

## **Reflections of the 14th GFMD Civil Society Intersectional Rapporteur on Gender**

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A gender lens is often viewed or interpreted as speaking about women and their needs alone, often bracketing them in their roles as mothers, as if maternity were the key signifier of their worth.

The most important concern raised by civil society regarding the 14th GFMD was the shrinking civil society space, the restricted numbers allowed participation, and the limiting criteria for such participation. Despite this restriction, the Civil Society Mechanism (CSM) made intentional efforts to bring an intersectional approach to Civil Society's presence at the GFMD, including a preparatory meeting on the subject, and "intersectional" rapporteurs linking gender, race and youth perspectives. The CSM also made great efforts to optimise the participation of civil society representatives, despite the smaller numbers.

Of the 120 civil society participants a sizeable percentage were women, and in the various civil society prep meetings and in the GFMD itself, women's participation in various panels and roundtables was noteworthy. However, that did not translate automatically into the kind of gender-responsive and gender-inclusive discussions one hoped for. We also saw a great resistance to the use of a 'feminist approach' or 'intersectional feminism' – from governments, UN officials and businesses – though when broken down to the essence of its meaning the resistance did weaken somewhat.

On a positive note, there were some interesting discussions during the CSM preparatory day and GFMD on the limited number of rights-based and "gender" based pathways. Migrant women tend to be concentrated in "feminised" jobs such as domestic and care work, which are often undervalued and even excluded from legal definitions of work in certain countries. They face specific challenges in labour migration, which need to be considered. There is a need for investment in the care economy, which would improve the employment rate of women as they bear the largest burden of unpaid care. Moreover, migrant women workers need to be assured of labour rights – the right to decent work, freedom of association, and collective bargaining – all critical to the agency of migrant women workers.

Clearly, there is a need for greater engagement around the framework, and to reclaim feminism and feminist approaches from the often sullied misinterpretations we see these days. While feminism is often reduced to equality between men and women, an intersectional feminist lens looks for all forms of inequalities that impact individuals across complex identities of gender, nationality, language, class, caste etc.

An intersectional feminist approach is not about women's rights alone, but situates the rights of women (and other intersecting communities) in the broader human rights framework and policy-making, and to see how it impacts all stakeholders in society. The whole-of-society approach of GCM is in fact a ripe and potent entry point to ensure an intersectional feminist approach.

**"No woman is really an insider in the institutions fathered by masculine consciousness."** – Adrienne Rich, *Blood, Bread and Poetry*, Ch. 1

Somehow, the dominant civil society space also seems to unconsciously imbibe masculine institutions, regardless of the gender of its participants. This was also evident in the content of discussions and the guidance notes, where there was barely a mention of migrant women, and even then the reference focused on motherhood: regarding rights and non-discrimination, the example of the needs of migrant women simply referred to “granting labour rights to move with infants/children” – a labour right which should apply to all migrants, not just to women migrants.

Some elements of concern included but were not limited to:

- Women’s issues are a footnote, or an add-on, instead of being integral to the main argument. The presence of a large number of women in what is essentially a masculine/patriarchal mechanism did not equate to a strong feminist discourse.
- Women are repeatedly addressed in a paternalistic manner, that feeds and strengthens masculine institution-building, eg: to be in need of protection, in terms of safety and security.
- Women continued to be contained in their maternal role. The phrase “Women and Children” must be retired, as it deprioritises the needs of each of the groups, and infantilises women as requiring protection. In roundtable sessions and tea tables, the need for childcare was seen as catering to the needs of women migrant workers alone, while childcare and parenting are family responsibilities and must apply equally to both fathers and mothers. When raised, this was not received well by constituents of the business community particularly, but also in off-the-record discussions with UN officials. Migration discourse must take into consideration women who remain at home to facilitate family members to migrate, women in transit, destination and return, and all their needs through the entire cycle.
- Access to sexual and reproductive health services for women continues to be difficult and/or expensive, but there was not much discussion around it. Businesses and governments need to be held accountable for this, including addressing the high costs of products that serve the needs of women, with sales taxes adding to that burden.
- There were government-civil society organised side events around social protection, and these discussions did not emphasise the need for an intersectional feminist approach at the design stage of these programmes but instead tried to adapt established hyper-masculine institutions and mechanisms to include the needs of women and vulnerable groups.
- In the experiences of the rapporteur and members of WIMN, discussions around city and spaces (mayoral and other local body governance representatives) were once again about how to secure women’s safety, while a more sustainable approach would be to discuss how spaces should be designed and built to cater to the full and safe participation of women in all public activities. This would mean a deeper engagement with how urban spaces are envisioned beyond the current status – transport infrastructure that assumes a male-worker commute or a play park facility that assumes a female caregiver as the chaperone of children.

- There was a deafening silence on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI), and despite the overall progress made to discuss this particular issue, a forum the size of GFMD, and the civil society mechanism meetings/discussions failed to include it.
- A promising note was the commitment given by the government of Colombia, which will be the host for the next GFMD. H E Mr Gustavo Gallón Giraldo, Permanent Representative of Colombia to the UN in Geneva, spoke in the closing plenary to the GFMD, promising in line with Colombia's commitment to a feminist foreign policy, that the next GFMD would prioritise a feminist approach, gender equality and women's rights in migration. He had asked all the women present to stand and be recognized.

There were about 20 representatives of Women in Migration Network, across diverse geographical and sectoral areas, including myself, and these are some of the recommendations we set forward, keeping in mind an intersectional feminist lens is key to ensuring the needs of all genders, and the community as a whole is addressed.

- Women's roles and needs go beyond their reproductive and maternal roles.
- Women's roles and needs go beyond being a primary caregiver, paid or unpaid.
- Integrate the feminist perspective of the social reorganisation of care, putting healthcare within public services delivery.
- Queer and transpeople are particularly vulnerable to extreme exploitation and abuse during migration. Ensure their participation.

***(With inputs from WIMN members)***