

The Legal and Social Situation of Migrant Women in Almería's "Plastic Sea"

In the agricultural region of Almería—often called the “Plastic Sea” because of its vast landscape of plastic-covered greenhouses—tens of thousands of migrant workers sustain one of Europe’s most intensive food production zones. It is estimated that over 100,000 people from Morocco, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Eastern Europe work in these greenhouses, with many more employed in warehouses and distribution centres.

Much of this workforce is employed informally or on short-term contracts, with little or no legal protection, and is systematically excluded from labour rights and social benefits.

Migrant women face multiple and overlapping forms of exploitation. Often recruited through informal networks, they work long hours—10 to 12 hours a day—in extreme heat and humidity, with limited access to shade, drinking water, or rest breaks. Protective clothing is rarely provided, and exposure to chemical pesticides is common.

Many live in rural areas or informal settlements known as “chabolas”, built from plastic and wood scraps, without access to basic sanitation, electricity, or running water.

Legally, these women face bureaucratic and residency-related barriers that prevent them from changing jobs or reporting abusive conditions. Irregular or semi-regular immigration status often ties them to exploitative employers and excludes them from education and legal protections. Language barriers, childcare responsibilities, and fear of retaliation further silence their voices.

Socially, migrant women in Almería experience deep isolation and invisibility. Despite being essential to the region’s agricultural economy, they are almost absent from public discourse and policy. Gendered and racialised power dynamics in the workplace further marginalise them, making them more vulnerable to sexual harassment, wage theft, and threats of deportation.

Concrete Demands

Based on the contextual analysis above, and fieldwork carried out by La Bolina in collaboration with local organisations—and most importantly, through conversations with the women themselves—we present six concrete demands that could meaningfully improve the lives of migrant women in Almería:

1. Real and effective registration for residents of informal settlements

We call for a legal clause allowing residents of “chabolas” to register (empadronarse) without a formal rental contract. Registration is essential for accessing healthcare, education, social benefits, and beginning the process of legalising their status.

2. Public transport that reaches greenhouses and settlements

We propose a public bus route that connects informal settlements, nearby villages, and greenhouse areas. This would reduce vulnerability to gender-based violence, assault, and theft, and eliminate the need for women to walk up to 6 hours a day to reach work.

3. Sexual and reproductive healthcare services

We demand the creation of a local sexual health and family planning centre with services for prevention and treatment of sexually transmitted infections, reproductive health, and counselling.

4. Awareness-raising and community-based programmes

We call for the implementation of intercultural and anti-racist awareness campaigns, community engagement activities, youth programmes, and gender-sensitive training for local authorities and security forces. An on-the-ground mediator or cultural liaison could help build bridges across local actors.

5. Social housing programme in the area

Affordable housing is nearly non-existent in this region. Luxury tourist developments exist alongside makeshift slums, and high demand drives prices up. Many families end up living in overcrowded conditions or renting garages. We demand a public housing programme that offers dignified, affordable rentals.

6. Support for the creation of a migrant workers' union

We propose support and accompaniment for migrant workers who wish to form a union independent of immigration status. Many workers are not registered for social security, go months without pay, and work beyond legal hours for less than the minimum wage. A union could defend their rights without fear of retaliation.