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The migrations of black African women to Europe, who cares?



Sources: South wind

On July 18, 2018, the face of Josepha (40), with her gaze fixed on nowhere and a gesture of horror, jumped to the mass media and social networks. Her head and shoulders barely protruded from the water as she was held by a member of Open Arms. Saved by floating next to a destroyed inflatable boat and the corpses of two other women and a child.

On November 11, 2020, Open Arms again rescued the survivors of the shipwreck of an inflatable boat. Again, through networks and televisions, we received the desperate cries of a woman who had lost her baby, Joseph, in the shipwreck. "I lost my baby! Where is my

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baby!" she screamed in anguish. For a couple of days the video went viral. For a few days that iconic image of an unnamed African mother who had lost her baby in a shipwreck would be present. Clarify that given the reinforcement of control operations of the European agency Frontex and the lower investment in rescue actions, NGOs like this have had to start rescuing migrants in the central Mediterranean. And they've been criminalized for it.

Captures of extreme drama. Two brushstrokes of a part of the discourses on migrant women that reconstruct the hegemonic media, where the humanitarian gaze is mixed and intersected, generating pity for the suffering of others, with the spectacularization of horror and morbidity that wins audiences. Dramas often decontextualized, without apparent explanation, served in seconds, of rapid consumption and that hardly invite reflection. That move more or less, depending on the degree of closeness with which the victims are perceived and the impact produced by the spectularity of the images.

A representation that focuses and hardly corresponds to the most specific facts of a very complex phenomenon such as migrations. In this case, we are talking about the migrations of women from black Africa mostly, although there are also black Maghrebi women. Women mostly invisible in the media narrative about migration from African countries, while fitting into certain stereotypes. In that story those who migrate are young men. The women wait, they are left in the care of the families, the house. They wait until they can be regrouped or the male returns. Although migrations at the global level are distributed equitably, the construct of the male provider and actor of migration remains well rooted. As much as the image of the woman caregiver who waits, as Dolores Juliano (2010) explains. On African women, Remei Sipi states that African women "are neither the idealized fruitful and generous mothers, nor the poor subjugated women given to marriage at puberty, among other things" (2004:40).

But about them there is a story with a significant burden of racism and sexism, where it is difficult to find something that reads or presents these women (nor men) as complex beings with a life that deserves to be lived. For the dominant narrative they are immigrants in an irregular situation, that is, outside the law, who are rarely linked to the right to asylum and refuge, mothers or about to be, always under the suspicion of being victims of trafficking, victims of sexual violence, but also at the limit of criminality for exercising

prostitution. A reconstruction between victimization and the criminal, black, poor, illiterate, fruitful, submissive, innocent, but which must be distrusted, who comes pregnant to be able to stay or is pregnant by the mafias to facilitate their reception, consumer of resources in all cases. Which must be helped and controlled at the same time.

Presented from that perspective where a violent gender system and a structurally racist system intersect, it is located in a well-defined mandate of black women, determined by their capacity for reproduction, their heteronormative sexuality at the service or violated by men, without any capacity for agency.

A portrait that, in the first place, would generate that compassionate look that before being given is already exhausted, by the repeated reproduction of similar images. The so-called compassionate fatigue, the limited ability to feel compassion in the face of the misfortunes of others. The greater the number, the more the desensitization grows, we also get used to the horror, we get tired, we cannot assume endless misfortunes.

Therefore, in this media representation of migrations, a compassionate look is given. But it is a humanitarian perspective that does not imply responsibility, as Buraschi and Aguilar (2019) affirm. It does not invite the recipient to act or question what is happening. Rather, it discharges responsibility in the face of a humanitarian drama to which, apparently, there is no individual responsibility and the collective responsibility is far away.

Often, that representation underlies the idea of placing the responsibility for their own misfortune on migrants. Of them is the decision to migrate and get into those situations, where they know they can die. And yet, they insist on doing so. This narrative carries implicit the idea that naturalizes the possibility of death when migrating. It normalizes the loss of life as a very possible option of migrations. However, critical analyses suggest that these restrictive measures ultimately cause deaths. They are caused by these migration and border policies that systematically deny visas to almost all countries on the African continent, this lack of safe ways to migrate or the veto on free movement, administered as a privilege for people recognized as citizens in Western countries. Therefore, also victims, now of their recklessness.

A re-victimization that nullifies their decision-making power. And that doesn't explain anything. In the words of Eduardo Romero, an incessant and mediatic trivialization. That dehumanizes people, opens the way to hate speech (when it does not reproduce and generates them) and, ultimately, builds explanatory frameworks for the denial of aid at sea, the refusal to give asylum, the normalization of death for trying to seek a better life, the millionaire investment in military technology and control agencies with Frontex at the head. As Helena Maleno defines it, it contributes to recreating the threat, fueling fear and justifying migratory necropolitics focused on security and border control, even if it means letting thousands of people die. At the moment the sea routes to the Canary Islands are among the most dangerous migration routes.

And, if we strip them of their quality as people, if we turn them into migrants who try to break into our territory, if we dehumanize them ... what does it matter what happens to them or how they are treated? Does anyone care that they have fundamental rights that are violated?

Why talk about these issues? Why try to know what is behind that grotesque representation that nothing explains and fixes imaginaries that would end up being difficult to transform?

War on migrants. Structural and constituent racisms

Because we have a problem of institutional racism that treats them as criminals from the moment they arrive in European territory, Spanish, if they get it at all. The organization Ca-Minando Fronteras (2021) counts 4,404 dead people trying to reach Spain in 2021. 12 people a day.

If your trip passes through Ceuta or Melilla, the Temporary Stay Center for Immigrants (CETI) awaits you. They can spend months immobilized until they are transferred to the peninsula. Or not. Before they have spent a great time stranded in Morocco, an experience that sometimes they do not want to name, where these women and men, mostly from West and Central Africa, would be the most undesirable group of migrants (Tyszler, 2020).

If they manage to reach the Canary Islands, after a journey that can last days, rescued by an increasingly precarious Maritime Rescue service **1** / or because they manage to reach port, the welcome will be that they are interned in police units for three days, often without legal assistance, without due information of what happens, to be identified. To paraphrase Maleno, those who are survivors of a shipwreck are de facto treated as criminals. Neither psychological assistance, nor dignified reception that allows people to recover.

A system that will assume that these women are victims of trafficking. This poses at least two problems. On the one hand, a question that deserves a separate article, for how this problem is approached from the legal, the police, the social and also the academic. The normalization of the discourse that most of these women are victims of trafficking, making invisible, erasing, almost without leaving room to think that they have their own migratory projects, that they travel by their own decision. That many are free in the context of a clandestine journey, even when they seek the protection of a fellow traveler in exchange for sex. That sometimes they themselves and the families themselves in origin are aware that they travel inserted in a trafficking network, because they have no other possibility of leaving the country.

A system that will proceed to carry out DNA tests to verify that they are mothers of the creatures they bring. That, if not, will almost certainly ignore the social customs of the countries of departure or the conditions of the trip. Where kinship has little to do with what is understood in white Europe by family, much more restricted. And if, for example, they are creatures of other women who have entrusted them with their guardianship, they will be separated from them.

Survivors of an imposed clandestine journey, as it is virtually impossible to get a visa in any country in Africa

A first reception system that will probably treat them from the category of black African migrants in an irregular situation. In the Canary Islands, the overcrowding to which migrants were subjected, without informing them of their situation, empties the words welcome and dignity of content (Buraschi and Aguilar, 2022: 117). Without psychological

support that allows them to manage the stress, the shock that can cause them what they experienced on the trip, at sea ... That is, treated as racialized, poor, less.

Survivors of an imposed clandestine trip, since it is practically impossible to get a visa in any country in Africa, where they have faced violence from fellow travelers, border police or traffickers.

For all these reasons, we have a problem of structural, institutional, social racism, which will not allow us to perceive and treat these women as people with decision-making capacity, adults, independent, masters of their destiny. Understand and accept that they are women weakened by a racist system that they have to confront. Precarious and interdependent, who need support, recognition of rights and solidarity, but not guardianship or overprotection or contempt from a white, ethnocentric, often unconscious superiority. Perhaps for this reason more dangerous and difficult to dismantle.

Counting to humanize

Faced with this discriminatory phenomenon, where racism, sexism and classism weave that tangle, we share again with Helena Maleno that, to resist and confront it, a strategy would be to collect and count, to tell the lives. In this case it is what we try to do from feminist anthropology, because migrations cannot be understood without gender analysis (Gregorio, 2011) and anti-racism. Even if it is fragmentary, through *patchwork* ethnography, we try to see what happens in the lives of those women in transit. In the words of Eduardo Romero, in the face of the radical decontextualization of these narratives, it would be a matter of reconstructing the trajectories of migrants, women in our case. The Iranian anthropologist Shahram Khosravi does so from his own experience as a migrant in his book *I am border*.

In July 2021, An (36) and Ese (21) remained in a centre for vulnerable people and families run by the Red Cross in Santa Cruz de Tenerife. Both of them, jaded, nervous, angry, aware that their rights were being violated and that they were entangled in a tangle of bureaucracy and disinformation that did not allow them to continue their journey. Blocked for two months. They demanded their passports to continue. They didn't have it. In the absence of identification, the reception staff had told them that they had to apply for

asylum in order to continue. But the appointment did not come. Day after day. The reference person of the Red Cross gave long, that the police were very busy ...

An was an empowered woman, aware of the situation of violation and the lack of diligence in the delay of giving them an appointment with the police, which would allow her to express her willingness to request asylum in the State. Without a perceptible accent of her origin, in her perfect French to an's ears, her way of expressing herself and her political conscience did not refer precisely to our Western imaginary of black African women, that is, treated, poor, illiterate, weak or victims of insurmountable or permanent and determining evils (Aguirre and Bullen, 2022).

There are many testimonies of migrants testifying that they are not provided with the legal assistance to which they are entitled in this process (Barbero and Donadio, 2019). They are then referred to devices in the reception system. In a pandemic situation, we have attended the reception organized in the Canary Islands, about which the users themselves have filed more than one complaint about the living conditions in the reception shelters and on which the Ombudsman's Office or associations such as Iridia have formulated reports on the violation of rights in the reception carried out in 2020 in the archipelago.

"*On nous a libéré*" (we have been released) said many migrants who had passed through the Canary Islands, when they arrived at the internal border between Irun and Hendaye. Immigration controls have been going on there since 2015 and since 2020 they have been uninterrupted. There are seven people who have died in this area trying to continue their journey north.

In the Canary Islands it seems that the reception crisis of 2006 did not help the institutions to organize a better reception system on the islands. That time, the arrival of migrants was called *the crisis of cayucos*, reversing with a rhetorical turn the weight of responsibility for what happened and placing it on migrants.

Let's not forget Ceuta and Melilla. Although at the moment it is a secondary route compared to that of the Canary Islands, from various human rights organizations, such as Migreurop, Melilla has been called, for example, as a laboratory for possible control policies in European territory. Researchers such as Claire Rodier (2013) point out the

multimillion-dollar businesses that European investments in this territory represent for the military industry.

Given the institutional and media discourses interested in focusing on human trafficking, mainly for the purpose of sexual exploitation and also on trafficking, we share with Khosravi the problematizing view on human trafficking. While these stories insist on showing the mafias and traffickers as the cause of the deaths and unwanted arrival of migrants, the role of traffickers should be taken into account. For many migrants it is the only way to make or continue the journey. Without romanticizing their existence or denying the abuses and thefts they can commit, *passeurs (smugglers)* can become the only alternative for migration.

In the question at hand, we understand borders or, rather, the border regime as a physical, legal, cultural, symbolic, tangible and intangible device, fixed, mobile ..., a tangle, in short, ranging from the sophistication of military technologies to the perversity of administrative and bureaucratic gear with the capacity to produce clandestine, vulnerable subjects, criminalized, outlawed...

Africa is also entangled by that border regime organised by the European Union. Hence, in the practice already established, the European policy is that of zero visas to be able to travel to Europe. Why, if not, would thousands of people risk (and lose) their lives every year? The report of the Association for Human Rights of Andalusia (APDHA) of 2022 shows that death also has gender. According to him, 10% of the arrivals in Frontera Sur correspond to women. While 5% of men die trying, among women 10% perish along the way.

That is to say, the migration and border necropolitics applied by the European Union and its border member countries are more focused on economic issues in the field of the military industry, on security propaganda for their electoral audiences, on the production of vulnerable or disposable subjects that can be exploited. If they perish on the journey, it matters little. If they reach their destination, we have produced vulnerable people who will be inserted into the most precarious economic niches.

African migrations

In the context of a political and media narrative where the African continent, if left to it, would be prepared to invade Europe, UN reports or research papers on African migrations that say otherwise contrast. Migrations would be circular and 75% of people on the move would do so within the continent. Porous borders, social, economic, urban-demographic, environmental and conflict factors are the causes listed in these circular migrations.

In a myriad of reasons that intervene in the migration process, in addition to the factors that pull and push to emigrate, the FAO (2020) emphasizes that motivations that highlight the agency of people who emigrate are often left aside. What is often depicted as erratic wandering would not quite explain today's African migrations. Factors based on economic, cultural and social expectations that go beyond economic needs. Migrations from African countries are mostly male. And most women who migrate are regrouped by their husbands. So much for the official statistics.

These migratory projects would be crossed by gender, the constituent matrix of their displacements.

Invisible, the reality of many women forced to face clandestine trips. Traveling alone or accompanied by a man since departure, may be a *porteur*, or someone with whom they have crossed paths on the trip and with whom they have agreed to sex in exchange for protection. Also women who meet on the road and accompany each other during the trip.

The fieldwork has allowed us to verify the diversity between them and the variety of reasons that lead them to migrate. Following Domínguez Olazábal *et al.*, these migratory projects would be crossed by gender, the constituent matrix of their displacements. Thus, we find among the outlawed travelers (Aguirre and Bullen, 2022) and sometimes forced to immobility and sometimes to the constant movement (*ibid.*), women fleeing forced marriages, the certainty of the cutting of their daughters, a situation of poverty after being widowed, daughters who are claimed by their mothers in Europe, women fleeing the threat of death because they are lesbians, women who leave their country due to gender violence, daughters claimed by their mother who have the irregular route as their only option, women who go to meet a sister, others who travel barely without contacts, who leave radically to the adventure ...

In this scenario, migration and border externalization policies play a fundamental role. It is these that influence the changes of migratory routes to Europe. When the central Mediterranean closes in 2018, the Southern Border route, the Atlantic route of the Canary Islands, is reinforced. Also the political and economic situation of the issuing countries. In 2015, Nigerian women had a special role. It also treats her. Already in 2018 there are the majority of women arriving from Guinea Conakry, Ivory Coast, Cameroon or Senegal.

2020 has been an especially tough year on the Atlantic route. Arrivals in the Canary Islands have been managed as if migrants had never arrived before. The reports of the Ombudsman's Office have denounced the plight to which migrants arriving on the islands have been subjected. Nor this time the work of the media has gone in the line of humanizing and normalizing these arrivals, but rather the opposite (Martínez Corcuera and Aguirre Larreta, 2021). The headlines that have reported on this immigration have focused on the arrivals or the conflict generated in the islands. Save or intercept victims from their own decisions. After some apparently informative headlines, the interpretation of the facts is presented in mental frameworks of understanding that connect with the racist and sexist mental structures in which we are built.

In contrast, and after the invasion of Ukraine, the adequate reception of refugees being carried out by the European Union is striking, as well as the media treatment that is being done of it in general. In the words of the journalist expert in migration Nicolás Castellano, it is the first time that an equal reception has been attended. As for the media narrative, the journalist affirms that from the first moment the causes and the need for help have been explained to the population. Here, discursive and institutional racism has disappeared.

Meanwhile, black African women and men continue to advance on the mined path that Europe is preparing for them. And on that path, in addition to violence, there are also movements and people in solidarity who try to help them in that journey. Proof of this are the citizen networks that have been created since 2018, for example in the Basque Country, the French border with Irun, the Canary Islands, the Italian-French border in the Alps, etc. Another (in)visible reality to explore.

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Note:

1/. <https://www.lamarea.com/2019/06/21/helena-maleno-sobre-la-nueva-politica-de-pedro-sanchez-sobre-pateras-son-las-medidas-de-salvini-pero-maquilladas/>

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