



Image: Angèle Etoundi Essamba, Cameroonian photographer

“This Bridge Called My Back”

Femicide, Violence and Discrimination against Black African Women

Statement by European Network of Migrant Women

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Statement by European Network of Migrant Women, Brussels, July 2020

European Network of Migrant Women joins the voices of global activists demanding the end of racial injustice and discrimination. We are as saddened and angered by the pervasive structural racism as by the lack of its recognition by the authorities responsible for its eradication.

Among the many discriminated Black African communities, women continue to bear the brunt of this discrimination. The thousands of disappeared Black women and girls, in the USA and Europe alike, testify to the grave neglect of the Black female lives.

It is crucial that in this Global Campaign for racial justice, the voices of Black women are not ignored and the violence and discrimination they suffer receive the attention they deserve.

The Coronavirus pandemic highlighted the violence and discrimination Black women face: in Europe, in Africa, in the Arab and Asian states, in the USA. The COVID related death rates are among the highest among Black populations in Europe highlighting the intergenerational poverty, poor living conditions, low access to health services and segregation in occupations most exposed to the virus .

Since the onset of the COVID crisis, we have seen the disposability of African domestic workers globally: left in the streets and in front of the embassies who are unable or refuse to help them, these women cannot travel home due to closed borders and lack of resources to afford a plane ticket. Homeless and destitute, they are an immediate prey for organised criminal networks and individuals.

Even prior to the pandemic, the Black African domestic workers had faced unprecedented levels of discrimination, abuse, as well as murder, around the globe.

"I'm scared. I'm scared; they might kill me" were the last words of Faustina Tay, a Ghanaian domestic worker in Lebanon, as she sent dozens of texts and pictures to activists and her family, detailing recurrent physical, psychological and sexual violence at the hands of her “employers”. The case of Faustina, found dead outside of her employer’s house in Lebanon on 14 March 2019 once again brought to light the abuse, and the impunity of the abusers, that the Black female domestic workers are subjected to.

In Brazil there are almost 6.5 millions domestic workers, 93% being women and 61% black women, who earn on average 60% less than other workers. Such a high proportion of black women in domestic work is linked to Brazilian colonial history and intrinsic to its gendered and racial divisions of labour.

We, black women and black men, we were trafficked from Africa and brought here to Brazil. The majority worked in the plantations, the others worked at the master’s house

–
Creuza de Oliveira, leader of the National Federation of Domestic Workers.

For many Black African women slavery is not only the legacy of the past; it is the horror of the present. The descent-based slavery is still prevalent in the West Africa, including Mauritania, Mali and Niger, where over 80% of the slavery victims in need of support are women. In this system, the children born to an enslaved mother are considered slaves, while women are treated as assets for slave production, routinely raped by “masters” and forced to bear their children. To restrict their movement women are forced into domestic work and even if they can escape, doing so with dependent children is impossible for most. The price some women will pay for freedom is leaving their children with the slave masters. After escaping slavery, illiterate and undocumented, women face pervasive discrimination, can't send their children to schools, and struggle to find decent work and housing.

Some of these women, as well as many others from the African continent, become (re)trafficked into **Europe where a whole new cycle of slavery begins.** Girls as young as twelve are shipped to the European shores, disappearing almost immediately upon arrival. Picked up by madams and pimps, they are brutalised and forced into prostitution, indebted for their own trafficking. Once these girls have disappeared they are rarely found, unless they are dead. When they are identified as victims of trafficking, their right to protection, asylum and compensation is routinely denied and the women are deported back to the countries of origin and into the hands of their exploiters.



Photo: Coffins of 26 Nigerian girls drowned in the Mediterranean, prepared to be buried in Salerno, Italy. 2017 (Source: AFP)

The sexual and pornographic abuse of Black women and girls has its own profitable niche in the system of prostitution where colonial fantasies of men are met with the "exotic" victims supplied by international criminal networks. Where the organised trafficking cartels remain invisible, the “lover boys” manipulate and coerce young Black women and girls into commercial sexual exploitation. Pedocriminal networks have multiplied on social media – Telegram, WhatsApp, Facebook – with men placing bids for the girls who can now be brutalised on demand without being physically trafficked. The pornographic sites are populated with tags “violated black teens” and “black female slaves”.

In Europe, many Women of African Descent face intergenerational poverty and exclusion and consistently appear among the groups with least access to health services, facing discrimination in obstetric, maternity and child services. In refugee accommodations, including the so-called direct provisions, African women are pushed into prostitution while living daily risks of intimate partner violence and coercive control from male partners. Most women do not report these crimes out of fear of losing their legal status and retaliation from the community.

"I'm so scared, I can't even breathe"

The lack of reaction, slow investigations and misconduct by police in the cases of violence against Black women in Europe aggravate the situation.

"I'm so scared, I can't even breathe" were the last words that Linah Keza, originally from Rwanda, told the UK's police when she repeatedly asked for help on 28–29 July 2013, before her violent ex-partner stabbed her to death on 31 July.

Linah also sought a protection order from the court, explaining in her statement how, in the course of four years, she was harassed, stalked, controlled, intimidated and abused by a man who punched her, attempted to strangle her, suffocated her with a pillow, put a knife in her mouth and was known to carry a gun.

"I believe that I will be at risk of significant harm if the respondent is not ordered to stop immediately ... I am petrified ... I do not want to live a life of violence any more," she said in her statement.

In March 2019, an unacceptably long period after her murder, the three police officers were found guilty of gross misconduct, received a warning but retained their jobs. Meanwhile, Linah's death became a "case study" in a domestic abuse training supposed to pay a particular attention to the treatment of black women.

The life of a Black Woman is more than a "case study". How many case studies do we need to come to terms that Black Women's Lives Matter ?

Despite centuries of colonial brutality and discrimination, despite the pervasive sexualised racism and racialised sexism, Black women have never been passive in the struggle against oppression.

They led and continue to lead the movements for liberation and justice: from the anti-colonial resistance in the African nations, to the 70s Combahee River Collective in the USA and Brixton Black Women's Group in the UK, to the Black Lives Matter in 2013. Black women have defended their rights – to life, to freedom, to safety and decent income – and they defended those rights for their communities, their families, their children and loved ones.

Black women consistently engaged in the struggle, for their communities' rights as equal citizens in the wider society and for their own rights as women in their communities. They have interrogated the racial discrimination within women's movements, they stood up to the patriarchs in the anti-racist movements and their own households, they spoke bravely about the white patriarchal dominance that continues to permeate the system of power and institutions.

Today, we call on the public institutions responsible for protecting the rights, freedoms and dignity of citizens, migration and asylum authorities, judiciaries and police, politicians in power and those preparing to run for the office, medical and educational institutions and business sector, to recognise and put an end to the systemic racialised and sexualised discrimination against Black women.

We call upon our sisters and brothers, in the human rights movement, to remember and recon with the Black women's role and contribution. To respect and cherish the analysis and input of Black African women. To recognise the racist-misogynist oppression the Black sisters face, globally, and to commit to taking concrete steps towards its eradication.