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Anti-racist Feminism or Barbarism:
Moroccan Women Seasonal Strawberry Workers

Let's take a small trip through time, to the height of recent feminist mobilizations in Spain. In September 2017, feminist assemblies begin meeting on the eighth of every month to prepare for what will be the first feminist strike in the country. That same fall, the streets are flooded with protests during the trial for the "wolf pack" gang rape: once again, the woman who was raped is being judged, not the rapists. The call goes viral; on social media and in plazas, women shout: "I believe you" and "Listen, sister, here is your pack." It happens again in April when the sentence is announced, finding the men only guilty of "abuse," not rape, with a vote from a judge who dares to say that there was enjoyment on all sides.¹

The streets are dyed a feminist purple: a capillary feminism that reacts as a single body against sexist violence. Something similar happens with the feminist strike on March 8, a strike focused more on public space than on jobs. Cities are taken over by a new rebellion. In that atmosphere, news of denunciations of sexual abuse reported by several women seasonal workers in the strawberry harvest in Huelva appear in the media. Some collectives call for a protest. However, the response is not at all the same either in number or in intensity. What happened? Was that body that screamed "if they touch one of us, they touch us all" not exactly unified? Debates catch fire. The feminism of March 8 and the protests against the wolf pack are accused of being racist.

Let's delve deeper into this entanglement. Moroccan seasonal workers who pick strawberries in Huelva embody the different forms of violence that economic neoliberalism needs in order to sustain and reproduce itself. I am referring to the blackmail of income in exchange for labor, of how racism and

patriarchy pave the way for that violence to be exercised. Elsewhere I have discussed how the strawberry region of Huelva is a laboratory showing how this system functions, bringing together the violence of capitalism, patriarchy, racism, and the over-exploitation of land and natural resources: all of the axes of the neoliberal world-system in a single territory (Filigrana 2019).

Harvesting red fruits through intensive exploitation, as in Huelva, requires thousands of hands for a three-month period. In other types of agricultural production, such as grain or olives, mechanization has replaced hands for harvesting. However, this cannot be done with strawberries and other red fruits since they are too delicate to withstand the machinery intact. The only way to lower costs and increase the bosses' profits is by cutting wages as much as possible.

Perhaps the word *intersectionality* is overused and has been appropriated by hegemonic discourse, but I cannot find a better term with which to describe this situation. Perhaps we have to invent a new word. The issue is that to save on wages, one has to turn to the cheapest labor offered by the market. That cheap labor is provided by women and, among them, those with the fewest choices, that is, the poorest. And the poorest, in the colonial and racist neoliberal ordering system, are racialized women, with responsibilities for children or other family members, who inhabit the global South.

This is a lived reality that can be seen and touched in the strawberry region of Huelva. The native male population receives higher wages, because they have employment possibilities in the hospitality and construction industries. Spanish women also live in better conditions because they are not constrained by immigration laws, which limit the migrant labor market to "difficult-to-cover" positions. In those positions, conditions are so bad that nobody with even a minimal support network and roots would accept them. Agricultural labor has long been on the "difficult coverage" list. It also has a certain permissiveness for work without "papers," in clandestine conditions. All of this ensures that producers have access to a captive workforce, one that has no alternative. Captive means more exploitable, more easily extorted.

Since 2000, this workforce has ceased being selected from among immigrants already residing in Spanish territory and is now directly contracted at the source for the harvest season, with the obligation to return to that source when the campaign ends. Strawberry employers impose a clear requirement for selection: those hired must be women. The discursive justification is that women are better suited to the agricultural task of picking delicate red fruits and, additionally, they "cause less conflict" when living together. Behind this discourse, however, is an undoubtedly sexist conception that migrant women will lead to fewer union conflicts.

At first, they tried to fill the quotas with women from Eastern Europe. However, employers were not satisfied with those workers. They complained of their “excess autonomy”: “they go out at night,” “they drink alcohol,” “they do not want to go back to their countries when the season ends,” “they steal Spanish boyfriends.” The popular discourse is that these women “break marriages” and that they look for Spanish husbands to be able to stay. The solution was found in Moroccan women who have families in their country of origin, with at least one underage child and/or are married or widowed.

Here a cultural classification of conflict, loaded with racist and sexist stereotypes, is in full operation. In the employers’ imaginary, Moroccan women have a surplus of docility. “They are Muslim,” “they do not go to clubs or drink alcohol,” and “they have profound respect for their family of origin.” The subtext is that they will tolerate much more arduous situations to avoid losing their family’s acceptance. This “surplus” is driven home in the case of the mothers and wives/widows among the selected women, in which the marital sexual contract is added to the labor contract to guarantee obedience.

Additionally, in the hegemonic scale of aesthetic and sexual valorization, Moroccan women are further from the white and blond archetype: their presence does not threaten the native racial hierarchy as women workers from Eastern Europe seem to. That hierarchy is necessary for labor exploitation.

There seems to be a contradiction between the denunciation of the sexual autonomy of Eastern European seasonal workers, which leads to looking for women who are supposedly less available for the sexual encounter in Morocco, and the fact that employers in the Huelva countryside are implicated in sexual abuse against Moroccan seasonal workers. Thus, we need a global understanding of the context to understand precisely how labor exploitation and sexual harassment are linked in the region.

The business owners, before the harvesting campaign begins, inform the government of their companies’ labor needs and the characteristics that those workers must fulfill.² The Spanish Labor Ministry sends those requests to the corresponding ministry in Morocco, and the ANAPEC (l’Agence Nationale de Promotion de l’Emploi et des Compétences; National Agency for the Promotion of Employment and Skills), the public agency for Moroccan placement, is supposedly responsible for choosing workers. In reality, many strawberry business owners travel to Morocco to *witness* the selection. Moroccan women’s associations report that, in many cases, the form of selection is humiliating: it takes place in villages’ public squares and the women are forced to remain standing for hours while they are handpicked by businessmen.

The women begin arriving in Huelva in a staggered way between February and March, according to the needs of each company. Once there, they

stay on the farms where they work. The farms are isolated places, located several kilometers from urban centers and difficult to access. In their testimonies, many women workers narrate experiences of semi-captivity: once the workday has ended, they do not have freedom of mobility to leave the farms. Companies regulate days for going out, and often these outings are supervised by farm overseers, who accompany the women to public places in nearby towns. Similarly, women recount that their passports are taken from them as soon as they reach the farms and are only returned when the harvest ends, when it is time to leave.

We do not have information about how widespread these situations are, because those of us who work for NGOs and unions have limited access to the farms, since they are private property. Invisibilization is the norm, creating the perfect breeding ground for all types of abuse and a high level of impunity. For years, the main complaints that have reached us are about breaches to agreements about rest and wages, charging for housing, despite the fact that the cost should be borne by the company, and limits to mobility. Accusations of sexual abuse have been more limited and more difficult to prove, although before the complaints that came out in the media in 2019, there were already convictions of sexual abuse by farm overseers that should have raised alarms.³ We do not know the extent of this sexual violence, but we do know what allows it to proliferate with impunity.

When the corresponding authorities encourage women to denounce this type of abuse, they are demanding something very difficult. They are asking a woman worker who is suffering a situation of sexual abuse to leave the farm, walk several miles along the highway to the closest town, go to a Civil Guard barracks, and file a complaint—all of this, very likely, without knowing the language or the route into town, and without being able to rely on support networks of family or friends in the territory. Many women recount strict racial segregation of the organization of work on the farms: Moroccans, Spaniards, and Romanians do not mix. Thus, employers practice a “divide and conquer” strategy that impedes the creation of broad networks of mutual aid and solidarity that would balance the correlation of forces between the company and workers when their rights are violated.

The steps taken and protocols put in place since the reports of sexual abuse were made public in 2018 share the same type of myopia. They apply a plan for fighting sexist violence that ignores the context in which that violence unfolds and its intersection with other types of violence. They provide gender awareness programs for farm overseers who have carried out systematic practices of abuse and extortion against women, telephone hot lines for

workers who do not know about them, and, at the height of absurdity, give powers of investigation and resolution in cases of sexual abuse to companies themselves, when both women's testimonies and the guilty verdicts indicate the employers' direct involvement in these situations.

Since the fall of 2004, the Andalusian Workers' Union (SAT; Sindicato Andaluz de Trabajadores), then still called the Workers' Union of the Countryside, has worked on educating male and female seasonal workers harvesting red fruits in Huelva. It is basic union organizing work. For years, we have carried out this work in coordination with other collectives and unions, grouped in the Seasonal Workers' Board of Huelva, an informal network of entities operating in the area with a commitment to public denunciation. The union's resources and capacity for action have been limited because it is a minority union and much of its funding is self-generated through affiliation fees. There is little union conflict in the area and majority unions have a very low level of intervention. The agricultural explosion of red fruits is the main driver of the region's economy, which is an important factor for social contention in union protests. The men and women in SAT have suffered all types of impediments for developing their union work. Women workers are usually accompanied by farm overseers in public places, making it difficult for them to speak to unionists or even pick up a flier. There is significant social collusion with the strawberry companies and it is dangerous to openly position oneself against them.

In 2018, the SAT played a key role in Moroccan workers' denunciations of sexual abuse. Women from the implicated farm managed to make phone contact with SAT unionists who were active in the area: labor and living conditions had become unbearable. When unionists managed to visit the farm, they found a group of three hundred desperate women. They jointly decided to initiate a public denunciation. The company's response was the immediate termination of employment contracts and forced return of the women workers. A group of them managed to escape and sought help from the SAT, which provided the necessary care logistics for a few months until legal action could be initiated. This type of public and judicial denunciation would have been very difficult if the workers had continued working for the company, inhabiting the same farm, and if they had not managed to escape deportation.⁴

The visibility of the news was an enormous surprise for those of us who have been denouncing the violation of fundamental rights in relation to strawberry cultivation in Huelva for more than a decade. Suddenly, we started receiving calls from television media and organized a historic protest of more than a thousand people in a context where positioning oneself

against the strawberry industry is to go against “putting food on the table” for thousands of people.

Without a doubt, the feminist mobilization against sexist violence is the context that has enabled this. Yet, doubts are generated by the fact that the mobilizations in defense of these seasonal workers do not make up even five percent of those in relation to the case of the wolf pack. For women who live in the West and are subjects with full rights, it is easier to empathize with a student from Madrid who has been the victim of a gang rape than with the many forms of violence that a Moroccan seasonal worker suffers on a farm in the region of Huelva, or a Nigerian woman victim in a sex trafficking ring in any industrial triangle of Spain. The student could be any one of us. The others, are the “other.”

There is significant social distance between the majority of feminist activists and immigrant women in general. In assemblies and political groups, women speak of anti-racism and immigration, but the experiences they refer to seem set off in a parallel world that has little contact with ours. Rarely in our affective and social life are there people like the Moroccan seasonal workers. There are exceptions, such as struggles for domestic workers’ rights, where, in certain spaces, political and affective networks of very diverse women have been consolidated, where a researcher from a university in Madrid can go out for beers with an Ecuadorian domestic worker as *compañeras* and friends. But that is an exception. Despite the fact that we share neighborhoods and territories, it is not common for a Senegalese woman selling goods on the street, an Ecuadorian woman who works in domestic service, and a Spanish woman with a professional career to form part of the same affective and social network. This social stratification in everyday life is translated into a lack of political alliances. The fragmentation of social class impedes the creation of broader feminist solidarity networks.

Racism is a subjectivity imposed at a global scale that traverses the bodies of everyone who inhabits this world. When we land in concrete practices, we face the arduous work of breaking down those vital barriers. Constructing an anti-racist feminism first means defying the barriers of social stratification imposed on the collective imagination that separate women from one another.

A year and a half after those denunciations, the reality not only of Huelva, but of all the zones of intensive cultivation based on the over-exploitation of migrant labor, becomes central again. In all of them, the ultra-right party Vox has sprouted like mushrooms, making sweeping gains in key locales such as Lepe (Huelva), El Ejido (Almería), Torre-Pacheco (Murcia), and Talayuela (Cáceres). How can we explain the fact that it is precisely

in those areas whose accelerated growth in recent decades depends directly on migrant labor that a party with a belligerent anti-immigrant discourse has gained strength?

I'll outline two possible hypothetical responses, which are not contradictory, but complementary. What gave Vox its victory in many agricultural localities is the vote of the extreme right-wing business leaders of the countryside, who have little reason to desire the mass expulsion of migrants that Vox speaks about, given that their wealth depends on those migrants. What they do want is a migrant workforce that is more threatened, more clandestine, and more persecuted, that works more for less under the fear of expulsion. The Vox vote of the hidden business owners of the countryside, then, is a desire for cheaper and more servile labor of migrant persons driven by fear.

At the same time, there is another, smaller but noteworthy, vote for Vox: agricultural workers. This is a vote challenging everything, a vote coming from the vital discontent that the ultra-right is capable of channeling against the most vulnerable people. In this phase of neoliberalism, many people fall off the ship and access to basic goods becomes increasingly difficult. Competition between those on the lowest rungs of the ladder, including migrants, could be the explanation for that vote. The breeding ground where this type of social fascism is gestated, that legitimizes violence against the most vulnerable, is a previously existing discontent: not being able to pay the rent, the temporariness of contracts, precarious living conditions. If we can point out the true causes of that suffering, we can stop the rise of the extreme right.

In the struggles of seasonal workers in Almería, in the mobilizations for housing of the Platform for People Affected by Mortgages, in land occupations, in the Tres Mil Viviendas community soup kitchen, and so forth—those are the spaces where I have seen social fascism brought to a halt. It is in those experiences that people, natives and immigrants, come together based on the same lack of access to basic goods to propose a collective response to the direct causes of their grievances. The challenge of feminism lies in organizing itself from the grassroots, in the micropolitics of everyday places, in generating networks that can articulate that discontent, and stopping the injustice of pointing the blame at the most vulnerable people.

Feminism is a political movement that originates from emotions and the body. Its organization and political horizon are projected later, starting from that prior suffering, that “living badly” due to being women that is felt in each body making up the mobilization. It is not an intellectual hypothesis that drives the movement; it is a latent feeling in each person that, in the encounter with other women, starts shaping a political force. That is the feminist power (*potencia*) that makes it possible to confront the challenge of organizing the

discontent from the ground up, from everyday life. That is the *potencia* that allows politics to leave activist spaces and conquer popular spaces. That *potencia* is what gives rise to the massiveness that we see in the streets.

Where the unreason of the elite white male possessors of power and wealth is imposed, feminism is the sense of the common. It is the logic of everyone and not of a few. The Moroccan seasonal workers' fight against the European bosses is a struggle between those two forces. In women, in racialized women, in the seasonal workers of the global South, in what we should not be, is where we will find the way out.

—Translated by Liz Mason-Deese

Notes

- 1 In the early hours of June 7, 2016, during the festivities of San Fermín in the city of Pamplona/Iruña, a group of five men, including a member of the Civil Guard and a military member of the Military Emergency Unit, raped an eighteen-year-old woman in a doorway and shared videos of the rape in a WhatsApp grouped call the “wolf pack.” The trial, which took place in fall 2017, received significant media coverage. Two courts in Navarra (the Provincial Court and the Superior Court of Navarra) issued convictions for sexual abuse and released the defendants on bail, until the Supreme Court reviewed the case and convicted the men for rape on June 21, 2019. The entire procedure was marked by feminist mobilizations on social media and the streets.
- 2 As already mentioned, there is a clear patriarchal bias to the main requirements: between eighteen and forty-five years of age; experience in agricultural work; married, divorced, or widowed; and at least one underage child under care.
- 3 In 2014, the Provincial Court of Huelva convicted two employers for crimes against moral integrity and one count of sexual harassment against twenty-five foreign seasonal workers. This situation alone should have been enough to provide guarantees for these women who come to Huelva from Morocco, but it was not to be. If situations of sexual abuse or harassment in the labor sphere are difficult to report and prove in court for the immense majority of workers, no matter how qualified their professions, imagine the difficulty in this type of context.
- 4 Based on the allegations of sexual abuse, the prosecutor's office opened an investigation that ended up being archived in the court of instruction for lack of evidence of a crime, without the affected women even being called to testify. Following the appeal of the team of lawyers that took over the allegations, the Provincial Court of Huelva reopened the case and forced the magistrate to continue the investigation. At the time of writing this article, the case is still open.

Reference

- Filigrana, Pastora. 2019. “El Laboratorio Neoliberal de la Fresa de Huelva” (“The Neoliberal Laboratory of Strawberries in Huelva”). *Topo Tabernario*, June 16. <http://eltopo.org/el-laboratorio-neoliberal-de-la-fresa-de-huelva/>.