

2 Power, Participation, and Positionality

A Situated Intersectional Approach to Gender Empowerment in the ReIncluGen Project

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2.1 Introduction

The concepts of “gender empowerment,” “empowering women and girls,” and “empowerment” are widely used in everyday discourse, policy language, and in discussions concerning women who do not conform to dominant societal norms or who face challenges in participating fully in society. This is particularly evident in debates surrounding the integration of migrantised women in Europe. However, less has been said about how this concept is framed and interpreted, subject to power dynamics and failing to consider the situatedness of experiences of empowerment. In this chapter, we seek to make a theoretical contribution to the ways in which the concept of empowerment, in relation to gender, can be conceptualised and examined with regard to migrantised women, both within and beyond civil society organisations (CSOs) across European countries.

CSOs are key actors in initiating and supporting empowerment processes. Building on situated intersectionality (Anthias, 2008; Yuval-Davis, 2015) as our theoretical framework, we aim to engage with contemporary academic discourses and critically examine the concept of gender empowerment (Cornwall, 2016; Leonardsen, 2007; McLaughlin, 2016). Our analysis centres on how empowerment is conceptualised in relation to gender and embedded within broader discourses on migrant integration (e.g. Cakir & Yerin Guneri, 2011; Ghosh, 2009). These discourses are primarily directed at migrant women but are frequently extended to include groups of women who, although still perceived as migrants, have not themselves experienced migration (see Goossens, Onrust, Monshouwer, & de Castro, 2016; Krummel, 2012). This is precisely why we adopt the term “migrantised” women—to interrogate and critique the discursive practices through which women with a migrant background are constructed as migrants, regardless of their actual migration histories, thereby revealing the racialised and gendered logics underpinning integration discourses.

As evident from the initial lines outlining the context in which we aim to study the concept of “empowerment,” the usage of the term “gender empowerment” varies significantly across different settings and target groups—particularly within (gendered) migrant integration discourses and policies. In response to a Horizon Europe research call, funded by the European Commission, on “gender empowerment,” we began a critical deconstruction of the concept. This was necessary, as the focus on gender empowerment presented considerable challenges for the research team in terms of conceptualisation, definition, terminology, and translation across diverse contexts and languages. Addressing these challenges required innovative strategies grounded in a critical feminist, participatory and co-creative research methodology,¹ enabling access to existing forms of knowledge—many of which are implicit, marginalised, or insufficiently articulated. The objective was not only to surface such knowledges but also to actively co-produce new insights with the potential to reshape academic discourse, inform policy, and share practical methodologies employed by practitioners in the field.

To meet these ambitions, all participants—both academic researchers and representatives of CSOs—were invited to engage deeply in the research process, bringing their whole selves into the collaboration, beyond their formal professional roles. This immersive approach echoes Maria Mies’ foundational work in the 1970s on the “methodological postulates of an engaged women’s studies,” in which she challenged the ideal of objective research and instead emphasised the inherent subjectivity present in nearly all research processes. [Mies \(2008\)](#) argued that research can be significantly enriched when this subjectivity—shaped by the researcher’s positionality and personality—is consciously acknowledged, integrated, and reflected upon throughout the entire research process. In line with standpoint theory ([Harding, 1987](#)) and situated knowledges ([Haraway, 1988](#)), we argue that knowledge on “empowerment” is never neutral but always shaped by power, embodiment, and positionality. As such we believe that the standpoint of the oppressed becomes the starting point of scientific inquiry.

Beginning from this standpoint theory and building on the concept of situated knowledges revealed a substantial lack of clear definition and conceptualisation of the term “empowerment,” as well as a lack of critical reflection on how this terminology, often originating in policy contexts, has entered everyday language and the operational practices of CSOs. For instance, in Spain, the term *empoderamiento* has a long-standing history, tracing back to the influence of Paulo Freire’s work (see 1978). In contrast, this conceptual heritage is largely absent in Belgium, where the Dutch language tends to borrow the English term *empowerment*, which remains less commonly used in everyday discourse.

The notion of “empowerment” offers a useful lens for exploring situatedness, as its meaning shifts with different target groups and societal settings, making “situated intersectionality” a relevant theoretical framework ([Anthias, 2012, 2013](#); [Yuval-Davis, 2015](#)). To further explore the added value

of “situated intersectionality,” this chapter is guided by the question: *What does it mean to conduct critical feminist and participatory research using the theoretical lens of situated intersectionality in a comparative research project?* We will first set out the framework of situated intersectionality and consequently discuss its relevance when applying it to the concept of gender empowerment in an international and comparative context, from a feminist participatory research methodology.

2.2 Designing a research project using a situated intersectional lens

Intersectionality is widely recognised as one of the most influential theoretical contributions to have emerged from feminist studies and related disciplines (McCall, 2005). Originally coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), the concept highlights how systems of oppression characteristic of patriarchal societies—such as racism, sexism, and classism—intersect to produce specific and differentiated experiences of privilege and marginalisation for individuals and groups situated at the nexus of multiple identity categories. As a comprehensive analytical framework for understanding social stratification, intersectionality challenges the limitations of traditional approaches that tend to isolate a single axis of inequality—most commonly class (Yuval-Davis, 2015). Instead, it emphasises the co-constitution of categories such as gender, race, class, ethnicity, citizenship, ability, and age in shaping an individual’s social location and thus lived experiences.

Building on this foundational insight, the concept of situated intersectionality introduces a further layer of complexity by emphasising the contextual and dynamic nature of these intersecting inequalities. As theorised by Yuval-Davis (2015) and Anthias (2008, 2012, 2013), situated intersectionality underscores the need to consider how social divisions operate differently across specific geographical, temporal, and social settings. This perspective draws from feminist standpoint theory (Harding, 1987) and the notion of “situated knowledges” (Haraway, 1988), which posit that all knowledge is embedded in particular socio-political, historical, and embodied positions. From this view, understanding a social problem—such as gender (dis)empowerment—requires attending to the vantage points of both the researchers and the researched, and the historically contingent conditions in which their experiences are formed.

In the ReIncluGen project, the application of situated intersectionality serves as an innovative analytical and methodological framework for examining gender empowerment among migrantised women across Europe. This approach facilitates a nuanced analysis of how power operates not only through intersecting identity categories but also across three interrelated dimensions: *translocality*, *transculturality*, and *transtemporality*. The first dimension, *translocality*, refers to the ways in which social divisions—such as gender, race, class, and religion—acquire different meanings and exert varying degrees of

influence across local, national, and digital spaces. In a globalised and digitised world, *translocality* extends beyond geographical contexts to encompass digital cultures and global economic interdependencies (Anthias, 2020). The second dimension, *transcascality*, addresses the multilevel nature of social divisions by analysing how power dynamics materialise differently across societal scales—from households and communities to national and supranational institutions. This concept challenges reductionist policy frameworks and promotes more inclusive and context-sensitive forms of governance across scales. Finally, *transtemporality* captures the evolving meanings and impacts of social categories over time, both in historical perspective and across individual life courses (Yuval-Davis, 2015). A decolonial lens is employed to examine the historical entanglements of racial, ethnic, and gender-based inequalities and to reveal their enduring influence on contemporary social formations.

The comparative approach adopted within the ReIncluGen project allows for a cross-contextual analysis of country-specific policies, CSOs and socio-political settings, facilitating the comparison of how gender empowerment is framed and enacted across different national and local contexts (*translocality*). At the same time, we examined how power dynamics and institutional responses operate at multiple, interconnected levels (*transcascality*). In doing so, we both examined gender empowerment on a micro-level as well as on a meso-level, conducting research on the organisational level (e.g. CSOs) as well as on a personal level (e.g. migrantised women). Central to our analysis is the knowledge of CSOs and their participants in general and of migrantised women in particular, which we explore through a temporal lens that consider both historical legacies and changes across individual life courses (cf. multi-staged interviews with women) and broader socio-political shifts (*transtemporality*).

In doing so, we engaged in a comparative analysis examining the various dimensions of the situated intersectional approach by comparing findings across time, space, and scale. Simultaneously, through conversations, focus group discussions, and interviews, research participants contributed their own narratives and forms of knowledge. These contributions offered insights into how location, temporality, and scale shaped their personal definitions of empowerment, as well as their lived experiences and evaluations of relevant practices. This participatory research process, which recognised diverse forms of knowledge on an equal footing, enabled the inclusion of multiple perspectives and underscored the importance of situated knowledge. It also facilitated critical reflection on how knowledge is constructed not only within the project itself but also within broader societal contexts. In doing so, situated intersectionality enabled a nuanced analysis of migrantised women's understandings of empowerment by accounting for how their subjectivities are shaped through the interplay of geographical location, historical context, and social positioning. For instance, a woman whose family migrated from rural Turkey to Austria may frame empowerment differently than someone with a similar background now living in Spain, due to the national integration regimes, local community

dynamics, and specific discourses around migrant womanhood in each context. Likewise, historical events, such as the recruitment of so-called “guest workers” in post-war Western Europe or the rise of anti-immigrant rhetoric after 9/11, structure how migrantised women are racialised and governed, influencing their opportunities for participation and self-definition. Importantly, the level of analysis also matters: a woman’s experience of empowerment as an active participant in a CSO may differ more or less sharply from her positioning within a household or ethnic community, where traditional gender norms or intra-community hierarchies may prevail. These examples illustrate that empowerment cannot be treated as a static or universal category but must be understood as relational and context-dependent, emerging through specific intersections of migration histories, spatial belonging, and social roles.

The use of this conceptual framework is needed to include multiple perspectives to unpack the concept of “empowerment,” especially when applied to gender, as it conveys a large set of “undiscussed” meanings and interpretations. Relevant here is that “empowerment” seems such a logical thing to wish for, that when you try to define it, you uncover a lot of hidden or structural power dynamics and imbalances (Chaudhuri, 2016). For instance, at the policy/group level, you can more easily state that “empowerment is needed” (e.g. World Bank; Alsop, Bertelsen, & Holland, 2006). However, within CSOs, it turned out that this topic was often “not discussed.” This caused debate within organisations, among social workers and their leaders, as many of them interpreted this concept differently—and especially never had the time to discuss its diverse meaning and interpretations.

These discourses underscore the “impossibility of empowerment” when it is framed as a fixed goal to be achieved. Women—whether engaged in formal or informal labour—are persistently portrayed as being “in need of empowerment.” This paternalistic framing is particularly applied to migrantised women and is often linked to notions of so-called societal integration, which is conceptualised as an open-ended, and arguably unattainable, process (Van Praag, Stevens, & Van Houtte, 2016). While the very definition of *integration* remains contested (Korteweg, 2017; Van Praag et al., 2016), a central paradox emerges: integration appears to be the main goal and an impossible to reach objective. Individuals born and raised in a given country may still be regarded as migrants and as perpetually “in need of integration”—a perception further amplified when the individual in question is a woman.

These persistent, underlying power dynamics shape dominant discourses on both integration and empowerment, revealing the structural impossibility of full achievement—let alone both simultaneously. This double standard calls for critical scrutiny. It is essential to interrogate how the notion of an “eternal need to change” is disproportionately applied to migrantised women, particularly in relation to their perceived integration into society and their empowerment within families, communities, and public life. Yet, these debates often overlook the patriarchal, political structures and broader power relations that sustain and legitimise such dominant discourses.

2.3 Power dynamics and empowerment throughout the research process

The concept of power occupies a central role in this research not only in its conventional understanding as hierarchical domination or control exerted by some over others but more importantly referring to agency and transformative capacity. Power is thus conceived as the ability not merely to cope with or navigate everyday life but to actively shape it and influence the broader structural conditions within which it unfolds. This understanding of power is foundational to the entire research design. Beyond the empirical research questions and the overarching theoretical framework of situated intersectionality, the question of power has been continuously posed and negotiated—both in the initial composition of the research team and throughout the process of collaboration.

Against the backdrop of a critical feminist epistemological stance (Hara-way, 1988; Harding, 1987), it was essential for the research process itself to be designed in a way that not only allows for critical reflection on power but also facilitates the possibility of generating new, embodied experiences of power dynamics within the research practice itself. This approach stimulates participatory research approaches (Apers, Richter, & Van Praag, 2021; Kesby, Kindon, & Pain, 2007; Kirby, Greaves, & Reid, 2010). Applying participatory research methodologies are needed and grounded in a fundamental epistemological premise: namely, a critical examination of how knowledge on empowerment in relation to gender is produced and what counts as forms of knowledge. Participatory research methodologies have the potential to challenge dominant hierarchies in knowledge production by exposing the extent to which the concept of “knowledge” is embedded in power-laden, hierarchical structures.

More conventional scientific paradigms often marginalise or invalidate alternative forms of knowing—such as lived experience, memory, emotion, or affect—by relegating them to lesser categories. These forms of knowledge are frequently labelled in ways that separate them from the sphere of “objective” or “legitimate” knowledge (Shpungin, Allen, Loomis, & Dello Stritto, 2012). In order to examine the entanglement between empowerment and inclusion, one needs to explicitly question hierarchies of knowledge. Participatory research approaches embrace the principle that diverse forms of knowledge should be regarded as equally valid and epistemologically productive (Kirby et al., 2010; von Unger, 2014). The methodological commitment to parity among different knowledge forms is not merely a normative position but a necessary precondition for addressing the research questions in a comprehensive and inclusive manner. In this view, it is precisely the plurality and heterogeneity of knowledge—emerging from different positionalities and lived realities—that enables a deeper understanding of the phenomena under investigation.

The aspiration to generate knowledge on an equal footing also introduced significant challenges in practice—particularly due to the presence of multiple languages throughout the research process. These linguistic dimensions

were multifaceted: on the one hand, there were the spoken languages used by participants from different countries, including Italian, Spanish, Dutch, German, and others. On the other hand, there were disciplinary and professional languages that differed markedly among the actors involved—academic researchers, practitioners from CSOs, and migrantised women with diverse educational and biographical backgrounds. Consequently, the research team was not only tasked with recognising and validating various forms of knowledge, but also faced the continuous need for translation—across spoken languages, disciplinary vocabularies, and culturally specific modes of expression. This work of translation was far more than a technical task; it became a fundamental part of the epistemological and methodological fabric of the project. It required a sustained effort to negotiate meaning, nuance, and conceptual integrity across highly diverse communicative contexts.

The translation work performed throughout the project can be considered one of its most innovative and valuable contributions. It enabled mutual intelligibility across epistemic communities and created the conditions for collaborative meaning-making. At the same time, this process revealed limitations and tensions. Every act of translation involved a degree of interpretive transformation and, inevitably, some loss of specificity. Concepts embedded in particular languages and intellectual traditions could not always be rendered with full accuracy or nuance in another idiom. Yet, it was precisely through this ongoing dialogical process—sustained over three years of joint inquiry—that a new, emergent language of collaboration began to take shape. This evolving language allowed the co-produced knowledge to be communicated in a shared and comprehensible way, even if it could never be entirely free of ambiguity or asymmetry.

In addition to these epistemological challenges, the project also had to grapple with structural asymmetries of participation. As will be discussed in the following section on the composition of the research team, while the academic researchers and one CSO per country received funding for their involvement, other CSOs and migrantised participants contributed their time and knowledge without financial compensation. This disparity had tangible effects on the degree and form of engagement possible for different actors. Some participants were able to integrate their project activities into paid working hours, while others had to participate in their free time—limiting their availability and continuity across the various phases of the research. These unequal conditions shaped not only the depth and consistency of participation but also had implications for the inclusivity of knowledge production. As such, the project was confronted with both epistemic and participatory boundaries. As von Unger (2014) has argued, every participatory research project has its limits. What matters is to remain transparent and reflexive about *who* is able to participate, *in what ways*, and *at what moments* in the process. Recognising these limitations does not undermine the participatory ethos of the research but rather strengthens it by fostering accountability and awareness of power dynamics that may otherwise remain obscured.

2.4 Building the research team: diverse expertise, languages, and knowledges

The theoretical framework of situated intersectionality is not only analytically central in the ReIncluGen project but also becomes manifest in the structure and functioning of the research team itself. Composed of academic researchers, technical partners, professionals from CSOs, and migrantised women engaged through these organisations and research institutions, the team reflects the project's commitment to a research practice that is both participatory and grounded in the lived realities of those it seeks to understand. The three core dimensions of *translocality*, *transculturality*, and *transtemporality* are not only theoretical lenses for analysis but also help to understand the project's internal dynamics and knowledge production processes.

In terms of *translocality*, the project spans fieldwork conducted in five European countries—Belgium, Austria, Italy, Poland, and Spain. However, national categories alone obscure the diversity of local contexts. The fieldwork focused on specific regional and socio-political settings such as Trentino-South Tyrol in Italy, Flanders in Belgium, Catalonia in Spain, Warsaw area in Poland, and urban Vienna in Austria. These regional differences shaped the experiences of all involved and required continuous reflection on how to bridge linguistic, cultural, and institutional diversities. The team had to grapple with the dual challenge of building bridges across diverse contexts while acknowledging the boundaries that often rendered mutual understanding complex. These efforts to create a shared space of dialogue and meaning-making are illustrative of a translocal sensitivity that is core to the project's approach. Language emerged as a particularly salient vector of both inclusion and exclusion. For most team members, parts of the research were conducted in a first, second, or third language, and final outputs were written in English—a non-native language for all. While English provided a common communicative platform, it also risked flattening context-specific meanings and losing the nuance of local concepts, particularly regarding culturally embedded understandings of empowerment or belonging. Thus, language functioned as both a bridge and a boundary, shaping what could be said, shared, or translated across the consortium.

The project's research methodologies, including ethnographic observations, participatory evaluation methods, and photovoicing trajectories, reflect the principle of *transculturality*. This was not only visible in the research's multilevel focus but also in the constitution of the research team itself. Actors with distinct knowledges and roles were brought together in ways that challenged conventional epistemic hierarchies. Academic researchers were invited to co-organise photography exhibitions, CSO practitioners assumed review responsibilities for co-authored reports, and migrantised women contributed written reflections that became part of published outputs. These practices disrupted traditional or dominant divisions of labour in knowledge production and created opportunities for mutual learning. They also exposed latent

power asymmetries within and across institutions, which had to be actively negotiated through shared authority and collective reflection. Crucially, these modes of engagement also unsettled dominant narratives on gender, empowerment, and integration by foregrounding the lived experiences and self-defined aspirations of migrantised women rather than reproducing state-centric or culturally assimilationist frameworks. In this regard, another key feminist principle became evident in the research process: namely, that participation in the project invited all to raise awareness and stimulate debate within and outside conventional groups, organisations, and networks. Each participant was engaged not only with their full personality and subjectivity, but the process itself also initiated a personal and professional trajectory of growth and transformation.

During the entire research process, CSOs in particular played a crucial role in anchoring the research in lived realities as this process also influenced the knowledge frameworks of CSO staff working with migrantised women, encouraging critical reflection on their assumptions and practices related to empowerment and integration. Defined as non-governmental, non-profit organisations that serve a public interest (Ahrweiler, Gilbert, Schrempf, Grimpe, & Jirotko, 2018), CSOs have traditionally been seen in European research frameworks more as vehicles for dissemination than as sites of innovation or epistemic expertise. However, the ReIncluGen project aligns with emerging scholarship that positions CSOs as essential partners in responsible research and innovation. Their proximity to marginalised communities, their knowledge of shifting migration patterns, and their embeddedness in local contexts position them to challenge monolithic and often damaging categorisations—such as the assumption that female migrants are either family-bound dependents or economic threats. As Kofman and Raghuram (2015) argue, such narrow frames deny migrant women their agency and diversity. CSOs, in contrast, bring critical insight and practical knowledge that resist these reductive assumptions, helping to foster new understandings of gendered empowerment.

The concept of *transtemporality* also illuminates the understanding of changes throughout the research process, albeit to a lesser extent. The project itself spanned a period of three years and was characterised by a certain degree of fluctuation within the team. In total, approximately 55–60 individuals were part of the consortium, and each national team experienced personnel changes over time. This meant that the temporal dimension repeatedly led to new team constellations, which at times introduced moments of instability but ultimately enriched the overall process. If we also consider the additional year from the initial idea through the drafting of the proposal to the official launch of the project, the total timeframe amounts to two years. Of all the individuals involved, it is especially the coordinating team that participated continuously from the beginning to the conclusion of the project and even focused on the reporting and reviewing after the project.

In addition to this internal fluctuation, there was another temporal element that shaped the research process: the intergenerational composition of the team. The members of the consortium were born between 1939 and 2002. These generational differences were not only defined by chronological age but also by professional age—that is, the duration and depth of professional experience. The team thus included both early-career researchers and experts with several decades of experience, contributing to a dynamic and multilayered research collaboration. This intergenerational composition deepened the reflexivity of the team and enabled a layering of perspectives across time, professional lifecycles, and institutional memory. Together, these dimensions highlight that the principles of situated intersectionality are not only applicable to the subject of research but also to the process of research itself. The ReIncluGen team became a living enactment of the very concepts it set out to study—diverse, stratified, and evolving—held together through shared commitment to participatory, inclusive, critical, and transformative knowledge production.

2.5 Researcher positionalities: navigating insider–outsider dynamics, power asymmetries, and situated knowledge

One of the most compelling and complex dimensions present in the ReIncluGen project is the question of researcher positionality, particularly as it unfolds within a diverse team, comprising academic researchers, CSOs practitioners, a tech-partner, and migrantised women participants, where the latter were oftentimes not financially compensated for their participation. This configuration challenges conventional academic roles and requires a high degree of reflexivity from all actors involved. The interweaving of personal (migration) histories, professional expertise, and structural inequalities renders positionality not merely a methodological concern but a lived, negotiated reality. Central to this reflection is the insider–outsider dynamic (Kirby et al., 2010; Ryan, 2015), particularly among migrantised and non-migrantised researchers and CSO staff. Their positionalities were neither fixed nor oppositional; rather, they involved complex, overlapping roles that simultaneously encompassed proximity and distance, empathy, and critical inquiry. Anthropological literature (Iqbal, West, McEachan, & Haith-Cooper, 2023) highlights that insider status can facilitate access, foster trust, and deepen contextual understanding while also complicating the boundaries between lived experience and academic analysis. In the ReIncluGen project, these entanglements were especially evident. Migrantised team members navigated the interwoven demands of empathising with participants and engaging with institutional frameworks that encouraged critical reflection, demonstrating that closeness and analytical rigor are not mutually exclusive but mutually informing. Non-migrantised team members, in turn, engaged reflexively with their positional limits while contributing perspectives that could illuminate assumptions less visible to insiders.

This iterative and relational process illustrates Haraway's (1987) notion of situated knowledges, emphasising that knowledge emerges from specific positions that are simultaneously partial, embodied, and relational, rather than from an abstract, universal standpoint. It also reflects Mies' (2008) principle of conscious partiality, foregrounding the inseparability of research from socio-political histories, cultural values, and embodied experience. Rather than balancing or choosing between empathy and analysis, solidarity and critique, the project embraced the coexistence and entanglement of these dimensions, highlighting research as an inherently relational, political, and dynamic practice. The researchers were thus continuously challenged to hold space for complexity without collapsing it into a single or binary narrative. This required cultivating an attentiveness to situated intersectionality—not only as a theoretical tool but as a daily research ethic (Tarrant, & Ladlow, 2024).

The complexity of researcher positionalities was further amplified by the temporal and socio-political dimensions of the “migrant” category. The involvement of women from different generations of migration, countries of origin, and socio-economic positions laid bare the contested nature of migration-related identity labels. This quickly resulted in adapting the term “migrantised” to foreground the structural processes of othering (Erel, Murji, & Nahaboo, 2016). The research team became only gradually more engaged in avoiding these othering practices, albeit at different speeds across research contexts. The term signals a shift away from essentialist, individualised notions of “migrant women” to a conceptualisation that highlights how social hierarchies are maintained through institutional discourses, public policies, and media representations (Erel et al., 2016). It is a term that denotes a process rather than a status—emphasising the external imposition of identity over personal identification. This shift in terminology also reflects a deeper epistemological stance.

By using “migrantised” as an analytical category, the research not only questioned dominant labels but also challenged the function of identity markers in knowledge production. The implications for researchers were far-reaching: they had to confront how their own subject positions affected not only their relationships with participants but also their self-perception and institutional roles. Reflexivity, therefore, became a necessary and ongoing practice. It was not treated as an abstract ethical addendum but as an integral part of epistemic accountability. In this regard, the project's commitment to participatory methods, such as co-creation of outputs and the photovoice method, supported a shared sense of authority and responsibility in the research process (Kirby et al., 2010).

The gender composition of the fieldwork teams added another layer of significance. Across all countries, the fieldwork was conducted exclusively by female researchers, often in settings where gender influenced participation dynamics. In Poland, Belgium, Austria, Italy, and Spain, the predominance of women among both researchers and participants created “inclusive spaces”

where gender-specific barriers and opportunities were openly discussed. The reflections also made clear that ethnic and racial positionalities within CSOs played a role. In one Belgian organisation, a Roma staff member challenged her white supervisor after recounting a discriminatory experience—explicitly invoking their divergent social locations. In Italy, leadership roles were often held by white majority professionals, whereas participants were largely racialised and migrantised women. While these dynamics carried the potential for tension, they were mitigated by long-standing and trust-based relationships. Other organisational settings maintained a more balanced leadership structure, ensuring that no ethnic group dominated management. In a Spanish organisation, for instance, a young staff member of Moroccan descent was described as enriching the team’s perspective through her presence and professional integration. Her positionality contributed to greater depth in discussions but also raised questions about how dynamics might have shifted if a formerly supported woman, rather than an integrated professional, had participated.

Across all country contexts, the organisational cultures of participating CSOs played an important role in shaping how participation and collaborative research unfolded. Some organisations worked with participatory decision-making, which helped reduce hierarchies during research activities, while others—often unintentionally—reproduced existing institutional inequalities. These internal dynamics also shaped how participants engaged and interacted. Additionally, they were also shaped by similarities between researchers, CSOs, and participants, in terms of being migrantised, gender, and educational level. In Austria, for example, the CSO team consisted of two white, highly educated, non-Muslim women of non-Austrian background—one senior and one junior—who worked together without overt hierarchy, though differences in experience and language fluency remained. In Belgium, the sessions in the CSO were organised by migrantised women, born and raised in Belgium. In addition, the CSO collaborated with two migrantised researchers from the university and a white supervisor. Alongside existing relationships with CSOs, this setup helped build trust and facilitated equal power relations between CSOs and universities, and created more equal spaces. In Italy, the lead researcher and the “critical friend”² were both white, non-Muslim women with backgrounds in social work, which supported mutual understanding between academic and civil society contexts. Similar dynamics were observed in Spain and Poland, where prior fieldwork experience and shared feminist values contributed to trust and reduced power imbalances between all actors involved. Taken together, these insights reveal that researcher positionality can never be understood as static. It is shaped by an intricate interplay of biography, institutional role, cultural context, and methodological approach. Thus, positionality was not a fixed identity marker but a relational practice—constantly shifting in response to context, time, space, and dialogue. It became a site of epistemic negotiation, where knowledge was co-produced, authority was shared, and normative assumptions were challenged.

Importantly, this processual understanding of positionality is not meant to evoke a romanticised image of harmonious collaboration. On the contrary, it acknowledges the real challenges and potential conflicts that arise when actors with different backgrounds, interests, and expectations engage in shared research processes. Precisely because of this, it is crucial to create sufficient time and space for dialogue, critical reflection, and conflict resolution. Without this, tensions may escalate or remain unresolved, undermining both participation and the co-production of knowledge on equal terms. High levels of pressure—be it due to time constraints, output expectations, or institutional demands—can be counterproductive and risk reproducing hierarchies instead of dismantling them.

In recognition of these risks, we made it a priority to convene the research consortium in person every six months over the three-year duration of the project. These three-day regular meetings were not only frequent but also geographically rotated across each of the five participating countries, ensuring that all partners had the opportunity to nationally collaborate as research institutions and CSOs and host and frame the space of exchange. Another aspect was that we consistently tried to pay a physical visit to the partner CSO in case the consortium meeting did not take place in their offices. This mobility embedded a principle of shared responsibility and spatial equity into our collaboration. The in-person format provided a valuable space for sustained and respectful dialogue, allowing us to build trust, acknowledge differences, and develop mutual understanding over time. While moments of friction did arise, the embodied presence and immediacy of face-to-face interaction enabled us to address disagreements more openly and honestly, rather than letting them simmer beneath the surface. This rhythm of in-person, rotating engagement became a key strategy for balancing the pressures of collaborative research with the feminist commitment to reflexivity, care, and relational accountability. All these insights have concrete implications for research design and funding schemes. Participatory and reflexive research requires not only methodological openness but also structural conditions that support slower, dialogical, and sometimes non-linear research processes.

2.6 Concluding reflection: what does it mean to conduct research through the theoretical framework of situated intersectionality?

Conducting research through the theoretical framework of situated intersectionality means engaging in a process that is not only analytically complex but also ethically demanding, methodologically plural, and epistemologically transformative. Within the ReIncluGen project, this approach was not treated as a static lens applied after the fact but as a dynamic framework that informed every stage of the research—from conceptualisation and team formation to data collection, analysis, and dissemination.

At its core, situated intersectionality acknowledges that systems of power and domination created along gender, race, class, migration status, religion, age, and ability do not operate in isolation. Rather, they intersect to produce specific experiences of marginalisation and privilege. Yet, the added value of *situated* intersectionality lies in its sensitivity to the social, political, historical, geographical, and institutional contexts in which these intersections unfold. It insists that knowledge, agency, and empowerment are always related and socially situated—that is, shaped by the socio-political and cultural realities that shape positionalities of both researchers and research participants, and by the relational dynamics between them.

In the ReIncluGen project, this also meant acknowledging the shifting positionalities of the researchers themselves. As described in this chapter, many members of the research team, including CSO staff, had migration histories or personal ties to minoritised communities. These biographies placed them in complex insider–outsider positions that defied easy categorisation. Far from being a methodological challenge to overcome, this positional ambivalence became a central epistemic asset. It required a continuous practice of reflexivity—not as a formalised ritual of transparency but as a lived mode of inquiry. Researchers had to remain critically attuned to how their own socialisation and actual context shaped the research questions they asked, the relationships they built, the analyses, and the meanings they co-produced. This reflexivity was further enabled and deepened through the project’s commitment to participatory action research (PAR) (Kirby et al., 2010). In line with critical feminist and decolonial traditions, PAR in ReIncluGen was understood as the most coherent methodological approach. Rather than treating migrantised women as passive objects of study, the research aimed to create conditions under which all involved could be co-creators of knowledge—through methods such as photovoice, collaborative writing, and collective analysis. This commitment challenged dominant hierarchies of knowledge production, especially the privileging of “expert” academic knowledge over lived experience. In a context where social science often reproduces extractive and objectifying relationships, the participatory, co-constructive orientation of ReIncluGen sought to foster a more relational and reciprocal approach to inquiry.

Yet, the commitment to situated intersectionality also required facing the structural limits and contradictions of such a model. Power asymmetries—within research teams, between researchers and CSOs, and between CSOs and participants—did not disappear simply because they were acknowledged. They had to be continuously negotiated. Hierarchies based on professional roles, race, language, migration status, scientific discipline, and institutional affiliation emerged in different ways across countries and organisational settings. For example, in some contexts, white majority staff held leadership positions in CSOs that worked with racialised and migrantised women, while in others, organisational cultures were more horizontal. These differences shaped the degree to which empowerment could be enacted rather than merely studied. Moreover, *translocality*, *transculturality*, and *transtemporality*—as key

analytical dimensions of situated intersectionality—helped the team to interpret these dynamics beyond surface-level description. *Translocality* revealed how gender, race, and migration are constructed differently across urban and rural settings, national borders, and digital platforms. *Transculturality* highlighted the importance of examining how power operates simultaneously at multiple levels—from the interpersonal and organisational to the legal, media, and supranational spheres. *Transtemporality*, finally, made visible how experiences of empowerment and marginalisation change not only over time but across generations, life phases, and shifting political climates. In each of these dimensions, the research was not simply looking at “empowerment” as a fixed outcome, but rather as a relational process shaped by historical contingencies and multi-scalar influences.

Another key insight was the importance of language—both literal and symbolic—as a site of power and potential exclusion. Conducting research in an international setting including multiple languages, with English as the common but non-native tongue, required the team to be attentive to the nuances of translation, interpretation, and loss. Concepts central to empowerment—such as agency, inclusion, or voice—did not always travel smoothly across linguistic and cultural boundaries. In some cases, their meanings had to be negotiated anew in each context. This linguistic pluralism mirrored the theoretical commitments of situated intersectionality: rather than imposing a singular vocabulary, the project embraced multiplicity as a necessary condition for epistemic justice.

Finally, conducting research through situated intersectionality meant being open and flexible to transformation—not just in the lives of participants but in the practices of the researchers themselves. As the project unfolded, team members were confronted with new perspectives, challenged by unfamiliar contexts, and moved to reconsider their assumptions. This iterative process of learning and unlearning reinforced the idea that knowledge is not only about representing reality or “scientific truth” but about participating in its ongoing formation. In conclusion, situated intersectionality in the ReIncluGen project functioned as both a framework and a praxis. It demanded intellectual rigor, methodological creativity, and ethical commitment. It called for a *rethinking of empowerment*—not as a static attribute to be measured but as a process of situated, collective, and contested becoming. It asked not only *what* we know, but *how, with whom, and for what purposes* knowledge is produced. In doing so, it opened a space for more inclusive, reflexive, and justice-oriented forms of research.

Notes

- 1 <https://www.uantwerpen.be/en/projects/reincludgen/project-outputs/>
- 2 A *critical friend* is an experienced professional who serves as a bridge between researchers and CSO staff, fostering trust and grounding discussions in practical realities. By mitigating hierarchies and validating the research with field expertise, the critical friend ensures that the process is conducted *with* CSOs rather than *on* them.

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