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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

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# At the Crossroads between Violence and Migration: Migrant Women's Grassroots Struggles Against Intersectional Violence in Spain

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**ABSTRACT:** This article examines the intersectional violence experienced by migrant women in Spain, emphasizing the complexity of their experiences beyond traditional conceptions of gender-based violence (GBV). It critiques the limited scope of existing research on violence against migrant women and calls for an intersectional approach that accounts for how race, class, sexuality, and other axes of oppression intersect with gender, shaping both experiences of violence and strategies of resistance. The study focuses on how migrant women resist violence by collectively developing their own discourse on the issue within migrant women's groups. Through discourse analysis, it explores the centrality of violence in these groups' narratives and highlights their alternative, critical, and intersectional perspectives on the topic. Lastly, it challenges essentialist narratives on violence against migrant women, highlighting their agency in resisting and shaping their own perspectives on the issue.

**KEYWORDS:** Intersectionality; Migration; Narratives; Resistance; Women

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## 1. Introduction

Violence and insecurity permeate women's mobility from displacement, through transit and resettlement(s) (Marchand, 2008; Freedman, 2012, 2018; Freedman, Sahraoui and Tastsoglou, 2022; Pickering and Cochrane, 2013). However, most of the research has focused on the violence(s) that women on the move experience in

their country of origin, often in contexts of war and political violence, and in the process of multiple border crossings. Less attention has been devoted to the multiple manifestations of violence, but also resistance, experienced by migrant women within the borders of Europe, the West, and the so-called Global North.

An analysis on the issue of violence against migrant women in European countries challenges the idea of seeing countries of immigration like the safe haven where western saviours save subaltern subjects (Spivak, 1985). Such perspectives create narratives, in particular regarding migrant women, that end up creating discourses in which they are portrayed as passive and vulnerable subjects and victims. In many cases, this stems from the systemic overlooking of migrant women's experiences and voices—a problem that manifests not only in policies but at the level of civil society. The discourse on violence against women lacks an intersectional lens that incorporates the demands and needs of “other” women across multiple levels, from public debate and policymaking to the political discourse of feminist and other social movements, typically regarded as allies or supporters.

Drawing on a feminist and intersectional approach on women's experiences of migration this article aims to de-essentialise discursive constructions on violence against migrant women, creating space for the representation of these women as subjects with agency, who do not only experience but also resist violence in different ways and build their own perspective on it. In addition, through the lens of intersectionality, it looks at the theme considering how gender interplays with other axes of oppression such as class, ethnicity, cultural or religious background, shaping not only their experiences of violence, but also their discourses around it and their strategies of resistance at the individual and collective level.

Building on these premises, and with the aim to recuperate still invisibilized experiences, practices and resistance of migrant women, this work — part of a wider research project on the interrelation between violence and resistance in migrant women's lives in Spain— aims to explore the kind of violence(s) migrant women experience in Spain due to their “intersectional subjectivity”, the role violence plays in migrant women's groups, and how migrant women movement(s) frame their discourse around violence at the collective level.

In particular, it focuses on how the theme of violence has always been at the core of migrant women groups and collective action and how migrant women's movement(s) in Spain build their discourse around it, framing it in intersectional terms.

Beginning with a discussion of the state of the art in scholarly literature on violence in the lives of migrant women on the move, I highlight how migration-related violence remains an underexplored topic, particularly in resettlement contexts within the Global North. Emphasizing that women's experiences of violence throughout migration are shaped by complex intersections of gender, race, class, sexuality, and other forms of oppression, I adopt intersectionality as both a methodological and theoretical tool to address this issue within and beyond migration studies.

The article explores the Spanish context—characterized by considerable migration flows, progressive gender equality policies, and strong feminist and anti-racist mobilizations—as a critical backdrop for examining migrant women's experiences of violence and resistance. After tracing the genealogy of migrant women's movements in Spain, the discussion focuses on how they frame the issue of violence. In their activism and discourse, violence emerges as a central struggle, deeply interconnected with immigration rights, labour rights, racism, and (neo)coloniality, all viewed through a strong intersectional lens.

Through the reconstruction of migrant women's movements and the discourse analysis of various movements' texts, this article aims to recover experiences, narratives, and framings of violence against migrant women. Drawing on Blackwell's (2011, 15) words, it seeks to “uncover genealogies of resistance” and offer

insight into how these movements can “transform the landscape of meaning and discursive fields” surrounding violence against (migrant) women. Equally important, this perspective challenges the categories of “woman”, “migrant” and the related life experiences and contributes to offering alternatives to dominant narratives about migration, and particularly migrant women and violence (Dos Ventos Lopes Heimer, 2021).

## **2. A critical literature review on violence against migrant women: what space for women’s resistance?**

The nexus between gender, migration and violence has been explored by scholars analysing women’s personal experiences before migration or the decision to migrate and revolve around themes such as female genital mutilation (FGM) and forced marriage, political violence and domestic violence (Bosworth, Fili, and Pickering, 2018; Freedman, 2012; Freedman, Sahraoui and Tyszler, 2022). Relevant research has also been conducted regarding cases of sexual violence(s) and exploitation and trafficking occurring throughout the migration path: violent violations such as rape and the so-called transactional sex have been significantly detected throughout women’s migration journey in different contexts (Freedman, 2012; 2016; Freedman et al., 2022, Gerard and Pickering, 2013; Hourani, Block, Phillimore, Bradby, Ozcurumez, Goodson, and Vaughan, 2021; Phillimore, Pertek, Akyuz, Darkal, Hourani, McKnight, Ozcurumez, and Taal, 2022; Reilly, and Tastsoglou, 2022).

Most studies concerning sexual and gender-based violence experienced by migrant women focus on the contexts of borders and refugee camps (among others, Diab, 2019; Wachter, Horn, Friis, Falb, Ward, Apio, Wanjiku and Puffe, 2018). Research highlights that both state and non-state actors are among the agents performing violence against women on the move: sexual and gender-based violence is perpetrated by police and security guards at borders, by smugglers or traffickers, by fellow migrants or by local populations.

Some scholars also explored this theme highlighting that gender, and therefore patriarchy, is not the only power dynamic at play in cases of violence against migrant women. For instance, research has confirmed that border violence is deeply racialized and gendered (Pickering, 2011; Freedman, 2012; Bosworth et al., 2018). The racialised construction of migrant women added to the gendered idea of women as “biologically difficult and inherently untrustworthy” (Bosworth et al., 2018, 9), fuels a narrative through which race and gender delegitimize women as transnational migrants, especially in the face of increasing border control (ibidem, 8).

Among the limited number of analysis of violence against migrant women in the Global North we find those addressing the issue mainly at the individual level, discussing intimate partner violence and domestic violence (Adams and Campbell, 2012), those considering structural factors e.g. violence emerging from the intersection of the crimmigration and securitization systems (Abji, 2017; 2020), but also other attempting to bridge the two (Borges, 2024; Gonçalves and Matos, 2019; Hourani et al., 2021).

Zooming in the European context, intimate partner violence and domestic violence are intertwined with structural violence, taking the form of barriers regarding the obtainment of the legal status, discrimination, exclusion in accessing services, especially welfare services, institutional neglect and abandonment (Di Matteo, 2022; Domaas, 2021; Freedman et al., 2022; Gerard and Pickering, 2013; Gillespie et al., 2022; Pickering 2011; Pinelli, 2019). In this concern, Freedman and colleagues point out how the securitisation of migration and the “slow violence” (Mayblin, Wake and Kazemi, 2020 in Freedman et al., 2022) that characterises the posture of European member states have impacted asylum seekers’ experiences of racialized and gendered violence.

Even more scarce are the contributions that focus on migrant women's narratives and strategies of resistance in addressing violence, both during transit and border crossing, as well as in the resettlement context. While many of the aforementioned works emphasize the importance of highlighting women's agency and challenging stereotypical portrayals of migrant women as passive victims, there is limited attention given to their resistance practices, both at the individual and collective levels. In the works engaging with this theme we find those showing practices of resistance through activism, in particular the rich body of literature on sex work and domestic workers activism and others focusing on migrant women's narratives and agency in the new life context (Dos Ventos Lopes Heimer, 2021; Marchetti, Cherubini and Geymonat, 2021; McIlwaine, 2022; Parreñas, 2001; Rydzik and Anitha, 2020; Tungohan, 2023). Research has gradually shifted toward emphasizing migrant women's agency and empowerment. Scholarly contributions are starting to actively engage in reassessing and understanding their lives, recognizing that despite facing abusive, sexist, racist and other oppressions, migrant women exercise agency and make strategic choices to improve their circumstances.

In addition, in the last fifteen years, scholars started to experiment and call for an intersectional approach in analysing the issue. However, intersectional approaches about migrant women's experiences of violence, are still underdeveloped in scholarly literature. Di Matteo (2022), for example, shows how poorly intersectionality is integrated into the current literature on access to social protection systems by migrant women who have experienced GBV. A similar gap is observed by scholars in the broader field of women's migration who increasingly claim the importance and the need to implement intersectionality in research not only as a theoretical framework but as a research methodology (Abji, 2020; Phillimore et al., 2022; Stasiulis, 1999).

### **3. Intersectionality as framework to analyse violence against migrant women**

What does it mean to explore violence against migrant women from an intersectional perspective? As underlined by Bows and Fileborn "It is no longer sufficient to approach the gendered aspects of GBV as if there is a stable, coherent or shared category of 'woman' or 'man'. Rather, gender is itself co-constituted by factors such as race, class, sexuality and (dis)ability. Violence that is 'gender-based' is likewise inflected and entangled with racist, homophobic, transphobic, heterosexist and other forms of violence" (Bows and Fileborn, 2020, 301).

While considering this an essential prerequisite for an intersectional analysis, I believe that it is important to further develop the discussion, in order to build a framework that can study the issue of violence in the lives of migrant women, taking into account the complexity that characterizes it. To do this, I propose starting from the concept of "intersectional violence", which migrant women experience as a result of the interplay between their multiple intersecting social identities and the specific forms of structural oppressions at work in different contexts. These dynamics, in turn, shape the types of violence to which they are exposed.

I focus on intersectional categories, different positionalities and (intersecting) power relations from a perspective that understands how they come to take a specific shape and configure differently in diverse social and material situations. This perspective is in profound continuity with the one proposed by Crenshaw in her *Postscript* (2016), where she underlines that intersectionality entails both structural and dynamic characters and emphasizes the relevance of using it as a lens that exposes the interaction of structure and identity.

Under this lens, an intersectional approach should look at the microlevel, and therefore at the interaction of categories and systems of powers and their effects on individual/subjective experiences, linking it to the macro-level analysis of how different systems of privilege and oppression work at the macro social-structural level in a specific context to produce, organize and maintain inequalities. These points reaffirm the importance of

examining the issue of violence considering, for instance, the impact of the complex web of social inequities rooted also in policies and laws. Consequently, an intersectional perspective highlights “how lived identities, structural systems, sites of marginalization, forms of power, and modes of resistance “intersect” in dynamic, shifting ways” (May, 2015, 21).

This point on resistance, presented by the feminist scholar Vivian M. May (*ibidem*) as one of the focuses of an intersectional analysis, provides a hook to discuss one additional element of how I conceive an intersectional approach to understanding violence against migrant women. Firstly, I believe it is essential to focus on this issue to provide different perspectives and narratives about violence in the context of migration, beyond the portrayal of migrant women as passive victims. Secondly, this perspective connects the intersectional analysis to its roots in the resistance and activism of black and women of colour. For instance, an analysis of migrant women’s collective strategies of resistance in formal or informal groups is relevant to the analysis of the personal experiences of violence of migrant women and their resistance.

Therefore, the multidimensional nature of this intersectional approach to studying violence in migrant women’s lives relationally integrates meso-level analysis with micro and macro levels to understand how violence is framed and understood, and to examine the strategies of resistance women employ to address this issue.

#### **4. Methodology**

This article explores resistance to violence against migrant women through an analysis of the discursive work performed by migrant women’s groups in Spain on the topic of violence. While considering both macro- and micro-level elements, this contribution focuses primarily on the meso-level dimension. Attention to the meso-level dimension oriented towards an analysis of migrant women’s collective resistance is particularly relevant and supported by scholars such as Celeste Montoya (2019; 2021; 2023), who has engaged with intersectionality in social movement studies.

The issue is explored through discourse analysis of various textual productions from migrant women’s groups in Spain. Discourse analysis is defined by Lindekilde, citing Snow and Benford (1988), as the effort “to pay attention to movement actors as ‘signifying agents’ who play an active role in interpreting grievances and defining goals, and not just as passive carriers of ideas and ideology” (Lindekilde, 2014, p. 196). To achieve this, I conducted a mapping of migrant women’s organizations in the Spanish context. This mapping involved collecting and analyzing data from various sources, including social media pages, regional and local databases, migrant organization websites, and, in some cases, news articles and blog posts. Approximately 60 migrant women’s organizations were identified, and for each, an analysis was carried out of their websites and social media pages, focusing also on their document production, particularly those related to the theme of violence. This analysis was complemented by two months of fieldwork in Madrid in 2024, where I observed closely the significant political mobilization of various migrant women’s collectives and associations taking place across multiple fronts.

## 5. Migrant women movement(s) in Spain

To provide an effective analysis of how migrant women collectively rewrite the discourse around violence, I find it essential to introduce the reader to the reconstruction of a brief genealogy of migrant women's movements in Spain. By examining the trajectory and development of these movements, we can better understand the motivations and dynamics through which these groups have formulated claims on various issues, particularly violence in its different forms.

Spain, after being a country of emigration for a long time (Serrano Sanguilinda, Barbiano di Belgiojoso, González Ferrer, Rimoldi, and Blangiardo, 2017), has now become an important destination for immigrant inflows in Europe especially after the Arab Spring in 2011 and the “2015 European migrant crisis”<sup>1</sup>. According to data made available by Eurostat for 2015, Spain was among the European states with the highest numbers of foreigners present in their territory (Eurostat, 2017). The latest data confirm this trend: in 2021 Germany reported the largest total number of immigrants, followed by Spain, which is also the European country with the highest share of non-EU immigrants (Eurostat, 2023).

In these more than 30 years of immigration history, migrant women have been overrepresented in gender-based violence statistics, suggesting that both social inclusion and integration processes, as well as improvements in gender equality policies (Lombardo, 2017; La Barbera, Espinosa Fajardo, and Caravantes, 2022) have had little impact on the prevention and protection of migrant women against gender-based violence (AIETI, 2024). It is, therefore, unsurprising that the issue of violence has played a central role since the very first spark and initial political mobilization of migrant women in Spain.

The genealogy of the migrant women's movement in Spain<sup>2</sup> has its roots in the intersection of anti-racist, feminist, and migrant struggles. The movement took its first major steps in the early 1990s, catalyzed by a violent event: the murder of Lucrecia Pérez, a Dominican woman in Tetuán (Madrid) on November 13th, 1992 by a xenophobic group led by a police officer. This case, officially recognized as the first racist murder in Spain, led to mass demonstrations across several cities. Migrant groups, along with local allies, protested, marking one of the earliest large-scale mobilizations by migrant people in Spain. This tragedy created a shared moment of solidarity that fueled the emergence of migrant organizations. Among them was the association of Dominican Mothers that mobilized to demand justice for Lucrecia's murder and that supported her family, but also made visible race, class, and gender violence against Latin American migrant women in Spain. From that moment until the 2000s, migrant women began organizing within mixed networks that addressed broader issues of migration, labour rights, and anti-racism. The first meetings and collaborations between migrant women specifically interested in discussing the unique aspects of the migratory experience from a gendered

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<sup>1</sup> The expression “European migration crisis” is used here in critical terms and thus appears in brackets to reflect a distance from its dominant usage. Rather than accepting the framing of migration as a sudden emergency for Europe, some scholars have proposed alternative formulations—such as the “Long Summer of Migration” (Hess et al. 2016)—to highlight the agency of migrants and the partial breakdown of European border control. The crisis, in this view, lies not in the arrival of migrants: this narrative serves to construct migrants as either vulnerable or threatening Others, diverting attention from the long-standing crisis of European governance and border regimes (see Hess et al. 2016).

<sup>2</sup> The genealogy presented in this section is primarily based on the comprehensive and excellent work carried out by the Calala Feminist Fund. The authorship of the document “Acercamiento al movimiento de mujeres migrantes en el Estado español” is attributed to Adriana Zumarán Jibaja, a decolonial feminist activist born in Peru and residing in Madrid, with a background in social psychology and participatory research, and extensive experience in research processes and self-management for social transformation and political advocacy. Additionally, it is important to note that key collaborators in the publication include the Advisory Group of the Calala Women's Fund project “Poder Migrante” (Migrant Power), composed of 17 organizations of migrant and racialized women from the Spanish State, with special support from Carolina Escobar of Colectivo Sirirí (Granada).

perspective took place. Although they were still largely embedded within broader mixed organizations, this period laid the groundwork for a more independent migrant women's movement. The shared experience of precarization, discrimination, and social invisibility began to forge a distinct agenda focusing on the intersection of race, gender, and migration. In the Spanish context, the first migrant women's associations began to emerge between 2006 and 2008, marking also an organisational shift from mixed to non-mixed organisations. In the very same years, other movements such as the domestic workers movement started to include migrant women and their concerns, up to the point that they were mainly composed of women with a migration background, in particular Latin American ones (Marchetti et al., 2021). This coincided with a new wave of domestic workers' mobilization in the mid-2000s, concurrently focusing on labour and migrants' rights, among those the most-known are *Sedoac*, born in 2005, and *Territorio Doméstico* active since 2006 (ibidem).

Between 2009 and 2011, the migrant women's movement in Spain was shaped by the profound impact of the economic crisis, which exposed underlying tensions within local social movements. Migrant women's collectives pointed out the problematic relations between the Global North and the Global South. In their account, without addressing colonial and neocolonial practices, alternatives to the crisis risked perpetuating the same injustices. However, these ideas encountered resistance particularly by white Spanish people and activists. During this period, Spain had witnessed an intense process of return and second or third migration and, at the same time, migrant communities experienced growing precarization. In response, migrant women's resistance intensified. For instance, in these years, the first meeting of *Red de Mujeres Latinoamericanas y del Caribe* (the Network of Latin American and Caribbean Women) in Spain laid the foundation for a more organized struggle. Between 2012 and 2016, migrant women's movements increased their political influence and became a more organized and constant presence in social mobilization. Migrant and racialized people became increasingly involved in social mobilization and political advocacy, particularly within the broader landscape of feminist organizing and the *15M Movement*. However, their efforts and in particular, their perspectives were quite disregarded and not included in the priorities of the movements. This seems to be a recurrent dynamic in the Spanish context. As explained by Poros (2008), a similar situation took place in the 90s in the case of labour struggles claims by Moroccan workers, who eventually decided to mobilize autonomously among them. According to the author, the creation of organisational ties among the migrant population was crucial to effectively demand for their rights (Poros, 2008). Similarly, more than 20 years later, migrant and racialized women started not only to consider, but also to take action to organize in non-mixed organisations. This move led to the explicit and even stronger mentioning of decolonial elements in developing their claims and mobilization, emphasizing the decolonial and antiracist character of their feminist positioning. In the same years, economic institutional support started to emerge to sustain the organisations. Between 2017 and 2019, migrant women's movements in Spain gained increasing political prominence, particularly through their involvement in the International Women's Strike and the 8M (8th of March) movement. Alongside other marginalized groups, migrant women played a significant role in introducing the proposal for the first International Feminist Strike, although differences in agendas led some groups to distance themselves from the initiative. This period also saw the rise of anti-racist demonstrations led by racialized people of diverse sexual identities, further amplifying the voices of migrant communities. The formation of the *Migration and Anti-Racism Commission* within the *8M Commission* marked a key development in organizing for the second International Feminist Strike, centering migrant, anti-racist and intersectional struggles. The year 2020 marks the beginning of the pandemic and the related limitations on the ability to meet and plan in-person mobilizations. The Covid-19 pandemic led to a profound transformation of the organizational strategies of

migrants (Martín-Díaz & Castellani, 2022), becoming an opportunity for the renewal and strengthening of the migrant movement in the Spanish context. In the initial phase of the first lockdown in spring 2020, migrant groups spearheaded a coordinated campaign, with backing from Spanish civil society nationwide, to expose the vulnerable situation of migrant households. This movement culminated in the formation of the *#RegularizacionYa* (*#RegularizationNow*) initiative, in which migrant and racialized people took the lead in promoting activities, often working independently from Spanish pro-migrant NGOs (Martín-Díaz & Castellani, 2022). The movement and the campaign have been and are still active today online and offline, bringing together various migrant groups across the country, uniting different struggles. Among these, migrant women's associations stand out, the majority by women from Latin American countries. These groups often have a strong political presence and are deeply committed to decolonial and intersectional perspectives. In addition to Latin American activism, recent research highlights also the participation of Moroccan women, organizing to defend their rights as day laborers (known as *Jornaleras*), and Bangladeshi women focusing on overcoming language barriers and combating social exclusion (Martín-Díaz & Castellani, 2022). Post-pandemic years are characterized by a consolidation of the process of political protagonism started in 2016. Such development has been possible thanks to a more progressive political context, the support via public funding from national and local governments and by feminist funds such as *Calala*, and most of all, migrant women owned initiatives.

## 6. Intersectionality in discourses on violence in migrant women's movements in Spain

In Spain, as in other contexts, migrant women's groups and associations generally emerge around a specific migratory network or a set of them. While on one side, they facilitate the first stage of integration into the host society and function in practice as mutual support groups similar to other migrant associations and groups; on the other, in groups of women the gender identity plays a crucial role in building connections and relations and also in setting the groups' agenda and the strategies to pursue it.

In its research on migrant women movements, *Calala Feminist Fund* in 2020 identifies 87 collectives, associations, and networks exclusively made up of migrant and racialized women, operating in at least 12 Autonomous Communities of the Spanish State. The document aims at providing a genealogy of the movement and a mapping of its distribution in the territory, together with its main characteristics, goals, and strategies of action. The information shared by *Calala* are particularly relevant because they are the result of a process of co-creation to which 89 migrant racialized women from different collectives participated. Among the organisations and the participants to the survey it is possible to identify an overrepresentation of Latin American women and, in smaller part, associations composed by women of African or Arab origins. According to *Calala's* investigation the three main areas of work of the associations are socio-political advocacy, interventions and direct support to the migrant community and the use of art/artivism as a tool for education, mobilization, and social advocacy (Calala, 2020).

As already underlined, the main and well-known points around which migrant women have organized their struggle are the questions of regularisation and migration related struggles and rights, actions in support of domestic, agriculture and sex workers rights, and the effort to deal with racism and (neo)colonial issues. These themes resulted more specifically in the political objectives shared by many migrant women's collectives which, in the last years, have revolved around the advocacy work to change the immigration law - Ley de

Extranjería<sup>3</sup> – and the closure and suppression of Migrant Detention Centres (CIES), the ratification of the C189 - Domestic Workers Convention<sup>4</sup> and the end of racist raids imbued with institutional racism, police violence, and the criminalization of racialized people.

In addition to these issues, from my own work of discourse analysis of documents and public declarations of activist groups, associations' social media posts, blogs and reports, and news reports, violence emerges as a crosscutting theme.

According to the analysis provided by *Asociación de Investigación y Especialización Sobre Temas Iberoamericanos* (AIETI) and *RED de Mujeres Latinoamericanas y del Caribe* (2024), between 2003 and 2021 migrant women accounted for 34% of all feminicides (a total of 394). This is a rate of 10 to 11 women per million migrant women residing in Spain, whereas the rate for Spanish women during the same period was between 1.7 and 2 per million.

Given the scale of the phenomenon, it is not surprising that this issue repeatedly emerges in various forms within the discourses of migrant women's groups, collectives, and associations throughout Spain. In particular, this may be due to a lack of interest and meaningful protection from state institutions and policies. Migrant women experiencing GBV, especially those with irregular status, often approach public institutions with fear (AIETI, 2024; McIlwaine, 2022).

As McIlwaine (2022) highlights in her study on the informal and formal resistance practices of Latin American women in the UK, amid pervasive institutional hostility, deep-seated fears, and ineffective state services, migrant organizations serve as crucial safe spaces for survivors of gender-based violence, helping them confront and resist the violence they endure.

In the following pages, I will explore in greater depth how migrant women's organizations develop discourses on violence as a strategy of resistance, providing alternative and intersectional narratives around their experiences and decentering conventional understandings of the state and violence.

It is important to emphasize that while asserting their right to a life free from violence (*derecho a una vida libre de violencia*), their approach strongly reflects an intersectional perspective. This is evident in how they

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<sup>3</sup> Organic Law 4/2000, which regulates the rights and freedoms of foreigners in Spain, has long been criticized by social organizations and migrant movements for its obsolete, exclusionary logic and restrictive nature. Although recent reforms to the Immigration Regulation—set to take effect in May 2025—have been presented by the government as progress, simplifying procedures and reducing waiting times, many collectives highlight their limitations and exclusions. Migrant organizations and rights advocates argue that the reform leaves significant issues unresolved—especially concerning the full regularization of undocumented migrants. One of the main criticisms is that the reform remains framed from a business-oriented perspective, responding primarily to labor market needs rather than prioritizing the human and fundamental rights of migrants. In response, since 2020, the social movement *Regularización Ya!* pushes for an extraordinary regularization process through a participatory Popular Legislative Initiative, one that centers on dignity, inclusion, and real access to rights for all migrants. As regards the topic at stake in this paper, a relevant network of migrant women organisations highlighted that one of the most alarming aspects of the current legal framework is that immigration status continues to determine access to basic rights such as justice or protection from gender-based violence, a situation that disproportionately affects migrant women.

<sup>4</sup> The ILO Convention 189 acknowledges that domestic work remains undervalued and largely invisible. It is work predominantly carried out by women and girls, many of whom come from migrant and disadvantaged backgrounds, making them particularly vulnerable to discrimination, exploitation, and other human rights abuses. The Convention came into force in September 2013, largely thanks to the tireless efforts of domestic workers' organizations around the world, who continue to campaign for its ratification and the incorporation of its principles into national laws and public policies. Despite repeated calls from the ILO since 2013, many governments have yet to ratify the Convention, leaving millions of domestic workers without the protections they deserve. Spain ratified ILO Convention 189 relatively late, on February 28, 2023. Nonetheless, this ratification marked a significant step toward addressing the historical discrimination faced by domestic workers in Spain, recognizing their right to equal treatment and to improved working conditions and social security protections.

theorize the issue, in their practical actions, in their understanding of migrant women's experiences, in the narratives they construct, and ultimately in how they shape their agendas and pursue their goals.

Violence and discrimination are interrelated with the issue of migration, racism, islamophobia, and in particular in the case of Latin American associations, colonialism. Therefore, GBV is tied hand in glove not only with the immigration status, but is experienced in conjunction with, for instance, labour exploitation, economic, sexual, institutional, racist violence. These forms of violence are still not sufficiently recognised and addressed, and when experienced simultaneously contribute to exacerbate migrant women's vulnerability.

The emphasis on the intersectional character of violence in migrant women's lives and the elaboration of claims around it can be clearly grasped by looking at multiple documents, investigations, and statements released by migrant women's association and activists in online and offline settings and events.

This emerges, for instance, in a case of grassroots mobilisation to denounce the lack of state protection of migrant women living in situations of GBV. The campaign #MurosInvisibles (invisible walls), developed by Spanish migrant women's organisations with the support of NGOs and feminist associations, was launched in March 2023 by the Latin American and Caribbean Women's Network and the Association for Research and Specialization on Ibero-American Issues (AIETI). #MurosInvisibles refers to the barriers and obstacles that migrant women encounter in Spain to have access to resources, care and justice in case of GBV, which are invisible to the institutions, officials and functionaries who are responsible for their creation.

Among the novelties in their discourses around GBV, the theme of institutional violence emerges clearly. Violence is framed its institutional roots and its impact in migrant women experiences and the multiple barriers encountered by migrant women living in situations of sexist and GBV in its intersectional traits.

In this regard, of particular relevance are a shadow report presented at the *Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women* (CEDAW) and the draft of a public policy proposal against GBV. The former is the first shadow report that specifically addresses the issue of GBV against migrant women living in Spain. In the document, presented jointly by AIETI, *Red de Mujeres Latinoamericanas y del Caribe*, and *Fundación ASPACIA* at 85th Session of the CEDAW, the organisations provide an intersectional analysis that considers the particular ways in which women with different racial, social, economic, migratory conditions suffer violence, emphasizing the fact that these multiple situations of violence are not addressed properly by the state. An even more interesting document is the statement presenting public policy proposals to address the cases of GBV against migrant women. In the statement, the signatories emphasize that in the case of GBV against foreign women the immigration status conditions the access to resources and protection and that this "is a form of discrimination, which is intersectional". Violence in its intersections with migration is produced and perpetuated in ways that are not taken into account neither by existing national laws on GBV, nor by migration and asylum legislation and procedures. Lastly, the campaign and the collectively elaborated documents, make clear the intersectional character of the violence and insecurities that migrant women have to face in the Spanish context, also with reference to the structural dimensions of racism and the impact of the intersection of racist and gender stereotypes in their access and relationship with institutions and services. The violence experienced by migrant women is framed and narrated starting from their personal experiences, becoming a material and concrete concept rather than an abstract definition.

This intersectional approach to the issue of violence fosters an openness to considering its multifaceted nature, in ways that diverge from — or rather, complicate — the mainstream perspectives on often found in the policies, discourses, and practices of Western/white feminist movements.

An additional aspect that caught my attention is the strong connection between the various forms of violence women experience on multiple levels and how these impact their children. In this case, the focus is not only

on the violence implied by the separation of a mother and child when, for social and political reasons, she decides to leave her country in search of better living conditions, but also on the consequences of the intersectional vulnerabilities that arise when they live together in the host country. Investigations such as the one recently carried out by AIETI (*Asociación de Investigación y Especialización sobre Temas Iberoamericanos*) on “the protection of migrant children against violence in Spain” clearly highlights the importance of considering migrant children as victims<sup>5</sup> of gender violence and the need for training professionals on the topic of gender violence from an intersectional perspective, to be able to provide better protection to migrant women and their children (AIETI, 2024). The lack of an intersectional perspective makes it difficult for migrant women to be recognised as victims of gender violence but at the same time, it does not allow the judicial system and specialized social services (both in childhood and gender violence) to take into account the barriers and specific circumstances experienced by children of migrant origin, who are victims of gender violence. This may result in cases in which the children are forced to go to a center or to the abuser’s extended family, which often facilitates contact between the minors and the abuser. This investigation and others such as the one by *Calala* in 2020, but also migrant women’s groups, highlight that the lack of recognition of the violence affecting migrant women and their children is often the result of institutional violence. In this specific case it regards, for example, Spanish institutions and their officers’ understanding of maternity which takes as point of reference an “ideal victim” and a “good mother” who is a Spanish citizen legally residing in the country, with a stable economic situation, who knows the language and for whom is relatively easy to deal with Spanish institutions and services. Institutional resources are designed and therefore allocated to these women, cutting out migrant women who oftentimes do not fit this stereotype. This may lead to the removal of child custody for many migrant women. This latter point is framed by migrant women collectives such as *Colectiva Madrecitas* in Barcelona as a form of institutional, patriarchal and racist violence against migrant mothers.

Lastly, a peculiar character of migrant women’s framing around violence, reflected in their claims, is its cross-temporal and transnational character. Indeed, violence is treated as an issue related to migrant women’s lives in Spain and throughout their migration trajectories, but they also mobilize and are committed to spot the light on the different forms of violence that women and their community endure in their country of origin. In this way, different forms, temporalities (Adami, 2024) and locations of violence come together in their understanding of the concept and in how they mobilize around it. This element underlines how relevant it is to frame migrant women’s experiences of violence in a continuum of violence (Phillimore et al., 2022; Sahraoui and Freedman, 2022) as theorized broadly by feminist scholars. The concept of gendered “continuum of violence” (Kelly, 1988), re-elaborated by Cockburn (2004; 2014) as a temporal and spatial continuum, addresses violence relationally in different spheres of social reproduction (Gentry, Shepherd and Sjoberg, 2018), pointing at the different layers of violence and linking the personal with the international (True and Tanyag 2018).

## 6. Conclusion

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<sup>5</sup> I use the term victim because it is the one used in the investigation I’m referring to. However, I underline that there currently is a debate on the adequate terminology to use in these instances, with some preferring the word survivor to the word victim.

The issue of violence in the context of migration processes, though recognized, often remains the “elephant in the room” in both public and academic debates on migration. This article brings the topic to the forefront, offering an alternative perspective that emphasizes the need to examine violence against migrant women in all its complexity. To achieve this, it advocates for moving beyond the focus on migration-related violence during transit and border-crossing, expanding the analysis to include the context of resettlement.

Additionally, it highlights the importance of considering the acts of resistance that emerge in response to violence, in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of migrant women’s experiences. In this direction, the article also proposes an intersectional approach, which entails examining migrant women’s experiences by analyzing how multiple forms of oppression are co-constituted and shape their subjectivities, lived experiences, definitions of violence, and strategies of resistance. To do so, it calls for a multidimensional analysis that relationally considers the micro, meso, and macro levels involved in this issue.

To explore violence against migrant women, the discussion focused on the meso-level dimension, analyzing how women resist violence through the construction of their own discourse within migrant women’s groups in Spain. This perspective connects intersectionality to its roots in social justice movements, centering voices and struggles that are often rendered invisible by dominant discourses.

The paper highlights how, since their earliest mobilizations, migrant women have shed light on the issue of violence, demonstrating that they are not passive in the face of widespread social and institutional hostility. Furthermore, their reflexive, critical, and intersectional narratives constitute a form of situated knowledge that provides alternative forms of denunciation and resistance, as well as the groundwork for bottom-up solutions. Migrant women’s mobilizations and claims regarding violence not only contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the issue but also expose the limitations of existing laws, policies, and civil society responses. This reaffirms the importance of addressing violence within the broader context of intersecting social inequalities, which are often embedded in policies and laws yet remain overlooked in theory, policymaking, and research. In a context where discussions on GBV are primarily led by the state, feminist movements, and third-sector organizations, it is crucial to examine how migrant women, based on their specific experiences and social positions, construct their own narratives on this issue. Their work is particularly significant in showing how autonomous organizing spaces, such as migrant women’s groups, foster the creation of counter-publics where they develop counter-hegemonic visions and articulate their claims.

In conclusion, migrant women’s collective framing of violence reveals alternative discourses and forms of political action and mobilization. Their perspectives contribute to a broader and deeper understanding of both migrant women’s experiences and resistance, as well as to a more nuanced conceptualization of GBV.

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