

Camelia Tigau\*

# Can She Help? Feminism and Skilled Diasporas in North America

**CHALLENGE TO EMPOWERMENT: EXPERIENCES AND REPLICABLE STRATEGIES OF REFUGEE WOMEN**

Find out how the successful initiatives in their supportive communities propelled refugee women from poverty to employment and towards gender equity. Hear about strategies employed by supporters to help refugee women achieve success.

 Tuesday, March 19, 2024  
 2:30 PM - 4:30 PM ET

**VIRTUAL** [Join here on Zoom](#)

**PRESENTED BY CAMEUS,**  
 AN ALLIANCE OF CFUW-FCFDU (CANADA), FEMU (MEXICO), & WG-USA






**AN NGO CSW VIRTUAL PARALLEL EVENT**



**Mary Miller**  
A successful advocate and volunteer with newcomers to Canada, she lives in Belleville, Canada.



**Raihanah Zaeefi**  
An Architectural engineer, she migrated from Afghanistan to Canada.



**Bibi Ndala**  
A research scientist at NYU, she migrated from the Democratic Republic of the Congo to the USA.



**Maria Corina Muskus Toro**  
A lawyer and university doctoral candidate, she migrated from Venezuela to the USA.



**Alma Anaya**  
A Commissioner at Cook County, Chicago, she migrated from Mexico to the USA.

On March 19, 2024, we gathered to hear stories of professional migrant women from different corners of the earth: Afghanistan, Congo, Mexico, and Venezuela. The call was made by CAMEUS, a collaboration among the North American affiliates of Graduate Women International (gwi)<sup>1</sup>. Notably, this dialogue called “Challenge to Empowerment: Experiences and Replicable Strategies of Refugee Women” was designed as a parallel event to the 68th annual meeting of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (UNCSW).<sup>2</sup>

The women told stories about crises and conflicts, the real ones lived by people, not those created for political purposes. The recent CAMEUS dialogue was based on an imaginary scale of forced migration, starting from the most extreme case of displacement (war refugees) to the more debated case of undocumented migrants. The women shared their stories in an act of trust and as a learning process, described below as four cases of study and action.

## Case 1: From Afghanistan to Canada as a Private-Sponsored Refugee

Forced migrants often face war, persecution, and scarcity. These conflicts are the basis for empathetic storytelling; and the protagonists of these conflicts are heroes by definition —especially the female voices.

\* Camelia Tigau is a researcher at CISAN, UNAM, and the coordinator of UNAM-PAPIIT IN302324 Project, “Diaspora Communication and Diplomacy Perspectives From the Receiving Contexts in the Americas, Europe and Asia”; you can contact her at [ctigau@unam.mx](mailto:ctigau@unam.mx).

The starting point was the testimony of Raihanah Zaeefi and her escape from Afghanistan. Zaeefi has a degree in architectural engineering and was a prosperous professional in international architectural firms in Afghanistan. She did not plan to migrate, but it was a matter of life or death. She explains:

The decision to leave my homeland was not one made lightly, but we esteemed it from the necessity to secure

**The women told stories about crises and conflicts, the real ones lived by people, not those created for political purposes.**

the safety of both my family and me. The vibrant streets of Afghanistan, vans bustling with life, and the echoes of diverse voices gradually transformed it into an ominous maze of danger. ... We had to embark on a journey filled with uncertainty, hope and the pursuit of a safer life.

Fortunately, Zaeefi received the Canadian Federation of Women's support through a private sponsorship program. The sponsors soon took on their roles, becoming an extended family for the Afghan newcomers. As proof of their ties, Mary Miller represented the Canadian woman who sponsored the Afghan family's arrival and accompanied Zaeefi at the event. She spoke about the efforts to raise money and take care of her family. The Canadian women organized a heritage-warming welcome party and a fundraising concert in Belleville City. They provided essential basics such as bedding and a truckload of furniture for the Afghan family. The sponsors agreed to cover the family's living costs for a year and support their English learning and integration into the job market. Says Miller:

So those sponsors often do things like: welcome them at the airport, help them find a place to live, gather up bedding and used furniture for their first home, drive them to appointments. You use their contacts to help them get access to the services they need, get jobs, etc. And of course, answer their many questions about Canada and Canadians. In other words, they make sure these new refugees feel that they have a known lifeline into their new world after months or years of anxiety and fear.

As Miller acknowledges, this post-arrival personal and financial relationship facilitates a quicker integration of newcomers into Canadian society and a greater degree of professional success. Is it help just for refugees or for the hosts themselves? Miller said, "Personally, I believe that this program helps most Canadians feel em-

pathetic towards refugees, and see the upside of bringing them to Canada."

Ultimately, Zaeefi recognized: "They were not just sponsors; they became our extended family. They promised us hope, change, and a better future. And this is where our journey began."

This first case involves two women whose roles as givers and receivers are intertwined. Their friendship teaches us about hospitality, responsibility to receive, and, of course, a hybrid way of cooperation among: the Canadian state—which acknowledged the refugee status of this Afghan family, the UNHCR—which assisted their applications and facilitated a way out through Afghanistan, and of course Canadian civil society, exercising alternative diplomacy and humanitarianism to help unknown people out of conflicts.

## **Case 2: From Congo to Canada and the United States**

Our second testimony was from Bibi M. Ndala, born in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Ndala and her family migrated to South Africa in the early nineties due to political unrest that culminated into the 1997 civil war. That conflict caused the displacement of around half a million Congolese, a figure that would double in the early 2000s and triple by 2015.

Eventually, Ndala moved to French Canada with her mother and siblings, restarting a new life for the second time. She had a happy coming of age in Quebec and became a public health professional to give back to the countries where she lived. She says:

I remained in concept search for how I could give back. And then, I ventured to redirect it to my career to do public health with the goal of working in the global health. But most importantly, I felt like it ... will allow me to support vulnerable women in other countries.

Ndala holds a master's in public health from New York University. She now lives in the United States, having changed countries for a third time. She currently works as a city research scientist at the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. Ndala also serves as a volunteer coordinator, networking with friends and

scientists in the DRC. Their primary interests relate to maternal and newborn health in low-resource settings. Her personal story is an example of diaspora networking and transnationalism across borders. It is also a story of resilience and ethics of care from a woman's perspective.

### Case 3: From Venezuela to the United States, Mexico, and Canada

The third story belongs to María Corina Muskus, a feminist lawyer and a doctoral candidate in law at Canada's York University. Her research is about alternatives to the criminal system for women who have experienced sexual violence in Venezuela. Muskus founded Venezolanas Globales in 2018, a network of Venezuelan women who act as ambassadors of their country and culture, fight against stereotypes and create networks of all types—professional, friendship or mixed.

Muskus is one of the 8 million refugees and migrants outside Venezuela, a massive and unprecedented exodus from a country that has historically been a destination for foreign professionals until it was transformed into a place of outmigration. As in the other cases heard through CAMEUS, Muskus thinks she is lucky to be where she is.

I, beforehand, would like to share how privileged I am, as I am not the common denominator of migrants. ... I had the access to go to a school that allowed me to learn English as my second language. I did not have the language barrier when I was trying to migrate. I had the great opportunity of getting a scholarship.

Muskus first emigrated to the United States in 2015, where she studied about the intersection between human rights and gender. She later became an advocacy officer in Mexico City, a job that inspired her to create Venezolanas Globales, a network mainly based on volunteer work but represented in 13 cities around the world. Says Muskus:

... going to Mexico ... changed a little bit more my feelings. I think that in Mexico there is a strong movement on feminist ideals and feminist movements that are of course not unique, but diverse. You know feminism when they try to refer to it is not a political party where you subscribe. Lastly, Muskus spoke about multiple responsibilities

to create connections between diasporas and their places of origin, an idea she experienced throughout her migration process. "We can contribute to our home countries from what we learned, and we can also contribute to the country where we now live based on our previous experience."

### Case 4: From Mexico to the United States

Our last case does not involve refugees, but a subtle form of forced migration involving the undocumented status of Mexican workers who search for better lives in the United States. The speaker, Alma Anaya, arrived in the United States as an undocumented immigrant and endured 11 years of hardships, including homelessness. This situation fueled her commitment to advocating for the rights of migrants, especially those in vulnerable positions.

I came to this country with my mother, my father, and my brother at the age of six. We were undocumented. We landed in the city of Chicago in the United States, where we grew up, right, and faced a lot of hardships. ... My father was at the time the only legal permanent resident. So, my mother, my brother, and I definitely had different challenges.

I think being in Chicago was quite a blessing. Looking in retrospect, it is wonderful to see, given the fact that Chicago was a sanctuary city and given the fact that although there were limited resources—if we had really looked for it—I think we would have been able to find ourselves surrounded by other Mexican immigrants and other South American immigrants who had very similar lived experiences. And therefore, you find your community and you're able to help each other.

Eventually, Anaya's family was able to obtain legal status through the Violence Against Women Act. Anaya

**Women can substantially contribute to conflict resolution and propose different solutions to relocating refugees.**

would later come to study communications and a master's in public administration from the University of Illinois in Chicago. In 2019, at 28, she was elected as the youngest and only Latina commissioner of Cook County—for the seventh district, with the largest Hispanic and undocumented population. As in the other cases described below, Alma Anaya made a life goal of helping other vulnerable migrants in the Latino community in need, fighting to reduce the backlog of cases processed by immigration authorities and, in general, improving the living conditions of migrants and refugees.

Millions upon millions of dollars that have been put aside to ensure that there's housing that there are resources available to be able to provide food and shelter for the thousands of individuals coming into play. So we have been working with national groups that continue to push for these types of efforts and through legislation.

This last case is a clear example of migrants helping other migrants, expert lobbying based on the hardship of personal experience, and maybe a way to make public policies more sensitive to migrants in need.

## Conclusions: The Case for Feminist Ethics of Care Toward Migrants

The above-described cases can be interpreted as an alternative exercise of the responsibility to protect; situated in North America, a historical migrant destination. They involve intersectional learning of what can help people out of conflicts based on a feminine experience.

Today, women constitute 48.1 % of the world's migrants<sup>3</sup>, and 50 % of refugees are women and girls. When we look at internally displaced individuals, 80% are women and children<sup>4</sup>. Not only has the number of migrant women risen, but also the significance of feminist geopolitics and gender perspectives on the needs of millions of women displaced worldwide.

Previous literature on international relations has shown that women can substantially contribute to conflict resolution and propose different solutions to relocating refugees. Scholars Rebecca Torres, Stefania Pannebianco, and Iole Fontana<sup>5</sup> are all positioned in feminist geopolitics

and reinterpret the responsibility to protect as hospitality toward migrants rather than military intervention.

Returning to where this article started, a small event such as the CAMEUS dialogue with successful women migrants can change perspectives when carefully analyzed. These stories are not just about women, but women and their families, an overview across genders. However, they involve the women's opinions on the needs and challenges regarding conflict resolution and forced displacement, based on an ethics of empathy and care.

The three organizations representing CAMEUS in Canada, Mexico, and the United States are committed to collaborating, sharing knowledge and resources, and promoting the value of education. It became apparent that education is crucial to improving the well-being of migrants, their families, and their communities. As Kathy Wosnick—the event's host—said, “education is a human right, and it has the power to ignite social change and individual growth.”

The CAMEUS parallel event to the UNSCSW 68 meeting exemplifies hybrid cooperation between academics, NGOs, civil society, diplomats, and most importantly, migrants. Such an open dialogue creates hope, as Wosnick—a former migrant herself—stated: “Together we are chemists. The canvas vision is to have women and children educated and empowered to reach their full potential; to make transformative change in the world.” ■■

## Notes

**1** CAMEUS is composed of the Canadian Federation of University Women (CFUW), Federation Mexicana de Universitarias (FEMU, Mexico) Women Graduates–USA.

**2** The UNSCW was established in 1946 to promote women's rights and education. In the beginning, all the government representatives were women, who, among other tasks, contributed to the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; at present, men are also involved.

**3** Migration Data Portal, Gender and Migration, 2020, 2020[https://www.migrationdataportal.org/themes/gender-and-migration#:~:text=At%20mid%2Dyear%202020%2C%20female,\(UN%20DESA%2C%202020\)](https://www.migrationdataportal.org/themes/gender-and-migration#:~:text=At%20mid%2Dyear%202020%2C%20female,(UN%20DESA%2C%202020),), revised on April 1, 2024.

**4** Joireman, Sandra; Swati Sachdeva and Victoria Stanley, 2024, Displaced Women and Girls in Cities, released on February 21, 2024, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/sustainablecities/displaced-women-and-girls-cities#:~:text=And%20in%202021%2C%20women%20and,of%20new%20internally%20displaced%20people>, revised on April 1, 2024.

**5** Pannebianco, Stefania, and Iole Fontana, 2018, “When Responsibility to Protect ‘Hits Home’: the Refugee Crisis and the EU Response,” *Third World Quarterly* 39, no. 1: 1–17.