



*Caritas Internationalis*

**'The Female Face of Migration'  
Saly, Senegal, 30 November 2010**

**Welcome Address by Lesley-Anne Knight  
Secretary General, Caritas Internationalis**

Your graces, excellencies, reverend fathers, distinguished guests, brothers and sisters, staff and friends of Caritas...

On behalf of Caritas Internationalis I would like to extend to you all a very warm welcome to this conference on the *'Female Face of Migration'*. It is an indication of the importance of this event that we have with us close to one hundred delegates from all over the world. We have representatives and guest speakers from leading academic and research establishments, from the Church, from Catholic and other humanitarian organisations and charitable foundations, and from Caritas organisations in all seven of the Caritas Internationalis Regions.

I would like to say a big thank you to our hosts, Caritas Senegal, who have worked tirelessly to ensure that this event is a success, and who also have several representatives taking part.

The title of this event is, as you know, *'The Female Face of Migration'*, but on reflection we could perhaps more accurately speak of the female **faces** of migration. Because the more one examines this phenomenon, the more one realises its multi-faceted and complex nature. It is a subject that is riddled with contradictions and paradoxes; with contrasts and inequities; with moral dilemmas and conflicting interests.

It is precisely these complexities that prompted Caritas to organise this event, in an effort to develop a deeper understanding of the role women are playing in the changing reality of migration and to examine how we can respond to these challenges.

I have to confess that for me personally, in many respects, the picture is far from clear.

For instance, on the one hand, migration can contribute to the gender equality and empowerment of women, providing them with the income and status, autonomy, freedom and self-esteem that employment brings. On the other hand, they are vulnerable to exploitation and easy targets for traffickers. They are lured into forced prostitution, sweat shops and inhumane domestic work, with promises of a more prosperous life abroad. Mothers who leave their children also suffer a huge psychological and emotional burden.

On the one hand, educated women facing employment discrimination at home can find jobs abroad that better match their qualifications. On the other hand, professional women migrants sometimes take unskilled jobs in the hope that they will eventually find a job in their profession. This often does not happen, however, with the result that their career prospects are damaged, while their home country is deprived of their valuable skills.

Growing demand for domestic labour in developed countries provides employment opportunities for migrant women; but domestic labour is often unregulated, leaving migrant workers vulnerable to excessive working hours and inhumane conditions.

As migrant workers, women tend to send a greater proportion of their incomes home as remittances for the benefit of their children. They also provide 'social remittances' in the form of ideas, skills, attitudes and knowledge that contribute to socio-economic development, human rights and gender equality. But the other side of the coin is that a generation of 'mobility orphans' is being created, whose mental and emotional development suffers as a result of their mothers' absence.

Formulating policy in the light of these contradictions will be no easy task. But that is the challenge we face over the next few days, and I am sure it will be a stimulating process.

As we work towards a better understanding of these complex issues, we might keep in mind St Paul's advice to the Thessalonians:

***“Test everything and hold on to what is good.”***  
(1 Thessalonians 5:21)

I believe it will also be helpful to keep the core values of our Caritas confederation at the forefront of our minds. In particular, our **preferential option for the poor**. Wherever we work, Caritas prioritises the needs of the poorest, the marginalised and the oppressed.

Poverty adds a further layer of complexity to the female face of migration. Poverty is one of the driving forces behind migration, and it is often women and girls who are most vulnerable to its effects.

But conversely, women and girls who migrate can become victims of new experiences of poverty in their host countries. Some who leave their homes as educated professionals can find themselves on the margins of society in their new home – stigmatised, excluded and discriminated against.

Addressing the issue of poverty, in all its manifestations, must surely form part of any strategy on the feminisation of migration.

Women and girls are not only most vulnerable to poverty, they are also a vital part of the solution to alleviating and eradicating it. Their role at the heart of family, community and society makes them powerful players in improving all aspects of life. For instance, even minimum education for girls has been shown to improve levels of family health and to reduce infant and maternal mortality. A girl educated to primary level is likely to marry at a later age and have a healthier family than a girl who never went to school.

Women also play an important role in upholding faith and cultural values, and passing them on to their children, preserving traditional wisdom and survival strategies in times of hardship.

Families suffer breakdown and lack of cohesion when women are debilitated by poverty.

For Caritas organisations, focussing on the feminisation of migration and poverty will mean different things according to the context in which they work. In countries of origin it might mean making women and girls aware of the risks involved, and helping migrant workers who want to return home; in host countries it might mean campaigning for more legal channels of migration and ensuring proper regulation of working conditions for migrants.

But however we approach this issue, we are united by our belief in one humanity. The Caritas confederation is a sign and symbol above all of God's love for his one human family.

Pope Benedict chose 'One Human Family' as the theme for his message for World Migrant and Refugee Day last month, in which he said:

*"Human brotherhood is the, at times surprising, experience of a relationship that unites, of a profound bond with the other, different from me, based on the simple fact of being human beings. Assumed and lived responsibly, it fosters a life of communion and sharing with all and in particular with migrants; it supports the gift of self to others, for their good, for the good of all, in the local, national and world political communities."*

The concept of family is especially important in considering migration because despite the financial contribution that migrants can make towards development, they are not merely an economic resource; migrants are wives and husbands, sons and daughters, mothers and fathers.

Their development therefore has to be about more than material wealth. It has to be an integral human development, based on a complete understanding of the human person.

As we enter the season of Advent, we are reminded of the Nativity and of one of the most famous migrant families of all. They arrived in Bethlehem without a place to stay; Mary gave birth to her son far from home and the support of her family. Jesus was born into a world of uncertainty and danger. And as the gospel of Matthew

tells us, the Holy family were soon on the move again, fleeing to Egypt to protect the life of their young son.

Today, more than 2000 years on, these are all familiar scenarios. Conflict and persecution still drive people from their homes in search of safety. Women still give birth in far from ideal conditions, a long way from home and their families.

In the 'female face of migration' we can see the image of Mary. We see love, courage and sacrifice. May that image inspire us as we seek to support and protect women on their journey towards a better life.

Lesley-Anne Knight  
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