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No Sweat— If You Are a Woman

What does it mean to have dignity and personal agency as a migrant?

Men and women told their stories to me in very distinct ways, through body language and in their retelling of traumatic events. What does this tell us about understanding gender in ethnographic research and the stories we do and do not hear while interviewing?

Each of my questions was met with the equivalent of a shrug: no problem, no big deal.

“Don’t worry, I take it day by day—all is hard, but all is well. It is what it is, and God will protect me,” she said.

She leaned back, slouched with exhaustion as her weary muscles melted into the plain, supple white plastic chair. It bent as she tilted her back, stretching her arms and allowing some physical, and perhaps emotional, weight to leave her. Around us, young children ran amok with machetes, swiping at trees and tall brush like an invisible enemy. On the dusty plastic table, a take-out bag of greasy empanadas steamed. Here was Superwoman, sprawled in her chair next to the table. She was from Anglophone Cameroon, having fled her village as it blazed behind her. She had no time to grab her debit card, much less her daughter, leaving on foot with only the clothes on her back.

Sitting beneath a shady tree outside of her safe house in Capurganá, however, you might be forgiven for thinking Superwoman was just casually passing through. This tropical village, full of Colombian sunbathers, masked the columns of African and Asian migrants that would soon be leaving from the beaches and heading into the Darién Gap. In fact, Superwoman and her fellow travelers—from Cameroon and Haiti—had just been disgorged from the jungle. She described her dangerous, multi-day attempt through an uncharted, road-less patchwork of swamp and rainforest. Despite having to return after being apprehended by Panamanian police, she was in a rather pleasant mood.

The Darién Gap—often referred to by refugees as simply *the jungle*—is as thick with tropical humidity as with unfamiliar flora and fauna. It is also crawling with gang activity. One migrant, not unlike Superwoman, had seen more than one body lining the jungle floor. Superwoman slowly reached for her foot, resting atop her knee, as she recounted her story. Large pustules swelled on the soles of her feet, explaining her earlier limp to the table. She sighed, massaging her heel—chalky with wear and from walking miles in a flimsy pair of rubber flip-flops. Less than a mile away, beachgoers ate fruit and cooled themselves by aquamarine Caribbean waters. Minus the observable wear and tear to her feet and a large scar across her face, Superwoman could have passed for one of them. “No problem,” she said. All was well.

Superwoman shared her journey with the same non-chalance as other refugee women we interviewed. From the woman who told of her unexpected pregnancy to the transgender woman who shared her pain in not being able to look her best, the women we spoke with largely treated migration as an uncomfortable journey, a series of moments to overcome, hurdles to jump. Each, including a Cameroonian who was forced to leave her hard-won PhD research behind, expressed a need to get through the pain and move on. While defiant about not suffering physical abuse, they appeared deflated at the same time, with the drooped body language and casual demeanor that suggested they had all been through it before.

Migrant journeys are fundamentally gendered for all who live them, including men. The gendering of these journeys plays into identity and how journeys are narrated, reflected upon, and retold by refugees themselves. Gender not only impacts the identity journeys that refugees experience but also the financial options available to them. Gender affects how migrants can earn an income and how they access life-saving funds.

When asked about finances along the journey, each woman described as mere annoyances the expenses they had to take on. Expenses for women were greater than for men. Superwoman was aware of the dangers of being a single woman traveling alone and knew that she could not sleep on the jungle floor or in an open plaza like the men she traveled with. She

had to spend money to sleep in a hostel or safe house every night lest she expose herself to abuse. This extra concern, she noted, was not always shared by men she traveled with. Sarah, another woman from Cameroon, casually added that, in addition to her expenses spent on travel, lodging, food, and local guides, she also paid for menstrual products throughout her journey. The added cost of hygiene meant that she sacrificed other necessary items in order to menstruate comfortably and to avoid the shame and stigma of having her menstruation be visible to others.

Other financial expenses were shared by both men and women, yet tied more specifically to the challenges of parenthood—especially single parenthood. Superwoman, for example, had one thought in mind when she fled Cameroon—to protect her daughter. To do so, she tried in vain multiple times to contact her mother, who remained in Cameroon and had access to her bank account. Finally, Superwoman was able to contact her mother, who had spent days trapped in her house, as everyone in her village was afraid to leave their homes. Equipped with her bank account number and PIN, Superwoman instructed her mother to liquidate her savings and use them to send her teenage daughter into a form of hiding in the Franco-phone side of Cameroon so that she could continue her education in relative safety. Doing so, of course, meant that upon starting her own migrant journey, Superwoman had no money at all—she had already placed it in her bank as a reserve for her child.

Franklin, a Cameroonian man, had a similar experience. Before he left the country, he made financial and social arrangements for his children to be safe and well cared for, sacrificing some of the funds he might have used on his long journey. Though Franklin was not raising his children alone, the financial as well as emotional strain weighed on him. “I don’t know when I’ll be able to see my children again,” he said, as he expressed his distant hope they could one day join him in the US.

Alexandra, on the other hand, experienced two separations from her children. In Venezuela, she lived with her young son. His absent father did not support the family financially, except when the son stayed with him. When Alexandra decided to migrate, she also had to make the painful decision to leave her son with his father, already settled with an-

other woman in a different town. She did not know when she would see her son again—she was even considering taking on more debt in order to travel to be with him, if even for a weekend—but knew that by separating herself from him, he would at least be taken care of.

In Turbo, she became pregnant again, complicating her travel. She fell in love with a fellow Venezuelan, who left her when he heard of her pregnancy. Alone with the responsibility of having another child, and again financially unsupported by the father, Alexandra was both heartbroken and worried. How would she manage to raise a child, when she barely had enough money to pay rent? When would she be reunited with her first child? Yet, in the face of these challenges, even Alexandra continued to move forward, placing her faith in God and the community of strong women she had built around herself in Turbo.

Finances, or lack thereof, also impacted migrants of all gender identities on their journeys. Roset, a transgender woman from Venezuela, found her passion in beauty and esthetics in Turbo, but did not make enough money to buy the beauty goods and services she herself needed to look and feel pretty—crucial to her dignity. As we discussed her story in the back of a spa, I could not help but feel the irony of her situation. It seemed a cruel joke that someone who wanted so desperately to transform her own appearance, if only to feel more like herself, spent her days doing just that for others while surrounded by beauty products that she could not afford. While finances were certainly an issue for Roset, the most trying aspect of her migration journey was the loss of self, her inability to meaningfully participate in the LGBTQI+ community, and her feelings of exclusion. Roset made a point of saying that she had other dreams—of beauty entrepreneurship and travel to Spain and beyond. Even in the depths of her identity crisis, Roset dazzled with laughs, smiles, and steady jokes. She spoke of the life she was sure to obtain for herself. Her confidence was contagious. “Even if it takes 40 or 50 years,” she said, “I will realize my dreams.”

Like Roset, the women we spoke to appeared empowered by their journeys. Though most—especially the women from Cameroon—described the experience as a journey not intended for women, they never once suggested that they themselves were

not capable of completing it. The women spoke in terms of dreams, goals, and ambitions. They spoke about the actions that they took to help themselves and the gendered precautions they took on the journey as plain facts of life. No one seemed to question why women had to pay more, whether for hygiene products or child support. All described themselves as strong, capable fighters and survivors. They were open in their tears when discussing pain, but quickly wiped them away, apologized for them, or hid them—uncomfortable crying in front of a stranger, perhaps, or not wanting to be seen as weak. Perhaps in masking the pain and their emotional and financial challenges behind humor and defiance, these women were proving something to themselves, or convincing themselves it would all work out. Perhaps it was a survival mechanism, not wanting to be vulnerable with other migrants or risk being judged by traveling companions and left behind. All had been traveling, at one point or another, alone.

Meanwhile, men such as Johnson, a recent student from Cameroon, depicted their journeys as unfamiliar, emasculating, and emotionally ruinous. He went into great detail about how difficult it was to leave Cameroon and the horrors of staying in the refugee camp in Ghana, and he vividly described how he passed and stepped over bodies in the Darién Gap. Johnson discussed feeling targeted by the Francophone militia for being young and strong, and he associated migrating with a total loss of masculine identity. Whereas in Cameroon, others saw him as a business tycoon, capable of anything, in Colombia he felt like nothing—even grasping his bicep at one point to show how much muscle mass he had lost. Without enough food to eat or a stable future, young men like Johnson felt less like themselves. He hid his tears as he spoke of his emotional losses and physical changes to his body, as well as his complete lack of finances after having done well for himself in Cameroon. Yet for Johnson and other men he traveled with, there was also something left to prove. He, too, insisted that this was a journey not for women, but for *real men*—difficult, trying, and a feat to overcome, full of unknowns and uncertainties.

In describing how challenging the journey was, it seemed that Johnson was justifying his masculinity. Indeed, only the strongest and bravest could undertake the trip. According to Johnson, “Fleeing home

and escaping . . . because of death, I could not have expected that I would be walking towards death as well.” By his account, Johnson was confused and felt like laughing and crying at the same time, unsure of who he was or what this journey would make of him. He was sleeping in the bush, did not know his location, and felt a total lack of control—something that, as a well-educated entrepreneur, was new for him. He also described helping women along the way, perhaps conforming to the gender roles he had been comfortable with at home, which made him feel strong and helpful along the route—a positive show of masculinity.

Men also helped each other along their journeys, lifting each other up with praise, encouragement, and community, much as the women did in supporting each other financially and socially. When Johnson looked up to the sky and rubbed his two blistered fingers to his teary eyes at the end of our interview, a friend approached, grabbed him firmly by both shoulders, and gave a little shake, willing us to look at his agile frame. “Look at this young man. Who wouldn’t want him?” his friend exclaimed, adding, “There is no country that does not want young, energetic young men to work. It is *man* power. Men help the economy. We will work and pay the taxes. But this journey is emotional torture. They should do something.”

Emotional torture. Both men and women evinced changes in identity as they moved along the route, with men confronting threats to their ingrained per-

ceptions of masculinity, and with women becoming by choice or by circumstance, more empowered to be on their own. Their stories flipped gender norms on their head: women, stereotypically more emotional, showed little emotion at all, while men, shamed for being too emotional, opened up and built community around shared experience.

As a woman, I felt uniquely connected to the women I spoke with. Though our experiences differed vastly, speaking with refugee women in Colombia encouraged me to think more critically about how women describe and live through emotional and physical pain. As I spoke with these larger-than-life women who dared to undertake such a punishing and dangerous journey, I sensed they were hiding some pain—because I was, too. I was diagnosed with cancer less than a month before entering the field in Colombia. I had no choice in the matter. The women I interviewed also had little choice. In our researcher-interviewee relationship, and in our efforts to project a calm image to the world despite our private struggles, were we being entirely honest with each other? And what were we trying to prove?

Roset, Alexandra, Sarah, and I were all attempting to move forward, out of sheer willpower, momentum, fear, or the force of our convictions and passion. Going forward is the only way to go—boldly, without apology, and with joy. This is the lesson that these amazing refugee women taught me as a researcher, as we pursue our uncertain futures on separate paths, but in an unspoken, shared sisterhood.

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