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FeMig Policy Brief

Making Migration Feminist: Directions from Civil Society

Authors: Jenna Hennebry, Marika Jeziorek, Neil Amber Judge, Paola Cyment, Abdelfettah Elkchirid

A Moment to Act

We are at a moment where we are witnessing lost ground on gender equality and women's rights globally. The world is not on track to achieve gender equality by 2030; at the rate reported in 2023, closing gaps in legal protection and removing discriminatory laws would take an estimated 286 years (UN DESA, 2023). Achieving gender equality requires changes to policy, law, and practice across all domains of governance. Yet migration governance remains largely gender-blind, leaving gender inequalities insufficiently addressed and women's rights inadequately protected (Piper et al., 2024).

Commitments to gender-responsive migration provide an important starting point, but they do not constitute a comprehensive feminist migration policy. Migration can create opportunities for income security and autonomy, but its opportunities and risks are unevenly distributed, with disproportionate consequences for women and racialized migrants (Gottardo & Cyment, 2019). Addressing these inequalities requires more than incorporating gender into existing systems: it requires examining how migration governance distributes power, rights, resources, and mobility.

This policy brief draws on the FeMig Project, funded by GIZ and led by the Gender+Migration Hub under the leadership of Dr. Jenna Hennebry at the International Migration Research Centre, Wilfrid Laurier University, in partnership with the Women in Migration Network and the International Detention Coalition. Undertaken during 2025-2026, FeMig brings together women and 2SLGBTQIA+ migrants, grassroots organizations, civil society experts, and researchers through participatory workshops, surveys, capacity-building activities, and video interviews to develop Feminist Migration Policy and Governance (FMPG). Project outputs include civil society mapping, videos, online capacity-building resources, policy recommendations, and guidance on gender-responsive indicators. FeMig adopts an intersectional, 360-degree perspective that centres migrants' and refugees' rights across all sites and stages of migration. Its grassroots-to-global approach foregrounds the knowledge and leadership of migrant women, 2SLGBTQIA+ migrants, and grassroots organizations, connecting their perspectives with researchers and representatives from governments and UN agencies to inform policy and governance. This approach builds on feminist scholarship that recognizes marginalized groups as producers of knowledge and emphasizes the role of migrant rights activists and organizations in shaping governance agendas (Harding, 1986; Haraway, 1988, 1991; Hennebry et al., 2018).

The project's core contribution is a grassroots-to-global approach. Rather than treating gender as an additional variable to be inserted into existing migration systems, FeMig asks how migration governance itself distributes power, mobility, labour, care, protection, risk, and voice. Workshops and related research activities consistently showed that gendered inequality is produced not only by social conditions surrounding migration, but also by migration pathways, documentation rules, recruitment systems, employer dependency, border enforcement, access-to-service arrangements, and the uneven distribution of care work.

Across the consultations, a feminist migration policy was understood as a set of policy mechanisms and infrastructure that moves beyond the protection of "vulnerable women" toward transforming the institutional and structural conditions that produce vulnerability, while expanding agency, autonomy, rights, mobility, leadership, and accountability.

The evidence converges around three linked movements:

- From systems of harm: Addressing gender-based violence, unsafe and precarious work, discriminatory and restrictive migration pathways, criminalization and detention, and intersecting forms of discrimination.
- To power and participation: Centring migrant agency, lived experience, civil society leadership, and co-governance.
- To feminist alternatives: Developing rights-based and gender-responsive regular migration pathways; labour and care protections; firewalls between immigration enforcement and access to services; survivor-centred justice; regularization and secure documentation; community-based alternatives to detention; accountability across recruitment systems; and sustained support across the migration cycle, including return and reintegration.

Background

Women and girls accounted for approximately 146 million—or 48 per cent—of the world's 304 million international migrants in 2024 (UN DESA, 2025). Their rights and opportunities are shaped by a global context of persistent inequality and growing backlash against gender equality. In 2024, nearly one-quarter of governments worldwide reported a backlash against women's rights, including threats to legal protections and institutions supporting gender equality (UN Women, 2025).

Migration can create opportunities for income security, autonomy, and participation, but these opportunities—and the risks of exploitation, violence, and exclusion—are unevenly distributed. Gender-segregated labour markets, insecure migration status, and the structural devaluation of care work can expose migrant women to precarious employment and human rights violations (Hennebry et al., 2018; Yeates, 2009; Mahon, 2021). For 2SLGBTQIA+ migrants and refugees, discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics can compound these risks. UNHCR guidance highlights the need to address violence, criminalization, and structural barriers to justice, healthcare, employment, and housing for LGBTIQ+ people requiring protection. These conditions underscore the need for migration governance that advances equality, rather than treating gender as an additional consideration within existing systems. Although gender-responsive approaches have gained recognition, translating these commitments into policies that address structural inequality and reflect the experiences of women and 2SLGBTQIA+ migrants remains a central challenge (Hennebry & Petrozziello, 2019; Cyment, 2021).

Over the past four decades, migration scholarship has increasingly examined how gender shapes migration. Early research challenged women's invisibility within accounts of migration, establishing their experiences as a substantive focus of inquiry (Morokvasic, 1984; Simon & Brettell, 1986). Subsequent scholarship moved beyond simply adding women to existing frameworks towards examining gender as a constitutive feature of migration processes, institutions, and relationships (Silvey, 2004; Mahler & Pessar, 2006; Donato & Gabaccia, 2015). Intersectional approaches further demonstrate how gender interacts with race, class, sexuality, nationality, and other relations of power to shape mobility, rights, and belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2006; Anthias, 2012; Herrera, 2013).

Despite this substantial body of scholarship, migration governance has historically remained gender-blind, insufficiently addressing the gendered organization of labour markets, care responsibilities, and access to rights and protection (Hennebry & Petrozziello, 2019; Bastia & Piper, 2024). Policy narratives have often positioned migrant women either as victims requiring protection or as economic actors whose migration benefits migrants, origin countries, and destination countries alike. Both framings can obscure the structural conditions that constrain agency and reproduce inequality (Basok & Piper, 2012; Anderson, 2012a; Mahon, 2021).

Civil society organizations and scholars have consequently called for human-rights-based and gender-responsive migration governance (Gottardo & Cyment, 2019; Hennebry & Piper, 2021; WIMN, 2018). However, the translation of gender-responsive commitments into substantive institutional change remains limited (Cyment, 2021). Feminist political economy highlights why this matters: migration systems can channel women into undervalued care and other gendered work, while governance decisions determine who is excluded and who is included on unequal terms (Kofman & Raghuram, 2006; Anderson, 2012b; Mahon, 2021; Bautista-Chavez et al., 2024).

Feminist foreign policy offers a related framework for examining power, inequality, and the participation of marginalized groups in policymaking (Aggestam et al., 2019; Robinson, 2021; Scheyer & Kumskova, 2019). However, its connections with migration governance remain underdeveloped, despite emerging scholarship explicitly linking these fields (Achilleos-Sarll, 2023; Cheung & Scheyer, 2024).

The FeMig Project addresses this gap by bringing feminist migration scholarship and feminist foreign policy into dialogue to develop Feminist Migration Policy and Governance. Its grassroots-to-global approach centres migrant knowledge, civil society leadership, and meaningful participation in defining policy priorities and alternatives. In doing so, it builds on scholarship that recognizes migrant women and grassroots organizations as agents shaping rights agendas, rather than passive recipients of protection (Hennebry et al., 2018; Tungohan, 2017).

Grassroots-to-Global Design

The project was designed around a sequence of participatory consultations that connected national and local realities with a global feminist migration-governance agenda. This design resisted a one-directional model in which global policy priorities are simply transmitted to civil society. Instead, workshops asked participants to identify how gender shapes migration in their contexts, what civil society is already doing, what feminist migration policy should require, and what concrete changes states and institutions should make. As one participant in the Ecuador consultation put it, “Nothing about migrant women/people without them.”

The Bangkok FFMD engagement provided the global frame, linking cross-regional feminist and migrant-led movements. National consultations then surfaced context-specific priorities while also testing the extent to which similar governance mechanisms—restrictive pathways, employer dependency, documentation barriers, labour segmentation, care burdens, violence, and weak accountability—recurred across otherwise different migration contexts.

FeMig brought together civil society perspectives through five country participatory workshops in Albania, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico and Nepal, alongside a cross-regional workshop at the Feminist Forum on Migration and Displacement in Bangkok and at the UN International Migration Review Forum in New York. Activities included facilitated group discussions, participatory arts, artistic performances, collective visioning and policy

priority-mapping exercises. In addition, a Global Civil Society Organization Survey (approximately 229 respondents) was administered via Qualtrics, and semi-structured video interviews with civil society (n=75) were carried out alongside the workshops and project activities.

The methodology was itself part of the project's substantive feminist approach. Feminist participatory workshops repeatedly emphasised inclusivity, co-creation, care, language access, lived experience, and the recognition of multiple ways of knowing. In Bangkok, multilingual interpretation was used to support language justice. In each workshop creative methods created ways to communicate experiences and aspirations that may be marginalized in conventional policy spaces. FeMig used innovative forms of participation and participatory knowledge production including: (1) Participatory arts and collective visioning, where participants were asked to represent their ideas about gender and migration through art and asked "What does feminist migration look like?" In addition, in both Mexico and Ecuador hosts shared artistic performances and in Albania, the host shared the "Girls and Walls" art installation; (2) Collective priority-mapping and policy-oriented exercises focused on feminist indicators, governance gaps, and areas for civil society intervention; (3) interactive digital tools, including Mentimeter exercises that enabled anonymous participant input (4) Video interviews where participants' voices were highlighted and have been used to guide project analysis and results, as well as a key knowledge mobilization format on the website.

The focus group discussions in the participatory workshops were structured around questions presented through Mentimeter, allowing participants to respond anonymously before engaging in facilitated group discussion. Questions were adapted in consultation with local partners to reflect country-specific priorities and migration governance challenges. For example, the Albania workshop included a question on how the country could align its migration policies with European Union gender equality standards and global frameworks while responding to local realities. This approach combined individual reflections with collective discussion and allowed participants to identify priorities relevant to their particular contexts.

Key Findings

The project's findings from video interviews and participatory focus groups highlighted three linked themes: systems of harm, power and participation, and feminist alternatives. Interviews highlighted restrictions under the kafala system, migrant women's concentration in poorly protected employment, and the need for meaningful rather than tokenistic participation in decision-making. The framework connected these concerns to practical responses, including stronger labour protections, secure status and documentation, migrant-led advisory structures, survivor-centred services, and community-based alternatives to detention.

The FeMig Global Civil Society Organization Survey (n=229), administered through Qualtrics, complemented the consultations by mapping organizations' activities, populations

served, geographic reach, and policy priorities. Survey findings helped identify shared priorities across contexts. Percentages use question-specific response totals, with multiple selections permitted where applicable; findings are descriptive rather than representative of all organizations working on gender and migration.

Across the consultations, survey responses, focus groups and interviews, participants identified recurring concerns about how migration governance produces dependency, insecurity and unequal access to rights. While these concerns varied across contexts, the findings point to the need for structural change rather than simply adding gender-responsive measures to existing systems. The following ten themes bring together evidence from these different sources, highlighting both shared priorities and context-specific experiences.

1 *Migration systems can produce gendered harm:* Participants identified employer-tied status, restrictive pathways, documentation barriers, labour segmentation, and enforcement practices as sources of precarity. Nepal highlighted how protective bans can push women towards irregular migration, while Ecuador showed how documentation requirements and fear of enforcement can undermine access to rights. Survey respondents prioritized human-rights protection for all migrants (78%) and protection from exploitation and trafficking (73%). Gender-responsive policy is therefore insufficient if it leaves structures of dependency, coercion, and exclusion unchanged.

2 *Protection must strengthen agency and autonomy*: Participants rejected approaches that treat migrant women and gender-diverse people solely as vulnerable subjects. Nepal's critique of migration bans showed how protective measures can restrict choice and increase risk, while Colombia and Ecuador emphasized co-creation and direct consultation. Feminist protection must expand safety alongside migrants' ability to make decisions, move, work, access services, and exercise rights. As one participant in the Nepal consultation put it when reflecting on migration, it "Should be choice, not obligation."

3 *Rights-based, gender-responsive regular pathways are foundational:* Participants called for accessible and secure pathways that support family unity, long-term status, and protection from dependency on employers or family members. Bangkok linked regular pathways with permanent residence and citizenship options, while Albania emphasized recruitment accountability. Migration pathways were an area of work for 40% of survey respondents. A key message shared by respondents was that regularity alone is insufficient unless pathways also secure rights and autonomy.

4 *Care and labour are central migration governance issues*: Workshops highlighted women's concentration in poorly protected sectors alongside disproportionate unpaid care and administrative responsibilities. Nepal emphasized domestic-work protections, while Colombia and Ecuador highlighted care burdens throughout migration. Survey responses echoed these concerns and included full access to labour rights (77%), decent work and living wages, including in care (73%), and social security for women migrant workers (72%).

Priorities include childcare, redistribution of unpaid care, qualification recognition, collective bargaining, and recruiter and employer accountability.

5 *Rights must be safe and practical to exercise:* Rights offer limited protection when accessing them risks immigration consequences or retaliation. Participants called for confidential violence reporting, independent status arrangements, and integrated legal, psychosocial, and other services. Violence was an area of work for 77% of survey respondents; 73% prioritized eliminating sexual and gender-based violence, and 72% supported services regardless of status. Feminist governance requires firewalls between enforcement and services, survivor-centred justice, and measures addressing language, disability, documentation, care, and cost barriers. One participant in the Ecuador workshop called for "safe reporting channels for the migrant population that do not jeopardize their status."

6 *Criminalization and detention are gendered governance choices:* The global workshop identified detention, deportation, pushbacks, family separation, and border militarization as gendered and racialized harms. Detention was an area of work for 32% of survey respondents. Proposed alternatives included community-based case management, non-custodial reception, individualized needs assessments, and investment in migrant-led support rather than punitive enforcement.

7 *Intersectionality must inform policy design and delivery:* Workshop participants discussed how gender interacts with race, ethnicity, caste, sexuality, disability, class, age, nationality, and legal status. Ecuador highlighted distinct barriers for Afro-descendant, Indigenous, racialized, and LGBTQI+ migrants, while Bangkok emphasized racialized and colonial structures. Responding to these differences requires disaggregated data, differentiated services, language access, safe shelters, and accessible complaint mechanisms—not inclusive language alone.

8 *Civil society and people with lived experience are governance actors:* Civil society organizations are more than service providers. They provide services, but also document harm, organize workers, support survivors, pursue litigation, and shape policy agendas. Colombia's "feminist citizen diplomacy" illustrated this role, while Ecuador highlighted civil society's protection work where state provision is limited. Feminist governance must move beyond one-off consultation towards sustained participation throughout policymaking, supported by flexible funding, compensation, interpretation, accessibility and care support, and protected civic space. As one participant in the Colombia consultation explained, "As civil society organizations, we play a key role as a bridge between communities and institutions."

9 *Return and reintegration require sustained support:* Participants identified stigma, economic exclusion, psychosocial needs, and gender-based violence among returnees. Ecuador, Nepal, and Albania emphasized the need for sustained economic, psychosocial, and

community-based support. Feminist migration governance therefore extends through return, reintegration, and longer-term social inclusion rather than treating return as an administrative endpoint.

10 *Feminist indicators must measure substantive equality:* Participants challenged measures centred primarily on remittances, employment, movement, or programme throughput. Nepal emphasized safety, dignity, empowerment, and reintegration, while Albania highlighted rights, services, and inclusion. Feminist indicators should assess whether governance expands autonomy, redistributes power, reduces harm, and makes rights usable in practice.

Recommendations



Data gathered through the project points to six priorities for feminist migration governance, linking structural change with practical measures to advance rights, autonomy, and accountability.

1 *Share power, not just consultation*

Recognize migrants and migrant-led organizations as knowledge holders and decision-makers, not simply beneficiaries.

- Institutionalize participation by migrant women, gender-diverse people, and migrant-led organizations throughout policy design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation.
- Support participation through interpretation, childcare, accessibility measures, transport, and appropriate compensation.
- Demonstrate how participants' recommendations influence decisions.

2 *Protect autonomy alongside safety*

Ensure that protective measures expand safety without restricting mobility, informed choice, or independence.

- Review discriminatory migration restrictions and expand rights-based, gender-responsive regular pathways and regularization.
- Enable status independent of employers, recruiters, partners, or sponsors.
- Guarantee access to protection, justice, and essential services regardless of status.
- Protect family unity in its diverse forms and assess risks created by border, visa, and enforcement rules.

3 *Change the conditions that produce vulnerability*

Address the governance arrangements that create insecurity rather than treating vulnerability as an inherent migrant characteristic.

- Review temporary status, employer-tied permits, recruitment fees, and sponsorship arrangements for gendered harms.
- Address racialized and gendered labour-market segmentation and documentation barriers.
- Assess apparently gender-neutral policies for unequal impacts and reform those that deepen dependency or exclusion.

4 *Make care and labour visible*

Recognize paid and unpaid care as central to migration, employment, and participation.

- Guarantee labour rights and social protection for domestic and care workers, regardless of status.
- Strengthen recruiter and employer accountability and accessible remedies.
- Address deskilling, qualification-recognition barriers, and unpaid care responsibilities through childcare and other supports.
- Ratify and implement ILO Conventions No. 189 and No. 190.
- Measure outcomes beyond employment and remittances, including safety, dignity, and well-being.

5 *Make rights usable in practice*

Ensure that migrants can safely access legal protections, services, and complaint mechanisms.

- Establish firewalls separating services and labour inspection from immigration enforcement.
- Provide survivor-centred justice and status pathways independent of abusers.

- Ensure LGBTQI+ inclusion, language access, disability accessibility, and sexual and reproductive healthcare.
- Use disaggregated data to identify unequal outcomes while protecting privacy and safety.

6 *Resource civil society and strengthen accountability*

Recognize civil society's governance role without transferring state responsibilities to under-resourced organizations.

- Provide sustained, flexible funding for migrant-led, women-led, and feminist organizations, and compensate for their expertise.
- Formalize civil society roles in monitoring, evaluation, and accountability.
- Protect civic space, human rights defenders, humanitarian assistance, and solidarity with migrants from criminalization.
- Ensure public institutions remain responsible for rights protection and service provision.

Conclusion

Workshops highlighted practical approaches that could inform feminist migration governance, including specialized shelters and integrated legal, psychosocial, and healthcare services; childcare and economic-empowerment support; strategic litigation; and migrant-worker organizing. Cross-sector coordination, arts-based participation, and feminist movement-building also created opportunities to connect lived experience with policy dialogue and collective action. These approaches offer promising directions for policy and practice, rather than independently evaluated best practices.

Together, the findings suggest that feminist migration governance requires transforming how power, rights, and resources are distributed. This means institutionalizing meaningful participation by migrants and civil society, expanding rights-based migration pathways that protect safety and autonomy, and addressing structural sources of vulnerability, including employer dependency, insecure status, and documentation barriers. It also requires recognizing paid and unpaid care, enforcing labour protections, and ensuring that migrants can access services and justice without fear of immigration consequences. Sustained funding for migrant-led and feminist organizations, protected civic space, and indicators centred on dignity, safety, rights, and inclusion are essential to making these commitments accountable in practice.

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