

The Gender of Migrations in the European Union: From the Single European Act (1986) to the Present

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ABSTRACT

The Single European Act (1986) was a major step in the organization of mobilities within and toward the European Community. It also corresponded with the rapidly growing presence of migrant women, who experienced new mobilities, as well as broadened their professional opportunities and life choices. Student mobility was encouraged, with women taking advantage in particular. In the case of women from former communist bloc countries, migration has become a way of preserving the social role and professional identities they lost after the fall of communism, while women from Africa and Asia were able to gain new social status through this mobility. However, the return of major geopolitical crises today has exposed many women to economic difficulty, preventing some from migrating, while forcing others to do so.



Syrian woman with two children leaving the Moria refugee camp in Lesbos, Greece, November 2, 2019. Photo : Jean-Luc RICHARD, Institut Convergences Migrations, November 2019.

countries, five of which were seen as countries of immigration, and one as a country of emigration (Italy). In this emerging European Economic Community, women, who represented a small minority of overall migrants, generally had a rate of labor force participation 30 percentage point below that of men. The Single European Act of 1986 was a major step in the organization of mobilities within and toward the European Community. These mobilities followed global trends, as nearly half of all migrants today are women (48.6%), with the movements being less for family and more for personal and independent reasons (Global Commission on International Migration, 2005). Women are actively involved in European and transnational networks and circulations in numerous migratory contexts. They are also taken into account as co-deciders, recipients of remittances, as well as migrants, and hence as initiators of money transfers. Over the last three decades, the possibility of mobility has increasingly contributed to women's access to social, residential, and professional independence.

European institutions have sought to encourage the mobility of European students. The ERASMUS student exchange programme was created in 1987. It is estimated that it enabled the mobility of five million students over the last 32 years, with a small majority of them being women (56% of the students involved in 2018). The mobilities officially associated with these exchanges are of course short-term in nature (generally less than one year, the maximum duration before a person is internationally defined as a migrant), although a high proportion of ERASMUS students continue their academic and professional career with mobilities in Europe. As an element favorable to developing a sense of European citizenship, it is estimated that one third of ERASMUS students formed a couple with a citizen from another European country, and it is thought that up to one million "ERASMUS babies" were born in Europe over the last thirty years.

The collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe in the early 1990s also promoted the development of intra-European migrations, and profoundly changed the migratory profiles of women entering Western European countries. The relaxing of visa policies, enlargement of the European Union (EU), and introduction of the liberal economy in former communist countries facilitated this mobility, with a near balance between men and women (52% compared to 48%). However, since 2010 women have been the majority among immigrants to Cyprus, Italy, Spain, France, and Ireland. While most immigrant women in Italy and Spain come from the East (Romania, Bulgaria), those from Africa and to a lesser extent Asia have now stepped, such as Filipino, Sri Lankan, and Vietnamese women in Cyprus.

These migrations are opposed to the previously dominant model of migration in view of settling permanently. Women from the former Soviet bloc (with the exception of Albania) have emigrated as breadwinners, and are chiefly employed as cleaning ladies, caretakers for children or the elderly, and in tourism. Many do not aspire to bring their family, on the contrary investing their income in their country of origin.

For that matter, alternative migrations ("in and out migrations") in which women play a leading role have continued since the early twenty-first century. They primarily involve movement connected to import-export activities (as shown by the sociologist Mirjana Morokvasik for women from Western Europe, and by the researcher Camille Schmoll in 2005 for Tunisian women engaged in international trade).

The living conditions of migrant women has sometimes required host countries to pass legislation. An important step was taken in the recognition—by the administrations and jurisdictions involved—of networks of female exploitation and prostitution originating in the countries of origin. As a result, the concept of "social group" (such as Nigerian women trying to escape prostitution networks or women seeking to avoid forced marriage) emerged in national jurisprudence—as in France during the early 2000s—against a backdrop of legitimization by European jurisdictions. Women who are persecuted in their countries, as well as those who risk being so, can obtain international protection, subsidiary protection and, as in France, even recognition as refugees. While the migration of underage girls is taken into consideration, many countries also protect those at risk of becoming victims of genital mutilation (excision). In France the National Court of Asylum, and later the Council of State in 2012, issued

important rulings to this end.

Finally, there is the question of whether migration in contemporary Europe is a factor of emancipation for women. There is surely no single answer, although migrant women in Europe actively contribute to the redefinition of gender roles in society within professional, family, artistic, and intellectual worlds. Women have become the full subject of rights, and the existence in the jurisprudence of social groups based on gender identity and the risks faced by many women represents considerable progress. Thanks to ERASMUS student exchange programmes, women from European countries have experienced new mobilities and broadened their professional opportunities and life choices. For those from former communist bloc countries, migration has become a way to preserve the social role and professional identities they lost after the fall of communism in their country of origin, while women from Africa and Asia can obtain a new social status through this mobility. However, emphasis has increasingly been placed on the effect of certain austerity policies in the European Union, which have exposed young women to economic difficulties that have prevented some from migrating—thereby slowing the development of social policies aiming to integrate them—while forcing others to do so.

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