Seeing the EU’s borders through the eyes of its migrant workers

Workshops, web documentaries and petitions – these are just some of the tools that REEL BORDERS is using to amplify the voices of the EU’s undocumented migrant women.

The EU-funded REEL BORDERS project has released a web documentary that draws attention to the plight of the ‘invisible’ migrant women working in the EU without legal documentation. Titled ‘ABCeuta: the Alphabet of the Border’, it is just one of the ways in which the project is exploring the role of Europe’s borders as perceived by its inhabitants.

The web documentary is a compilation of 26 short essay films resulting from a participatory filmmaking workshop held in the Spanish enclave of Ceuta on the border with Morocco. It is a collaboration between REEL BORDERS, the Spanish research project ‘No estamos todas’ (‘We are not all here’), and the Ceuta-based NGO Digmun that offers language literacy and legal support to Moroccan cross-border women. Led by award-winning documentary filmmaker Irene Gutiérrez, a PhD researcher at REEL BORDERS project coordinator Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), Belgium, the workshop provided 13 migrant Moroccan women working as domestic workers in Ceuta the opportunity to share their stories.

Thousands of Moroccan domestic workers in Ceuta have been working undeclared for decades, a situation that has become even more precarious since COVID-19 with the reinforcement of border security measures. Now unable to travel to Morocco to
visit family or renew their expired passports, they are separated from their loved ones, often left without basic human rights and also subjected to racism and sexism.

**Gaining visibility**

REEL BORDERS, Digmun and ‘No estamos todas’ have started an [online petition](#), to help change the situation of these undocumented workers. Addressed to the Spanish authorities, the petition asks for three things. First is that a temporary residence and work permit be issued to workers with their expired passports. Second, 1-day travel permits should be issued allowing workers to travel to Moroccan consulates in the Iberian Peninsula to renew their passports. Last, the petition asks that the criteria currently preventing these workers from registering in the cities of Ceuta and Melilla (another Spanish enclave) be modified.

“For Reel Borders, visibility begins with recognising what is happening on the EU’s borders from the perspectives of its inhabitants,” remarks VUB Associate Prof. Kevin Smets in a [‘EurekAlert!’ news release](#). “We want to amplify the voices of these women seeking action and response.”

Drawing from the Ceuta workshop and two other participatory filmmaking workshops held in Madrid and Vitoria (Basque Country), Gutiérrez wrote a new [book chapter](#), discussing ethical and methodological challenges when approaching archival research as a participatory filmmaking practice in migration and border studies. The chapter was published in the book ‘Doing Digital Migration Studies: Theories and Practices of the Everyday’.

Funding from REEL BORDERS (Fiction Film and Borderlands) has also resulted in the publication of a new [article](#) in the journal ‘Emotion, Space and Society’. The article reports on ethnographic research conducted in various Irish border towns and explores the emotional significance of the border and how processes of othering are shaped by people’s memories of periods of violence and animosity.

For more information, please see: [REEL BORDERS project website](#).

**Keywords**

REEL BORDERS, documentary, woman, migrant, worker, migrant worker, domestic worker, Ceuta

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Last update: 3 April 2024


European Union, 2024