

WOMEN AND BORDERS IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

ARTICLE

Camille Schmoll*

My research draws on over a decade of ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2010 and 2020 across Malta, Italy, Cyprus and Tunisia to explore the contributions of feminist research—particularly feminist geography and ethnography—to the study of international migration and border regimes. Central to this inquiry is the concept of *feminizing the gaze*, a methodological and epistemological approach that foregrounds women's experiences and bodies in migration studies, and destabilizes dominant masculinist narratives of mobility.

Women's Invisibility, Feminist Political Geography and Border Sites

Despite a growing body of literature on migration, women's roles and experiences remain underrepresented in media and scholarly discourses, particularly in the context of the Central Mediterranean. While women comprise over 50% of international migrants to Europe, their journeys are often invisibilized due to both structural and narrative forces. Media images frequently render Mediterranean migration as a masculine phenomenon, erasing women either through literal absence or through depersonalizing representations of mass movement. This invisibility extends to academia, where migration has long been coded as a male experience. Feminist migration scholarship since the 1970s has pushed back against this invisibility, identifying successive waves of inquiry: from the recognition of women as workers and agents in migration flows; to an emphasis on family, kinship, and household dynamics; to current critiques that interrogate gendered borders, intersectional violence, and the moral economies surrounding migration. Yet stereotypes persist—such as viewing women as recent, passive, or exceptional migrants—despite ample historical evidence to the contrary.

As a feminist political geographer and ethnographer, my research focuses on the spatialities and materialities of migration, particularly through the lens of "border sites". These are not only territorial edges but zones of control, waiting, and negotiation—often located inland, in reception centers, or in the blurred spaces of detention and accommodation. Drawing on concepts such as *moralscapes* and *borderscapes*, I analyze how space and moral regimes intersect to govern migrant women's bodies, behaviors, and futures. In one field site—a remote Sicilian village housing an accommodation center for asylum seekers—I observed how mundane, gendered objects like pink underwear or cuddly toys indexed broader dynamics of control, care, and confinement. These "trivial" materials offered insight into everyday life in border zones, and the ways in which gendered control is enacted through both humanitarian and repressive means.

Borders as a Moral and an Embodied Experience

Reception centers emerge as key moral sites, where migrants live in protracted states of waiting. These spaces operate through a gendered moral economy: women are subject to heightened surveillance, their mobility restricted in the name of safety. Privacy, intimacy, and autonomy become sites of negotiation and contestation. Importantly, these centers are not only spaces of control but also of interaction, care, and what I call *moral activism*—practices of support, solidarity, or surveillance performed by local actors, staff, and volunteers who engage with migrants. Feminist attention to emotions, the body, and ordinary life reveals how gender is a central axis of border work. Policies and practices of care—such as controlling women's movements “for their own protection”—often reinforce the very vulnerabilities they claim to address.

Women's migration across the Mediterranean is profoundly embodied. Drawing on testimonies from African women who survived perilous journeys, I trace how their experiences—of sexual violence, pregnancy, illness, and survival—expose the bodily toll of crossing multiple borders. The border becomes not just a site of passage, but a liminal zone that marks, transforms, and inscribes the body with meaning. Importantly, these narratives also confront the absence of empirical research on women's deaths and disappearances in the Mediterranean. In the early stages of my fieldwork, fictional characters offered the only representations of these trajectories. These figures remain critical companions in thinking through the silences, absences, and traces of women who did not survive.

Mobile Ethnography and Feminist Reflexivity

My earlier work focused on transnational trade and circulation, employing mobile ethnography to trace connections across the Mediterranean. But in the current era of hardening borders and “sticky” migration trajectories, ethnography must grapple with immobilization, waiting, and interrupted journeys. Today, multi-sited research means moving between border sites rather than following continuous routes. This shift reflects broader changes in the border regime: from frictionless mobility to regimes of sorting, suspension, and exclusion. However, we are living not just through a “long summer of migration” but through an extended bordering process shaped by overlapping crises since the Arab Spring. This evolution has transformed not only migrants' experiences but also our epistemologies, methods, and positions as researchers.

Situating the researcher is a critical element of feminist ethnography. My work is shaped by positionality—both as an outsider in the lives of migrant women and as an embedded scholar within migration studies. Over the past two decades, the field has undergone significant epistemological shifts: from the optimism of transnationalism to the critical lens of border studies. Today's scholarship emphasizes in-between spaces, rhizomatic borders, and the complex interplay of actors and institutions involved in migration governance—from humanitarian agencies to repressive apparatuses. But this proliferation of “border talk” risks dilution. We must remain cautious about conceptual overreach and maintain empirical grounding, especially when theorizing borders as everywhere and nowhere at once.

Feminizing the Gaze: Towards an Embodied and Relational Approach to Migration Studies

To feminize the gaze means to center the embodied, emotional, and relational dimensions of

migration. It involves tracing how bodies—particularly women's bodies—become sites of control, desire, resistance, and healing. Through aesthetic practices, care, and digital routines, women reclaim autonomy even within regimes of immobilization. Digital spaces, for example, offer women tools to maintain transnational ties and express emotional states. These affective practices challenge the outdated notion of the uprooted migrant and instead underscore the connected, relational nature of mobility.

Feminist perspectives highlight that autonomy is not an individual trait but a tensioned, relational process. Migration is rarely emancipatory in a linear sense; rather, it unfolds amid contradictions, attachments, and shifting forms of power. Women's strategies—whether grounded in silence, motherhood, contraception, prayer, or protest—demonstrate autonomy in tension: the pursuit of life and possibility within constraint.

Conclusion

Feminist research on migration and borders compels us to confront the erasures, moralities, and violences embedded in contemporary bordering practices. It also opens space for new narratives—emotional, embodied, and situated—that reflect the lived experiences of women in migration. Feminizing the gaze is not merely about adding women to the picture, but about reframing the picture itself.

By centering women's voices, ordinary practices, and bodily experiences, we gain deeper insight into the workings of power, care, and resistance in the border regime. In doing so, we not only produce more inclusive knowledge but also challenge dominant epistemologies and create space for alternative futures.

References

- FASSIN, D. (2011). Policing borders, producing boundaries: The governmentality of immigration in dark times. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 40(1), 213-226.
- GREEN, N. L., & REYNOLDS, S. (2020). Four ages of migration studies: men, women, gender and sexuality. *Clio. Women, Gender, History*, 51(1), 185-206.
- HYNDMAN, J., & GILES, W. (2011). Waiting for what? The feminization of asylum in protracted situations. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 18(3), 361-379.
- MOUNTZ, A. (2011). Where asylum-seekers wait: Feminist counter-topographies of sites between states. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 18(3), 2011, 381-399.
- PICKERING, S., & COCHRANE, B. (2013). Irregular border-crossing deaths and gender: Where, how and why women die crossing borders. *Theoretical Criminology*, 17(1), 27-48.
- PROGLIO, G., HAWTHORNE, C., DANEWID, I., SAUCIER, P. K., GRIMALDI, G., PESARINI, A.,... & GERRAND, V. (Eds.). (2021). *The black Mediterranean: Bodies, borders and citizenship*. Springer Nature.
- RIGO, E. (2019). Re-gendering the border: Chronicles of women's resistance and unexpected alliances from the Mediterranean border. *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies*, 18(1), 173-186.
- SASSEN, S. (2000). Women's burden: Counter-geographies of globalization and the feminization of survival. *Journal of International Affairs*, 53(2), 503-524.
- SCHMOLL, C. (2024). *The Wretched of the Sea. Women and Borders in the Mediterranean*, Mobility and Politics, Palgrave Macmillan