

# The female face of migration



Christine Campeau/Caritas, Sean Sprague/CBS, David Snyder/CBS

# The female face of migration

Sister Bernarda of  
Caritas Guatemala  
operates a centre  
for pregnant  
women and  
children.

Rita Villanueva/CRS

# Foreword

By Lesley-Anne Knight,  
Caritas Internationalis Secretary General

Here are the stories of six women who took a step into the unknown. Vivian, Zeina, Amina, Marion, Maria and Julia\* left difficult conditions in their home communities to go in search of work, security and opportunity.

Most of these women found jobs. But in the quest to improve their lives, and those of their families, all had to pay a price. Poverty in some cases, ill health in others, and in one, a mother had to give up the chance to see her children growing up.

More than 214 million people, half of them women, live outside their countries of origin as migrants or refugees. The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) predicts that the total number of international migrants will be close to 250 million by 2050.

Migrant women have often felt disempowered in their own countries and so sought opportunities elsewhere. As poverty, conflict and climate change force more people from their homes, Caritas is working to protect their rights, especially those of women.

They face marginalisation because of the way we look at them as strangers rather than neighbours; as a burden rather than productive human beings; with suspicion rather than friendship.

Governments have failed to implement policies to protect vulnerable women migrants from abuse and exploitation. This document illustrates the challenges they face so that both Caritas and society as a whole can better serve their needs.

Christian faith has long recognised the plight of the migrant. *“You shall treat the alien who resides with you no differently than the natives born among you; have the same love for him as for yourself; for you too were once aliens in the land of Egypt.”* (Leviticus 19:34)

Our obligations are deeply engrained in the Caritas commitment to the poor and marginalised. Many Caritas activities began with the

care of refugees. And supporting migrants continues to be a major part of our work worldwide.

This means offering a range of services at every step of their journey, from counselling before they leave their homes to medical, livelihood and legal support once they have reached their destinations, as well as assistance for those who want to get back to their homes.

Caritas does not just provide care; it advocates for more legal channels of migration and works to promote better integration. We have an obligation to combat all human rights violations and the structures that support them.

This document makes clear that migration is increasingly about women as well as men. It seeks to encourage reflection and exchange with experts and governments about the particular risks and challenges linked to the migration of women.

It aims to encourage discussion among Caritas staff about the services we offer. Do they satisfy the material and psychological needs of those we seek to support? Are we as welcoming and helpful to migrants as we could be? What changes need to be made to ensure that migration is legal, safe and empowering?

We want a fairer world for women migrants. We want to see them have the same chances as others in their pursuit of happiness. The strength and determination of migrant women themselves will be a major factor in bringing about change, and we fully support them in that struggle.

\*Names changed to protect identities

# Women, migration and Caritas



**Would you like to be safer, richer, healthier and happier, with more choices for yourself and your family? Millions of migrant women leave their homes in search of this dream every year.**

Some are driven by poverty, or natural disasters, or a lack of opportunities and a need for work. Others are fleeing persecution or conflicts. They leave their families and homes to take terrible risks.

Women migrants face exploitation and abuse, but they live in the hope that they will be able to improve their lives and those of their children. This is the female face of migration.

For a long time migration was considered a purely male issue. But there is growing attention to the "feminisation of migration": the increasing number of women striking out alone without their families, husbands and children in some parts of the world.

Women who do this face different risks and challenges to male migrants, and yet also enjoy different opportunities.

As more and more women migrate independently, the impact on families and communities grows. Increasingly, women are becoming the sole breadwinners.

## Why women migrate:

- To join other family members or to marry abroad
- To seek protection from persecution for themselves and their family members
- To flee poverty, economic and political instability and lack of opportunities
- Unemployment
- For a better education
- To escape cultural traditions that hinder their development
- A desire for more freedom and respect
- A dream of a better life

Social and economic conditions are often among the reasons why women migrate. Another important factor for migration is that women workers are in greater demand in more and more countries in sectors such as domestic work and healthcare. The jobs offer money and opportunities that may not exist in their own countries. It enables them to support families back home.

According to the IOM, remittances sent home by women and men are up from \$132 billion (€95 billion) in 2000 to an estimated \$414 billion (€300 billion) in 2009. The money sent home feeds, clothes and educates children, provides healthcare and reduces poverty.



Far left: Thousands of undocumented Central American migrants journey across Mexico every year, risking their lives in the hope of reaching the USA and Canada.

Middle: Free trade policies have devastated economies in Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala, forcing people to leave their homes in search of a better life.

Left: The journey through Mexico is often by dangerous freight trains known as "the beast." Many migrants are victims of robbery, kidnapping, rape and extortion along the train route.

Katie Orlinsky

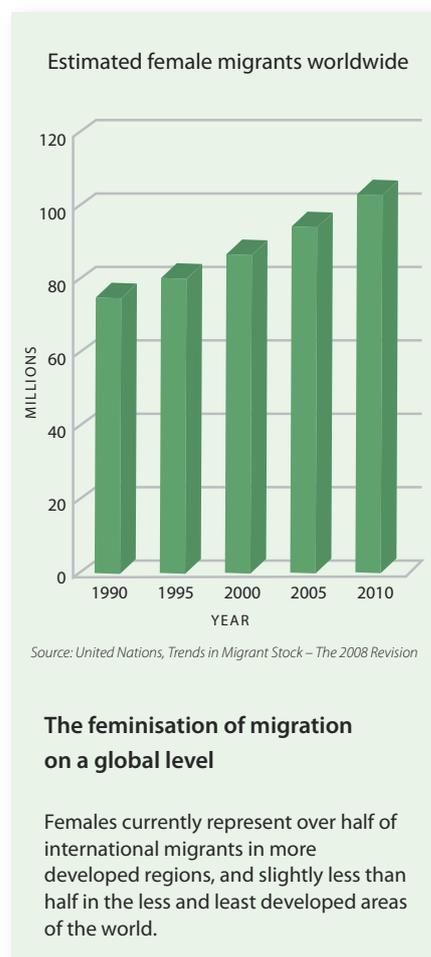
### The difficulties faced by women who migrate:

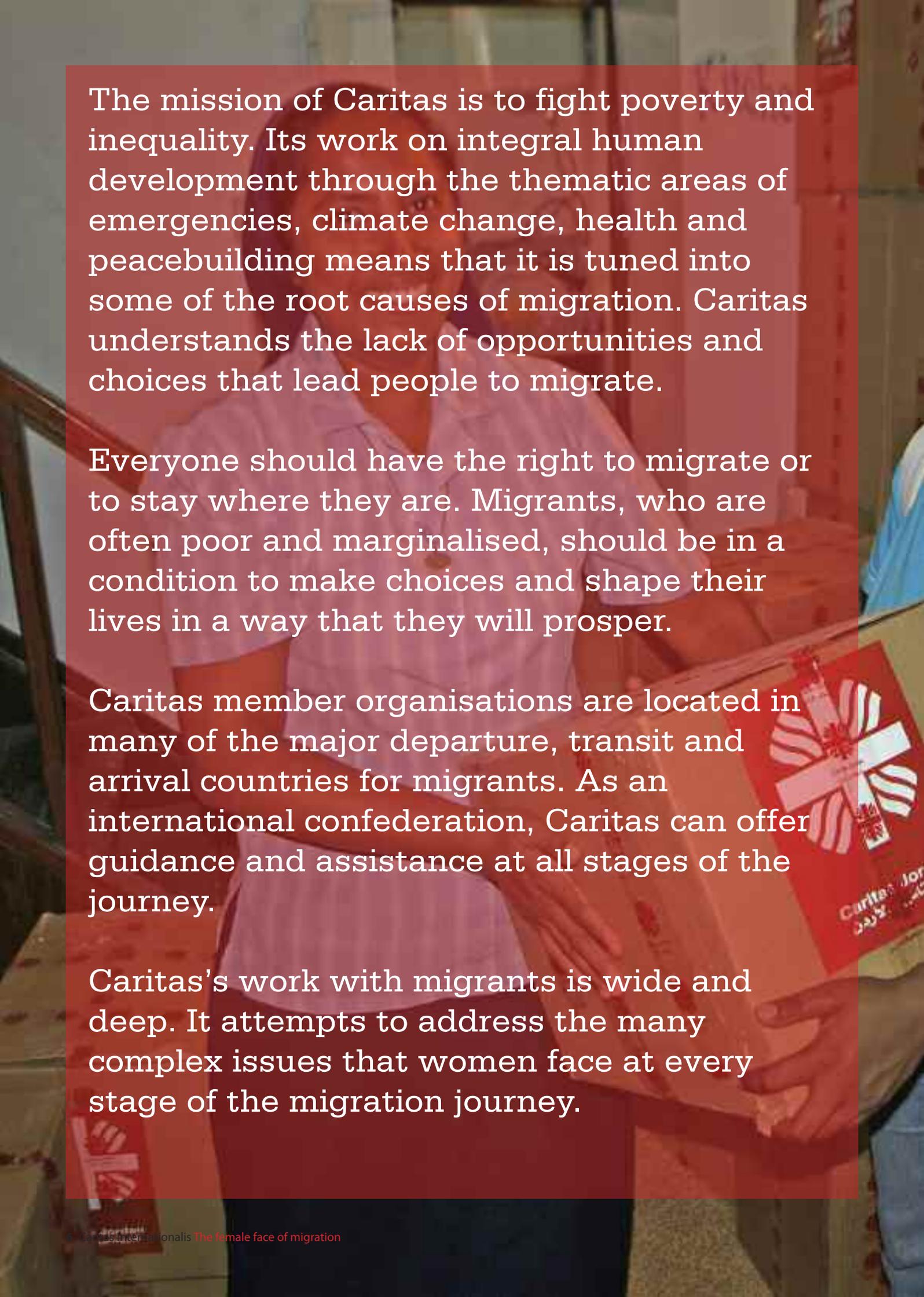
- Exploitation
- Physical and mental abuse
- Lack of protection in the labour market
- Lack of security
- Economic difficulties
- Lack of access to healthcare
- Cultural alienation
- Loneliness

By undertaking the migration journey, women are much more vulnerable than men to abuses, smuggling and trafficking.

Women who go abroad to work risk abuse from both employment agencies and employers. They often lack legal and health protection and can fall victim to discrimination. Their children born abroad are sometimes denied citizenship and an identity.

Women are trafficked either against their will or as a result of a deception and are forced into prostitution or slavery.



A woman with dark hair, wearing a light pink short-sleeved button-down shirt, is smiling and holding a large cardboard box. The box is wrapped in brown paper and has a red Caritas logo on it. The background is slightly blurred, showing what appears to be an indoor setting with other people and boxes.

The mission of Caritas is to fight poverty and inequality. Its work on integral human development through the thematic areas of emergencies, climate change, health and peacebuilding means that it is tuned into some of the root causes of migration. Caritas understands the lack of opportunities and choices that lead people to migrate.

Everyone should have the right to migrate or to stay where they are. Migrants, who are often poor and marginalised, should be in a condition to make choices and shape their lives in a way that they will prosper.

Caritas member organisations are located in many of the major departure, transit and arrival countries for migrants. As an international confederation, Caritas can offer guidance and assistance at all stages of the journey.

Caritas's work with migrants is wide and deep. It attempts to address the many complex issues that women face at every stage of the migration journey.



Caritas Jordan provides food packages to migrant women.  
Michelle Hough/Caritas

# The work of Caritas on migration

## Prior to departure

To ensure that migration is an informed option, Caritas provides pre-departure counselling. Experts give guidance on risks, on what to expect and on how to make the experience safer.

Caritas Sri Lanka has awareness-raising programmes that warn potential female migrants of the difficulties of going to places like the Middle East. Sometimes employers confiscate passports, thus trapping vulnerable migrants in abusive situations. Caritas gives commonsense advice, such as telling migrants to give a copy of their passports to their families.

## Support along the journey

The journey to other countries can take migrants across deserts and seas. It can leave them open to hunger, ill health and desperation. Caritas welcomes strangers and offers them food and shelter, whatever their legal status. In the desert of Mali, the Caritas Gao Migrant House provides a resting place during their departure and return trips. It gives them food, medical and psychological support.

## On arrival

Without a family, support network or local knowledge, migrants often need an enormous amount of help in their host country. Caritas gives language and vocational training to help migrants settle in. Caritas offers social and legal support to those seeking refuge.

## Healing trauma

Many women have faced violence and torture before or during the journey. Specialised services are offered by some Caritas members to help migrants deal with trauma they may have faced in their host country, or with the difficulties of returning home.

## Finding work

Caritas helps migrants identify job and training opportunities both in their new country and also if they return home. In Senegal, Caritas helps people start up small businesses. This gives them an income and provides them with a reason not to migrate.

## Children

Children who migrate alone are particularly vulnerable. Caritas reports abuses and ensures that children's best interests are taken into account. Caritas Switzerland actively campaigns against the genital mutilation of women and young girls.

## Trafficking in human beings

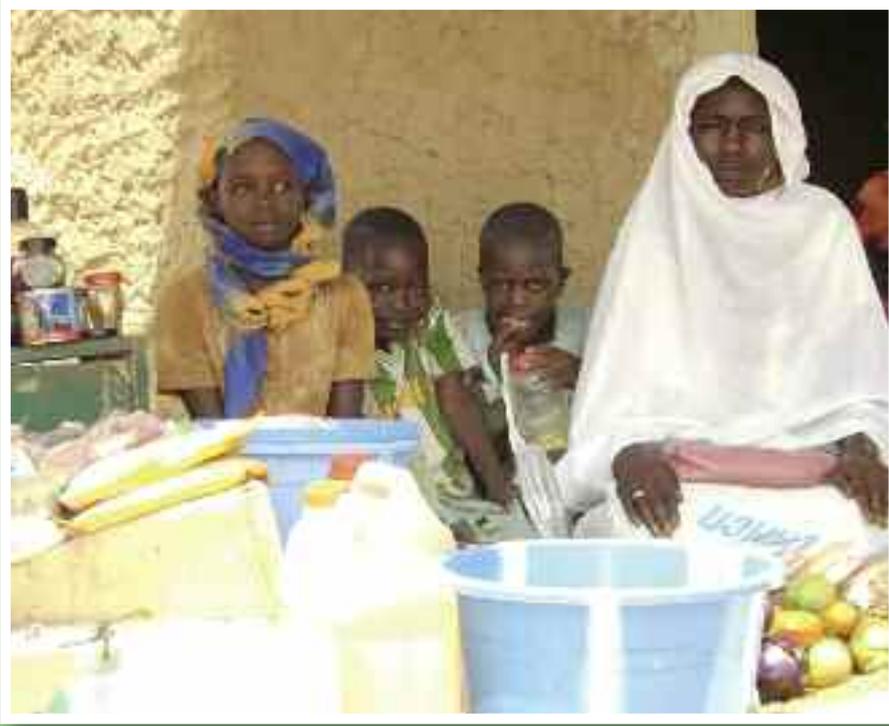
Caritas supports COATNET (Network of Christian Organisations against Trafficking in Human Beings). This offers advocacy and a network of service providers who give advice on preventative measures, assistance and help on returning home.

## Return

European Reintegration Support Organisations (ERSO) provide voluntary returnees with pre-departure counselling, information about reintegration when they decide to return and assistance once they arrive back home. Six of the ERSOs are Caritas members.

## Advocacy and capacity building

Caritas advocates for changes for migrants at local, national and international level. In 2010, Caritas launched the "Under one roof, under one law" campaign to highlight the need for greater protection for migrant domestic workers. And Caritas Lebanon helped a domestic worker achieve an unprecedented legal victory when she received compensation for being badly treated.



Following violence and displacement, Zeina has built up a business selling food in Chad.

SECADEV

## Working towards independence: Sudan to Chad

**Zeina's\* life took a downward spiral when her husband died. He was a successful trader in Fasher, Darfur, in Sudan. He travelled to the capital Khartoum, and to Egypt and Libya, as he built up his business.**

"I lived like a queen. My husband had herds of camels, cows and sheep. He earned a lot of money," said Zeina, 45.

This life ended when her husband was killed in the Darfur conflict. His elder brother took over the running of the family and Zeina's family had to go and live with him in the village of Angabra.

But the conflict caught up with them again. They had no choice other than fleeing to safety in eastern Chad. It was in a camp in Tiné that Zeina discovered that her brother and other relatives had been killed too. She was at the mercy of her increasingly violent brother-in-law.

Zeina has sustained wounds to her face and hand. "It was he who injured me," she said. "He tried to abuse me several times. Make me take him as my husband. To abide by tradition, I said I would marry my

**"One evening, he sent three men here to torture me"**

**Zeina\***

husband's younger brother. The older one prevented this. He has made the younger brother leave the camp.

"He accused me of secretly seeing a man and being pregnant by him. One evening, he sent three men here to torture me so that I'd admit being unfaithful."

The violence only stopped after her brother-in-law was arrested. He later escaped prison, where he'd been detained for what he'd done to Zeina.

Many husbands and fathers were killed as a result of the war in Darfur. The widows and orphans are particularly vulnerable groups in the refugee camp environment.

Through Caritas Chad (known nationally as SECADEV), the women receive a small amount of money to undertake group

activities that will increase their income. There are 23 groups of mostly women in the Milé camp in eastern Chad.

The group to which Zeina belongs is made up of three women and two men and is called Lessis, which means "kind deed" in Arabic. Each member of the group gets \$40 (€30). The idea is that the group gives back the capital plus interest after six months.

Zeina bought a spaghetti machine. Caritas trained her in spaghetti making. Six training centres in the camps teach women techniques to make and sell local food products, such as mango juice, tomato sauce and biscuits.

"At the moment I have about \$150 (€113) of merchandise and make an average of \$12 (€9) a day," said Zeina. "I use around a third of this to take care of my daily needs and those of my family. I put the rest to one side to finance my activities, and I also send some money to my mother in Fasher."

Zeina is still young. One day she would like to remarry. But for now her focus is on taking care of her family and earning enough money to ensure her independence.



Maria has set up a restaurant with other families in Colombia with help from Caritas.

CAFOD

## Women as actors of their development: Colombia

**Maria\* and her eight-year-old daughter are caught up in the endless conflict that has been devastating Colombia for over four decades. This war has left many people dead and maimed. Millions of people have been forced from their homes through fear, or in Maria's case, quite simply because her home no longer existed.**

"I was forced to flee my home in the countryside with my daughter when illegal militias burnt it down," she said.

Maria, 44, lives in a little shack made out of wood and plastic in the shanty town of Huila, in southwest Colombia.

"There is only one bedroom and I have no toilet or running water," said Maria, who is a single mother.

Half of the displaced people in Colombia are women, according to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC). Forty-seven percent of displaced households are headed by women.

Maria used to make a living by selling empanada snacks. Then, after training given

by Caritas, she and some other families set up a restaurant.

Besides Maria's restaurant, 25 businesses have been set up, including a coffee-growing cooperative, shoe and clothes making activities, a chicken-rearing business, a beauty salon and a scrap metal yard. The programme also provides counselling and legal advice.

The aim is that these enterprises, based on people's existing experience and expertise, will enable them to earn a good income and become more self-reliant.

"I really hope our new business will be a success. There are many problems for young people in this area, such as drugs, so I hope this business will give me the opportunity to provide a better life for my daughter and also to find a new home," said Maria.

**"I really hope our new business will be a success"**

**Maria\***

\*Names changed to protect identities



Marion visits Caritas Jordan to collect some food supplies.  
Michelle Hough/Caritas

## Living in fear: Eritrea to Jordan

**“Sometimes I’m afraid when I see the police,” said Marion\*. “If they catch me I’ll be sent back to my country. I have nothing there. There’s nothing to eat. What would I do? How would I live?”**

Marion, 50, left her home in Eritrea and came to Jordan nine years ago.

The agency she signed up with told her to say she was a secretary as it would be easier to get a work permit. She was really going to be a domestic worker.

After four years she lost her job. She wanted to change her permit to that of a domestic worker, but she couldn’t. Ever since then she has been undocumented.

Marion has no house, job or money to return to in Eritrea, but she has left something very precious back home: her children. There are four of them, aged between 12 and 20, and they have grown up without her.

Her worn face draws into a frown and she rubs her side just below her ribs. “I have a spasmodic colon,” she said. “It comes from thinking in the night about my children. I’ve not seen them since they were very young.

**“I hope that if I see my children I’ll be healthy”**

**Marion\***

I’ve lost a lot of weight because of it.”

The children’s father is from Ethiopia. They all lived there together, but Marion and her children had to return to Eritrea after war broke out between the two countries in 1998.

“I haven’t seen him since,” she said. “I don’t know if he’s dead or alive.”

Her children live with her mother. Marion used to send them money from her salary, but now she works infrequently because her documents aren’t in order.

“Sometimes I work, but I also try to hide. Do you want to know why I wear this?” she said, scrunching the sides of her blue veil in her hands. “So I blend in and look like a Muslim woman. But I’m not, I’m Christian.”

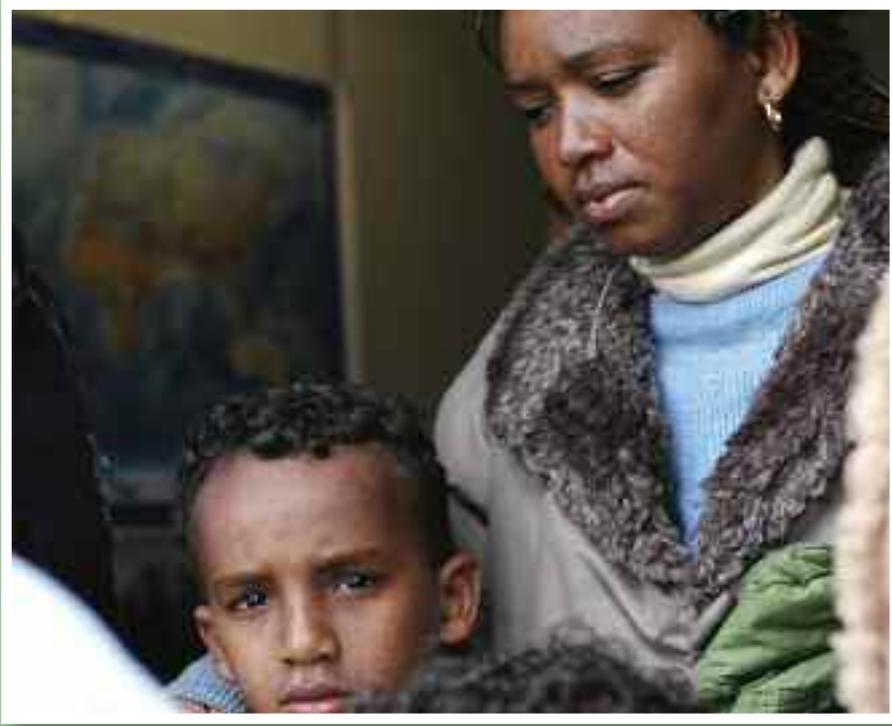
Marion shares a room with two other

women. It costs 17 dinars (around \$24) a month. When she works, she contributes to the rent; otherwise she relies on the help of friends. She tries to work one or two days a month, always in the knowledge that if she’s caught she’ll be imprisoned.

A return home wouldn’t be easy. Under current law she would have to pay for each day she’s lived in Jordan undocumented. She said after five years without a residence permit, she would owe around 3,000 dinars (over \$4,200). It’s a sum way beyond her means. Her only hope would be for an amnesty, which the King sometimes grants to let migrants return home without paying fines.

Caritas has helped Marion do tests for her health problems. On this particular visit to Caritas Jordan’s community centre, she also received a food package containing lentils, tea, oil, sugar, milk, cheese, rice and stock cubes. She said her faith and the community where she worships help her.

“Only God knows what will happen. I hope that if I see my children I’ll be healthy,” she said.



An Eritrean woman queues up in a camp in France. Like Amina, she left Africa to find new opportunities.

S. Le Clézio/Secours Catholique

## When nothing is permanent: North Africa to Italy

**“My country is beautiful,” said Amina\*. “It’s got everything apart from work.”**

Leaving seemed like the best option after Amina’s tailoring school failed. In 2001 she went to France where her brother and two sisters were already living with jobs. Her father, who lived in a North African country with her mother and two other siblings, had also studied in France.

But Amina quickly realised France was a difficult place to get documents to stay. She then went to Italy where another brother lived. Her arrival coincided with new legislation. Non-EU migrants could only enter Italy if they had an employment contract with a firm or family. At the same time, employers of undocumented migrants were given the opportunity to apply for a permit for them to stay in Italy.

Amina’s brother knew a family who needed a domestic helper.

“The family took me in like a daughter. They paid my pension contributions and applied for a residence permit for me to stay in Italy,” she said.

She continued working for the family

**“My children were born here but they don’t have citizenship”**  
Amina\*

when she had her children, a boy and a girl, now aged four and two. She worked first with the mother, and then worked for the daughter until July 2009 when the woman’s husband died.

Amina then took a free 160-hour course to become a family assistant. She now works for a family from 9am-2pm, Monday to Friday.

She also did a 120-hour course to work with people with Alzheimer’s disease. Caritas helped her find a position as a volunteer to help a man with Alzheimer’s for 10 months to complete the requirements of the course. She does four hours twice a week with the man.

Caritas has helped by providing her with used clothes for her children through the “Save the Mothers” project, and by giving her food coupons to go to its basic needs supermarket.

“I’m lucky. I’ve looked for things myself but it’s also helped meeting good people like the ones at Caritas,” says Amina, but adds that integration is difficult.

“I always feel like a foreigner, and I’ve not been back to North Africa in five years,” she said.

Amina says that if one change should be made to the law in Italy it should be that children of immigrants who are born there should be given Italian citizenship.

“The difficult thing here is that my children were born here but they don’t have citizenship, and yet they’ve never been to North Africa and they don’t know Arabic,” she said.

Amina realises that whatever she builds will always be precarious under the current immigration law in Italy, even though she has a permit to stay until 2013.

Her future has just been made more uncertain after the family she’s been working for has told her they can no longer employ her. She said, “I’ve got a permanent contract, but what does it mean when they can just get rid of me like a rag?”

\*Names changed to protect identities



Sister Sherly Joseph with some of the children of destitute migrants Caritas are helping.

Michele Bombassei/IOM  
2008 – MLY0003

## The journey towards a better life: Nigeria to Libya

**Vivian\*, 24, left Nigeria to look for a better life in Europe. Almost two years later, she's going back home having only got as far as Libya.**

Even though Vivian has a degree in biology and integrated science, she couldn't find a job at home in Nigeria. The journey across desert and sea to a land where she didn't know anyone seemed like her only chance.

Getting to Libya was much tougher than she imagined. Vivian paid a trafficker to take her across the desert. By the time they got to Duruku in Niger, he wanted more money.

"My family couldn't afford to send me any more money, so I had to ask a fellow traveller to help me," she said.

The man who paid the trafficker \$400 (€290) was more than just another traveller. He was the father of the child that Vivian was carrying. Vivian had got pregnant not long into her journey. Every day she faced the challenge of not having enough food or water.

But with the dream of Europe, Vivian persisted on her difficult journey. She didn't give up when she was arrested and detained

**"I just can't face more suffering. I'm now happy with the idea of returning home"**  
Vivian\*

for two months in the desert. Even when heavily pregnant, she still travelled 800km in the back of a pick-up truck covered by a tarpaulin.

She had to rely on strangers to help her on her journey once she got out of the camp in the desert. The driver of the pick-up tried to help her find lodging with another Nigerian once she arrived in Tripoli, but the man refused.

Exhausted and wandering the capital's streets alone, Vivian was lucky enough to meet a woman who took her to the Tripoli Christian Fellowship. There she was given accommodation and was helped with hospital bills when it was time to give birth.

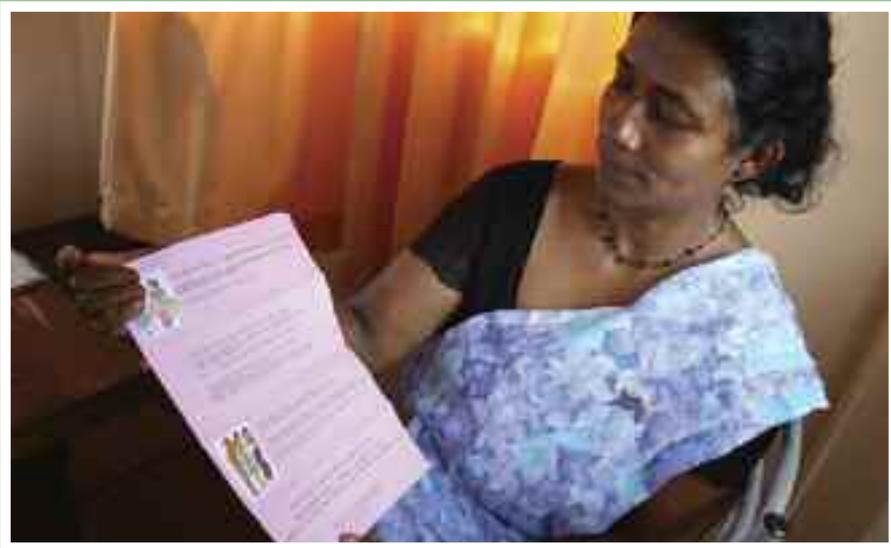
The woman lost her job and was no longer able to help Vivian. Through a friend,

she contacted Caritas in Tripoli. They helped her with rent, food, clothes and with things for her baby. Following so many difficulties, Vivian decided that the best option is to return home to Nigeria.

"I just can't face more suffering," said Vivian. "I'm now happy with the idea of returning home. I will continue my studies. I hope to find a job that will give me a good salary and some dignity."

Caritas helped Vivian contact the International Organisation for Migration to organise her return. Sr Sherly Joseph, who works for Caritas in Tripoli, says they also work with migrant women to help them understand just how difficult life abroad can be.

"Many of these young women are looking for a better life and an easier way to make money," said Sr Sherly. "Many of them aren't informed about the risks, many don't even know what an international passport is."



## More skills, less exploitation: Sri Lanka to Saudi Arabia

Caritas ensures migrants are informed about the risks before they make the decision to go abroad.  
Laura Sheahan/CRS

**“I told the agency there was no food,” said Julia. “They said they didn’t care if I was hungry.”**

Julia\*, a 48-year-old Sri Lankan woman, was calling her employment agency in Saudi Arabia out of desperation. She had left Sri Lanka several times to work as a maid in the Middle East, once in Dubai and once in Jordan. Though her time in those countries was difficult, she had never faced what she was facing now in Saudi Arabia: near-starvation.

Julia’s wealthy employers – a doctor and a teacher – rarely ate at home. Days would go by and Julia might receive a piece of toast or a little meat. “They’d give me some fried chicken one day, and then there would be two or three days with no food,” she said.

Like hundreds of Sri Lankan women who go abroad as domestic workers, Julia couldn’t leave her employers’ house. The doors were locked. In her case, she couldn’t even see outside. At the mercy of her employers and her agency, she worked for months, not only at her employers’ home but for their relatives.

Julia had dealt with ill-treatment in Jordan, where she worked from 5am until late in the evening. “I usually slept five hours a night,” she said.

She earned about \$100 (€78) a month, wages typical for Sri Lankan maids abroad. But at least she was fed.

In Saudi Arabia, she had to contend not only with hunger but with suspicion. “Madam was afraid her husband would fall in love with me,” she said. “She wouldn’t let me talk to him.”

**“There would be two or three days with no food”**  
Julia\*

Though her agency had promised her \$133 (€103) a month, it paid only \$88 (€68). After four months of hunger, Julia told Madam she wanted to leave. Again she was lucky as they let her go.

Julia is back in Sri Lanka now, living near Kandy. Her husband is unemployed and beats her. There is little money for their son. She is receiving support and training from Caritas Kandy (SETIK).

Caritas trains migrant returnees in skills like sewing, soap making, mushroom-growing, fabric-painting and home gardening. The goal is to give women options so they can earn money in their home country.

For those who decide to go overseas, Caritas and Sri Lanka’s Catholic Migrant

Commission provide advice that prevents women from being exploited, such as keeping copies of their passport in Sri Lanka, or leaving the employer’s contact information with relatives. They put posters in temples, churches and government offices, making sure women know how to stay safe.

Caritas Kandy has formed a group called Rakawarna Hawla (“Guardian Gathering”) in which ex-maids tell village women about the risks and challenges of working abroad.

For migrant women who have been abused and have returned home, Caritas provides financial aid. In the worst cases, Caritas helps maids’ families take legal action.

“We don’t simply give them loans, we also give them training and identify their talents,” said Father Roy Clarence, Director of the Catholic Migrant Commission (Diocese of Kandy).

Julia is in the group, excited to learn how to make a space-saving garden. After a lifetime of being at the mercy of others, she now has access to the skills that can help her become independent.

\*Names changed to protect identities

# Conclusions

Caritas builds on the strength of women such as Vivian, Zeina, Amina, Marion, Maria and Julia and accompanies them on their journeys.

For these women the road has been long and hard, but they have faced up to their difficulties and fears as they had no choice. The hope for a better future for them or their children, and the will to cope with difficult situations, has never left them.

Their stories give us a starting point to reflect on the following questions:

How do we ensure that migrant women find their voices and that they are heard?

How can the numbers of lives lost during migration be reduced? How can we ensure that migration for women becomes a legal and safe option?

What steps are needed to ensure migrant women's rights belong to themselves, and are not tied to a husband or employer?

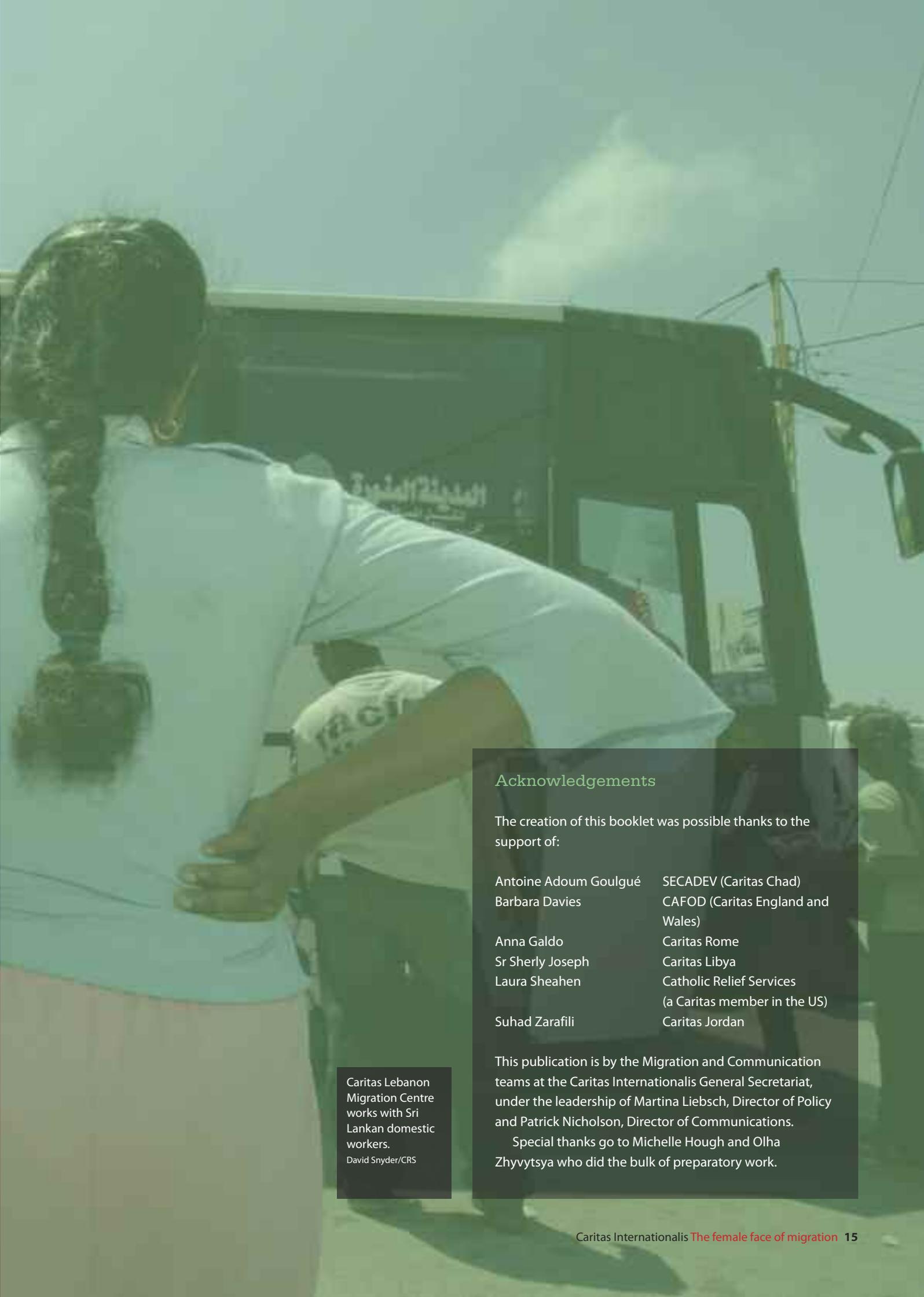
How can the fees and expenses linked to migration be reduced?

How can the protection needs of women fleeing persecution be ensured?

What is the impact of migration policy on men and women?

To what extent are trafficking, abuse and exploitation, migration policies and the regulation of the labour market inter-dependent?

How can Caritas balance its advocacy work with its humanitarian and caring dimension?



## Acknowledgements

The creation of this booklet was possible thanks to the support of:

Antoine Adoum Goulgué	SECADEV (Caritas Chad)
Barbara Davies	CAFOD (Caritas England and Wales)
Anna Galdo	Caritas Rome
Sr Sherly Joseph	Caritas Libya
Laura Sheahen	Catholic Relief Services (a Caritas member in the US)
Suhad Zarafili	Caritas Jordan

This publication is by the Migration and Communication teams at the Caritas Internationalis General Secretariat, under the leadership of Martina Liebsch, Director of Policy and Patrick Nicholson, Director of Communications.

Special thanks go to Michelle Hough and Olha Zhyvytsya who did the bulk of preparatory work.

Caritas Lebanon Migration Centre works with Sri Lankan domestic workers.

David Snyder/CRS

WWW  
caritas  
.org



Palazzo San Calisto  
V-00120  
Vatican City State  
+39 06 698 797 99