

Migrant women: the move to Western Europe — a step towards emancipation?

Emigration is an economic necessity. No woman from Southern Europe, Asia or the West Indies emigrates in order to escape her fate as a second-class human being and in search of independence from father, husband or the repressive environment. And yet many a woman has discovered that being a wage earner allows her to take decisions of her own, to contradict her husband, in some cases even to separate from him. What process of development does she undergo to reach this new self-confidence?

Very generally speaking, there are two types of migrant women: those who go to Western Europe to join their husbands already working there, and those who go to take up work themselves. Although both share the inferior living conditions of the immigrant stratum of the working class, they have a different position within the production process, and their understanding of society and of their own position within it vary accordingly.

NON-WORKING MIGRANT WOMEN

The literature on migrant women is, with a few exceptions,[1] limited to the first category of migrant women, the non-working wives, although this group is, at least in the cases of Germany and Switzerland, smaller than that of working migrant women. Their problems are all too well known: they are virtually their husbands' servants. Their activities are limited to those typical in their home countries and indeed for all women in pre-capitalist societies — the kitchen, the children and the appropriate religious rituals. They live in almost complete isolation in a strange society where the different

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values and norms become all the more a threat to them as their husbands become 'integrated' into the new surroundings. The large majority of them not only do not speak the national language sufficiently to find their way round the big cities, but even feel insecure when they go shopping. Thus they are dependent upon their husbands or children as interpreters and hardly dare leave the house alone. They try to keep their way of life as close as possible to that in their home countries and often enough lose touch with their children, who have to cope with the environment in a more active way. Such migrant women are sustained by the idea of returning home some day. They see the freer behaviour of Western European women as a threat to them. Even if they might like to be able to tell their husbands what they think of them or to go out in the evenings, they have no basis on which to demand this. They are not only emotionally but also economically completely dependent upon their husbands. An example may illustrate this.

Mrs L from a village in Calabria, Southern Italy, came to a small town in Switzerland, where her husband and her two adult sons had worked for twelve and four to five years respectively. She took her two daughters with her. The youngest was sent to school, while the 16-year-old was kept at home to help with the housework. Two attic rooms were rented for the three women, while the three men stayed in their firms' accommodation. Thus Mrs L did not even enjoy the family reunion she had hoped for. Her day consisted of keeping her rooms tidy and cooking for her three men, who usually came to fetch the food to eat at work during their lunch-break, only occasionally staying for a meal. They brought their clothes for washing and mending and continued the way of life which they had led as 'single' migrant workers, spending most of their time after work in bars and a substantial part of their money on drinks and the consumer goods, such as smart clothes, radios, motor-bikes, which they saw their better-paid Swiss colleagues enjoying.

Mrs L had to make ends meet, not even getting a regular sum for the housekeeping. The two sons, who wanted to enjoy the same life as the Swiss unmarried men, did not recognize any responsibility for keeping their mother and their two sisters, although they expected it of their father. The father, however, did not want to have more commitments than his sons, and thus there was a permanent quarrel about the amounts of money each one had to give to Mrs L. Her economic dependency meant a permanent humiliation, having always to beg for what she and her daughters needed. When, however, the 16-year-old daughter cautiously asked to be allowed to go to work in order to escape this dependence, not only were all three men against it, but also her mother. They argued that this was not necessary as long as three members of the family were working; moreover, it would diminish her chances of marriage, as everyone

knows that an economically independent girl behaves much more freely than girls safe-guarded by the family. None of the three women learned enough German to be able to find their way around, and even the 12-year-old daughter stopped going to school, having missed classes for a while due to illness.

After a year the family crisis came to a climax: the women were threatened with eviction from their rooms due to rent arrears, and none of the men thought it his responsibility to pay the debts. So Mrs L and her two daughters went back to Italy, leaving their three men to cook and keep their clothes in order by themselves. They piously hoped to receive the necessary funds to be able to make a living at home, but at least life was cheaper there and there were no monthly rent bills for their small house.

Mrs L had hoped for a different type of return. She saw many a family where husbands and sons were paying a substantial part of their wages into a family savings account, which not only allowed the women to have a decent standard of living, but also nourished the hope of changing the economic status of the family through buying a piece of land or building a better house. Since then the recession has brought all three men back to Calabria. There they are faced with long-term unemployment, and even if they had saved part of their wages, they would have been used up by now.

But despite her sorrow about the men's inconsiderate and irresponsible behaviour towards herself and her daughters, Mrs L, 43 years old at the time of emigration, would never dream of demanding anything from her husband or sons. Marriage only meant exchanging her position as servant to her father and brothers for that of being a servant to her husband and later to her sons. She has never known a life of her own. For her it is enough when her men accept what she offers them, and life is all right when there is enough to eat and she is not beaten. Like her husband and her sons she expects the same fate for her two daughters.

However, M, her elder daughter, wanted to escape this fate. At 18 she turned down a couple of marriage offers, being determined not to follow in her mother's footsteps. She knew that the only way of becoming independent was to take this independence for herself. One day (while her father and brothers were still employed in Switzerland) she left Italy again in order to find work in Switzerland, without the permission of the family. Her mother did not have the power to hold her back, and her father, who at the time was off sick at home because of a work accident, was not informed of her intention to find work. He was persuaded to allow her to visit her brothers and stay with another relative in the same town. When she arrived there her brothers were taken by surprise and wanted to send her straight back to Italy, but she surprised them even more by finding a job in a bar without their help. When they realized how

determined she was, they made the best they could out of the situation and found her a job in a factory, which they thought less compromising for her reputation, and a place in a women workers' hostel. But the recession sent her back to Italy even sooner than her father and brothers, and her prospects of finding a job in Italy and of emancipation from the repressive male-dominated family have become as remote as before her emigration.

MIGRANT WOMEN WORKERS

Women migrants form a substantial part of the immigrant labour force. In France there were 206,400 foreign women workers registered in 1968, making up 16.45 per cent of the total of immigrant workers at that time.[2] In Switzerland the female proportion of the foreign labour force is more than twice that in France: in 1974 there were 221,668 economically active foreign women — 33.7 per cent of all foreign workers.[3] The latest figures in Germany date from 1973, when there were 706,600 migrant women workers, accounting for 30.11 per cent of the total foreign labour force.[4]

These figures only give a rough idea of the number of foreign women workers in Western Europe today. Except for Switzerland the figures date back to before the main impact of the economic crisis was evident, and it may be assumed that 1974 and 1975 have brought about a change in the immigrant population structure. The generally low level of qualifications of women migrants, together with the short-term and fluctuating type of employment open to them, means that they are often the first category of workers to lose their jobs. In Germany they sometimes are not even registered as unemployed: labour office officials argue that if women with children cannot prove that they have kindergarten places, they are not available for the labour market. The fact that they have been working up to then is not adequate proof!

Many women, however, went originally to Germany, Switzerland or France without a work permit. Such women, if they want to improve the family budget, have to work illegally, and are subject to the worst forms of exploitation. Some work for less than half the normal wages for up to 12 and 14 hours a day without health or pension insurance. The number of illegal women migrant workers is likely to have increased during the recession, as no new labour permits are being issued and the fall in men's incomes necessitates additional earnings.[5]

It is important to stress that in Germany and Switzerland there are more working than non-working migrant women — their rate of activity being substantially higher than that for indigenous women. The rate of activity for Swiss women is 32.44 per cent, compared with

46.6 per cent for foreign women in Switzerland. However, this latter figure includes women of all nationalities, and while Austrian, German and French women, for example, have an activity rate as low as that for the Swiss, 77 per cent of all Yugoslav, 64 per cent of all Spanish and 47 per cent of all Italian women are working.[6] In Germany, the rate of activity for foreign women is 50.9 per cent, compared with 30.1 per cent for the German female population. Again this rate varies according to nationality: it is lowest for Turkish women, 41 per cent, and highest for Yugoslav women, 72 per cent.[7] Only in France are foreign women less likely to be employed than French women. In 1968 the rate of activity for foreign women was 19.8 per cent, compared with 39.2 per cent for all women in France. This low proportion of migrant women workers in France is due to the large number of North Africans among the immigrant population, who hardly ever allow their wives or daughters to earn their living. Thus the rate of activity for Algerian women in France is only 4.8 per cent, whereas that for Yugoslav women is 48 per cent — higher than the average.[8]

THREEFOLD SUPPRESSION OF MIGRANT WOMEN

Migrant women are suppressed in three ways:

1. They are workers or workers' wives.[9] This means that they share the fate of their class, i.e., they are excluded from owning the means of production and live by selling their labour power, either directly as wage earners or indirectly through their husbands' labour power. In exchange for their keep, they care for the reproduction of the male labour power and that of the next generation. From their relationship to the means of production follows the alienated character of their work. They have no say in what is produced, how it is produced and for what it is produced, but have to submit to production in the interests of profit maximization. Because of educational barriers their children are as a rule doomed to the same fate.

2. They share the fate of women in all class societies.[10] Although women are actively involved in the production process in agriculture, industry and the services, the prevailing ideology states that woman's main domain is the household and the family. Neglecting the fact that for the majority of lower-class women it is an economic necessity to do productive work, sociologists like Parsons, Claessen, Koenig and many others state that women 'typically' do not earn their living but share their husbands' incomes and socio-economic status. This is taken as a justification for lower pay, for worse educational opportunities, and for largely excluding them from public offices.

3. They are migrants and as such subjected to all the forms of discrimination typical to foreign workers. In comparison to indigenous workers they get the most strenuous, most dangerous, most monotonous, dirtiest and lowest-paid jobs; they have to pay more for lower quality housing; their mobility and political rights are severely restricted by discriminatory legislation, and their children have hardly any chances to advance socially.

These three forms of discrimination are not separate aspects of the migrant woman's existence. The basic problem, which conditions the other two, is the exploitation of workers in a class society. The underprivileged position of women and of migrants has the function of splitting the working class and of hindering emancipation. Migrant women have to fight harder than Western European women to be recognized as equals by their husbands. They have to overcome greater obstacles than their indigenous female colleagues to achieve promotion at work. But their chances of emancipation as workers is as close or as remote as that of the whole working class.

THE MIGRANT WOMEN'S REACTION

It is the extreme form of discrimination which makes migrant women fight. They get much lower pay than male workers, have to suffer authoritarian behaviour from the almost inevitably male foremen and, in addition, have a second day's work waiting for them at home — household and children — while their husbands consider it their right to relax after work. This obvious injustice mobilizes many migrant women against their previously unquestioned position as their husbands' servants. Many men try to counter this by not sending their wives to work (e.g., the North Africans in France), but for most the mere necessity to have additional family income brings about gradual changes in the relationship between men and women.

This becomes particularly clear in cases of labour struggles, when male workers often realize that they cannot win if the women in the factory are not actively involved. The number of migrant women in the labour force is so considerable that no working-class movement can do without them. Nor is this necessary. Where there have been struggles in factories employing immigrant women, the women have played an active part.

One of the best-known unofficial strikes of 1973 in Germany — the Pierburg strike — was initiated and led mainly by Greek, Turkish and Yugoslav women. This factory, which produces parts for the most important car plants in Germany, draws its vast profits mainly out of the extreme exploitation of migrants, especially women. In 1973 it employed 370 white-collar workers (almost exclusively Germans), as well as 900 Greek, 850 Turkish, 380 Yugoslav, 300 Spanish,

200 Portuguese, 150 Italian and 850 German workers. Nearly two-thirds of all workers (65 per cent) were women, of whom 73 per cent, almost all of them foreigners, were paid according to wage category 2 (the second lowest) with a brutal hourly wage of DM 5,28. This low wage category is open discrimination. It is justified by the allegation that it is paid for 'light physical work', but in fact the women receiving it at Pierburg were exposed to dangerous chemicals (like petrol for cleaning metal parts) or had to do nerve-racking monotonous procedures at ever increasing speeds. The jobs for the somewhat better-paid German women workers and for the men were hardly different. Before the August 1973 strike, there had been two short strikes by the low-paid women. As a result, the trade union promised negotiations with the firm with the aim of abolishing wage category 2. Negotiations took place and an agreement was reached, but the firm did not implement it. Therefore, when the foreign women demanded the abolition of wage category 2 in August 1973, they were only asking for something that had already been agreed upon. Nevertheless, the trade union did not support the strike.

The strike was initiated in a department almost totally made up of foreign women. They not only demanded the abolition of wage category 2, but also an extra 1,—DM per hour for everybody, and wages comparable to those of men for all women doing hard physical work. The firm's reaction was to try and sack some of the 'ring leaders'. Then it attempted, unsuccessfully, to mobilize the well-paid skilled German workers (hourly wages of over 10DM) against the foreigners. Finally the employers got the police to intervene, and some violent arrests were made. The foreign women succeeded in getting the foreign men to join in the struggle at an early stage of the strike. On the fourth day the women, who by then were locked out, found a very unconventional way of winning the German men over to their cause. As they entered the factory premises at 6.30 in the morning, the women gave each of them a red rose with the words: 'We are expecting you at 9 o'clock.' And indeed, at the agreed time the German skilled workers came out in solidarity. This was a real blow to the management who had hoped to break the strike through the loyalty of the German workers. From that moment the strike was won. On the fifth day the firm made the offer: payment for four of the five days of strike, no sackings, 0.30 DM more per hour for each worker, 50,—DM more monthly for the white-collar workers, abolition of wage category 2, and a one-time 'inflation allowance' for all white- and blue-collar workers.

The way in which such a strike can change the consciousness of immigrant men and women is seen in the example of Anna Satolias and her husband. Anna had already been active in the strike of 1970, as a result of which the wage category 1 was abolished. She described

her mobilization in an interview with a German paper:

The work went from bad to worse, more production, more work, more workers, less working space. And the speed: faster and faster, the supervisor and the foreman shouting at us all the time — all that in the lowest wage category, which is called 'light'. [At that time Anna Satolias became active.] First I joined the trade union — like my husband — then we women started making demands. We wanted the abolition of wage category 1, because the work was and is heavy and not light — and because category 1 is supposed to be only for beginners, although we had been working five or six years in this category.

At first the women's demands were not taken seriously, then they were answered with empty promises, until 'we went on strike. We women simply stopped work — and after four days, wage category 1 was abolished. We were all in category 2 then.' That was in 1970. In the same year, Nikiforus Satolias was promoted to tool-setter, and placed with his wife and her colleagues in the machine room. 'Perhaps', says Anna, 'the firm thought we would be more docile then, because I would have to do what my husband said.' 'Perhaps', says Nikiforus, 'the firm thought that as a tool-setter I would earn so much that I could let my wife stay at home — and there were even colleagues who said such things aloud.'

But the appeals to male dominance as boss at work and at home did not bear fruit.

Anna Satolias feels that she has equal rights. She says this is a term that she has learned in Western Germany for the first time. At home, girls and women do not count. But here? Doesn't she work like her husband? Doesn't she earn her own money? The division between work and family does not exist for her. Both are important, both are part of her life. The family only has it good when there is work, when one can work well — that is her opinion. And she has been convinced of it — since 1970.[11]

Another example of a militant strike, where migrant women took the initiative, is that of the Eles stocking factory in Bleidenstadt, near Wiesbaden. The working conditions in this factory were medieval. Of 130 workers, 120 were foreigners. They did not receive hourly wages, but only piece work. For an 8-hour working day, a woman worker who folded and packed 1,500 pairs of stockings received only 500 to 600 DM net a month. They did not receive the Christmas bonus or holiday pay laid down in the collective agreement, their holidays were shorter and they did not get bonuses for overtime or Sunday work.

At the time I talked to the head of the Betriebsrat (workers' council), Gulay, a Turkish woman in her mid-twenties, married with one child. Gulay, who was in the strike leadership, said:

We have often tried to negotiate with the firm. But they have remained unmoved. For more than a year the trade union tried to get the boss to accept the collective agreement as it is valid for nearly all textile workers — in vain. One day we said: Now it's enough. And we decided to strike. The trade union found that all right and supported us. 100 of us came out on strike on the 29th of October. We were almost as many men as women. Those 30 to 40 who are still working are afraid to lose their jobs. We don't hate them. We talk to them every morning, but we can't prevent them from going inside the premises. At the beginning we tried to block the gates, but in no time 100 police were here, with dogs and everything, and one dog bit a Yugoslav woman. So we are just talking.

But among us, who are striking, we have learnt a lot. When we came out on strike, we consisted of many different nationalities. We were Turks or Italians, or Greeks or Yugoslavs or Germans. But today we know that we all are just workers and that we have a common struggle to win. We are women and men, but even that does not make any difference. Before the strike, men and women did not chat with each other. But within the seven weeks of the strike we have come to know each other better than in years before. We also talk about personal things. And in matters of the strike, men accept what women say, and women respect the men without being afraid of them. We are all equals.

I asked whether such an experience also changed attitudes at home.

O yes, my husband, who is not working in this firm, supports me. He comes to discuss matters with us in the evenings. And with regard to housework, he is doing just as much as I do. It's not like this everywhere, but in many families things are changing.

I wanted to know, why she was elected into the Betriebsrat. 'Well, you better ask the others.' Gulay herself had to act as an interpreter. She responded after a long vivid debate in Turkish:

They say that I am more 'cheeky' than the others, and so they thought that I would represent our interests more aggressively than anyone else. You see, when there is something unjust, I just have to protest. And this is what qualifies me as a strike leader.

Had she always been like that, even before migration? 'A little bit perhaps, but now I have learnt a lot, and I can do much more than before.'

The strike ended after more than seven weeks with a bad compromise between the trade unions and the employer. The workers were disappointed and about half of them decided not to go back to work, risking getting the sack and having to find a new job — a nearly hopeless undertaking in a small town with little industry and

in the middle of the crisis winter of 1975-76. Gulay was one of those who did not want to accept the offer.

CONCLUSIONS

Does migration to Western Europe mean a first step towards emancipation for migrant women? I would say: Coming to Western Europe does in itself not bring about emancipation. For Mrs L it meant greater suffering than in her home country. Not being able to participate in the production process she did just the same as she had always done at home, only without the warmth of a familiar neighbourhood.

Only when migrant women take up jobs and become economically independent do they realize the injustice of women's discrimination. They come to doubt their husbands' right to dominate them and demand certain participation in the housework. But this is a slow process and leads to many conflicts. Most of them reluctantly take up their double responsibility as workers and as wives and mothers and let their husbands enjoy their evenings in the bars, so as not to lose their support altogether. For even if they are working, migrant women's incomes are much lower than those of men, and alone they would not be able to make ends meet.

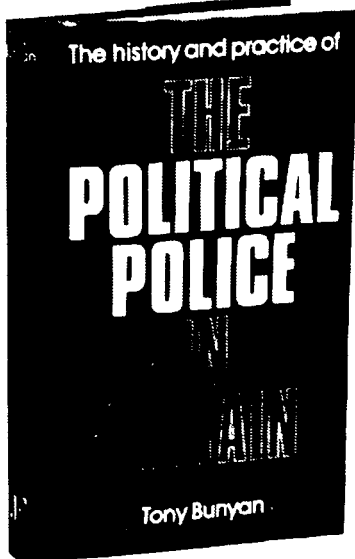
It is mainly in the process of labour and of political struggle that both men and women realize that it is not merely desirable but essential to change their relationships. When a strike can only be won if the women workers participate, they have to go to meetings and their opinions have to be taken seriously. At such times, men see themselves forced to look after the children in their own interest.

In other words: being actively involved in the production process, having the same power as all productive workers and getting involved in struggles are the preconditions for migrant women's emancipation.

REFERENCES

- 1 Mirjana Morokvasic, for example, draws attention to the neglect of the problems of working migrant women. See 'Les femmes immigrés au travail', a paper delivered at the European Colloquium on the Problems of Migration, which took place under the patronage of the European Commission, 31 January-2 February 1974
- 2 1968 Census of France
- 3 *Die Volkswirtschaft* (No 11, 1974), p. 690
- 4 'Ausländische Arbeitnehmer', *Bundesanstalt für Arbeit* (1972-3), p. 27
- 5 Official sources estimate far more than 200,000 foreign workers in Germany. See *Der Spiegel* (2 June 1975). The actual figure may well be higher.
- 6 Swiss Census 1970
- 7 'Repräsentativuntersuchung', *Bundesanstalt für Arbeit* (1972), p. 19
- 8 M. Morokvasic, *op. cit.*, p. 10

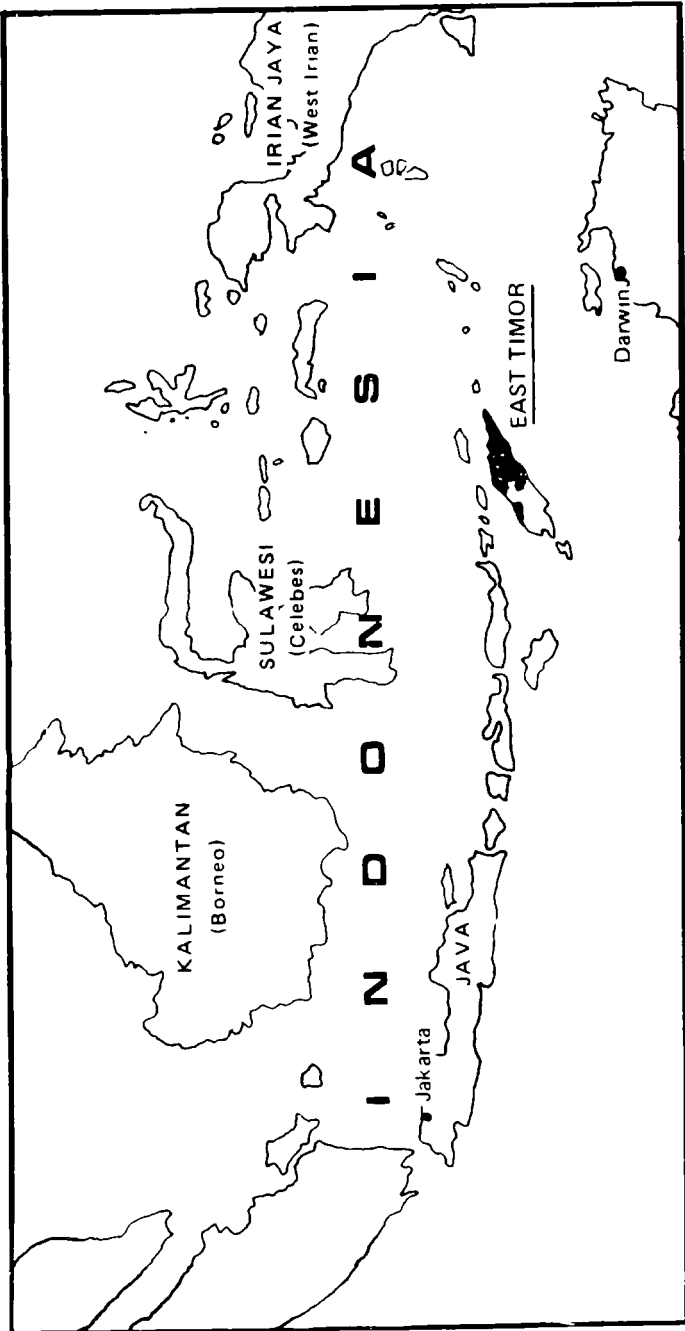
- 9 I am not concerned with the small minority of professional migrants.
- 10 This is not the place to prove my thesis that the suppression of women originates with the development of private property. For some arguments on this point, see F. Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*.
- 11 Quoted in 'Pierburg-Neuss: Deutsche und ausländische Arbeiter — ein Kampf', Autorenkollektiv, (Pierburg, 1974)



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