

## Call for Papers: Activists in Exile. Gender, Political Commitment and Migration in the Twentieth Century

Symposium organised in collaboration with the Forum for Belgian research on history of women, gender and sexuality (AVG-CARHIF) and the BRAIN project (Belspo) **WomenExile: Gendering political exile in Belgium (1918-1958).**

### Argument:

Twenty years ago, a special issue of the journal *Sextant* was published on "Migrant Women" (Gubin and Morelli, 2004), followed five years later by a new issue on "Women in Political Exile" (Morelli, 2009). In these two volumes, the contributors noted both the need for historical research to consider the singularity of female exile (Gubin and Piette, 2009), and the many methodological difficulties of uncovering migrant women in institutional archives (Gillen, 2004). For the female political exiles who are the subject of the second volume, their invisibility in the sources is coupled with their non-recognition as activists, a reflection of their illegitimacy in male political circles (Gubin and Piette, 2009). At a time when the history of migration had shown little interest in women, the two volumes of *Sextant* highlighted the many facets of women's mobility, and challenged the representation of women as mere "victims", highlighting their ability to make the best of difficult situations, to forge links of solidarity, to organise themselves, to emancipate themselves, and so on.

The desire of the editors of *Sextant* to bring together the history of women and migration was shared by other historians. The interaction between these two fields of research intensified from the 2000s onwards (Schrover 2008, Guerry 2009, Green 2013, Schrover and Moloney, 2013), as is demonstrated by the publication of a special issue on gender by the *International Migration Review* in 2006 and a special issue on migration by *Gender & History* in 2019. In Belgium, *Jaarboek voor Vrouwengeschiedenis* had already published an issue on the subject in 2001, while *Tijdschrift voor Sociale en Economische Geschiedenis* devoted a special issue to gender, migration and government policies in 2008.

Many avenues still need to be explored: feminist perspectives on migration and social and political engagement continue to be enriched by new fieldwork and new grids of interpretation.

**The aim of this conference is to highlight recent developments in research on migrant activists, exploring the interactions between gender, political commitment and migration in the 20th century. Proposals may focus on women's involvement as well as on masculinities or gender relations in an activist context. How does gender influence militancy in migration? And how do political commitment and migration influence gender relations and the construction of femininity and masculinity?**

Our perspective is to consider gender as a **central organising principle of migratory flows and the lives of migrants** (Mahler and Pessar, 2006). Gender influences where, how and why people migrate, and how they fit into the host society (Morokvasic, 1991; Donato et al, 2006; Pessar and Mahler, 2003; Mahieu et al, 2009; Lutz, 2010). The influence of migration - understood as an engine of socio-cultural change - on gender relations has also been widely demonstrated (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2003; Parado and Flippen, 2005): it sometimes leads to empowerment, and sometimes to an accentuation of female subordination (Piper, 2005; Foner, 2001; Dahinden et al., 2007). From this perspective, the conference will look at **social relations as expressions of inequality, domination and power**, considering that **gender relations are always mediated by other socially constructed categories**, such as "race", ethnicity, social class or nationality (Anthias and Yuval Davis, 1992, Phoenix and Pattynama, 2006).

**Particular attention will be paid to the question of agency** –political agency and migratory agency - a concept that is central to new research on the history of exiled women engaged in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Maugendre, 2019; Lo Bido, 2013; André, 2016). Indeed, women have often been seen as following in men's footsteps or migrating as a result of family decisions (Kofman, 1999) and, as such, without agency, without mobilising their own networks or shaping their own destinies (Harzig 2001). Yet research shows that they are not blindly subject to structural factors, but play an active role in the design of the migration project, the decision to migrate, the organisation of the journey, participation in networks and in the society of arrival (Timmerman, 2015, 235-243). However, attention to women's active role should not lead to overlook **the specific vulnerability of migrant women** (Nouvelles Questions Féministes, 2006). For this reason, agency is also often interpreted in the sense of adaptation: how do women adapt to opportunities and constraints, how do they give meaning to their migratory trajectory? The concept of agency is also fruitful for thinking about the collective commitments of immigrant women (Veith, 1999). Migrant women's involvement in associations can be analysed as a strategy for empowerment and resistance to insecurity (Lesselier, 2003), and migrant women can be portrayed as "resilient, strategic and in search of autonomy" (Schmoll, 2020, cited by Guerry, 2020).

Three axes have been defined, in order to consider the multiple social and spatial scales on which gender operates simultaneously across transnational terrains (Pessar and Mahler, 2003):

- **Axis 1: micro level: activism in migration and negotiating gender boundaries:** This axis looks at the forms of women's political commitment and the gendered distribution of activist work in the context of migration. It examines the porous nature of politics and intimacy, and the intersections between commitment, community life, public life and private life. How are care responsibilities negotiated within militant families? What are the continuities and discontinuities in activist careers over the course of migration, and how are relationships with the country of origin negotiated? Particular attention will be paid to the effects of commitment and migration on bodies, and on the gendered agency of migrant activists.
- **Axis 2: meso level: networks, sociabilities and activist movements :** This axis looks at gender relations within activist, political and/or community networks, and the issues involved in the gender (non-)mixture of organisations. What impact does the gender of activists have on their sociability and networks in their countries of arrival and origin? This axis also looks at gender relations within transnational activist networks, internationalism and mobility as a modality of political commitment - and their implications in terms of gender.
- **Axis 3: macro level: institutional views, normative views, representations, and their consequences on people's lives:** This axis looks at the gender dimension in the discourse and representations of activism in exile: moralisation, repression, stigmatisation, invisibilisation, etc. It looks at the representations (in the press or literature) and police apprehensions of the political commitment of exiled women and men. How are migrant women recognised as active political subjects? What impact does this have on their daily lives and their commitments? Some research, for example, has highlighted how the invisibility of women activists can also be a resource: they are less distrusted by the authorities, opening up a number of possibilities for action (Durant, Dupont and Diaz, 2021)...

### Practical information:

The symposium is organised in collaboration with the the Forum for Belgian research on history of women, gender and sexuality (AVG-CARHIF) and the BRAIN (BELSPO) project WomenExile: Gendering Political Exile in Belgium (1918-1958) jointly supported by the National Archives of Belgium, the Université libre de Bruxelles and the Universiteit Antwerpen.

The day will be held at the National Archives of Belgium (2 rue de Ruysbroek, 1000 Brussels) on **24 September 2024**. **Presentations will be given in English. Proposals (300 words) should be sent with a short biography by 15 March 2024 to [migrationhistory2024@ulb.be](mailto:migrationhistory2024@ulb.be)**. Notification of acceptance will be sent no later than 8 April 2024.

The conference proceedings will be published in a special issue of the journal *Sextant* (2025) by Éditions de l'Université de Bruxelles ([https://www.editions-ulb.be/fr/review/?collection\\_ID=8](https://www.editions-ulb.be/fr/review/?collection_ID=8)). **Articles may be written in French or English**, as *Sextant* is a bilingual journal. The first version of the articles will be submitted for peer-review in early 2025.

### Organising Committee :

- Michaël Amara (NAB)
- Henk de Smaele (UAntwerpen)
- Juliette Masquelier (ULB/UAntwerpen)
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