

# COMICS AND MIGRATION

## Representation and Other Practices

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# 3

## FEMINIST COMICS ACTIVISM

### Stories about migrant women in Sweden by Amalia Alvarez and Daria Bogdanska

*Anna Nordenstam and Margareta Wallin Wictorin*

Migrant women became a theme in the Swedish comics world with the publication of *Fem papperslösa kvinnors historier/Cinco historias de mujeres indocumentadas/The Stories of Five Undocumented Women* by Amalia Alvarez in 2013. The album is a collection of five powerful stories about women coming to Sweden, dreaming of sanctuary and new beginnings, meeting friendly individuals, but also experiencing exploitation, racism, and violence. Three years later, in 2016, Daria Bogdanska's *Wage slaves* was published.<sup>1</sup> It is an autobiographical comics album about a young Polish woman who comes to Sweden to study at a comics art school. To make a living, she has to work without a permit at a restaurant, and she is exploited in her wages and working conditions, hence the use of “wage slave” as a metaphor in the title. The stories in both albums take place in Malmö, the third-largest city in Sweden. It is a diverse and segregated city with a documented population of almost 345,000 inhabitants in 2019 (SCB.se), hailing from 184 countries and speaking 150 languages (Hansen 2019, 155).

There are a considerable number of migrants without permits living in Sweden. Exactly how many is unclear, but researchers have estimated that there were between 30,000 and 75,000 in 2014 out of a population of almost 10 million people (Moksnes 2016, 211). Many are former asylum seekers who have been denied residence and work permits. Another large, partly overlapping group consists of migrants from outside the European Union, from Eastern Europe, Africa, Asia, and Latin America, who came to Sweden to find work to support themselves and, in many cases, their families back home as well. Their position in the labour market is unsafe and insecure, but there is a significant demand for their services among less scrupulous employers since their illegal position makes it difficult for them to ask for reasonable wages and safe working conditions (Moksnes 2016).

Women without legal rights are especially vulnerable; for example, a woman without a residence permit who reports her employer for sexual assault to the police

would disclose her lack of permission. Any woman working without a permit in a restaurant or pub who reports being sexually harassed or raped by a colleague, employer, or customer risks being fined, imprisoned, and deported. The gravity of the situation is a function of intersecting power structures based on factors such as gender, class, ethnicity, race, nationality, sexualities, legal status, and functionality. Research has shown that undocumented female migrants are officially invisible, but they do not live invisible lives. Many of them work in restaurants or clean office buildings. Their children go to school, they stroll the streets, and they do the usual daily chores, such as purchasing groceries (Sigvardsdotter 2016).

This article argues that Alvarez's and Bogdanska's stories about migrant women in Sweden can be regarded as *feminist comics activism*. Their albums are examples of *comics activism* according to comics scholar Martin Lund's (2018, 42) suggested definition: "the practice of creating comics in support of or opposition to one side of a controversial issue". They claim the right for migrant women to reside and work in Sweden in accordance with human rights, which is not agreed upon by everybody in Sweden. Their focus on women's conditions also makes it relevant to analyse their work as *feminist activism*; hence, the concept of *feminist comics activism* is suggested here. Gender scholar Mia Liinason and sociologist Martha Cuesta discuss feminist activism as a political practice, a practice that produces stories that are performative, in order to create change. They maintain that stories generated by feminist activists in texts and in dialogues linked to actions, workshops, manifestations, meetings, and festivals can produce concrete change regarding policies, legislation, pedagogy, and language; in addition, they argue that the ways in which people formulate and communicate thoughts about themselves and others contribute to changing relations between individuals and groups in society (Liinason and Cuesta 2016, 15–19). bell hooks's concept of "talking back" is also relevant, focusing on women moving from silence to speech, as a revolutionary gesture (hooks 1989, 12). By collecting stories and creating comics, Alvarez and Bogdanska in different ways aesthetically thematise the situation of migrant women in Sweden with the aim of "talking back". The following analyses examine how activism is manifested verbally and visually in these comics, and how they talk back about migrant women's situations from an intersectional perspective in which gender, ethnicity, race, nationality, and class are connected as grounds for discrimination (Hill Collins and Bilge 2016).

## The Swedish comics field in relation to migration

The comics field in Sweden is dominated by native Swedes as creators, not counting translations of comics from other countries. Despite the parallel increase in migration to Sweden and a rising number of new comics published at the end of the 20th century, there were hardly any stories at all about migrant women until 2011.<sup>2</sup> One exception is "Tuula", a comic strip published intermittently in the daily newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* between 1997 and 2019, created by Arja Kajermo, a representative of the Finnish labour migration to Sweden in the 1950s and 1960s (Strömberg

2009). However, immediately after the xenophobic party Sverigedemokraterna (Sweden Democrats) entered Parliament in 2010, a group of comics artists decided to cooperate in a project called “Serier mot rasism” (Comics against racism); an eponymous anthology, with stories about racism against migrants, was published by the comics publisher Optimal Press in 2011.

The same year, the project “Tusen Serier” (A thousand comics) was founded to support the production and publication of comics by “those among us who live/have lived in Sweden but don’t look ‘Swedish’ enough or don’t have Swedish family names” (Tusen Serier 2021, our translation). Based in Malmö, Tusen Serier aims to open the Swedish comics field for new comics artists, perspectives, and narratives. In 2013, Tusen Serier published Alvarez’s album about undocumented women as one of their first editions, and she started as a member of the board of the organisation, which became an independent non-profit association in 2015. It supports and arranges workshops and exhibitions and has published more than 15 books, as well as fanzines and anthologies, since 2011. The ambition is to publish each book at least bilingually, in Swedish and another language (Tusen Serier 2021); sometimes the publications are even trilingual, such as *The Stories of Five Undocumented Women*.

Galago, the publisher of Daria Bogdanska’s *Wage Slaves*, is a well-established publishing house with its own eponymous comics magazine. Founded more than 40 years ago, it maintains its reputation as an alternative and politically radical leftist publisher. However, Galago released very few comics on female migrants’ experiences before 2015, when they published Rakhsha Razani’s autobiographical comics album *Var ska jag lägga mitt huvud?* (Where shall I lay my head?) about her childhood in Iran and her escape that concluded in Sweden. According to Nina Ernst, Razani was the first comics creator with a migrant and refugee background to introduce this experience in a graphic life narrative to Sweden (Ernst 2017, 84). Galago’s vision seems to have broadened recently, as the publisher now releases comics by writers and artists with a wider variety of backgrounds.

Dotterbolaget, a network for female and trans comics artists in the Swedish cities of Malmö, Gothenburg, Stockholm, and Umeå, also has interests in comics about migrants. This network cooperates with the Asylum Group in Malmö, a non-profit organisation that has been working for the benefit of asylum seekers and undocumented people since 1991. The members of Dotterbolaget make comics, fanzines, and other material for the Asylum Group.

### **Creating change – *The Stories of Five Undocumented Women***

Alvarez came from Chile to Sweden at the turn of the millennium. Artistically, she is an autodidact; she has been drawing comics since she was a young schoolgirl. In Chile, she created graphic stories about the indigenous group to which her family belongs. During the dictatorship in Chile (1973–1990), she made fanzines together with friends, and she took part in producing the country’s first fanzine made solely by women, *XU* (Schylström 2014). In Sweden, Alvarez has drawn illustrations for

newspapers and journals such as *Arbetaren*, *Liberación*, *Mana*, and *Bang*. Her next book after the one about undocumented women was *Fem historier om prostituerande / Five stories about prostitutes / Cinco historias sobre prostityentes*, published in 2016 (Alvarez 2021). In 2018, she took part in the Swedish comics activist project “Draw the Line”, which resulted in an anthology on the issue of #metoo, edited by Malin Biller and Karin Didring (Nordenstam and Wallin Wictorin 2020). Alvarez’s contribution was an 18-page comic, “Basta”, which tells the story of a migrant woman working in a dental clinic in Sweden who is economically discriminated against and sexually harassed by her employer. The story ends with the protagonist quitting her job in protest. In 2020, Alvarez published an online version of the comic, but with the text in English and the title extended to “Basta! A Comic on Migrant Workers’ Struggles in Sweden” (Alvarez 2020, 2021).

On her web page, Alvarez presents herself as “an anti-racist activist that creates comics” (Alvarez 2021). She is active on Instagram and Facebook and organises exhibitions and workshops about representation and antiracism in comics (Alvarez 2021). She has illustrated the *Antirasistisk ordbok* (The antiracist dictionary), edited by Adrián Groglopo (2015; see the article by Groglopo and Alvarez in this volume), and published four issues of the antiracist fanzine *Antirasistiskt och postkolonialt fanzine från utanför vitheten* (Antiracist and postcolonial fanzine from beyond whiteness) in 2017.

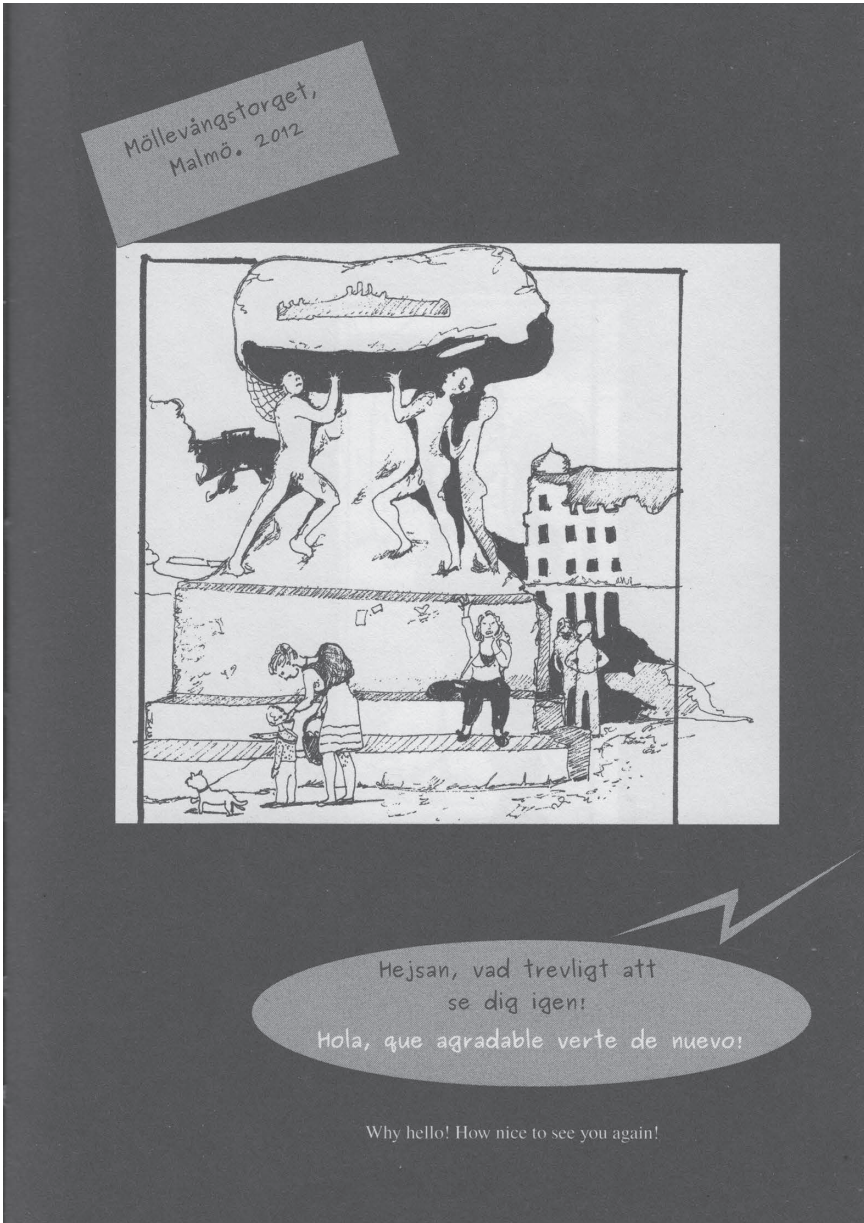
The creation of the five comics for *The Stories of Five Undocumented Women* started with Alvarez interviewing her friend “Luz Maria” (Schylström 2014). She went on to meet other women who told her about their experiences as undocumented and created five typical stories based on true stories of migrant women from countries outside the European Union. Alvarez listened to their previously untold stories and condensed them into five comics (Alvarez 2021). “Luz Maria” tells the story of a mother who does not have permission to live in Sweden while her child has the right to stay. In the story “Asylum seeker”, Sara talks about her escape from war, without getting the right to stay in Sweden. The story “Undocumented worker” narrates the vulnerable situation of exploitation at work that a lack of documents entails. “Imported wife” is about a migrant woman living with a Swedish citizen who abuses her physically, and Carmen in “My secret life” talks about applying for asylum because of her sexuality. Violence of different kinds is present in all the stories.

Amanda Casanellas and Mattias Elftorp from Tusen Serier invited Alvarez to publish a book about the women. Alvarez took the opportunity, anxious as she was to use her pen to stridently proclaim their existence and to bear witness to the injustices and crimes they had suffered (Schylström 2014). Having experienced difficulties in trying to enter the comics field in Sweden, Alvarez was pleased to make contact with Tusen Serier. Based on her early encounters, she later described the field as “almost like a private club” (Schylström 2014, our translation). She has compared the encounter with a culture clash, blocking the spread of multiple perspectives and colours (Schylström 2014). Her book was first published with a print run of 500 copies, then 500 more (Elftorp 2021).

The comics album has a black cover on which the title is inscribed in thin white letters. There are also five white masquerade masks, four of them resembling cats, drawn against the black background. They signify the five women in the book, and the same masks are also placed, one by one, as vignettes for each story. The back cover is also black, with a white vignette in the form of brass knuckles with sharp-edged gems, resembling a piece of jewellery. A woman, perhaps defending herself with the “jewellery”, is seen taking shelter behind it; she appears to be wearing a similar set of knuckles on her right hand. Most of the pages have black backgrounds, grey speech balloons, and white panels with drawings in black – with between one and three panels and several balloons intermixed and spread out on each page. The English text is written in small white letters directly on the black page background, while the Spanish (white) and the Swedish (black) texts are inserted in the grey speech balloons. The text conveys the women’s stories in first person in all three languages. The handmade drawings in the panels give the visual narrator’s personal interpretation of the stories and convey human actions and reactions, while the regular, computer-designed forms of the captions and speech balloons give the impression of a mechanical structure framing human activities. The overall impression is dominated by a dark, serious, and sorrowful – but also angry – tone. Although the stories are also filled with pride at having coped with difficult situations and relief when talking about help given by friends, no “happy” colours are applied, only greyscale. On her webpage, Alvarez has written, “These untold stories came from the underground”.

As a contrast to the darkness of the cover, on the first page, before the title page and the individual story pages, there is a white panel showing a group of women chatting, having tea, and giving each other advice and information about jobs, places to stay, etc. A connected text explains the situation: “During my time in Sweden, my new country, I got to know these five women who entrusted me with their stories, which I now give to you” (Alvarez 2013). This is an image of the activism Alvarez is part of, where the women tell each other about their problems (which she transfers into comics stories), share their experiences, and support each other in a friendly community. The image represents the politics of hope connected with feminist activism (see Liinason and Cuesta 2016).

One of the five stories, the one titled “Undocumented workers”, focuses especially on problems that arise at work for undocumented people. In that way, it is comparable to Bogdanska’s *Wage Slaves*. The following analysis, therefore, focuses on that story. Regarding the visual and verbal narration, it gives a good idea of how all five stories are constructed. On the first page, there is a drawing of one of the cat-like masks, which can be interpreted as a symbol of someone with nine lives, a survivor. On the following page, there is a white panel with a black line drawing, in which the main character is introduced and the *mise en scène* is important (see Groensteen 2007, 120). The image establishes the setting with a large public sculpture in a cityscape. The sculpture is the famous *Arbetets ära* (The glory of labour) in the centre of the well-known square Möllevångstorget in Malmö (Figure 3.1). This sculpture, made by Axel Ebbe, consists of five naked human



**FIGURE 3.1** Amalia Alvarez, *The Stories of Five Undocumented Women*, Tusen Serier, 2013, n.p.

Source: © Amalia Alvarez. Reproduced with the permission of Amalia Alvarez.

bodies in bronze, carrying a huge boulder of granite. It was placed there in 1931 as a symbol of the history of the working class (Ernst 2017, 128; Hansen 2019, 155). The placement is significant since a large worker's revolt, the *Möllevångskravallerna* (*Möllevång riots*), took place here in 1926. The reader is alerted to the setting by a caption at the top of the page: "Möllevångstorget, Malmö, 2012". A woman is shown sitting on the immense base of the sculpture and waving happily at the approaching interviewer, saying: "Why hello! How nice to see you again!"

The reader is addressed when the woman communicates her story to the interviewer. Comics scholar Elisabeth El Refaie (2012, 9) has underlined the importance of drawing the reader into the story to produce an emotional and intellectual response. This is essential, of course, when it comes to activism aimed at creating sympathy for an issue, and attention is encouraged here by the protagonist's waving hand. In this story, as in the others, Alvarez also uses frequent representations of the protagonist in close-ups and aligns the reader with the protagonist's point of view, two methods for achieving the affective engagement mentioned by El Refaie (2012, 10). In this story, the protagonist is primarily shown in close-ups, and occasionally at a short distance, speaking and gesticulating vividly. She starts telling her story about having decided to go to the trade union with her problems. Her employer has refused to pay her miniscule wages for three months, and, on previous occasions, when he actually did pay her, he first forced her to engage in sexual intercourse. Now she is pregnant. Having paid for her journey to Sweden, he took her passport, which he still keeps even though she has repaid the last part of her debt to him. She is afraid of him since he is connected to the restaurant mafia and uses violence when it suits him. Another woman who threatened to go to the media disappeared. But the protagonist has gotten a hold of some compromising information about the employer and asks the narrator to give it to a trade union representative without mentioning her name. She regards this as an act of longed-for revenge.

The story ends with the woman saying to the reader: "Don't look at me with compassion! I don't want your pity. I want you to help me destroy them. That's all I want from you, then you can forget me! We're not from the same world". This attitude of a demand for respect and help to reveal and change the system is common to several of the stories in the book. The comics target not only native Swedish readers who might not be aware of the existence of these kinds of serious problems in Sweden but also women who perhaps find themselves in situations similar to those experienced by the protagonist. In this way, the stories work as a means of activism by pointing to conflicts and injustices, not only revealing existing deficits regarding human rights but also confirming common problems and strengthening the spirit of people in similar situations who are striving for change.

The fact that the comic is trilingual makes it readable for more people. It also makes it necessary for the reader to search for the most suitable language. The reader has to decide which text to follow, and which language to read first, if not exclusively. Gradually, it becomes possible to discern a personal reading path through the text.



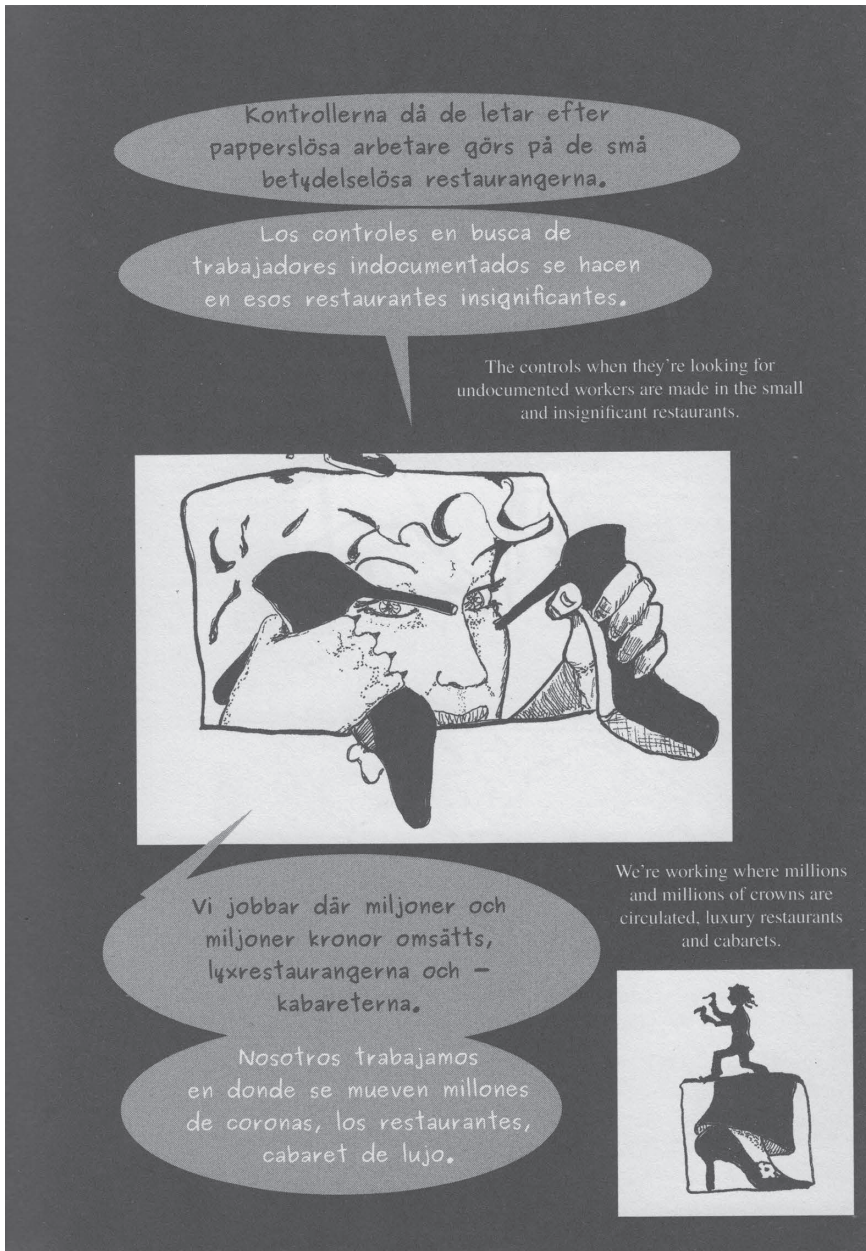


FIGURE 3.2 Amalia Alvarez, *The Stories of Five Undocumented Women*, Tusen Serier, 2013, n.p.

Source: © Amalia Alvarez. Used with the permission of Amalia Alvarez.

Visually, the story conveys the protagonist's sensitive situation by alternating between a happy face and desperate expressions. The setting dissolves very quickly in the visual narrative, which then focuses on the woman, who leans forward and then backwards, and is sometimes shown from below, then from above. As the story evolves, the woman handles various pointed objects with sharp edges. These can be interpreted as signs of her need to defend herself and also of her aggressive feelings about the situation, namely, as weapons for defence and attack. On her right hand, she wears the brass knuckles, which are also shown on the back cover of the book, while with her left hand she plays with a fork, which grows surrealistically large as she talks about her sexually abusive landlord or her employer. A third kind of pointed object is a pair of black stiletto heels, used by the protagonist as defensive weapons. She displays them from several perspectives, sometimes lifting them protectively in front of her face, at other times pointing them like guns towards an abstract threat in front of her (Figure 3.2).

The story "Asylum seeker" is also clearly directed at native Swedes. After the protagonist has told her story filled with the violence that she has experienced on her way to Sweden and upon arriving in the country, she is shown turning to address the reader, saying: "Horrible? You think so? I think it's more horrible that you don't know about reality ..." (Alvarez 2013, n.p.). This story, like the others, shows and tells how the protagonists experience their circumstances and their treatment by the Swedish society. The economic dependence of these women on cynical men is clarified and exemplified as they are sexually abused and beaten, without help from the legal system – and barely any from the health care system either. For the majority-Swedish and other readers, it becomes clear that there are deficiencies and cracks in the welfare society that enable the exclusion of migrants. Alvarez tries to make these readers understand the precarious position of undocumented women. Simultaneously, she expresses the strength in the community between women in similar situations and represents them with pride, strength, and the agency to cope with various difficult conditions and events. The protagonists tell their stories not because they seek pity but rather because they hope for legal and political change. The sharpness of Alvarez's verbal and visual narration and the justified angry tone of the protagonists voiced in this book constitute a serious critique, and the comics album is both a result and an example of feminist comics activism.

### **Mobilisation – *Wage Slaves***

Daria Bogdanska's autobiographical comics album *Wage Slaves* drew a great deal of attention in the Swedish media when it was published in 2016. It received positive reviews, sold well with a relatively large print run of 4,200 copies, and is currently sold out (Olsson 2021). To date, the comics album has been translated into French (2017), Norwegian and Spanish (2018), and English, German, and Italian (2019). Regarded as an example of working-class literature, it focuses on the situation of workers in Sweden, especially exposing the exploitation of migrant women in the restaurant industry (Nordenstam 2017; Nilsson 2020).

The panels in *Wage Slaves* are drawn in black ink on white backgrounds with distinct frames and gutters. They have various and irregular sizes, and the number

of panels on each page varies between one and eight. Bogdanska's drawing style is reminiscent of Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* but is not as elaborated, minimalistic, or expressionistic (see Chute 2010, 135). The style in *Wage Slaves* is rougher and more realistic, but there are also expressionistic images, such as those showing the protagonist's anger or despair because of her situation.

Bogdanska retells her own story about Sweden, a country she first learned about through a Swedish boyfriend travelling abroad. She discusses the ordeal of an abortion in Sweden rather than an illegal procedure in Poland, and then moving to Malmö to attend comics art school.<sup>3</sup> Being Polish, Bogdanska is a citizen of the EU; she can study for free at the Swedish school, but she cannot get a student loan. She does not have a Swedish personal identity number, without which she cannot find employment or health insurance, a bank account, a first-hand apartment contract, or membership in the restaurant workers' union. Daria, the protagonist in the story, tries to get permission to stay in the country with the aim of getting a job, but the Tax Authority rejects her. The decision is reprinted in the book:

The Tax Authority's opinion: You have notified us that you have moved to Sweden and that you are an EEA-citizen. You have in your application stated that you intend to look for work in Sweden. Since you as a job seeker are not economically active, the Tax Authority opines that you have not proven your right to stay in Sweden. Furthermore, you have not shown a residence permit issued by the Swedish Migration Agency. The Tax Authority declines your application to move to Sweden.

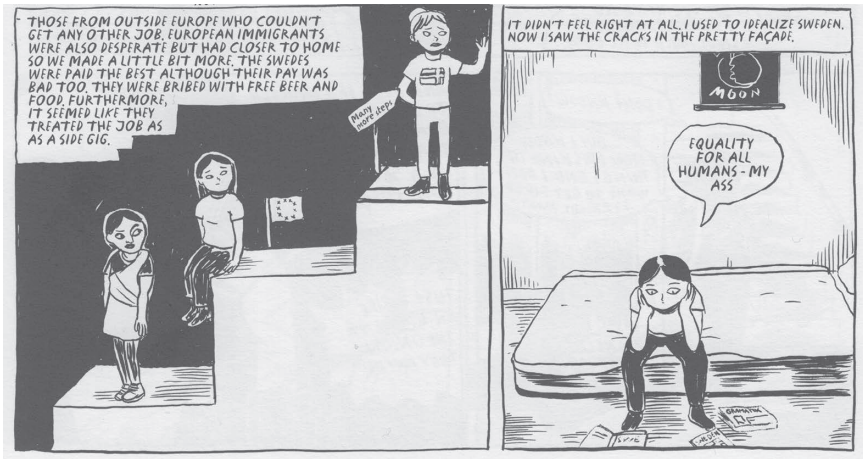
(Bogdanska 2019, 23)<sup>4</sup>

In this situation, Daria must find a job without a permit. Thus, she belongs to the large group of migrant women located on a low rung of the societal ladder of the black labour market. At the very bottom are thousands of migrant women from outside the EU, as this comic claims. As the comic's title suggests, Daria and the other workers at the restaurant live as wage slaves. This concept, which is the crucial focus of the book, here signifies exploited workers who are paid less than the regulated wage level, having no employment certificate or insurance.

When Daria finds a job at the inexpensive restaurant Indian Curry Hut in Malmö, she gets no contract and is paid under the counter. As a Polish citizen, she earns less money than a Swedish woman who does the same work, but more than her Bangladeshi workmate. The hierarchy is symbolically visualised with a staircase with a regionally or nationally identified woman on each step (Figure 3.3). The narrator in the caption explains the hierarchy, with the lowest paid being the most desperate ones:

Those from outside Europe who couldn't get any other job. European immigrants were also desperate but had closer to home so we made a little bit more. The Swedes were paid the best although their pay was bad too. They were bribed with free beer and food. Furthermore, it seemed like they treated the job as as [sic] a side gig.

(Bogdanska 2019, 37)



**FIGURE 3.3** Daria Bogdanska, *Wage Slaves*, trans. Aleksander Linskog, Centrala, 2019, p. 37.

Source: Reproduced with kind permission of Centrala.

As a complement to the verbal narration, this image documents and symbolises the protagonist's understanding of the hierarchical structure. The caption in the next panel reads: "It didn't feel right at all. I used to idealize Sweden. Now I saw the cracks in the pretty façade". The protagonist is shown sitting on a bed, musing: "Equality for all humans – my ass" (Bogdanska 2019, 37). This is a turning point for Daria, who is both saddened and angered by her insight.

In the story's representations of exploitation at a restaurant, the owner is far more concerned with acquiring greater profits than with the well-being of his staff, and this is described from the protagonist's point of view. The concept used in the title, "wage slaves", is activated in the story when Daria reflects on her own treatment: "And they say slavery was abolished several hundred years ago" (Bogdanska 2019, 68). The comic explains this statement with an image depicting a page from a dictionary, where the terms "slavery" and "slave" are explained: "1.1 A person who works very hard without proper remuneration or appreciation, 1.2 A person who is excessively dependent upon or controlled by something, 1.3. A person who is the property of another" (Bogdanska 2019, 68). On the following page, Daria is reflecting on this, lying on her bed; just before she falls asleep, she says to herself: "I don't want to be a slave" (Bogdanska 2019, 69). Daria is part of a modern practice of wage slavery, and the story is about how she will be able to resist that and fight the system.

The young woman is strong and brave in her search for help and justice. As the story proceeds, she becomes increasingly angry with the unfair working conditions, and she transforms into an activist. A crucial turning point is the moment when she finds a newspaper article online in which a Swedish woman, a journalist,

reports about the unregulated “black labour market”, where migrants work for low wages under bad conditions at Möllevångstorget, especially in restaurants (Bogdanska 2019, 86). After this, Daria begins her fight against criminal employers, first by contacting the journalist, who also has worked in such restaurants, and then the local syndicalist trade union (Sveriges Arbetares Centralorganisation, SAC), which is described as helping migrants, contrary to other unions. In a naïve but empathic way, Daria educates all the workers at the restaurant and exhorts them to demonstrate and fight together against the restaurant owner, in order to get better working conditions and fair salaries, but her agitation does not end well. The workers need their money and are afraid of losing their jobs; she has been told this could be the case. After much effort and help from the syndicalist union, a meeting is held with the restaurant owner, who relents and pays Daria what he owes her – before firing her. Thus, the story shows a path to relative social justice for the individual, although the systemic structure remains intact.

Bogdanska’s story points this out to the reader, who may not know these facts about the unions and the modern wage slave system, and in that sense, the comic is enlightening and works as an activist text with the aim of mobilising for change. The comics album has an overall political, leftist activist mission, presenting changes achieved through organisation and cooperation, but in the comic itself, no overall change in the system occurs. Nevertheless, the story is about hope and power. In the epilogue, Daria and her friend are walking in the street; outside a convenience store, a newspaper poster headlines her fight and how she got her money back. In the last full-page image, Daria is once again walking down the street with a cigarette in her mouth, passing an empty restaurant window. The text says, “KARMA IS A BITCH”, meaning that justice will be served in the end. The restaurant is closed, and the situation presents a sense of power and strength. For the moment, the protagonist can get on with her life in Sweden with her friends and her romances, playing in a punk band and drawing comics at a school in Malmö. But she still needs a job for a means of subsistence. The modern wage slave system is still going on in other restaurants as long as no radical changes are being made.

Bogdanska received a lot of attention in real life and in the media for taking and winning the fight against the restaurant owner (Hansen 2019, 169). Two years later, she retold her story in *Wage Slaves* by talking back and raising the question of injustice. She was working for change because she had hope that it was possible to achieve change. As Liinason and Cuesta (2016) note, activism is “the politics of hope”, and this comics album politically works for change.

The setting for Bogdanska’s story is, as in Alvarez’s story “Undocumented workers”, primarily Möllevångstorget, a square that previously functioned as a centre for workers’ protests before being occupied mainly by poorer migrants. More recently, it has been gentrified and is now described as Malmö’s SoHo (Hansen 2019, 155). The place provides a good illustration of the class structure and its workings. The middle-class benefits from the migrants’ low wages. At Möllevångstorget, migrants could until recently find inexpensive living possibilities, but now the gentrified area with expensive apartments is known for its excellent falafels, “Malmö’s national

dish”, the cheapest fast food in the area (Hansen 2019, 168). In *Wage Slaves*, Daria’s friend relates the current situation to the “creative middle class” and notes: “Gentrification is in full swing” (Bogdanska 2019, 71). The white middle class is described as standing on their balconies, looking down at the people in the square on New Year’s Eve, terrified by firecrackers. In a scene from the restaurant, a young male customer discusses the middle class’s problem of choosing between buying a house in the countryside and continuing to live in the city (Bogdanska 2019, 106). The man is drawn with the attributes of a contemporary middle-class hipster: a small beard, eyeglasses, cap, and checked shirt. This panel illustrates well the class conflict, with the female worker and a middle-class man at the same restaurant; the man is perhaps not even aware of her working conditions or does not care about them.

The workers meet derisory attitudes from customers. To be a migrant female worker at a restaurant at Möllevångstorget is described as being exposed to more or less patronising treatment from majority-Swedish people. In an early sequence of the story (see Figure 3.4), despite her heavy accent, Daria tries to speak Swedish to a customer at the restaurant: “Hi, hav you made decided what to order?”. The customer answers something which the protagonist perceives as: “Å E ÄR Ö Ä M Å B Å P Ö Å E Ö Ä Å”. She asks: “Sorry ... What you say? Can you rip it?”. The Swedish, white female customer again answers incomprehensibly. The sequence expresses that the protagonist does not understand a word, and it invites the reader to share Daria’s predicament. She gives up and says, “I’m so sorry ... my Swedish is not so good could you say that in English please ...” and the customer takes the opportunity to deride her (Bogdanska 2019, 30). The customer uses a typical master suppression technique, flaunting her power by telling Daria that she should be grateful to meet someone able to speak English.



**FIGURE 3.4** Daria Bogdanska, *Wage Slaves*, trans. Aleksander Linskog, Centrala, 2019, p. 30.

Source: Reproduced with kind permission of Centrala.

*Wage Slaves* is a political autobiographical comics album. It raises important ethical and political questions about who is included in the Swedish welfare society. How can there be “wage slaves” at restaurants in Sweden today? Why are migrants treated so poorly and so differently from majority-Swedish workers? What kind of responsibility does the state have, or the trade unions? Bogdanska finds help and solidarity among the syndicalist trade union members, the journalist, and some friends. In her comics album, she shows a way to work together against economic exploitation.

After *Wage Slaves*, Bogdanska has continued the fight for justice in *Lobbyland*, another comics album also intended to gain international outreach via the internet, this time focusing on how lobbying works in the EU (Bogdanska 2018). The comic has been financed by the Greens/European Free Alliance group in the European Parliament. She has also illustrated *Bostadsmanifest. 22 krav för framtidens hem* (Housing manifesto: 22 demands for future homes), in which 25 Swedish researchers and activists demand improvements in the housing market to counteract the increasing urban segregation resulting from current neoliberal policies (CRUSH och vänner 2020). In 2019, Daria Bogdanska received the Robespierre Prize, a radical left-wing award, for her comics, for her work with the Swedish syndicalist trade union, and for helping Eastern European migrant workers in the salad industry in Sweden (Leninpriset n.d.).

## Conclusions

Amalia Alvarez’s comics album *The Stories of Five Undocumented Women*, based on a collection of stories told by migrant women, and Daria Bogdanska’s autobiographical comics album *Wage Slaves* can be regarded as *feminist comics activism*. They are examples of *comics activism* since the comics point to important issues in opposition to a controversial issue, namely, the treatment of migrant women (see Lund 2018). The emphasis on migrant women’s situation also makes it relevant to regard the comics as *feminist activism*, in line with Liinason and Cuesta’s discussion, since the comics have a performative potential to create change regarding politics and legislation. The stories can influence readers regarding how they formulate and communicate thoughts about themselves and others, and can contribute to changing relations between individuals and groups in society (Liinason and Cuesta 2016, 15–19). The two comics albums also show how it is possible to work together, support each other, and create hope. By creating and publishing the comics, Alvarez and Bogdanska give migrant women an opportunity to come to voice and talk back against their situation (hooks 1989, 12), as well as against people who just express pity instead of taking action.

Feminist comics activism in these cases involves dealing resolutely with political issues such as migrant women’s bad working conditions and the vision of a fairer and more equal world for all. By creating stories that can be read by the majority of Swedes, Alvarez and Bogdanska contribute to the task of increasing knowledge and awareness. Their comics can also support and empower other migrant women in

similar situations. Alvarez uses journalistic methods and bases her comic on interviews conducted with female migrants about their situations, while Bogdanska tells her own story in the tradition of feminist autobiography (see Chute 2010). Alvarez and Bogdanska are both critical of Swedish society in their comics as well as in their own lives, where the exploitation of migrant women still persists, and where justice and welfare benefits are not available for everyone. However, their comics do offer hope by showing mobilisation for better conditions, with other activists. Evidently, there is a need for radical publishing houses that work to produce feminist comics by and about people with migrant backgrounds living in Sweden.

## Notes

- 1 The Swedish title is spelled with a lower-case *s* for the word “slaves”, but hereafter we use the English translation *Wage Slaves*.
- 2 From the 1990s to 2019, the number of originally published comics albums rose from 32 in 1992 to 99 in 2010. It peaked in 2015, totalling 119 albums, then decreased to 65 albums in 2019 (Hammarlund 2021).
- 3 From 1956 on, during the communist period, abortion was legalised in Poland, and many women came from abroad, including Sweden, until 1974, when abortion became legal in Sweden. Since 1993, Poland has had restrictions against abortion, and the number of illegal abortions is extensive (Dahlqvist 2018, 27–28).
- 4 In the Swedish original of the book, the text is: “Skatteverkets bedömning: Du har anmält inflyttning till Sverige och du är EES-medborgare. Du har i din anmälan uppgett att din avsikt är att söka arbete i Sverige. Då du som arbetssökande inte är ekonomiskt aktiv anser Skatteverket att du inte styrkt din uppehållsrätt i Sverige. Du har inte heller visat uppehållstillstånd utfärdad från Migrationsverket. Skatteverket avslår din anmälan om inflyttning till Sverige” (Bogdanska 2016, 25).

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