

# Gender and circulations in Europe, 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> centuries

**Delphine DIAZ**

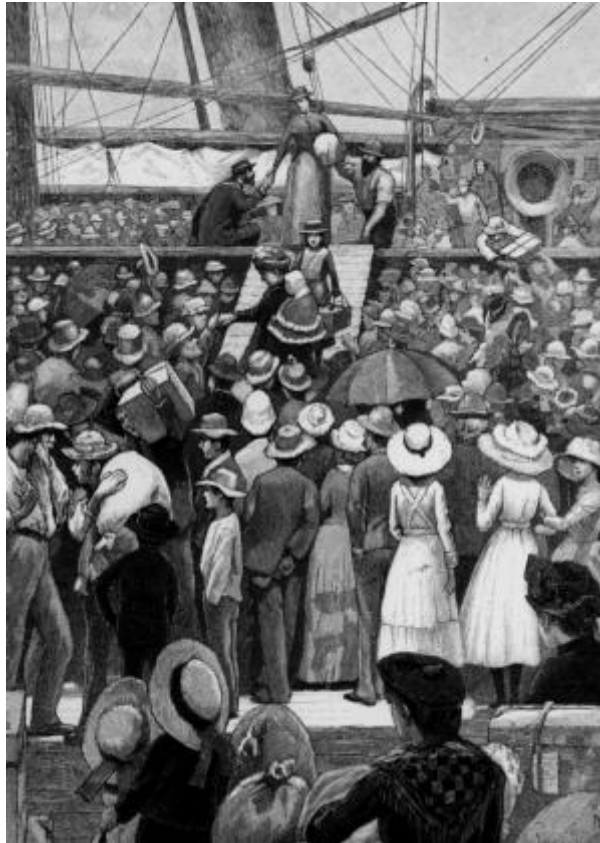
## ABSTRACT

The history of migration during the modern period has been studied without taking into account the respective roles played by men and women in individual and collective displacements. The study of forms of mobility in space, such as leisure travel, exploration, and colonial conquest, has rendered women invisible despite the fact that they were also active figures in long-distance displacements. Female victims of forced displacement have also remained in the dark for a long time. The history of circulations in Europe from the nineteenth century to the early twenty-first century shows how the movements of men and women in space have contributed to the evolution of the gendered division of social roles, as well as the shifting and blurring of gender identities.



Bundesarchiv, B 145, RS 88-F010200-0004  
Foto: a. Aug. 1941, Juli 1941

Deportation of Russian Jews: convoys of women and children, July 17, 1941 Das  
Bundesarchiv Source: Wikimedia Commons <https://goo.gl/Zc7CLR>



The emigration and disembarkation of European families in Australia, year 1885  
 (Drawing of migrants disembarking from a ship, 1885) John Oxley Library, State  
 Library of Queensland, Australia. Source: Wikimedia Commons  
<https://goo.gl/UKt6im>



Title in English: Friedland Transit Camp, Aussiedler: men and women waiting in a  
 hallway, June 1988 Original title in German: Lager Friedland, Flur, Aussiedler



Flüchtlinge June 1988 Bundesarchiv, B 145 Bild-F079095-0030. Source: Wikimedia Commons <https://goo.gl/5zEjYX>

“And yet they move!” In uttering this phrase at the dawn of the twenty-first century, the historian Cécile Dauphin called for a re-examination of female mobilities during the modern period. Women were neglected by a historiography content with depicting “female travellers” as being subject to the movements of the men in their family, who were often considered the only “protagonists” in migration. Yet women were undoubtedly active figures in their migration: they played a pioneering role in migratory chains, and used their circulation to free their families, or for sexual or social purposes. This gendered reading of mobility abandons dichotomies traditionally used in the study of migration, such as the distinction made during the twentieth century between “work migration,” which was supposed to be essentially male, and “family migration,” in which women and children were simply passive agents.

### **Women in movement during the nineteenth century: towards a “broadening of space” (Michelle Perrot)**

From the early nineteenth century, certain categories of women travelled across long distances. One of the types of voyages taken by European women was the Grand Tour, an educational practice of the nobility that was born during the early modern period. Nobles, and later emancipated and cultured bourgeois women, were encouraged to complete this journey, which was seen as being a formative experience. The British woman Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) began a *Northern Tour* by travelling through Scandinavia in 1795, while Dorothy Wordsworth (1771-1855) left in quest of a romantic Scotland in 1803. Female travels were accompanied by practices of writing: in *Le Voyageur*, which was published in 1800, Madame de Genlis (1746-1830), a noble *émigrée* during the French Revolution, recommended that female travellers systematically carry a travel journal “on the very site of visits,” in order to set down their impressions on the spot. As Sylvain Venayre has written, for women the nineteenth century was “the time of a struggle for solitary travel, one that moved beyond the norms of stays in spa towns and seaside resorts or the honeymoon, which in many respects was codified as an anti-voyage.” The Frenchwoman Flora Tristan (1803-1844), who wrote a pamphlet entitled *Nécessité de faire bon accueil aux femmes étrangères* in 1835, practiced and advocated for solitary travel for women. In 1840, she published her *My Walks Around London*, a social investigation conducted in the British capital, in which she recounts how the doors of boarding houses closed upon seeing an unaccompanied female traveller, who was immediately classified as a woman of ill repute or even as an actual “pariah,” to echo the account of her journey to Peru entitled *Peregrinations of a Pariah*. The desire to investigate and to bear witness to an elsewhere that was both near and far also explains the frequency of voyages taken by women in rapidly expanding colonial spaces. The Englishwoman Barbara Leigh Smith (1827-1891), who fought for women’s rights in education and the workplace, stayed in Algeria a number of times from 1856 onwards.

After marrying a Frenchman there, she published a travel guide for the English vacationing in Algiers, another form of literature produced by women while traveling. While female travellers in colonial empires often re-appropriated the discourse on the otherness of the “natives,” some challenged the binary model imposed by Europeans. Beginning in the late eighteenth century, Western women traveling in the Middle East or the Maghreb sought to establish a dialogue with “Oriental women.” In the late nineteenth century, the Genevan Isabelle Eberhardt (1877-1904) travelled through the Maghreb, which she described in her travel writing. While there, she played on confusions of gender, and did not hesitate to dress as a man to increase her freedom of manner and action. At the dawn of the twentieth century, she married Slimane Ehnni, a naturalized “native”, and thereby became a French citizen.

The long nineteenth century, which was the height of the second colonization, also saw the rise of professional and temporary migrations on the European continent. The seasonal travels of journeymen, woodcutters and agricultural workers, which were essentially collective and masculine experiences, played a role in the construction of sexuality and virility. For instance, in his *Mémoires Agricol* Perdiguier (1805-1876) recalled how during their travels the Tour de France’s unskilled labourers took part in village celebrations, which were presented as so many opportunities for episodic sexual encounters. Groups of women also engaged in seasonal migration in Europe, albeit in smaller numbers. Beginning in the seventeenth century, recruiting agents in the Po Valley—the *capi*—hired women primarily from the Alps or the Apennines for rice cultivation. Rice growers appreciated female labour, which had a reputation of being more dexterous and docile. On the other hand, the societies that seasonal migrants came from deemed that they had broken the rules of morality and propriety, simply because they worked alongside men during the hoeing season. Moreover, they were often the victims of the sexual abuse of *capi*, which some of them sought to escape by running away. The search for better-paid professional activity also led many European women to cross borders, sometimes without returning. In the late nineteenth century, Eastern Prussia employed a growing number of foreign workers from the East, who for the most part were Polish. In fact, half of this agricultural reserve army, called “beet pullers” or “potato yankers,” consisted of women and young girls, whom the historiography for a long time left in the shadows of their husbands and fathers.

During the nineteenth century, European women also went abroad or were forced to leave for non-professional reasons. In this “century of exiles” (Sylvie Aprile), political emigration also involved women: while some women were content with following their husbands, others left alone, such as the republican and feminist Jeanne Deroin (1805-1894), who went into exile in London in 1852 two years after being convicted in France. Like so many other female convicts, the *communarde* Louise Michel (1830-1905), who was convicted in December 1871, was deported to New Caledonia in 1873, where she supported a Kanak rebellion against the French colonists.

## **Intensified mobilities of all kinds during the first half of the twentieth century**

Feminine mobilities intensified considerably at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The transportation revolution and falling costs made work and leisure travel accessible to new social classes. In France, the rural exodus, which became more pronounced between 1870-1890, chiefly involved the young of both sexes, although until the early twentieth century men had a tendency to migrate further than women. In Paris, Breton women, who had already been migrants in the preceding century, now arrived *en masse* at the Montparnasse train station to be taken on as housemaids. In 1905, the first episode of an immediately successful comic book called *Bécassine* appeared in *La Semaine de Suzette, magazine pour fillettes*. The heroine was the archetype of the naive Breton peasant woman who came to the capital to be hired as a housemaid. These ancillary migrations were not specific to France, as housemaids in a number of neighbouring countries—Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands for example—were primarily recruited among foreign women from rural backgrounds. For example, the number of foreign women hired in the Netherlands increased sharply after the First World War: in 1920 they numbered 9,100, with a majority of them being German, a number that almost reached 40,000 three years later. These arrivals prompted the intervention of Dutch and German organizations for the protection of female migrants, which focused

on monitoring train stations where associations—the *Mädchenvereine*—were present on site to help and supervise young German girls upon their arrival.

In similar fashion, during the first half of the twentieth century, foreign females were called on for the most difficult agricultural work. After the First World War, the total number of foreign workers in Germany was estimated at 1.2 million, one third of whom were Polish men, but there were also Polish women, who made up a little over half of the workforce in agriculture. After the signing of a German-Polish treaty on migrations in 1927, Germany was able to recruit directly in the areas of origin, hence the increase in the proportion of women, which rose from 50% to more than 80% of migrants overall. Many Polish women were also employed in French agricultural farms during the interwar period after the signing of a bilateral French-Polish treaty in 1919. In the Indre, Indre-et-Loire, and Cher departments, they made up for the shortage in agricultural labour caused by falling birth rates and rural flight. In France 1928 saw the creation of a committee for the assistance and protection of immigrant women employed in agriculture, which was designed to respond to the concerns of the Polish government after petitions on the part of female migrants who had been the victim of overwork or sexual violence. The organization had female inspectors who investigated on-site at farms. In general, the intermediaries of female migration gradually increased in Europe during the interwar years: these included governmental organizations imposed by host or departing states, along with associations and placement offices. Initial recruits sometimes became recruiters in turn, thereby participating in this work of mediation. In 1930 in Marseille, no less than eight charities or offices that specialized in placing housemaids were announced to welcome female migrants from abroad, who were essentially Italian at the time.

The mobilities connected to the consequences of The Great War intensified with Armenian and Russian exiles, as well as movements of the Greek-Turkish population. The League of Nations, which was created by the Treaty of Versailles (1919), developed new instruments for identification (the Nansen passport, initially issued to stateless Russians in 1922), along with the first international conventions that gradually enabled the attribution during the 1920s of “refugee” status to members of certain well-defined national groups (Russians, Armenians, Turks). The ensuing decade saw an increase in mobilities connected to the repression of totalitarian regimes. After the establishment of the Third Reich, approximately 500,000 people fled Germany, including numerous women of letters such as Anna Seghers (1900-1983), who took refuge in Switzerland and later Paris, and Nelly Sachs (1891-1970), who went into exile in Stockholm.

During the Second World War, forced labour involved both men and women: over half of the Polish and Soviet workers taken to Germany were women, with an average age of less than 20 years old. While forced labour can be the subject of a gendered analysis, the same is true of the practice of deportation. For example, the convoys of Resistance deportees going from France to Germany were initially not mixed, as women were separated from men and sent almost systematically to the camp of Ravensbrück. The convoys of Jewish deportees headed for Auschwitz became mixed after the Vél’ d’Hiv’ roundup (July 16-17, 1942). The selection of deportees made on the ramp upon arrival was not based on gender, but on each person’s aptitude for work. Similarly, Gypsies were the target of deportation practices: sometimes these involved only men, who were condemned to forced labour, and sometimes entire families. For example, in early 1942, approximately 5,000 members of Gypsy families in the Lodz ghetto, over half of whom were children, were sent to the gas chambers of Chełmno.

The end of the war did not bring an end to mass mobilities. In 1945, US military authorities created the notion of “displaced persons” (DPs), a category numbering over 10 million individuals immediately after the German surrender: it indiscriminately included survivors from Nazi camps, former forced labourers, and freed prisoners of war, who were often from Eastern Europe. While fewer in number, the mobilities of war brides also drove specifically feminine migratory flows. For example, between 1945 and 1949, 15,028 German women left their country for the United States as the fiancées of American soldiers and officers, while approximately 10,000 others married British men. Once settled in their host societies, they had to contend with xenophobic movements that remained strong until the 1970s.

## **The second half of the twentieth century: towards a feminization of international migrations**

After 1945, European reconstruction led to a rise in international migrations relating to work, which for the most part involved men. This was particularly true in Southern Europe, which was a major provider of flows: according to the International Labour Office, between 1946 and 1957 59% of Spanish, 63% of Italian, and 65% of Portuguese migrants were men. However, single women also had to leave their country to find employment. A great many Irish women were hired in Great Britain as housemaids (approximately 60% of female migrants) or as nurses (20% of female migrants, sometimes working up to 50 hours per week for meagre salaries). From the late 1950s to the 1970s, Francoist Spain saw the departure of tens of thousands of Spaniards, who left their country to improve their daily lives, thereby following the republican refugees from the civil war (1936-1939). For the first time in the long history of Iberian migrations, single Spanish women emigrated during the Trente Glorieuses, many of whom were hired as “all-purpose maids” in wealthy parts of Paris. Such emigration heightened awareness on the part of authorities. While in his speeches Franco included feminine emigration among the “sad slights” suffered by expatriated Spanish women, he continued to present masculine emigration as a school of discipline.

Migrations in Europe slowly changed in nature and origin during the 1960s: the largest proportion of movements was for family reasons, or due to the increasing number of migrants from outside of Europe. The majority of Moroccan and Algerian women coming to France at the time reunited with their husbands to be housewives, with much lower employment rates than French women as a result. Portuguese emigration towards France was primarily masculine at the outset. It peaked in 1962 despite the refusal of the Portuguese government to allow its poor nationals to leave, and became feminized beginning in 1965. Ten years later, women represented 46.1% of the Portuguese population settled in France. The decision to completely suspend immigration to France (workers *and* families) that was enacted in July 1974 as a result of the economic crisis was supposed to be temporary. In April 1976, faced with the impossibility of denying families divided by migration the right to reunite, France recognized the principle of “family reunification.”

The proportion of women in international migration has consequently increased from the 1960s to the early twenty-first century. According to global data provided by the United Nations Secretariat, in 1960 46.8% of international migrants were women, as compared to 49.6% in 2005. There are a number of reasons for this increase: the growth of work-related migration for women; the impact of family reunification in prompting women to reunite with their expatriated husbands; and forced mobilities involving women, whether they were of a political or religious nature, or linked to their gender or the violence of war. The Geneva Convention was adopted in 1951 and became the first text on the international level to define the refugee based on the criteria of individual persecution, although sexual identity was not explicitly stated as a reason for persecution in and of itself. Many women in exile requested asylum and obtained this refugee status in Europe during the second half of the twentieth century, for instance the persecuted Chilean or Argentinian women who went into exile during the military dictatorships, and who were welcomed in Europe during the 1970s. However, the end of the “iron curtain” in 1989 fundamentally changed the asylum system in Europe. In 1986, nearly three quarters of asylum seekers in the Federal Republic of Germany were from the countries of the South, whereas in 1993, in united Germany, 72.1% of these asylum seekers were from the former Soviet bloc. In addition to the migrations of asylum seekers towards West Germany, there were those of the *Aussiedler*, the return migration of former Germans who applied to regain their nationality and had legal grounds for doing so (400,000 people in the late 1990s at the moment of German reunification). The reconfiguration of Central and Eastern Europe also explains the flow of women to the West, primarily employed in the service sector.

Prostitution also contributed to migratory flows. In 2000, migrant female prostitutes represented approximately 70% of sex workers in Western Europe, including between 30-40% from Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe according to estimates. Some of these women were the victims of human trafficking networks.

Internal migrations within the European Union, which have grown considerably since 2004 when ten new member states joined the union, increased during the ensuing decade: the number of European migrants rose from 1.3% in 2003 to 2.6% of the EU's total population in 2012. The principle of the free circulation of persons within the Schengen space—which took its name from the agreements signed in 1985 by five EU member states, who were later joined by seventeen member states and four third-party countries—encouraged these migrations and led in countries of immigration to the emergence of gendered stereotypes, such as the “Polish plumber.” Yet it is the EU's external borders that have drawn the most attention, after being confronted since the summer of 2015 with mass flows of migrants and asylum seekers from the Middle East and Africa, areas marked by war and political instability. The management of such a migratory crisis by EU member states has endangered the implementation of the Schengen Agreement, as the free circulation of people without internal border checks within the space was suspended by a number of signatory countries. The gendered distribution of migrants coming to the European Union should also be presented in detail: while in 2015 approximately 70% of those migrating from Africa and the Middle East towards Europe—most likely over a million individuals—were men, the other two categories of women and children represented 60% of these flows in the spring of 2016. Migrant women prove more vulnerable than men both during the journey and while passing borders, as well as once welcomed in host countries. In the “Calais jungle,” which was partially dismantled beginning in February 2016, it is estimated that women represented approximately 14% of the migrant population. An international instrument, the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combatting violence against women and domestic violence, which was adopted in Istanbul in 2011 and took effect three years later, established preventive measures and systems to assist women suffering from discrimination. For all that, the adoption of this treaty by the Council of Europe is still far from addressing the scope of the social, health, and psychological problems experienced by migrants coming to Europe today.

---

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

“Femmes de l’immigration, XIX<sup>e</sup>-XX<sup>e</sup> siècles,” *Migrance* 42 (2013).

BADE, Klaus et al, *The Encyclopedia of Migration and Minorities in Europe : from the 17th Century to the Present* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

FRAISSE, Geneviève, PERROT, Michelle, eds., *Histoire des femmes en Occident. Le XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, t.4 (Paris: Plon, 1991).

GUBIN, Éliane, MORELLI, Anne, ed., *Pour une histoire européenne des femmes migrantes. Sources et méthodes, Sextant, revue du Groupe interdisciplinaire d’études sur les femmes* 21-22 (Brussels: Université libre de Bruxelles, 2004).

LILLO, Natacha, Rygiel, Philippe, ed., *Images et représentations du genre en migration : mondes atlantiques XIX<sup>e</sup>-XX<sup>e</sup> siècles* (Paris: Publibook, 2007).

MOROKVASIC, Mirjana, “The Overview : Birds of Passage are also Women,” *International Migration Review* 18 (1984): 886-907.

---

## Source URL:

<https://ehne.fr/encyclopedia/themes/gender-and-europe/gender-and-circulations-in-europe/gender-and-circulations-in-europe-19th-20th-centuries>