and Gattullo 1996; Ozkazanc-Pan 2019; Tadros 2021). This agency allows them to attend to and manage those realities that exclude or discard them as political and historical members (Contreras and Alcaide 2021) by making contributions in their country of destination (Solé et al. 2013) and in society as a whole.

These protagonists are not indifferent to oppression and the position of vulnerability in which they are placed (Ullah et al. 2023), as they act individually or collectively to address this reality and transform it (Aceros et al. 2023; Goldsmith 2007; International Labour Office 2013). The difficulties and situations of vulnerability to which they are exposed are related to diverse and multiple conditions such as the situation of administrative irregularity in which many of them find themselves (Angulo-Pasel 2019); economic precariousness and stigmatized job niches (Contreras and Alcaide 2021); the difficulty of reconciling work and family (Aceros et al. 2023); and the gender roles assigned to them (Klein and Vázquez-Flores 2013); among many others.

These realities generate duality. On the one hand, they hinder the participation of migrant women in various spheres and, especially, in politics, as they are not considered, on many occasions, as citizens; their rights are not recognized, expelling them from spaces of formal participation (Merino 2017). On the other hand, these barriers in turn act as drivers of their involvement in their target society, motivating them to seek alternative forms of mobilization and collective action (Bosco et al. 2011; Solé et al. 2013). To this end, they develop different mechanisms that ensure a sense of belonging and resistance, such as participation in associations, feminist collectives, entities that work exclusively with migrant women (Contreras and Alcaide 2021), and participation in religious and spiritual spaces (Miri 2025), among others.

All this highlights the importance of participation understood from a holistic and comprehensive approach. Although there are studies that consider participation from the political sphere, here we refer to civic or socio-political participation. Usually, political participation refers to the right to vote, to be voted for, and to access public office or representation (Conge 1988; Conte and Burchill 2009; Momesso 2022). However, participation is much more than that, as it means being an active part of the community in which one resides (Garrido and Cubero 2019), considering the practices of belonging developed by the protagonists (Pajnik and Bajt 2012).

As stated by different authors, political participation is an essential requirement to ensure integration into a target society (Gatti et al. 2024; Martiniello 2005). It is a basic need (Bastante 2021) that also contributes to the development of a greater resilience capacity on the part of the migrant population (Paloma and Manzano-Arrondo 2011). Without participation, we cannot talk about integration, which is why participation has become a public issue that evidences the management of migration by destination countries (Momesso 2022).

In cases of migrant women, as various studies have shown, this participation is severely complex. To begin with, we must take into account the sex/gender relationship that exists in their countries of origin (Oca and Lombardero 2018) and shared cultural expectations (Donato 2023; Ogunsiji et al. 2025), which influence the protagonists' personal interests in participating. On the other hand, the little mastery that the protagonists may have of different aspects of their destination society, such as culture, language, or the regulatory framework (Aceros et al. 2023; Ayalon et al. 2008), is closely linked to the condition of the migrants. And finally, the situations of racism to which they may be exposed influence the protagonists' personal interest in participating (Garrido and Cubero 2019).

Taking these elements into account, it can be said that in order to understand the participation and socio-political involvement of migrant women and how they act in their

destination society, it is essential to take other systems of oppression to which they may be subjected into account, in addition to gender, such as neoliberalism, xenophobia, or colonialism (Movimiento por la Paz 2024). Hence the importance of approaching this from an intersectional approach (Davis 2014; Gilliéron 2022; Lutz 2014), in which the situation of privilege or oppression of a person is considered depending on their belonging to multiple social categories and the interrelation that occurs between these (Crenshaw 1991).

While intersectionality originally identified gender, race/ethnicity, and social class as hierarchical systems, this study reformulates the categories of intersectionality, considering that the original model is especially rooted in the context of origin, making it difficult to apply to all people involved in migration processes (Salvatori and Terrón Caro 2019; Salvatori and Flores 2023). Specifically, the concept of gender is maintained; the Marxist category of social class is replaced by that of social position based on Bourdieu's (1997) proposal. And, finally, the ethnicity/race category is modified to that of ethnicity/origin, considering the self-identification that migrants develop in their country of settlement.

In addition to these aspects, the combination of multiple other factors that influence participation is considered, such as age and employment status (Gatti et al. 2024). In this way, the categorization of migration as a homogeneous group where there are no internal differences (Momesso 2022) is avoided, and the greater difficulties that migrant women encounter in ensuring full participation in their destination societies are made visible. According to Kam et al. (2008) and Gatti et al. (2024), participation is difficult when gender is combined with migration.

Based on the established conceptual framework, this article analyzes, through the narratives of 43 migrant women, strategies of resistance and the demands that migrant women develop in Spain to strengthen their capacity for agency and their participation in their destination society. It also examines how agency and participation constitute interrelated and interdependent dimensions, the articulation of which is fundamental for the full exercise of rights. Based on the analysis of these narratives, comprehensive public policy recommendations aimed at building fairer and more equitable societies are proposed.

2. Materials and Methods

The present study, although it focuses on analyzing in-depth interviews, arises from the implementation of two larger research projects. The first is the project "International female migration processes in Andalusia. Challenges and contributions for democratic governance" (UPO-1380907), financed by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and by the Ministry of Economy, Knowledge, Business and University, of the Regional Government of Andalusia, within the framework of the ERDF Andalusia 2014–2020 operational program. In it, a qualitative methodology with a feminist perspective was developed combining a Delphi Panel, in-depth interviews, a focus group, and square tables.

The second project is entitled "Voices of Immigrant Women", with reference number 2020-1-ES01-KA203-082364, co-financed by the Erasmus+ program of the European Union, in the modality of Strategic Partnerships projects in the Higher Education sector (KA203). The implementation of this project was developed through the application of a mixed methodology combining qualitative methods (documentary analysis, a Delphi Panel, in-depth interviews, and a focus group) and quantitative methods (questionnaires). In this way, it achieves a complete vision of the reality studied—in this case, female migrations (Chaves-Montero 2018). In addition, the research was developed in different European contexts, given the consortium that comprised the project, namely Pablo de Olavide University as a coordinating entity (Spain); Institut de Recherche pour le Développement (France); the European Public Law Organization (Greece); Università Degli Studi di Firenze (Italy);

Pixel-Associazione Culturale (Italy); Polytechnic Institute of Bragança (Portugal); EMET Arco Iris Foundation (Spain); and Mirovni Institut (Slovenia).

Based on this framework, this scientific article will focus on the results obtained from the in-depth interviews carried out in the two projects in the period between 2021 and 2023. The interviews we analyze were carried out in Spain with migrant women who considered themselves to have undergone a successful migratory process. The use of this instrument has been key to understanding why and how certain situations occur, as well as knowing the motivations and opinions of the protagonists (Jain 2021); in short, it allows us to hear their voices.

The interview script used in these studies was registered in the Intellectual Property Registry under the file name IPRUPO2024-015 GEMMA, “Interview script for migrant women from a gender perspective”. The structure of the script is structured around 108 questions distributed into 16 different categories. For the topic addressed in this article, it is necessary to consider the following: Category “Limiting factors for participation and social inclusion”; Category “Expectations”; and Category “Proposals for improvement”.

The sample was composed of a total of 43 migrant women. A non-probabilistic sampling technique was developed, until saturation of the discourse, by applying the snowball technique. The only inclusion criteria established were being a woman, being a migrant, being of legal age, residing in Spain, and having a positive self-perception of the migratory process. No additional exclusion criteria were applied, since it was considered a priority to obtain a heterogeneous sample that would allow for diversity of experiences in different spheres of life—family, economic, social, health, and educational, among others—and thus avoid any form of homogenization that would limit the richness of the analysis.

The interviews lasted approximately one hour and were recorded, with the consent of the participants. The analysis was carried out through the transcription of the audios and the creation of a code book that was used for the systematization and study of the discourse of migrant women. During this entire process, the transcription software “DSS Player Standard 2.1.1” and the analysis software “Atlas.ti 9” were used.

It should be noted that, based on current scientific recommendations (Bloemraad and Menjivar 2021; Clark-Kazak 2021; Deps et al. 2022), the entire research process was carried out ensuring the achievement of ethical principles. To this end, this study was reviewed and approved by the Ethics Commission for Research with Human Beings (CEIH) of the Pablo de Olavide University (authorization code: 22/3-8).

Profile of the Women Interviewed

The following, Table 1, are the characteristics of the profile of the sample that participated in this study, bearing in mind that this information is essential for an adequate interpretation of the results.

Table 1. Main characteristics of the women interviewed in Spain.

Characteristics	Detail
Age	The age of all the people interviewed was between twenty and fifty-nine years old. The largest number of interviewees were in their twenties.
Birth	Most of the participants were of Moroccan origin, although there were also four cases of women from other African countries, specifically Ghana, Senegal, Ivory Coast, and Cameroon. In second place, women of Latin American origin stand out in number. And, finally, participants who were born in Europe were from France, Poland, and Portugal.

Table 1. *Cont.*

Characteristics	Detail
Nationality	All but three participants only had the nationality of their country of birth. Three of the women participating in this research had dual nationality.
Length of stay	Although there was diversity in the time that the women interviewed had been in Spain, most of them arrived between 2014 and 2019, and it is noteworthy that almost all of them migrated during their twenties. There are 9 women who claimed to have resided in Spain for more than 15 years, eight of them from Morocco and one from Cordoba, Colombia, who had been in Spain for 22 years.
Sons and daughters	Of the sample, 31 women indicated that they had children, and 12 women had no children.
Education	All the participants, except two from Colombia and Portugal and five from Morocco, claimed to have received some type of training in Spain. Most of the interviewees had had access to free courses or training, dependent on public entities or the third sector.

Own elaboration.

3. Results

In this section, we present a summary of the essential findings corresponding to three of the categories analyzed in this study, illustrated by selected citations from the codes applied. The analysis contrasts the coincidences and divergences identified in the interviews, avoiding any homogenization among the participants. This highlights the existing diversity and how it influences their participation processes.

3.1. Limiting Factors for Participation and Social Inclusion

The main problems alluded to by the women interviewed revolve around the lack of information about the procedures and bureaucratic procedures that must be put in place to achieve a regular situation in the country of destination, with important differences from the countries of origin and reflected as those with the greatest impact on an emotional level. These procedures range from obtaining homologation of the training they had in their country of origin, or a residence permit, to access any benefit related to Social Security, including the registration of vehicles or obtaining a driving license.

For women who were not Spanish speakers, language appears to be a barrier of great importance to develop all kinds of action during the time of their arrival, from those discussed in the previous paragraph to the establishment of personal relationships. In these cases, the participation process is significantly hampered.

“But I think you could ... That you could ... promote these things more? For example, where to do it. Because I didn’t find because I don’t know, because it was easy, but someone ... I was already in my circle of people in Poland, where I asked things ... Because I was always looking, but ... It is not information that can be reached very easily, to be honest. It is very difficult to find these sites, if ... If not, I don’t know, if you don’t speak Spanish, if you don’t know anyone ... Especially if you don’t speak Spanish, because then it’s very difficult to find it, because on the internet it’s difficult, yes, difficult to find these things” (2ESPCOL)

On the other hand, irregular employment situations, as well as abuses by employers and the lack of respect for the labor rights of the women interviewed, make it difficult for migrants who arrive in Spain to achieve an optimal economic situation.

Finally, regarding cultural differences and language, social relations both inside and outside the home have become difficult for migrants, especially for some of them of

Moroccan origin, upon arrival, as concerns integration and the development of their personal lives beyond the workplace.

“She says that the hardest thing for her was getting married and then being here being insulted and mistreated and being insulted and being insulted and from her husband. A little bad about the husband. When I went anywhere, whether you have papers or not, they treat you well, but the husband at home treats her with mistreatment from him” (9ESPMAR)

“Everything. For example . . . people without papers very difficult to work and nobody wants us and . . . help you and . . . and always when I talk to someone they tell me “you don’t have papers, I can (. . .) cheap travel in Morocco” since when I heard these words that hurt me a lot. So everything is the same, people without papers or with papers, everything is the same” (10ESPMAR)

In relation to cultural differences, these have been pointed out by migrant women as being limiting when it comes to deepening and strengthening certain relationships. However, some of them also claim to find no problems on this point, even using these distinctions to bring their cultures closer together.

“Yes, yes, because not . . . Well, it has been difficult for me, but I am still at my pace. I was never a person who . . . (. . .) And I’m never going to feel like that, and I’m not going to identify myself, and I’m not going to . . . And I’m not going to live in a style like that, because I just don’t . . . I don’t like it. I love living here, I love the weather, all the smiles on the street, the open people and everything, but then I don’t like this style of eating several times on the street, I prefer to cook my food. I like to meet people and maybe do something other than just eat or have a drink . . . From time to time yes, but not always” (2ESPCOL)

Other passages collected in this regard suggest that, although the participants do not encounter problems in establishing relationships, the level of depth of these relationships is ephemeral, often not being true friendship established, which is something that some of them attribute to the outbreak of the pandemic. This reality, in cases where it occurs, makes it difficult for women to create a solid bond in the host society.

“We are more closed in principle, but then if we open up we are already open. And here what I see is that people are already open from the beginning, but then it is more difficult to enter. It’s what . . . what I see, the difference. The truth is that it is difficult for me to have friends here. As good friends, really. Because I don’t know, I don’t feel . . . Hm . . . I don’t feel much connection with them, because they talk about other things, I’m not interested in these things, talking about nonsense . . . But it’s my . . . Is . . . It’s because it’s me, maybe other girls feel good, or I don’t know, but then I have many friends who don’t either . . . That they also don’t have Spanish friends who are foreigners, and that each one connects more with a foreign girl than with the girl here.” (2ESPCOL)

Overcoming these difficulties is attributed to multilevel support networks: (1) personal networks (family/acquaintances); (2) transnational digital networks (forums/WhatsApp connections with fellow nationals); (3) labor networks; (4) state institutions; and (5) third-sector entities, crucial in emotional support, linguistic competence, and job training.

3.2. Expectations

Regarding the aspirations and desires of the women interviewed, a series of aspects can be pointed out that are structured around the achievement of a certain economic stability. All the interviewees intend to find improvements in their working lives, either

by finding jobs related to their training, accessing better contracts through the regulation of their situation, or even starting their own projects. A greater tendency towards social participation is identified among those women who wish to start their own businesses, this being a distinctive element to consider.

“Well, I would like to have my own business and also have the freedom to travel. I look like . . . Living in Spain, but with . . . With the possibility of traveling and visiting my family when I want to and continuing working, that’s how I see myself . . . Me” (2ESPCOL)

In the same way and in relation to these expectations, there is the desire of a large part of the interviewees to continue their academic training, which would allow them to not only to achieve better jobs but also obtain a job related to what they like.

“What she wants is to work, Fabiola,” she says. To arrange their papers and work and have a dignified life, that they can have a future and work (. . .) they want and want to have courses, for example, in the kitchen, in the future” (EA_22_MAR)

All the above is also related to the possibilities of becoming closer to their families. Some of the participants describe their desire not only to visit their country of origin, for which they need to have residence permits and be regularized in their country of destination, but also to achieve family reunification in Spain. These women often experience a certain disillusionment in not being able to maintain the family relationship they desire.

In addition to this, the goals of the women interviewed in most cases involve, as a common point, the importance of achieving a stable future for their sons and daughters, with the hope that they can access higher education and jobs that would allow them to adopt a good standard of living.

“That later on I can have a little better economic stability and my children can come and my children if they want they can get a job, which they are, they will have already finished university and everything, let’s see what . . . that things happen, I don’t know” (3ESPCOL)

Finally, it is worth noting the intention of some of the interviewees to achieve improvements in their social relationships, which they believe would provide them with greater integration and emotional stability, necessary to feel good in their country of destination.

3.3. *Proposals for Improvement*

As for the elements or issues that the interviewees believed would have been necessary to facilitate their arrival in Spain, these concern appointments with agencies, associations, or any other type of entity in charge of explaining to migrants the different processes that they must undergo to regularize their situation and achieve real and effective integration in their country of destination. Some of the women point to entities that they encountered once they were already in Spain and that were an important help, but they also point to the lack of information about this type of tool and the fundamental role played by social relationships, families, and other migrants regarding knowledge of them.

Language appears to be a fundamental instrument that facilitates relationships in any area, and that is why migrants whose native language is one other than Spanish point out the importance of learning the target language even before their arrival in order to avoid the frustration derived from language-related issues. In relation to this, there are citations in reference not only to the Public Administration and the need to learn the target language (or to be in contact with people who know the language of origin in order to more easily regularize their situations) but also with respect to the world of work and the increase in possibilities that they believe they would have by knowing the language well, with these even extending to medical assistance.

“And it has also been the language because I also came for a professional subject, right? And that it was very frustrating for me, sometimes, emm to know what I had to do, how I knew it was my job, I knew how to solve problems and not know how to express it to my boss and I felt that I seemed silly and I said “No, no, but I promise you, I know what I have to do but I don’t know how to express it”. Ummm, and I had the feeling of, I don’t know, not being able to be productive or efficient enough ummm so there are days when, on the contrary, everything was fine, I saw it as an opportunity to learn more and there are days when I completely blocked myself” (6ESPFRA)

Finally, accommodation and employment also appear to be instruments of essential importance to ensure the well-being of migrants upon their arrival in Spain. Among the various passages, the women interviewed point out that having a job even before arrival can be a highly recommended action for future migrants to undertake since it is also directly related to greater ease of obtaining needed documentation, such as residence-related documentation, for example.

“Eh . . . Looking for a job before I arrive, or already having a job waiting for me ehm . . . I think I would ask for a manager to do all the paperwork for me, and I would pay without having . . . (...) Also ehm . . . Finding a flat before . . . (...) Arrive . . . Or if . . . or if you don’t have a job, arrive with . . . with I don’t know, a money . . . much more than I had, or something, to live two or three years, to have for everything, for the flats, for the deposits. This, above all. I think that above all having a job, or already arriving in Spain having your own business, for example, too.” (2ESPCOL)

By way of summary of the proposals pointed out by the migrants interviewed, on the one hand, the importance of correctly planning the journey before embarking on it can be highlighted, as well as knowing the different bureaucratic processes that are required, places to go, training opportunities, work, etc., and, on the other hand, we can highlight the need to have a mentality able to face the changes and new processes that are going to be encountered.

“Basically, that, having documentation that allows you to at least mobilize and be open, be open to everything . . . that you’re going to have to change professions, that you’re going to have to study new things, that you’re going to have to eat new things, because the issue of food has shocked us a lot, especially at breakfast, which for us is super super different, and that, silly as it may seem, is not, these are things that we have been used to for years and it is a shock, but I think that if the person is open to receive and adapt, it is possible . . .” (1ESPVEN)

4. Discussion and Conclusions

As evidenced in the results presented, migrant women are key players in the migratory processes and social integration in their societies of arrival, distinguishing themselves as autonomous agents with a transformative capacity—a role historically made invisible by research biases that relegated them to mere companions (Gregorio-Gil 2012). Nevertheless, despite this theoretical advance, the findings of this study reveal that, in most cases, their political and social participation remains the least developed dimension, which demonstrates the weakness of the integration policies in Spain (Solano and Huddleston 2020).

The findings of our study—where Moroccan, Colombian, and Polish women describe bureaucratic, labor, and ephemeral social media barriers that limit deep integration—confirm this gap. Their experiences reveal how the overlapping of discrimination (origin, gender, legal status) hinders basic rights and community ties, evidencing the

absence of institutional frameworks that translate theoretical intersectionality into concrete actions. Therefore, considering the contributions of the protagonists, it can be stated that to promote political participation, a model of measures and actions is necessary that includes the following:

- (1) Structural bases: Guidance, information and legal support via a gender approach to combat the lack of knowledge of rights, as well as intersectional training of public agents to eradicate institutional biases that silence their voices.
- (2) Integration tools: Public services with intersectional mediation (e.g., multilingual one-stop shops) and the institutionalization of support networks (third-sector, transnational digital communities) as channels for their advocacy on local policies.
- (3) Political protagonism: Citizen Participation Forums where policies with a gender focus are designed, associative strengthening with stable funding for collective action, and accessible intersectional information that guarantees a voice to all migrants.

This approach, from basic rights to political leadership, highlights its transformative capacity, closing the gap between theoretical recognition and the practical exclusion manifested in the testimonies presented (Example: "... people without papers who are very difficult to work with and no one wants us ..."—10ESPMAR).

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