



**MEETING OF THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE  
NETWORK OF WOMEN PARLIAMENTARIANS OF THE AMERICAS**

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**THE IMPACT OF MIGRATIONS ON WOMEN  
IN LATIN AMERICA**

**Context**

The current economic context is characterized not only by market liberalization and increased trade, but also, paradoxically, by the growth of barriers to the mobility of individuals. The inequalities and asymmetric development caused by the new international economic order have had repercussions for the populations of the Americas, leading in particular to an upsurge in migration, principally from the South to the North.

According to UN figures, in 2002 there were 150 million international migrants; one in ten was born in a Latin American or Caribbean country. In Quebec, according to year 2000 statistics, residents hailing from Latin America numbered 132 371, a little less than 13% of the total number of immigrants and nearly 2% of the overall population.

**Causes**

Two fundamental causes of emigration must be distinguished: forced displacement and voluntary movement. Voluntary migrations are often motivated by a desire to find better living conditions or to reunite families for example.

**Types of migrations**

- 1) Spatial: a) internal, that is, from one region to another within the same country, from the countryside to the city; b) regional—i.e., from one country to another within Latin America; c) extraterritorial—i.e., outside of Latin America
- 2) Temporal: temporary; seasonal; long-term
- 3) By status: legal or illegal immigrant; asylum seeker; refugee

**Effects on Women's Living Conditions**

In Latin America, women figure in all of the above-mentioned categories. The living conditions that they are attempting to flee are varied, of which a few will be discussed below.

**Violence** against women is frequent, in particular against indigenous women, who are confronted with racism and exclusion. In addition, there is the well-known problem of domestic violence. Indigenous and non-indigenous women have been the victims of rape and torture during armed conflicts and under military regimes, they have also had to face the disappearances and murders of their children and their families. These conflict situations and economic problems have caused the displacement and migration of millions of Latin American women. As they migrate, these women are also vulnerable to abuse by soldiers, bandits, and “coyotes” (guides paid to smuggle them into the United States). Furthermore, refugee communities also present a high level of violence. Few legal recourses are available to women who find themselves in an unfamiliar environment (i.e., they are immersed in a different culture and language; they are cut off from their social network, etc.), especially if they do not have refugee or landed immigrant status.

In situations of displacement or migration, many young women, including minors, are forced to engage in **prostitution**, often via networks trafficking in women that have been on the rise in Latin America. Domestic servants and women are the main victims of prostitution networks, and very often minors are involved (e.g., Aboriginal minors from Equator sent to Japan). Furthermore, if they are arrested, they are often punished for being in an illegal or undocumented situation (the truly serious matter is the impunity of the authors of this violence who operate on a global level).

In Colombia, for example, where there are approximately 1 million displaced individuals—perhaps more, but precise data are lacking— violence levels are high and very few convictions are obtained against the guilty. There is a flagrant lack of security in **refugee** camps and an absence of reintegration programs, when what is required is to provide special attention to women and children.

**Working** migrant women who are frequently exploited, as much economically as sexually, particularly in the “maquilas”; they have neither access to services, nor recourse when their rights are disregarded. When they get jobs as domestic servants, for example, they leave their children in their home countries, are cut off from their family and social environment, and suffer from loneliness in addition to the problems of discrimination, human rights violations, and economic **exploitation**. These situations are fraught with danger and can lead to arrests and then deportations; for example, migrant Latin American women in the United States who are placed in **detention** have difficulty accessing services in their own language and obtaining respect for their rights, thus causing them significant psychological distress as well as negatively affecting their children and families who are dependent on their income.

In Canada and Québec both, **immigration policies** that have been established for several decades now are aimed at promoting the integration of new arrivals, respect for their rights and culture, and their full and complete participation in the host community. One of the objectives of immigration policies is to reduce the demographic deficit that is becoming a growing source of problems for Northern countries. Admittedly, even if immigration legislation and integration programs have been developed, they do not settle all the problems that arise between the members of various cultural communities; efforts must continually be made at all levels to avoid racial tensions, manifestations of intolerance, and all forms of discrimination.

Forced displacement has a **different impact** on men and women. For women, displacement is more difficult, but they are better able to adjust to a new environment and to devise survival strategies. This also means that they experience difficulties when returning from exile or a forced migration situation, because the roles and **responsibilities** have changed (when husbands are no longer at or close to home, widows or grandmothers have to take charge of the household). Sometimes, women take on new responsibilities for organizing associations or “peace communities” (targeted at refraining from participation in armed conflicts and at maintaining links with humanitarian organizations).

Discrimination is sometimes directed at women by **NGOs** that come to the assistance of populations—for example, during natural catastrophes, where assistance and reconstruction efforts have neglected the crises occurring in the poorest communities. In numerous project evaluations, it has been noted that assistance and resources provided to small agricultural businesses tend to favour men.

### **IS THERE ANY POSITIVE IMPACT?**

- International migration has historically contributed to cultural exchanges.
- In the United States, Latin American and Caribbean immigrants number 35.3 million—that is, 13% of the US population; this makes them the largest ethnic minority in the country, a vital element both for the United States and its relations with countries in the region.
- Money transfers from migrants to their countries of origin constitute a significant revenue source, but the diversity of channels of transmission and forms of utilization (consumption, savings, or investment) makes it difficult to produce an accurate assessment of their impact on community development. Depending on the calculations referred to, Mexico is believed to receive, between 7 and 11 billion dollars, which makes it the region’s principal beneficiary even though the impact of such inflow on the national economy is relatively slight (1.1% of GDP). In contrast, in the cases of El Salvador, Nicaragua, the Dominican Republic, Equator, and Jamaica, the impact on their economies is greater, given that transfers represent between 8% and 14% of GDP; in El Salvador, the amount of money sent “home” is the equivalent of 48% of the value of exports.

### **REMEDIES TO BE APPLIED, MEASURES TO BE ENACTED**

- Establish a legal structure to counter violence against women; enforce legislation.
- Support NGOs and other organizations that work to assist, educate, and empower women in all sectors.
- Enhance equitable participation: men must learn to recognize the value of women’s work, and projects must include women as well as men.
- Women who request asylum must have access to the necessary services, including presenting their case before individuals who understand the situation women are subjected to in their country of origin, and gaining acknowledgement of the abuses—particularly in the sex trade—of which they have been victims.
- Promote the establishment of a comprehensive agreement on migration policies among countries in the region (intergovernmental forums, integration agreements, conferences, etc.).
- Recognize the fundamental role that civil society can play in the field of displaced people.
- Guarantee full respect of migrants’ rights through a framework policy on international migration throughout the Americas.

- Implement all possible means required to guarantee the security and protection of the populations of all Latin American countries and improve their living conditions so as to reduce dependence on transfers of money from emigrants.