

MODULE 5. INDUSTRY: IRREGULARITY PROVIDES CHEAP LABOUR

Capsule 2. “Carrier” women

The way of life of the global north produces a series of ecological, social and economic crises in the global south. In order to isolate the global north from these consequences, fortress capitalism is created (walls, unequal mobility, immigration laws, visas, etc.). The border functions as an institution of social discrimination to divide the unequal global distribution of wealth and poverty between different regions of the world.

Ceuta's geopolitical situation combined with socio-structural factors such as the separation of two countries, two continents with different majority religions and two unequal economic zones, make this territory an example of what fortress capitalism means. Ceuta and the wilaya of Tetouan - Castillejos (Fnideq), Rincón (Mdiq), Martil and Tetouan - are located within a radius of 40 kilometres, which generated a constant flow of people and goods across the Tarajal border on a daily basis. In this module we will focus on cross-border workers, especially on the so-called “porteadoras” (carrier women), those who crossed goods between Ceuta and Morocco, in a smuggling regime, or as it is called from the Spanish side “atypical trade”.

This fact, in itself, is no different from what happens at many other borders; the particularity of this case is generated by two factors: a) the Spanish-Moroccan border of Ceuta is not a commercial customs

office; and b) the citizens of the wilaya of Tetouan are allowed to enter Ceuta without a visa, only with a valid passport (see capsule 8). These two singularities are generated by the geopolitical positioning of Ceuta, which, like Melilla, are the only European territories on the African continent, in other words, they symbolise the southern European border.

Spain's entry into the European Economic Community (EEC) meant that Ceuta, at the express request of the Ceuta Chamber of Commerce, did not join the Common Customs Union due to the tariff advantages that this brought to the Autonomous City. In this way, the EEC determined that Ceuta would enjoy a special status.

However, the main incentive for "atypical trade" comes from the fact that there is no commercial customs between Ceuta and Morocco. As a result, goods cannot be exported from the Autonomous City to Morocco. This situation is caused by Morocco's refusal to recognise Spanish sovereignty over Ceuta and, moreover, claims its incorporation as part of its territorial integrity. Consequently, this disrupts the normal flow of exports between two neighbouring countries by not being able to move freely between the Spanish-Moroccan border, and forces the goods to leave on the backs of the carriers through the Biutz crossing or hidden in the vehicles crossing the Tarajal border.

The situation of a continuous flow of goods from Ceuta to northern Morocco was tolerated by both countries. Although neither of the two parties recognised or regulated this circumstance, a strong police network - Spanish Civil Guard, Spanish National Police and Moroccan Gendarmerie - can be seen throughout the 'circuit' carried out by the "carrier" women and men.

Atypical trade generated significant economic revenue for Ceuta. Ceuta has free port status and enjoys significant tax reductions. One example is that the Spanish city does not apply the Value Added Tax (VAT), which taxes products at 4% to 21%, but instead applies the Tax on Production, Services and Imports (IPSI), which taxes products at a much lower rate than VAT. This also means that exports to Ceuta and their subsequent passage to Morocco reduce the costs that would be incurred, for example, between the ports of Algeciras and Tangier-Med. So much so that in Ceuta's budget (2015), 25.7% of the city's total revenue comes from the IPSI on imports.

The warehouses - the shops - in the Tarajal industrial area in Ceuta buy their goods wholesale at very competitive prices, but sell them on the basis of the retail prices of the carriers. The trafficking of goods has been a source of employment for the population of northern Morocco, which has also traditionally been discriminated against or treated unequally during the reign of Hassan II.

Until the closure of the land border of Tarajal in March 2020, every day a very large group of Moroccan women -called "porteadoras", or carrier women- crossed the border between Ceuta and Melilla between 5 a.m. and 12 midnight, in order to cross the goods that they buy in these cities and transport them to Morocco. They do so by carrying heavy weights (between 50 and 90 kilos) on their backs, as this is not treated as a commercial transaction, but is considered as hand luggage under Moroccan law.

Carrier women are not the only Moroccan women who go to work in Ceuta on a daily basis, but together with domestic workers and sex workers they make up the three main categories of cross-border women. Cross-border women: domestic workers, sex workers and carrier women share similarities such as the fact of going to work in Ceuta, but there are big inter-group differences such as: social

prestige, salary, working hours or the self-perception of their legal status.

Domestic workers have an average degree of social prestige in the north of Morocco, and among cross-border workers, they are the women who receive the best social recognition from their society of origin, while sex workers and carrier women have a low social prestige, and carrier women are equated with sex workers in Moroccan society. The constant interaction with men makes them lose their "family honour", giving rise to the contradiction that, if on the one hand, labour insertion allows them not to depend on the figure of a male provider, questioning the imposed patriarchal patterns and inhabiting traditionally masculinised public spaces, carrying out this work entails stigmatisation.

In relation to wages, it should be noted that the work of cross-border women is exploited by mafias in the case of sex workers and carrier women, and by certain employers in the case of domestic workers. Carrier women' wages were low, between 8 and 10 euros a day. Carrier women are in a situation of illegality. It is not illegal for them to make purchases in Ceuta territory and therefore it is the country where the merchandise enters - Morocco - in this respect, Moroccan legislation considers it legal to enter its territory with the merchandise they carry in their bodies without weight limitations, which is why women enter Morocco loaded as "mules" with merchandise purchased in Ceuta.

The border closure as a containment measure of Covid-19 between Spain and Morocco caused thousands of cross-border workers who crossed the border every day to lose their jobs. Within this group, Moroccan carrier women face a situation of particular vulnerability, who, in addition to losing their livelihood, have limited alternatives for subsistence. One of these major difficulties is related to their responsibility to exercise both the role of family provider and

caregiver. The vast majority of carrier women are responsible for other dependents and are the sole economic providers in the household. This extreme situation is due to the fact that the vast majority of these women do not have the traditional figure of a male provider, either because they are single, divorced, separated, widowed, or because their husband is unable to find a job and/or works occasionally. In fact, many of them say that carrying was their last option or the only job that allowed them to reconcile their work with care work at home. In addition to the added difficulty for these women in finding alternative employment due to their responsibilities, these are further reduced by their low level of formal education. Therefore, the only employment options are low-skilled, feminized and precarious jobs, such as carrying or housework.

Currently, after the pandemic situation and the consequent closure of the Spanish-Moroccan borders and their reopening in May 2022, the brake has been put on the work activity of carrier women. In fact, so much so, that in the case of Ceuta, carrying activity is not expected to return to being a "characteristic" image of the border crossing, and in the case of Melilla, the uncertainty is greater as to what the future of carrying will be. This forecast is based on the fact that, for some years now, Morocco has been trying to put an end to the 'atypical trade', both for political and economic interests.

Text sources:

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