



## COVID-19: Structural Violence against and Resistance of Migrant Women in Spain and Europe

**This is a briefing paper reflecting on the knowledge shared during two webinars organised by Red de Mujeres Latinoamericanas y del Caribe (Red Latinas in English) supported by WIDE+ (Women In Development Europe+) in 2020.**

In the webinars, migrant women organizers presented the strategies and forms of resistance that migrant women and associations they belong to have developed in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The webinars highlighted the social dynamics and violence that normative, political and social structures establish and reproduce.

The first webinar focused on the situation in Spain; the second reviewed examples from countries across Europe. There are similarities between the dynamics around structural violence faced by migrant women during the COVID-19 pandemic in Spain and elsewhere in Europe. These similarities are visible in the multiple forms of resistance of migrant women as well.

The webinars were organized with the intention of generating a debate on structural violence that directly affects migrant and refugee women, with the emphasis on gender violence, sexual violence and other types of violence that affect women in irregular situations in Spain and other European countries.

What the webinars showed is that migrant women face multiple forms of violence, not only violence in current or ex-intimate partnerships, which is the only type of gender-based violence recognized by the law in Spain.

*Violence against migrant women is structural and requires institutional solutions that strengthen the legal position of migrant women.*

*The combination of legal limitations, racism and sexism result in the vulnerability of migrant women, who daily experience limited autonomy. All these factors create a precarious situation for migrant women, which makes it harder for them to report violence and break out of violent cycles.*

*The pandemic heightened these circumstances but also created new forms of solidarity among (migrant) women, men and non-confirming people.*



Gender-based violence and sexism that migrant women face are clear results of the sexist and racist social structure of society. This conclusion is backed up by the report **"Mujeres Migrantes Víctimas de Violencia de Género en España" (Migrant Women Victims of Gender Violence in Spain - a quantitative analysis)** by **Silvina Monteros**. This research was initiated by the Red Latinas in alliance with AIETI (The Association for Research and Specialization on Ibero-American Issues).

**WEBINAR**

**via ZOOM**



**Resistance of Migrant Women in the European Union and Spanish state**

**FRIDAY 11/27 17-19h.**

**FRIDAY 12/04 17 - 19h.**

Gender based violence and other violences in the Spanish state

Strategies and resistance of migrant women to the crisis: COVID-19 and structural violence

Carolina Elias - SEDOAC

Clara Ligia Castro - REDHMI

Beatriz Cantero - Mujeres Pa'lante

Martha Acosta - Red Genera

Paola Verdejo - Red Promotoras Comunitarias Amalgama

Chairperson: Lucy Polo -Asoc. Por Ti Mujer

General framework: Silvina Zayoud - ESCODE

Jennifer Kamau - International Women Space (IWS) - DE

Katherine Muñoz - Colectiva de Refugiadas, Exiliadas y Migradas - ES

Elizabeth Jiménez - Latin American Women's Rights Service (LAWRS) - UK

Antonia Avalos - Mujeres Supervivientes -ES

Chairperson: Karen Rodríguez - REDHMI

Presentation: Tatiana Retamozo, Red Latina

**This event will have simultaneous translation English/Spanish**

**Prior registration required**

What is found across Europe is that migrant women are denied equal access to political participation and job security and they are also subjected to greater racism and discrimination due to lack of legal citizenship. Because of this, migrant women experience difficulties when trying to gain access to safe residence and decent work.

The webinars came from the observation that the data on femicide, the gender-based murder of Spanish migrant workers, is extremely alarming. According to data from 2003 to 2019, 338 migrant women were murdered as a consequence of gender-based violence in Spain. This represents 29 women for every million foreign women living in the country. In comparison only five Spanish women for every million Spanish women are murdered every year. However this data is still limited. It is important to obtain data on other types of gender-based violence in order to assess the necessary protection and care of

migrant women.

Some questions demand an answer from this limited data: *Why is there such an excessive representation of migrant women in the figures on gender-based violence? What is the reason for the higher incidence of violence against migrant women but for lower police and judicial protection? Do migrant women have the necessary access to legal measures, and if not, why not?*

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## Gender-based violence and other violence in the Spanish state: Analysis and resistance of migrant women

### Alarming rates of sexual violence against female domestic workers

*Migrants flee to countries of the global north, where protection of human rights is generally a bigger priority.*

*However the protection received by legally recognised citizens does not provide legal protection to migrants.*

The webinar was structured around the presentation of the updated report "*Mujeres Migrantes Víctimas de Violencia de Género en España*" (*Migrant Women Victims of Gender Violence in Spain*) - a quantitative analysis) by **Silvina Monteros**. This research work was initiated by the Red Latinas in alliance with AJETI and focuses on the issue of gender-based violence. SEDOAC contributed to the report with its research on sexual violence against female workers within the field of domestic work. The association works to raise awareness of sexual violence against female domestic workers, which is of great importance due to its taboo status. As **Carolina Elias, President of SEDOAC**, explained in the webinar, domestic workers are most often unprotected and usually they reside within the homes of their employers, which they leave during weekends.

Among these migrant women, who often lack knowledge about their rights and about reporting sexual violence cases, one in 10 women has reported having suffered sexual violence in the workplace, but official reporting rates are generally much lower than this. Sexual violence has an impact on physical, psychological and sexual health and is detrimental to migrant workers' self-esteem and autonomy. As a consequence of sexual violence they often show signs of anxiety or depression, as they do not have access to adequate institutions to listen to them and care for them.

**Webinar: "Gender based violence and other violence in the Spanish state: Analysis and resistance of migrant women", 27 November 2020.**

#### **Panelists:**

- Lucy Polo (Asociación Por Ti Mujer) - moderator
- Carolina Elias (President of SEDOAC - Active Domestic Service)
- Clara Ligia Castro (REDHMI)
- Beatriz Cantero (Mujeres Pa'lante)
- Martha Acosta (Genera Enlaces)
- Paola Verdejo (RED de Promotoras Comunitarias Amalgama)

**Organized by:** Red de Mujeres Latinoamericanas y del Caribe (Red Latinas in English) supported by WIDE+



## Violence against women in irregular situations

**Clara Ligia Castro from REDHMI** talked about how the situation of migrant women upon their arrival in Spain often remains one of violence. Migrant women most often flee their home countries because they are denied the right to live life without violence there. These former colonized countries have historically been stripped of natural resources, as well as economic and political autonomy. In Spain, for example, the requirement for accessing housing and acquiring temporary work permits is living in the country for three years. During this period, migrants are forced to live in shared or illegal accommodation where they are vulnerable. Within the neighbourhoods they live in, they often face social stigma, a situation worsened by the pandemic. Since the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, migrants have been blamed for the outbreaks and spread of the virus, which negatively impacts the collective image of these groups.



*The COVID-19 pandemic made protection against gender-based violence more difficult, with many workers unable to leave the homes of their employers.*

## Systemic violence experienced by migrant women

The organisation **Mujeres Pa'lante** works with migrant women and helps them regardless of their resident status. **Beatriz Cantero of Mujeres Pa'lante** talked about their work and experiences during COVID. During the coronavirus lockdown all processing of foreigners came to a standstill, causing big delays and long waiting lists. Meanwhile, the unregistered migrants remained defenseless. Working systems of some social service institutions have also been affected by the coronavirus pandemic. There is a greater demand for their resources, the number of staff has not increased and people are having to wait longer to get an appointment. Advocacy organisations like **Mujeres Pa'lante** offer alternative forms of help, however these are also very precarious due to lack of funding.

When gender-based violence occurs in mixed couples, cultural stereotypes often emphasize complex custody dynamics. Migrant women are judged more harshly in terms of their ability to mother. Meanwhile it is assumed and taken for granted that the Spanish man has a greater capacity to assume custody. Migrant mothers are judged on the basis of being poor and having difficulty providing for their children, which, if true, is a consequence of the system failing them. It is these discriminatory dynamics that must be denounced.



## Sexual and reproductive rights of migrant women

Before the pandemic, migrant women were experiencing difficulties of various kinds in accessing sexual and reproductive healthcare. During the pandemic these difficulties have increased greatly, according to **Martha Acosta of Genera Enlaces**. Many migrant women have faced difficulties in obtaining or even failed to obtain prescriptions for contraceptives. Some women were not able to access abortion services during the pandemic and were consequently forced to gestate. Obstetric and gynecological care had been impoverished for all during the COVID-19 pandemic, however migrant women in irregular administrative situations face greater obstacles in receiving care.

*Before the pandemic, migrant women were experiencing difficulties of various kinds in accessing sexual and reproductive healthcare. During the pandemic these difficulties have increased greatly.*

Organizations like Genera Enlaces that offers consultation services to young women and education sessions to migrant women, regularly point out the importance of sexual and reproductive rights for the wellbeing of women, including migrant women and girls. This is not only a health issue, it is something that should be considered cross-disciplinarily.

## Assistance to migrant women who are victims of gender-based violence

The pandemic has further worsened the situations of migrant women who are experiencing gender-based violence, according to **Paola Verdejo of RED de Promotoras Comunitarias Amalgama**. Many women are forced to stay indoors with their abuser and have not been able to access psychological support, care or protection services.

When migrant women manage to leave their abusive relationships, they most often find themselves in precarious economic and housing situations. Organizations like RED de Promotoras Comunitarias Amalgama are providing assistance to female survivors of gender-based violence.

*There are many different factors that make it difficult for victims to seek out help and support, from language barriers to lack of knowledge and information and lack of support networks. Migrant women are often not given all the information they need to make timely decisions.*



## Conclusions

The research work presented at the webinar has revealed difficulties in protecting migrant women. Due to their irregular administrative status, migrant women experience many problems daily. They experience precarious working and housing situations, difficulty in accessing the internet, non recognition of their official qualifications, social stigmatization, racism and consequent criminalization. A special category, in even riskier situations, are migrant female victims of gender-based violence, who are unable to access resources for protection and care.

The coronavirus pandemic has brought to light these difficult and dangerous situations but it has also reminded us that these problems existed before.

Resources for advocacy of marginalized and vulnerable groups are often scarce, even more so during a pandemic. Migrant women's associations provide most of their care on a voluntary basis. The pandemic should serve as a reminder that migrant women's associations deserve support and attention as they are providing essential care where other programmes fail. It has also shown how necessary research-based advocacy is in continuing to highlight types of violence experienced daily by migrant women and exposing the system that enables and reproduces these structures of power.

*Another problem with social services is their lack of working from a gender and intersectional perspective.*

*They contribute to the reproduction of stereotypes of migrant women who are victims of violence.*

## Structural violence and COVID-19 - Resistance of migrant women in Europe

### (In)Accessibility of COVID-19 restriction measures

There has been a lot of information about governmental measures during the COVID-19 pandemic, but a lot of time was wasted before this information reached communities of migrants. Many of them don't speak the language of the country they reside in and advocacy organisations lost a lot of time arranging translations into various languages. According to **Jennifer Kamau, Espacio Internacional de Mujeres, IWS**, the German government did not take an active role in making sure new regulation reached and was understood by migrant women, including those in refugee centres.



In refugee camps, the consequences were even more severe, with no possibility of social distancing from others (sharing facilities) and increased isolation from the outside world. Health problems were on the rise and more undocumented migrants were facing deportation, which subjected them to more police brutality and human trafficking risks. In all these situations, migrant women have felt severely violated in different ways and there has been a big rise in gender-based violence.

The prosperity of migrant people is the main priority of IWS and therefore they promote unity and collective alternatives which must be actively sought out and promoted.

**¡No se puede dejar  
a nadie atrás! \***

**No one can be left behind!**

**Webinar: “Structural violence and COVID-19 - Resistance of migrant women in Europe”, 4 December 2020**

#### **Panelists:**

- Tatiana Retamozo (Red Latinas)
- Jennifer Kamau (Espacio Internacional de Mujeres, IWS)
- Elizabeth Jimenez (Servicio por los Derechos Latinoamericanos, LAWRS)
- Katherine Muñoz (Colectiva de Mujeres Refugiadas, Exiliadas y Migrantes)
- Antonia Avalos (Mujeres Supervivientes)

This webinar was organized in the form of questions asked by the moderator and answered by the panelists. Before this, Tatiana Retamozo of Red Latinas made a speech in which she highlighted the importance of sharing knowledge and experiences.

**Organized by:** Red de Mujeres Latinoamericanas y del Caribe (Red Latinas in English) supported by WIDE+

## **Gender-based violence and migrant women**

In order to access education, rent a house or access specific medical services, migrants must provide proof of their migratory status. Without required documentation migrant women who are victims of gender-based violence are rejected when trying to access official protection.

The lockdown that came about as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic presupposes a lot of situations and arrangements which are not accessible to all migrant women. As **Elizabeth**



**Jimenez from Servicio por los Derechos Latinoamericanos, LAWRS** explained, being able to follow government restrictions is to a large degree a matter of personal privilege. Who is able to work from home and isolate themselves? Some groups of people, often including migrant women, working in certain job sectors like cleaning, have been forced to keep working during the pandemic, exposing them to a heightened threat of catching the virus. The inequalities that existed before the pandemic have been amplified and deepened in the last year, with a disproportionate impact on the lives of women who live in vulnerable conditions. So many migrant women continue to live in oppressive situations, besides being discriminated against regularly because of their race and migrant status.

In addition to violence in hostile domestic situations, migrant women often experience institutional violence, since the perpetrators can have political or social status, combined with the failure of the government to protect women's and children's rights. Undocumented women often choose to stay in their violent living situations, due to the risk of being arrested or even deported if they call the police.

Women who tried to seek help often had difficulties getting through due to the fact that appropriate services were closed during lockdown. Cases of domestic violence were more difficult to attend to because of structural barriers.

*During the first lockdown, which started in the UK on 23 March 2020 and started easing in July of the same year, the UK government failed to establish emergency protection for migrant women.*

*According to Elizabeth Jimenez, the number of calls to emergency services increased by 60% and there were 10 femicides in the first week of the second lockdown.*

## Struggles in advocacy during the COVID-19 pandemic - the case of Spain

While the problems of many migrant women hugely increased, advocacy organizations found that their ability to offer support during the pandemic became more limited, as **Katherine Muñoz from Colectiva de Mujeres Refugiadas, Exiliadas y Migrantes**, reported. The major challenge of the pandemic has been social distancing while offering support to migrant women. Before the pandemic, the organization was regularly performing physical visits and psychosocial appointments. Since the pandemic they have been having to resort to telephone appointments.

*It has become apparent, since the beginning of the pandemic, that there are two existing systems in the UK - one for non-migrant and the other for migrant women.*

*The latter are discriminated against - first seen as foreigners and then as victims.*

*The impact on many migrant women has been that they have become unemployed or have been subjected to even more precarious types of work. The increased amount of working from home has placed additional pressures on mothers. There has been a rise in housing problems, especially among younger migrants. The migrant population has also been experiencing many difficulties when trying to access health services.*



The pandemic has created many precarious situations for migrant domestic workers. They have either been made to live permanently with their employers or they have been made redundant, so that they would not infect their employer by leaving and returning. Since the beginning of the pandemic, **Colectiva de Mujeres Refugiadas** has mostly been trying to maintain spaces where women can be listened to, explained **Katherine Muñoz**. Since many of the members of the collectives are unemployed, they took advantage of the time on their hands for reflection and sharing knowledge. The needs of migrant and refugee women are most often not deemed a priority in the eyes of the public. The organization tries to help when difficult situations occur but they do not have access to the official means of power, which poses the question of what is happening to the official bodies that are supposed to be ensuring safety and protection.

*One of the main governmental measures during the pandemic has been social distancing. However, migrants often live in precarious housing situations where it is impossible to comply with the distancing measures.*

They are also worried about the difficulties that emerge when women try to access asylum or refugee status. *The data on systematic rejection of asylum requests in Spain is alarming.* Women who are rejected are left in extremely precarious and vulnerable situations when protection and aid mechanisms are cut. They do not have any alternatives in terms of finance or documents. Often the victims of systematic asylum denial are Colombian and Honduran women.

*Being a small organization that helps share information proved extremely difficult in times when information changes all the time and when there is also a spread of misinformation. The government did little to provide updated information in different languages.*

**The Mujeres Supervivientes** set up a soup kitchen in Seville which was able to operate with solidarity from surrounding neighbourhoods, as **Antonia Avalos** from the organization reported.

They delivered food to vulnerable groups of the population, such as the elderly. The solidarity started to extend beyond lunches, to organizing working teams of lawyers providing legal guidance and psychologists providing emotional support. They also created a box for funds to help pay people's bills, buy their medicine and help to finance any other needs that women and vulnerable families face. However there was a constant fear of additional virus spreading and the threat of the police shutting down their activities.

According to **Antonia Avalos**, since the beginning of the pandemic, **Mujeres Supervivientes** has made several demands at a systemic level, for example for home workers to gain equal labour rights, regularization of undocumented people, economic resources for migrant women's associations and for recognition of the professionalism of migrant women in their field of work.

**Mujeres Supervivientes** also established a stronger working connection with the **RED Latinas** and took their work to the national level. They generated »knowledge spaces« and started to produce qualitative and quantitative information to document everything that has been occurring. They believe the state needs to be held accountable for their human rights violations and reminded of their responsibility to not allow anyone to be left behind. The association joined a regularization campaign supported by the **Red Latinas** and more than 100 organizations demanding



regularization of migrant people with a temporary or undocumented status on a state level and also requesting answers from the Council of Ministers and the Ministry of Equality.

*The initiatives have unfortunately been on the receiving end of violence. Besides hate speech from politicians in Andalucía, they have been targeted by fundamentalists at the soup kitchen, who used racial slurs and sexist insults, yelled at the visitors to the soup kitchen and even damaged their property with stones.*

### **Strategies to cope with the lack of funding and the need for communal support**

Due to offices being closed as a consequence of social distancing rules, organizations tried to keep up their work by moving their services online, so that they could be immediately reached in urgent situations, according to **Elizabeth Jimenez from Servicio por los Derechos Latinoamericanos, LAWRS**. A new problem arose, however, posed by the technological gap. How to reach women without access to a computer or the internet? For NGOs providing information is a form of resistance.

Professionals who are in close contact with survivors need more support. Greater solidarity among different organizations is also necessary so that information spreads out of London more quickly, concluded Elizabeth Jimenez. Funding of organizations needs to become sustainable and durable, not scarce and only available during emergencies. The concept of austerity has long been affecting women and the services they require. LAWRS keeps campaigning for women, regardless of their migratory status, to have the right to security and protection measures. They have also written a letter to the Interior Minister with various demands.

As **Jennifer Kamau** pointed out, it is important that the community organizes itself around protecting human rights. Specific spaces and working groups should be generated.

### **Conclusions**

All the panelists agreed that the pandemic worsened the discrimination and inequalities that migrant women in Europe face. Migrant women are not an isolated example among marginalized groups that have been affected by the pandemic but can serve as a reminder of the inequality and injustice created by the COVID-19 crisis. These negative developments are the result of the economic, social and cultural aspects of the neoliberal and patriarchal system.

Advocacy organizations and NGOs must focus on these inequalities, raise their profile and resist the rise of dangerous right-wing policies.

***Campaigns must be organized around the Istanbul Convention to address gender based violence against migrant women.***

***It should protect them from violent deportations and we need to push for a greater understanding of how border policies in Europe affect the lives of female refugees.***



The COVID-19 crisis has placed emphasis on the precarious situations of unemployed people, on evictions, the housing crisis, digital gaps and health exclusion. Having a decent home, internet connection and access to social media has become a privilege, rather than a basic human right. More and more migrant people, as well as advocacy organizations, have been experiencing poverty and budget cuts.

There has been a rise in domestic violence as a consequence of lockdown, as well as a rise in violence within migrant camps. It has become increasingly apparent that the police are not only active within the security forces but are extending their power into public services through which they target vulnerable groups of people. Migrant people are always questioned about citizenship, work and residence as they always exist right on the border between being included and excluded from society. Lockdown emphasized the need to address these legal situations.

**The COVID-19 pandemic has generated new initiatives and ways of community building as well as the creation of new political initiatives. Even though there is an existing problem of the digital gap among migrants, technology has been one of the main facilitators of many campaigns and a way of framing members of civil society as political subjects.**

**Political and creative activism has persevered and despite the lack of financial resources has managed to formulate forceful demands that must be heard at the European level. In conclusion, practices to fight far-right, racist, xenophobic and intolerant ideologies that threaten human rights must be formed.**

**All the panelists and their respective organizations are legitimate political subjects with the power to change prevailing discourses, generate new arguments and help the situation of many migrant women.**

*One of the main governmental measures during the pandemic has been social distancing.*

*However,*

*migrants often live in precarious housing situations where it is impossible to comply with the distancing measures.*

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**Layout:** Hana Turšič, Gea Meijers

**Image 1 header:** Mujeres migrantes víctimas de violencia de género en España. (2018). Red Latinas, AIETI. Available at: [https://aieti.es/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Violencia\\_genero\\_mujeres\\_migrantes.pdf](https://aieti.es/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Violencia_genero_mujeres_migrantes.pdf)

**Image 2 source:** We Are Red newsletter #2. (2020). Red Latinas. Page: 8. Available at: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/12x1aZRBMrwVVHnfw7uzebG1zJqmk-jvV/view>

**Image 3 source:** ¡Para no dejar a nadie atrás!: Documento político de asociaciones y colectivas de mujeres migradas. (2020). Red Latinas, AIETI, Ministerio de Igualdad. Page: 14. Available at: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/16v5xhOYTEz-lwiQ5UgdyB-i98LS4VIDA/view>