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# The Key Role of Gender in Migration Governance

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The conditions under which men, women, and people of diverse sexual orientation, gender identity and/or expression, or sexual characteristics migrate are dictated by very different territorial, cultural, and historical contexts. This heterogeneity in the act of migration exemplifies the impact and influence that gender has as a cultural and political element in most social phenomena. Therefore, any measure to strengthen the policies of the Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD) requires building mechanisms that incorporate a gender perspective into GFMD actions.

Talk of implementing gender-sensitive migration and development policies is framed within a time of widespread global backlash against migrants. From a political perspective, political conservatism and xenophobia broadly define a criminalizing and discriminatory attitude toward migrants in most national territories and borders; on a technical level, these discourses underpin the retrenchment in the allocation of resources that allow migration governance to operate. For example, we observe that in internal disputes within countries, especially during election times, migrants have gained a high profile, as stigmatizing them has become a tactic in campaigns seeking to blame them for the ills afflicting host societies.

Considering this scenario, mentioning the gender perspective in migration governance also lacks auspicious support. Around the world, political conservatism has also attempted to silence mentions of gender.<sup>1</sup> However, gender and sexuality are social elements that permeate all human actions; migration is no exception. One fact that allows us to see in figures the dimensions of the importance of the gender perspective is the number of women currently migrating: in 2024, according to UN estimates, 146 million international migrants were women or girls (48%); furthermore, the number of female migrants increased by 35.5% since 2010. The number of male migrants increased by 39.5% during the same period.<sup>2</sup>

As research conducted by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) confirms,<sup>3</sup> gender and sexuality are relevant at all stages of migration: before departure, upon entry, during stay, and upon return. Cultural gender designs mean that migration is not an activity isolated from what societies have prescribed for sexuality, the body, and gender identities, thus conditioning occupations, jobs, the use of wages, remittances, and, in general, the ways migrants integrate into their new societies. This conditioning not only compromises the individual actions of migrants but also “programs” the receiving societies and all institutions involved in migration processes. This omnipresence of gender in migration makes it a political, development, and security problem that must be addressed, as shortsightedness toward gender recognition leads to marginalization and violence.

Gender influences and impacts the ways we migrate because it makes the experience neither homogeneous nor universal. It shapes migration aspirations and satisfaction with the migration project, as well as conditions the integration of migrants into the societies that receive them. Because migration policies are not gender-neutral, they perpetuate existing inequalities in the places where migrants come from, reproduce biases, and limit opportunities based on their gender identity wherever they go. Consequently, women and LGBTIQ+ people generally suffer the reality of a less-skilled workforce that makes their options precarious and reinforces gender vulnerability, amid obstacles rooted in the policies governing entry and residence in host countries.

The migration governance crisis is exacerbated by the failure to integrate a gender perspective into policy. There are gaps in the implementation of policies that would improve the lives of migrants due to the lack of institutionalization of gender perspectives: a lack of continuity in gender-centered positions, insufficient funding, poorly implemented

1 <https://gfmddcivilsociety.org/jornada-de-accion-de-la-sociedad-civil-colombiana-lo-que-construimos-juntas-juntos-y-juntas-en-bogota/>

2 <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/top-statistics-global-migration-migrants#:~:text=How%20many%20women%20and%20girls,and%20other%20vulnerable%20humanitarian%20migrants.>

3 <https://worldmigrationreport.iom.int/what-we-do/world-migration-report-2024-chapter-6/beyond-numbers-gender-dimensions-throughout-migration-cycle>

objectives, and, most critically, the exclusion of the voices of those who experience gender discrimination. If women and LGBTIQ+ people do not participate meaningfully in the evaluation and strengthening of migration projects, policies will remain disconnected from reality and perpetuate the distance between discourse and implementation.

Closing these gaps requires a political commitment to a gender perspective in development policies that benefit migrants, along with the technical capacity to assess the genuine aspirations of migrants, activists, and allies. The GFMD proposes a transition to bottom-up governance models, focusing on community development and coexistence, by building on the existing design, consultation, and implementation structures within the Forum. The goal is to empower women and people of color to become protagonists of their own migration journeys, thereby overcoming narratives of victimization and uncertainty.

## Recommendations to the Global Forum on Migration and Development

1. The GFMD Secretariat is recommended to develop an action plan focused on mainstreaming the gender perspective into civil society, business, and mayoral mechanisms. To this end, the GFMD Steering Group is specifically recommended to create a thematic group on gender and sexual diversity. This strategic framework for promoting the agency and recognition of women and LGBTIQ+ migrants will allow the GFMD Secretariat to strengthen the agency of women and LGBTIQ+ migrants and their position as key actors in development. This requires States to overcome vague policies of tolerance and assimilation of migrants, which are primarily responsible for their irregularization and expulsion. The goal is to develop formal recognition plans that align with the real needs and experiences of people on the move.

2. Once established, it is recommended that the thematic group on gender and sexual diversity build a collaborative intraregional migration agenda across the various migration corridors in Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and Latin America. The intraregional agenda should prioritize critical nodes and geolocate the most complex migration corridors for targeted interventions, focusing on gender mainstreaming.

3. The Civil Society and Mayors mechanism should design local development plans, municipal laws, and legislation with a gender perspective. These plans should explicitly incorporate gender and sexual diversity as fundamental pillars for transforming societies into truly free and democratic spaces. It should follow strict territorial criteria and be based on the most transitory migration corridors, cities, and municipalities (hot spots) to prioritize implementation.

4. It has been diagnosed that there is a chronic lack of data on LGBTIQ+ migrants for migration governance,<sup>4</sup> so one way to test the effectiveness of a thematic group on gender and sexual diversity is to create a centralized database on this population that can be fed horizontally. This platform should respect historical and regional diversity, while allowing to produce comparable data and articulated strategies, while adhering to ethical standards for managing data on vulnerable populations. The strategic objective is to provide visibility to this group in its broad diversity and heterogeneity.

5. The Civil Society mechanism, together with universities and educational centers with which it establishes partnerships, will develop low-cost mobile applications for the geolocation of safe and essential services (legal, medical, accommodation) for people on the move, with a firm ethical commitment to user privacy and data security. This digital infrastructure should include online banks of educational resources and platforms for defending the rights of migrants.

6. The three GFMD mechanisms should forge alliances with unions, associations of migrant rights advocates, women's movements, associations, banks, and chambers of commerce so that migrants can enter the labor market with less paperwork and clear procedures for opening bank accounts, joining job boards, and being hired. What is expected is a committed collaboration between institutions with the financial capacity or the capacity to provide employment, and the States.

7. In specific cases, such as Ethiopia, or in other countries where bilateral labor agreements and memoranda of understanding exist, the GFMD recommends that the Business and Civil Society mechanisms, together with the thematic group on gender and sexual diversity,<sup>5</sup> establish a methodology for mainstreaming these agreements, to be

4 <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/explainer/2024/06/in-search-of-safety-lgbtqi-people-on-the-move>

5 <https://worldmigrationreport.iom.int/what-we-do/world-migration-report-2024-chapter-6/beyond-numbers-gender-dimensions-throughout-migration-cycle>

discussed with the companies and unions involved in the implementation of labor laws. It has been observed that, on occasion, the laws that protect these agreements and memoranda do not guarantee the rights of migrants or consider the vulnerability of women and diverse individuals. Therefore, a mainstreaming methodology supported by the GFMD secretariat mechanisms would allow for the review of cases and situations of discrimination.

8. The GFMD secretariat should work toward standardizing legal definitions with a humanitarian focus, in conjunction with States. National authorities must demonstrate the political will to clarify and harmonize their legal definitions of people on the move within specific corridors and territories, ensuring that strategies are realistic, grassroots, and based on humanitarian needs, rather than restrictive legal categories.

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## About the Author

**Luis Briceño Gonzalez** PhD in Anthropology, specializing in research on community processes in Indigenous, Afro, urban, and migrant populations. His approach connects local perspectives with the global dynamics that strain community and convivial relationships.

## Abstract

If women and LGBTIQ+ individuals do not participate meaningfully in the evaluation and strengthening of migration projects, policies will remain disconnected from reality and will continue to perpetuate the gap between discourse and implementation.

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