



MIGRANTS  
REFUGEES

**International Congress on 'Women on the Move.  
Violence and Displacement in Five Regions of Africa'**

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**MIGRANT AND REFUGEE WOMEN  
A Constant Concern in the Universal Magisterium**

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I would like to start by thanking the organizers of the International Congress on 'Women on the Move. Violence and Displacement in Five Regions of Africa' for inviting the Migrants & Refugees Section of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development to contribute to the discussion on challenges and possible solutions.

In my contribution, I intend to present and briefly comment on a selection of official texts that acknowledge the special vulnerability of migrant and refugee women and call for prompt and adequate action. Most of the texts introduce general reflections and recommendations, which apply perfectly well to the geographical context of our concern: Africa.

The contribution follows the '4 verbs' - to welcome, to protect, to promote and to integrate -, which, according to Pope Francis, constitute the response of the Catholic Church to the pastoral challenges posed by

Millions of migrant workers, male and female - and among these particularly men and women in irregular situations - of those exiled and seeking asylum, and of those who are victims of trafficking. Defending their inalienable rights, ensuring their fundamental freedoms and respecting their dignity are duties from which no one can be exempted. Protecting these brothers and sisters is a moral imperative.<sup>1</sup>

## **Welcoming Migrant and Refugee Women**

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, *Address to Participants in the International Forum on 'Migration and Peace,'* 21 February 2017.

Welcoming means essentially enhancing safe and legal channels for migrants and refugees. Such an enhancement would start with the provision of sound and certified information before the decision to migrate is taken. In this regard, in 1995 St. John Paul II warned:

Due vigilance must also be exercised in the countries of origin, since, taking advantage of the reduction of legal migration channels, unreliable organizations push young women onto the streets of illegal expatriation, flattering them with the prospect of success, not without having first robbed them of their accumulated and hard-earned savings. The fate which many of them are meeting is known and sad: rejected at the border, they often find themselves dragged, in spite of themselves, into the disgrace of prostitution.<sup>2</sup>

Welcoming migrants and refugees also means offering responsible and dignified accommodation and basic services. The enormous mass movements of persons seeking asylum and of refugees has not produced positive results. Instead these movements have created new situations of vulnerability and hardship, particularly for women and children. In his Message for the 2018 World Day for Migrants and Refugees, Pope Francis chose to emphasise

The importance of offering migrants and refugees adequate and dignified initial accommodation. More widespread programmes of welcome, already initiated in different places, seem to favour a personal encounter and allow for greater quality of service and increased guarantees of success". [...] For the sake of the fundamental dignity of every human person, we must strive to find alternative solutions to detention for those who enter a country without authorisation.<sup>3</sup>

In emergency situations - and too often beyond the emergency - retention camps become home to thousands of displaced people, asylum seekers and refugees. In these camps women are frequently discriminated against, with no chance to express their concerns and be included in the decision making process. The 2013 Pastoral Guidelines 'Welcoming Christ in Refugees and Forcibly Displaced Persons,' jointly issued by the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People and Pontifical Council 'Cor Unum', state: "It is also necessary to assure the participation of refugee women in camp administration as a way of guaranteeing sufficient attention especially to problems affecting them and children."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> St. John Paul II, *Messaggio per la Giornata Mondiale dell'Emigrazione 1995*, 3. The original text recites: "Una doverosa vigilanza deve essere esercitata anche nei Paesi di provenienza, poiché, approfittando della riduzione dei canali di emigrazione legale, organizzazioni inaffidabili spingono giovani donne sulle vie dell'espatrio clandestino, lusingandole con la prospettiva del successo, non senza averle prima depredate dei risparmi accumulati con sacrificio. La sorte a cui molte di esse vanno incontro è nota e triste: respinte alla frontiera, si ritrovano spesso trascinate, loro malgrado, nel disonore della prostituzione." The translation is by the author.

<sup>3</sup> Pope Francis, *Message for the 104<sup>th</sup> World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2018*, 15 August 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People - Pontifical Council 'Cor Unum,' *Welcoming Christ in Refugees and Forcibly Displaced Persons*, Vatican City 2013, 65.

## Protecting Migrant and Refugee Women

The second verb - to protect - refers to the actions needed to protect migrants and refugees from the violence, abuse and exploitation that they often fall victim to, because of their extreme vulnerability. And this is particularly true for women.

Looking at the African continent, women's vulnerability is often inherent in the very configuration of the societies of origin. And this situation is made more severe by the migration process. As St. John Paul II stated in 1995:

The Church deplors and condemns, to the extent that they are still found in some African societies, all the customs and practices which deprive women of their rights and the respect due to them. It is recommended that Episcopal Conferences establish special commissions to study further women's problems in cooperation with interested government agencies, wherever this is possible.<sup>5</sup>

In the same year St. John Paul II decided to dedicate his Message for the World Migration Day to women on the move, highlighting a series of vulnerabilities related to specific situations, as the one of unmarried migrant women:

Unmarried women, increasingly numerous among migrants, deserve particular pastoral care. Their condition requires not only solidarity and reception from responsible agencies, but also protection and defence from abuse and exploitation.<sup>6</sup>

In 2005, Pope Benedict XVI, acknowledging the increasing presence of women in labor migration, stressed the vulnerability of migrant women within the labor market of receiving countries:

It often happens that the migrant woman becomes the principal source of income for her family. It is a fact that the presence of women is especially prevalent in sectors that offer low salaries. If, then, migrant workers are particularly vulnerable, this is even more so in the case of women.<sup>7</sup>

In 2015 Pope Francis, addressing the Diplomatic Corps Accredited to the Holy See, called their attention to the vulnerable situation of many refugee women in Africa:

Of particular concern, too, is the situation in South Sudan and in some areas of Sudan, the Horn of Africa and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where civilian casualties are on the rise and thousands of persons, including many women and

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<sup>5</sup> St. John Paul II, *Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation 'Ecclesia in Africa,'* 14 September 1995, 82.

<sup>6</sup> St. John Paul II, *Messaggio per la Giornata Mondiale dell'Emigrazione 1995,* 2. The original text recites: "Particolare sollecitudine pastorale deve essere riservata alle donne non sposate, sempre più numerose all'interno del fenomeno migratorio. La loro condizione richiede da parte dei responsabili non solo solidarietà e accoglienza, ma anche protezione e tutela da abusi e sfruttamenti." The translation is by the author.

<sup>7</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Message for the 92<sup>nd</sup> World Day of Migrants and Refugees,* 18 October 2005.

children, are being forced to flee and to endure conditions of extreme distress. I voice my hope for a common commitment on the part of individual governments and the international community to end every form of fighting, hatred and violence, and to pursue reconciliation, peace and the defence of the transcendent dignity of the person.<sup>8</sup>

Unscrupulous criminals take advantage of women's vulnerability in the country of origin, aiming at fuelling the highly profitable business of human trafficking:

In this context it is necessary to mention trafficking in human beings - especially women - which flourishes where opportunities to improve their standard of living or even to survive are limited. It becomes easy for the trafficker to offer his own "services" to the victims, who often do not even vaguely suspect what awaits them. In some cases there are women and girls who are destined to be exploited almost like slaves in their work, and not infrequently in the sex industry, too.<sup>9</sup>

### **Promoting Migrant and Refugee Women**

In 1995 St. John Paul II, addressing the Catholics of Africa, saw the need to remind that

In creating the human race 'male and female', God gives man and woman an equal personal dignity, endowing them with inalienable rights and responsibilities proper to the human person. The Synod deplored those African customs and practices which deprive women of their rights and the respect due to them and asked the Church on the Continent to make every effort to foster the safeguarding of these rights.<sup>10</sup>

The lack of opportunity to achieve integral human development - often linked to prejudices, cultural constraints and traditional abusive practices - push many women to look for opportunities abroad:

Public authorities cannot ignore the many and often serious reasons that push so many women to leave their country of origin. Not only does the need for more opportunities underlie their decision; they are often pushed by the need to escape cultural, social or religious conflicts, inveterate traditions of exploitation, unjust or discriminatory legalization, to give only some examples.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Pope Francis, *Address to the Members of the Diplomatic Corps Accredited to the Holy See*, 12 January 2015

<sup>9</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Message for the 92<sup>nd</sup> World Day of Migrants and Refugees*, 18 October 2005.

<sup>10</sup> St. John Paul II, *Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation 'Ecclesia in Africa'*, 14 September 1995, 82.

<sup>11</sup> St. John Paul II, *Messaggio per la Giornata Mondiale dell'Emigrazione 1995*, 4. The original text states: "I pubblici poteri non possono dimenticare le molteplici e spesso gravi motivazioni che spingono tante donne a lasciare il proprio Paese d'origine. Non vi è soltanto il bisogno di maggiori opportunità all'origine della loro decisione; esse sono spinte non di rado dalla necessità di sfuggire a conflitti culturali, sociali o religiosi, a inveterate tradizioni di sfruttamento, a legalizzazioni ingiuste o discriminatorie, per non fare che alcune esemplificazioni." The translation is by the author.

In African situations marked by forced migration, the promotion of women's dignity constitutes an urgent challenge, since being foreigners in their new location is likely to increase the gender discrimination they generally suffer. This is also true in the labour market, as St. John Paul noted in 1995:

The recent phenomenon of the increased prevalence of women in emigration requires, therefore, a change of perspective in the formulation of related policies. There is an urgent need to guarantee women equal treatment regarding both remuneration and the conditions of work and security. It will thus be easier to prevent the risk of discrimination against migrants in general being particularly intense against women.<sup>12</sup>

### **Integrating Migrant and Refugee Women**

The verb *to integrate* refers to reciprocal processes involving both migrants and local communities in an enriching cultural exchange. The importance of the family dimension of the integration process was highlighted by Pope Benedict XVI in 2010:

The future of our societies rests upon the meeting between peoples, upon dialogue between cultures with respect for identity and legitimate differences. In this scenario, the family retains its fundamental role. [Family] is a place and resource of the culture of life and a factor for the integration of values.<sup>13</sup>

And one should acknowledge the specific role of women within the family, to whose development they largely contribute with their genius and love. Moreover, the protection and care of every new life, in its very beginning, are totally entrusted to women.<sup>14</sup> Therefore investing in women's integration is investing in family integration and in migrants' integration as well. In this regard, in 1995 St. John Paul II stressed the importance to promote

The development of tools to facilitate the insertion and cultural and professional training of women, as well as their participation in the benefits of social measures, such as allocation of living spaces, school assistance for children and appropriate tax relief.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> St. John Paul II, *Messaggio per la Giornata Mondiale dell'Emigrazione 1995*, 4. The original text recites: "Il recente fenomeno di una più larga presenza della donna in emigrazione richiede, pertanto, un cambiamento di prospettiva nell'impostazione delle relative politiche ed emerge l'urgenza di garantire anche alle donne la parità di trattamento, sia per la retribuzione, sia per le condizioni di lavoro e di sicurezza. Sarà così più facile prevenire il rischio che la discriminazione nei confronti dei migranti in generale tenda ad accanirsi particolarmente contro la donna." The translation is by the author.

<sup>13</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Address to Participants in the Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People*, 28 May 2010.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. St. John Paul II, *Letter to Mrs. Gertrude Mongella, Secretary General of the Fourth World Conference on Women of the United Nations*, 26 May 1995, 3.

<sup>15</sup> St. John Paul II, *Messaggio per la Giornata Mondiale dell'Emigrazione 1995*, 4. The original text states: "Si impone inoltre la messa a punto di strumenti atti a facilitare l'inserimento e la formazione

There are some situations in which the integration - or reintegration - process requires extra efforts, due to specific vulnerabilities and traumas. This is the case of the survivors of human trafficking, and particularly women who have been trafficked for sexual exploitation:

Trafficked sexually-exploited women are worthy of special protection. A residence permit is necessary for them to start a new life. In case they desire to return home, they need to have access to financial aid, preferably in the form of micro-credit, to facilitate their reintegration, while measures to overcome discrimination should also be taken and sufficient protection must be in place to prevent the victims from falling again into the hands of traffickers, who are frequently known in their place of origin.<sup>16</sup>

## Conclusion

The texts presented above are part of the Church's magisterium, its official teaching. They clearly show how migration is likely to increase the vulnerability that women customarily experience in their society of origin. Sadly, abuses, exploitation and discrimination are frequent features in the daily life of migrant and refugee women.

Any action aiming at welcoming, protecting, promoting and integrating migrant and refugee women correspond to what is owed to all women. Therefore it is crucial to include - as much as possible - all women with similar vulnerability and problems in the programs and services, independently from their nationality.

As Pope Francis stated in 2017, referring to the protection of migrants and refugees, coordination is a key condition for the success of all actions aiming at protecting, restoring and promoting the dignity of migrant and refugee women; he calls for "coordinating the efforts of all actors, among which, you may be assured will always be the Church."<sup>17</sup>

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culturale e professionale della donna, nonché la sua partecipazione ai benefici dei provvedimenti sociali, quali l'assegnazione della casa, l'assistenza scolastica per i figli ed adeguati sgravi fiscali." The translation is by the author.

<sup>16</sup> Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People - Pontifical Council 'Cor Unum,' *Welcoming Christ in Refugees and Forcibly Displaced Persons*, Vatican City 2013, 73.

<sup>17</sup> Pope Francis, *Address to Participants In the International Forum on 'Migration and Peace'*, 21 February 2017.