Columns
Migration

Migrant women from Venezuela and Haiti prepare to embark in Necoclí, Colombia, on April 28, 2024. (GSR photo/Manuel Rueda)

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Editor's note: *Global Sisters Report's Welcoming the Stranger series takes a closer look at women religious working with immigrants and migrants. The installments feature Sisters and organizations that network to better serve persons crossing the border, explore global migration trends and address the issue of immigration in the U.S. presidential election.*

The phenomenon of female migration has grown significantly in recent years due to various causes: lack of employment and educational opportunities in the countries of origin, violence, abuse and gender discrimination, among other factors.

It should be noted that migration has always existed historically, but it was more common for men to migrate in search of better opportunities. However, the International Organization for Migration reports that female migration now represents 49% worldwide, and in Latin America it has increased to 50.1%; so, more women migrate than men, a phenomenon known as the "feminization of migration."

While in the city of Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, Mexico, in 2018, I had the opportunity to witness this reality when I visited the Nazareth Migrant House, directed by the Scalabrinians. Sometimes I accompanied the arrival of people, mostly women. I shared the Eucharist, dinner and listened to their stories about the road to the "promised land," where hope got stronger and stronger, and many said: "We have already passed the worst, and we are close to crossing." It was heartbreaking to hear and see the vulnerability in their pained faces, disappointed by a deportation, hopeless at not having the economic resources to continue, and scarred by reliving episodes of abuse of all kinds to which they were exposed.

I remember the faces of some women, like that of a Honduran woman who told me: "Sister, I have already been raped six times; they beat me and stole everything, but I hope to be able to cross." Another woman came pregnant, with the illusion that her child would be born in the United States for a better future, although she said with disappointment, "He was born in Mexico."

> The Latin American migrant woman ventures forth, risking her own life to look for a better future. Beyond her vulnerability lies her motivating and resilient strength.
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The first story I heard from a migrant woman when I arrived in Chicago, Illinois, was that of my aunt, whom I had not seen for 25 years, because she had to migrate with her family, facing all kinds of uncertainty and discrimination based on gender. Men had the privilege of crossing with false documents, while women had to walk, often separated from their children.

Each of these women, who continue to leave their countries or who have already crossed the border, are a true reflection of the vulnerability that all migrants experience, but especially women because of the violence they encounter on the

way, or because of that from which they flee in their countries of origin, where they experience precarious health, food and hygiene conditions, and exposure to harmful situations. In his article, "*Mujeres migrantes en tránsito por México. La perspectiva cuantitativa y de género*" Eduardo Torre Cantalapiedra, researcher at El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, divides the situations to which they are exposed into five: 1) exposure to natural dangers; 2) accidental, violent and crime-related deaths; 3) robberies and assaults; 4) sexual aggressions; and 5) human trafficking for sexual exploitation.

In the midst of so many anxieties and troubles, we see the journey of so many Latin American women highlighted who daily risk their lives to leave their homes. As the biblical story of the book of Ruth recounts, the phenomenon of migration among women has existed since ancient times, forcing them to leave their land in search of hope: "Naomi then made ready to go back from the plateau of Moab. … She and her two daughters-in-law left the place where they had been living. Then, as they were on the road back to land of Judah" (Ruth 1:6-7).

To be a balm of hope, and to honor the name of so many heroines, I pause to contemplate that, between vulnerability and strength, the life of female genius is interwoven. The Latin American migrant woman ventures forth, risking her own life to look for a better future. Beyond her vulnerability, lies her motivating and resilient strength, as described by Pilar De Miguel Fernández in her book, *Espiritualidad y Fortaleza Femenina*: "Resilient ethics is not born from the autonomy of the female subject, but from her pain, or from her reaction to the pain of others. It is not something originating in her, but rather her response to reality" (p. 76).

Ruth, the Moabite, shows us the strong woman who decides to leave her land and becomes a companion of her mother-in-law, Naomi: "Do not ask me to abandon or forsake you! For wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God" (Ruth 1:16).

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Ruth is able to risk and take the reins of her destiny in order to achieve salvation. Between Ruth and the migrant women, one can see the strength that makes the road more bearable. Knowing and accompanying these experiences of strong migrant women and companions on the road, who continue to struggle day after

day, fills me with pride and strength. I continue to learn in my local context that each story gives us the opportunity to listen, feel and empathize. I propose that, as a society, we look at the Ruths of our time through three actions that you and I can take in our local context:

First, be aware of the reality. Although we have heard about the issue many times, it is still difficult for us to look at our migrant brothers and sisters with compassion. The subject of migration in Latin America continues to be of little interest to governments since it is often not part of their agendas, or it is seen as a threat. Therefore, let us understand the reality of migration; let us promote a conscience of empathy and solidarity; let us confront rejection of migrants, discrimination and racism and let us promote community and inclusivity.

Second, value and dignify the lives of so many women in the light of characters like Ruth. She, like so many faces today, has shown strength and hope. Therefore, the importance of implementing, in our communities, liturgical spaces to reflect on female migration and the contributions of migrant women, transformers of their communities and of a collective reality.

Third, practice inclusion and listening to the heart. Faced with this reality, it is our task to motivate all the baptized to live in a constant exodus, seeking gender equality so that no woman feels alone, and so that we can recognize the role of women in the reconstruction of a better world. Let us ensure that their voices are not silenced, that there are policies aimed at protecting and assisting them, and that no one loses their human dignity as sons and daughters of God.

Latin American migrant women have much to teach us today as women of faith, missionaries of hope and defenders of justice. In the midst of a world, disfigured by so many situations, feminine strength continues to be fruitful. It is essential that, as a society and as parishes, we build support networks so that migrant women can meet again and share their spirituality. As a woman, I realize that we are blessed with the gift of wisdom, which knows how to heal wounds, forgive and transform reality.

To close this reflection, I propose the following questions:

- What can we learn from the feminine spirituality of migrant women?
- What more can we do to continue weaving bonds of support, and listen to and reach out to the many migrant women of Latin America who continue to cross

the border?

- How can we help others to recognize the dignity of migrant women and God's action in them?
- What can we do to reintegrate migrant women into society?