

Routledge Research in Gender and Society

INCLUSION AND GENDER EMPOWERMENT IN EUROPEAN CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS

Edited by

Amal Miri, Lore Van Praag, Havva Akçaoglu,
Andrea Fleckinger, and Laia Narciso



Inclusion and Gender Empowerment in European Civil Society Organisations

This book aims to rethink the intersection between inclusion and gender in civil society, media, academic, and policy discourses across Europe.

With a critical and participatory approach, this book advances the concept of ‘situated intersectionality’ to rethink empowerment as a dynamic process shaped by local contexts. Drawing on rich data from the Horizon Europe project ReIncluGen, this book examines discourses on gender empowerment and inclusion in Austria, Belgium, Italy, Poland, and Spain. From both academic and civil society perspectives, the volume explores how these discourses are addressed, as well as how they contribute to, or reduce, inequalities. These insights further our understanding, reflecting on innovative practices used by civil society and policymakers to foster social change.

This book assembles chapters that will be of interest to scholars and students of gender studies, sociology, migration, and media studies, as well as practitioners, policymakers, and CSOs working on issues of migration, diversity, equality, and inclusion. It offers valuable insights for anyone seeking to understand and support inclusive practices that foster a more equitable European future.

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**To all the migrantised women that have shared their
life stories, experiences, and knowledge during the
ReIncluGen project**



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Abbreviations

ACW:	aid and care workers working amongst others with MW
AI:	artificial intelligence
CEDAW:	UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women
CSO:	Civil Society Organisations
CSR:	corporate social responsibility
DAWN-MUDAR:	Development Alternatives for a New Era
EASHW:	Ethics Committee for the Social Sciences and Humanities
ECHR:	European Convention on Human Rights
EU:	European Union
EVS:	European Values Study
FGD:	focus group discussions
GAD:	gender and development
GBV:	gender-based violence
GDPR:	General Data Protection Regulation
GEM:	Gender Empowerment Measure
IRC:	International Rescue Committee
INGO:	International Non-Governmental Organisation
ISSP:	International Social Survey Programme
ISTAT:	Italian National Statistics Institute
MLP:	minimum lovable product
MVP:	minimum viable product
MW:	migrant and migrantised women
NGO:	non-governmental organisation
PAR:	participatory action research
PhD:	doctor of philosophy
PTSD:	posttraumatic-stress-disorder
ReIncluGen:	Rethinking Inclusion and Gender Empowerment
SDG:	Sustainable Development Goal
UNFPA:	The United Nations Population Fund
WAD:	women and development

WAVE:	Women Against Violence Europe
WE-GAP:	Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality Action Plan
WHO:	World Health Organisation
WID:	women in development
WLO:	women-led organisation
WMLFM:	When Mom Left for Mars
ZUS:	social security



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1 Introduction

A Participatory Approach to Rethink Inclusion and Gender Empowerment

Amal Miri and Lore Van Praag

1.1 Rethinking inclusion and gender empowerment in Europe

There is a growing diversity in European societies, in terms of gender identities, ethnicity, culture, religion, class, sexuality and residency status. This brings along cumulative effects of multiple forms of discrimination and disadvantages for specific combinations of these categories. As a response to such diversities in Europe, governance, policy and everyday discourses focus on ‘how to deal with this diversity’. Oftentimes, the voices of disadvantaged groups in many of these discourses are not heard or underrepresented. At the same time, these discourses highlight that these specific ‘disadvantaged groups in society’ are stimulated to express their voices, to participate in society and to voice their concerns. This is certainly the case for migrantised women, who are considered as migrants, regardless of whether they migrated themselves or have been born in Europe. For this group, dominant discourses on migrant integration or acculturation suggest they should integrate in society, meaning that they should participate more in dominant institutions and means in society. At the same time, gender-specific stereotypes apply, within and outside their own communities, suggesting that this group is subordinate to men and needs to be more ‘empowered’, or even ‘liberated’ to ‘speak up’ against their traditional cultures or religious beliefs (Farris, 2017).

In these prevailing discourses, gender- and migrant-specific stereotypes intersect and shape gendered migration policies while disregarding both structural conditions and a critical reflection on the patriarchal symbolic order (Piper, 2006). This may, for instance, be visible in the requirements to apply for citizenship or to receive social welfare benefits, and may have long-lasting impacts for society and how this society approaches its inhabitants. We want to debunk these prevailing ideas by presenting empirical findings and theoretical reflections on how migrantised women across European societies approach ‘empowerment’ in general, and how this further relates to their multiple identities, life stories and context in which they live and have lived before. By adopting the term *migrantised*, we interrogate the processes of othering that persist across European integration regimes, where women are continuously positioned as ‘in need of integration or empowerment’.

2 *Inclusion and Gender Empowerment in European CSOs*

In this book, we will present findings, critical reflections and practical experiences of research conducted as part of the Horizon Europe Mission ReIncluGen project. The ReIncluGen project stands for ‘REthinking INCLUsion and GENDER Empowerment: A participatory action research’. This European project pays particular attention to differing social, cultural, economic and political contexts across Europe, focusing on Austria, Belgium, Italy, Poland and Spain, with partners located in these countries and in the Netherlands. Central to this project is the critical feminist approach towards structural societal crises such as the economic crises, the care crisis, security, violence and the specific contexts of (forced and environmentally induced) migration. The patriarchal system—whether on a political, economic, social or cultural level—is fundamental to why our research is necessary in the first place.

The ReIncluGen project aims to study and co-construct creative and innovative ways to help reverse socio-economic, cultural and racial inequalities and help realise gender empowerment and inclusion of women and girls with a migration background (cf. migrantised women) across distinct societal contexts in Europe. In order to realise this, the ReIncluGen project aims to rethink and move beyond ‘gender empowerment’ as a container term and, in doing so, achieve a more ‘situated’ and comparative understanding of gendered power relations across societal spheres both within and between the above-mentioned European countries. Our critical and holistic approach aims to rethink and re-imagine gender empowerment as an ongoing process, with different manifestations depending on women’s social positionings across time, rather than as a loosely articulated outcome. Additionally, we will consider it to go further than solely women’s or gender empowerment, emphasising that social empowerment, cultural empowerment and economic empowerment are in fact interrelated and linked to overall gender empowerment. By researching the various understandings of gender empowerment among migrantised women, professionals and within digital media discourses, we will continuously discuss the inherent power dynamics and imbalances, inevitably addressing issues of structural violence as well.

Building on the innovative theoretical concept of ‘situated intersectionality’ (Yuval-Davis, 2015), the ReIncluGen project aims to critically reflect upon the notion of ‘gender empowerment’ and to study, co-evaluate and co-develop good practices promoting inclusion and gender empowerment in civil society organisations (CSOs). Centralising the participation and co-creation with European CSOs, their target groups and members not only go back to the roots of gender empowerment—which are in the social action movement of the 1960s and the self-help initiatives of the 1970s (Gibson, 1991)—it will also help us to study and unravel the situated meanings and discourses of gender empowerment as well as their implementations within different societal spheres. Our participatory action research was conducted with explicit attention to women and girls with a migration background (cf. migrantised women) and their agency and the diversity within this group. Focusing on this specific target group is of particular relevance considering

the cumulative disadvantages and Othering experiences that come with being women and having a migration history, thus making it crucial to approach gender empowerment as interrelated to issues of migration, class and race (Miri, 2021).

As a consortium, we strongly support the right to movement and migration of every person. Despite the potential for this right to migration to improve women's lives, there are many disadvantages and risks that women face as compared to men (Parreñas, 2011). On a socio-economic level, many studies indicate that migration involves deskilling for some groups of women (e.g., many migrant women with degrees work in domestic and care services; Kofman & Raghuram, 2015; Parreñas, 2011). One of this book's contributions lies in the search for more situated meanings and conceptualisations of gender empowerment. In doing so, this book challenges liberal and Western notions of freedom and empowerment, which often underpin policy initiatives framed in paternalistic terms as efforts to 'empower' or 'save' female migrants (Abu-Lughod, 2013; Cornwall, 2016).

In Europe, civil society is oftentimes positioned in such a way that they are closer to minoritised or disadvantaged groups compared to policy makers and governmental organisations. By collaborating with academic research institutions and CSOs in this book and project, we aim to generate more innovative insights and creative solutions to foster gender empowerment and inclusion. Therefore, we include a wide variety of CSOs working with and for migrantised women and/or girls focusing on themes such as gender equality, (gender-based) violence, representation, socio-cultural participation and labour market participation using education, media, networking, legal counselling and psychological therapy. To consider the socio-political context and CSO landscape within the project, we focus on five countries (Austria, Belgium, Italy, Poland and Spain) and on media discourses related to the Netherlands that vary in terms of gender policies and inequalities, which may also impact the CSO practices currently used and promoted as well as processes leading to gender empowerment.

1.2 The participatory ReIncluGen project

The ReIncluGen project ran from 2023 to 2025. The project has four research objectives. The first objective of the ReIncluGen project is a contextual policy analysis and secondary data analyses to fully understand the contexts in which CSOs are embedded, locally, regionally and nationally, and to provide policy support. A second objective is to use a bottom-up and participatory approach to unpack the different conceptualisations of gender 'empowerment' across societal spheres and contexts by bringing in more nuance and situatedness (Haraway, 1988) in notions of gender 'empowerment'. In doing so, we will move beyond the written diversity and gender equality policies and take into account both the heterogeneity and agency of minority and migrant groups and migrantised women and girls. A third objective of this

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project is to conduct an evaluation and impact assessment of empowering and inclusive trajectories applied in distinct CSOs in order to co-design innovative tools to further support their work. We aim to understand their rationale, linkage with prevailing policies and contextual preconditions of their success, and study their applicability across different organisations, countries and cultural contexts. A fourth objective is to examine the discourses and actions of media and digital cultures in strengthening, supporting or contributing to gender empowerment (Fotopoulou, 2017). Our aim is to analyse the impact of these media discourses on CSO practices, to evaluate the ways in which CSOs contribute to and shape these discourses, and to account for the contextual factors—including policy frameworks, societal domains, cultural contexts and the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, we aim to study the tensions between the situatedness of CSOs in local contexts and the transnational nature of social media.

In order to realise these objectives, the ReIncluGen project integrates both research/university partners and CSOs, fostering equitable collaboration and participation in the co-creative research methods. In each of these countries, one university or research partner was included to coordinate the research aspects, and one CSO to guide the evaluation of the practices. To understand the impact of distinct societal spheres, we opted to include CSOs that work in different societal spheres. All the CSOs included in this consortium, namely Empact vzw (Belgium), InteRed (Spain), Feminoteka (Poland), La Strada-Der Weg (Italy) and Orient Express (Austria) work in the socio-cultural, socio-economic, legal and socio-political spheres, focused on providing networking activities, education/training, support and/or counselling for migrantised women and girls.

Additionally, the ReIncluGen project relies on four key concepts that form the theoretical and methodological backbone of our research: 1) situated intersectionality, 2) civil society and their role in innovative European action research, 3) participatory action research and 4) traditional and social media discourses and digital cultures.

1.3 **A marriage between research, technical and civil society partners**

The ReIncluGen project brings together a diverse range of stakeholders, each contributing a unique perspective to the challenge of gender empowerment and inclusion. At the core of this collaboration is the partnership between academic institutions, CSOs and software developers. Our academic partners have an extensive expertise in anthropology, sociology, social work and media studies focused specifically on the empowerment and inclusion of migrantised women. This academic perspective offers valuable insights into the historical evolution of these social issues, supported by years of complementary research on the structural challenges faced by these communities. In parallel, CSOs bring their on-the-ground experience of working directly

with migrantised women and other marginalised groups. Their practical understanding of daily challenges enriches the academic framework by connecting theoretical knowledge with embodied and situated knowledge. Partners from five countries, each with unique historical and cultural contexts of gender and inclusion, further strengthen this collaboration. The international dimension adds an additional layer of complexity, but also opportunity, as it allows for cross-country comparisons and knowledge exchange that enhance the overall project.

With over 35 years of experience, **Orient Express** in Austria has evolved from offering German courses to Turkish women to providing essential services for Arabic- and Turkish-speaking women facing forced marriages and honour-based violence. With its 24/7 refuge for young women, the organisation plays a vital role in protecting those at risk. However, Orient Express faces significant challenges not to fall in the trap of colonial feminist assumptions due to Austria's institutional complexity and high levels of racism. Despite limited funding, the organisation remains committed to providing long-term support.

With 45 years of experience, **La Strada-Der Weg** has grown from a small volunteer group addressing drug addiction into a well-established organisation providing support to children, youth and families in need. Based in South Tyrol, Italy, the organisation operates in a region marked by a unique cultural mix of Italian and German influences, which has resulted in fragmented policies and services. This cultural complexity poses challenges in providing cohesive support to families, especially in areas related to social inclusion and empowerment.

Founded in 1992, **InteRed** is a Spanish organisation committed to transformative education in favour of social justice, gender equity and social and environmental sustainability. With a team of 50 staff members and 200 volunteers, it works to empower marginalised communities through socio-educational projects, ensuring participation and dialogue with CSOs from different countries. One of the major challenges InteRed faces is the rise of far-right political movements in Spain, which have introduced new barriers to social progress.

Impact vzw, founded in 1991 (formerly known as FMV vzw), serves as a Belgian umbrella organisation in the socio-cultural sector, supporting its migrant-led member organisations on issues related to social participation, education, employment and cultural identity. The organisation faces several challenges, including the need to demonstrate the impact of its work amid increasing political pressures from right-wing movements. Additionally, Impact vzw must navigate the risk of being co-opted by other organisations that seek to superficially include migrantised groups in their projects without giving them proper recognition.

Established in 2005, **Feminoteka** is dedicated to supporting women affected by violence in Poland. The organisation provides counselling, conducts research and publishes educational resources to raise awareness

about gender-based violence. The recent war in Ukraine has added new layers of complexity to their work as they now extend their services to refugees fleeing the conflict, placing additional strain on their already limited resources.

Next to these long-standing CSOs, the ReIncluGen project is supported by a diverse group of academic institutions from across Europe, each contributing valuable insights into gender empowerment and inclusion. The **University of Antwerp (UAntwerpen)** is the project coordinator and a leading research institution in Belgium, particularly in the fields of migration, culture and diversity, and social inclusion. The team involved in ReIncluGen brings expertise in sociology and anthropology, with a focus on the gendered experiences of migrantised women. Their work explores the intersectionality of race, gender and social status, helping to shed light on the systemic barriers faced by these groups in Belgium and beyond. Their contribution to the project is deeply rooted in understanding how policies and social frameworks impact gender empowerment and how people themselves define empowerment across settings and countries.

The **University of Trento's** involvement in ReIncluGen is led by researchers with a strong focus on migration and gender. The UNITN team examines how migration processes affect women's lives, particularly from Eastern Europe to Italy. Their work highlights the transformations that migrantised women undergo, both personally and socially. The unique cultural and historical context of Italy, especially in regions like South Tyrol with its Italian-German cultural mix, presents challenges in integrating gender empowerment within these migration dynamics.

Synyo, an Austrian research and innovation company, brings an interdisciplinary approach to tackling complex social issues. In ReIncluGen, Synyo's expertise in social science research and analysis provides critical insights into the societal challenges faced by migrantised women and marginalised groups. By examining the intersection of migration, social inclusion and systemic barriers, Synyo helps ensure that ReIncluGen's initiatives are grounded in a deep understanding of Austria's unique social and cultural landscape, enriching the project's broader impact across Europe.

The team from the **Autonomous University of Barcelona (EMIGRA, UAB)** specialises in the socio-cultural and educational dimensions of migration and gender inequality. Their research focuses on the integration processes and the barriers in educational and social institutions. As Spain grapples with the rise of far-right movements, the UAB team's work is crucial in understanding how gender empowerment can be promoted.

The **University of Warsaw** team brings a rich background in sociology, particularly in the study of gender and social movements in Poland. Their research explores how gender intersects with other forms of social inequality, such as class and ethnicity. The ongoing war in Ukraine has introduced new dynamics into their work, as the country has become a major destination for refugees. This has added urgency to their focus on gender empowerment, as

they seek to address the unique challenges faced by migrantised women in a rapidly changing social landscape.

The **Erasmus University Rotterdam** in the Netherlands mainly plays an advising role and safeguards the development of ethics and data management from the data used in the project. Although no fieldwork was conducted in the Netherlands and no CSO participated in the research consortium, media discourses were analysed and contrasted against the prevailing discourses in other countries.

Kunlabora is the technical partner based in Leuven (Belgium), responsible for developing the digital platform QUWA that supports the collaboration between academic researchers and CSOs. It is a socially driven software development company that builds tailor-made digital solutions with experienced, collaborative teams. Founded in 2018, Kunlabora has grown into a team of around 50 employees dedicated to creating impactful software that meets unique needs of organisations. With a strong focus on co-creation, Kunlabora's teams work closely with stakeholders, taking full ownership of projects to ensure that each solution is not only functional but also technically robust, meaningful and sustainable. Diversity and inclusion are core values at Kunlabora, and they strive to build a team that reflects the diversity of the society we live in. While the IT sector typically lacks diversity, Kunlabora is committed to changing that by actively working towards a more inclusive workforce. Although they acknowledge that progress is ongoing, they are dedicated to fostering an environment where diverse voices and perspectives are valued, knowing that such diversity strengthens their work and enhances their impact.

It is exactly the collaboration of this multidisciplinary and international team that provides a distinctive context for both practice and research, which offers unique insights for social workers, CSOs, academics and policy makers.

1.4 Presentation of chapters

This book is divided into three parts, featuring chapters by academic researchers and civil society actors, with some co-authored by CSO staff and academics to highlight cooperation and exchange. [Chapter 1](#) introduces both the research project and the consortium partners, as well as the different parts of the book.

The first part presents an introduction in situated intersectionality and discusses the relevance of participatory research. [Chapter 2](#) is titled *Power, participation, and positionality: A situated intersectional approach to gender empowerment in the ReIncluGen project*, written by Andrea Fleckinger, Lore Van Praag, Amal Miri and Havva Akçaoglu. As a starting point for this book, this chapter seeks to advance theoretical understandings of how empowerment, in relation to gender, can be conceptualised and examined with regard to migrantised women within and beyond CSOs across European countries. This chapter situates our research team and introduces our

theoretical framework of situated intersectionality, taking into account the different positionalities and the prevalent power dynamics throughout the research process.

Chapter 3, *Power relations, participation, empowerment, and social work: How empowered are women allowed to become?* by Andrea Fleckinger, explores the power dynamics between addressees of social services and social workers in Italy. Using this case study, Fleckinger examines the implicit boundaries that both define the limits of empowerment and, paradoxically, reinforce the power relations between social workers and addressees.

In **Chapter 4**, titled *Gender empowerment: CSO's approaches and experiences of migrant women and girls*, Laia Narciso and Charo Reyes aim to address how migrant women define gender empowerment and what spheres emerge relevant to them in contrast to other political-discursive meanings or meanings implemented by the CSOs in theory (documents) or in their everyday practices and actions.

In **Chapter 5**, titled *(Un)Knowing and understanding: Artistic practices as modes of research*, Golnesa Rezanezhad Pishkhani and Amal Miri look into the potential of arts-based participatory research as a way to balance power dynamics between academic researchers and their participants reflecting on their own ethnographic studies with Iranian and Moroccan women in Belgium. This work shows how research, art and empowerment intersect through co-creation, amplifying marginalised voices and deepening understanding of migration and belonging.

The second part of this book engages in studies that focus on situated attitudes, discourses and implementation of gender empowerment in Europe. **Chapter 6**, *Migration as a gender equality issue? A comparative study on gender attitudes across Europe*, written by Martina Cvajner and Margherita Odasso, adopts a longitudinal and comparative perspective using data from the European Values Study to explore how individuals in Austria, Belgium, Italy, Poland and Spain have changed their views on gender roles over the last three decades. The analysis also takes into account how people's opinions differ based on their gender, educational attainment and cohort. Additionally, the chapter focuses on the perspectives of individuals on gender equality with a migrant background living in Italy.

This comparative analysis is followed by a comparative media discourse analysis in Flanders (Belgium) and the Netherlands to examine how mass media reinforce stereotypes related to gender and migration. **Chapter 7**, *Reinforcing gender and migration-related stereotypes: A discourse analysis of five topics in printed media articles in Belgium and the Netherlands*, is authored by Loubna Ou-Salah, Myrthe Fransen and Lore Van Praag. In this chapter, they reflect upon the way these stereotypes are being reproduced in printed media articles by comparing two newspapers per region and studying how these discourses differ across themes, focussing on five topics: 'paid domestic work', 'islamophobia', 'femicide', 'abortion' and 'citizenship and rights'.

Chapter 8 elaborates on *How civil society organisations approach empowerment in Flanders (Belgium): The role of positioning, organisational cultures and identities*. In this chapter Kaya Klaver, Lore Van Praag and Amal Miri use insights from their ethnographic fieldwork to elaborate on the implemented discourses and concrete actions to promote gender empowerment by comparing two Flemish CSOs as they take up a prominent place in the implementation of governmental policies on this matter. Although many CSOs are subsidised by the Flemish government, they remain at a considerate level of independence when implementing their actions.

Chapter 9, *Navigating the institutional tightrope: The case of Polish women's organisations*, by Dagmara Szczepanska and Renata Siemieńska-Zochowska explores strategies that organisations employ to maintain their community-focused approach while adhering to institutional requirements. By critically analysing these dynamics, the chapter aims to offer insights into how CSOs can balance the benefits of institutionalisation with the need to remain adaptive and responsive to the communities they serve.

The third part of this book focuses on practices and pathways of gender empowerment and inclusion in civil society. **Chapter 10** on *Empowering women with migration background in Italy: Experts and resource centres on their own journey*, written by Marica Balestrieri and Jessica Fabbro elaborates on the practices of the Italian organisation La Strada-Der Weg Onlus in which users are respected as well as their life experiences. Their interpretative models and point of views are accepted and supported in their development, as well as their ability to help themselves, their capacity to perceive and their principle of action.

In **chapter 11**, *The path to identify, dismantle and act: The importance of approaching educational practice from an intersectional perspective*, Elena Alfageme, Marta Casanova, Anna Celda, Neus Garriga, Idoia Landaluce, Rosa López and Emilio Romero elaborate on the practice of implementing an intersectional approach to educational practice in Spain. Here the authors state that the 'path to identify, dismantle and act' can prevent situations of racism in education, reduce school drop-out rates among migrantised and racialised students and ensure the continuity of certain educational pathways to higher education as well as promote the implementation of an anti-racist curriculum by teachers.

Chapter 12, titled *Theatre as empowering: From remembering to healing with migrantised women in Flanders*, studies the lived experiences of migrantised women and their trajectories as participants of a pilot theatre project that has been set up by Empact vzw. In this chapter, Havva Akçaoglu, Amal Miri and Hanane El Fikri present a participatory theatre trajectory that centralises the remembrance and honouring of migration narratives and labour migration histories in general and the role of migrantised women and mothers in particular. Through the involvement of these women as agents from the start of the trajectory, this chapter sheds light on the practice of theatre as a tool for socio-cultural empowerment.

Chapter 13, *The power of intersectoral collaboration, innovation and art-based tools in promoting gender equality and awareness. Lessons from Feminoteka*, written by Katarzyna Szczepaniak, delves into some good practices in recent years by the Feminoteka Foundation in Poland, including the intense work after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. The experience covers the areas of cross-sectional and international collaboration, i.e. art-based solutions, such as mobile art exhibitions and art therapy workshops used in promoting the helpline for Ukrainian women in Warsaw in 2022.

In **Chapter 14**, *The inherent power dynamics in empowering spaces: CSOs working with migrantised women in Austria*, Neda Deneva and Sarah Häckel examine how empowerment is defined, enacted and negotiated by CSOs and migrantised women in Austria. In doing so, they used qualitative data collected in three CSOs to compare the role of structural inequalities, institutional mandates and the lived experiences of women navigating migration, trauma and social exclusion across these CSOs.

In **Chapter 15**, titled *Co-creating software for inclusion and gender empowerment*, Kris Aerts elaborates on how Kunlabora as a socially driven software development company and Empact vzw collaboratively built a software solution in a co-creation process. This co-creation process resulted in an application called EFIKO to enable Empact to improve their internal management processes and lower their administrative burden. This good practice opens up time for Empact's core task: strengthening their members and responding to their needs and wishes.

Chapter 16, *Conclusion*, includes an overview of the major themes, findings and arguments presented across the chapters, drawing attention to patterns, contrasts and important intersections between the different contributions. The conclusion will also discuss the broader implications of this edited volume for the field of gender empowerment and inclusion. Additionally, it will include a summary of the new perspectives and understandings that have been introduced and how this contributes to academic discourses, CSO practices and policy making. Finally, some suggestions will be made for future research and inquiry. This will include some forward-looking perspectives, emerging trends and gaps in knowledge that this book has revealed.

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Part I

Introducing Situated Intersectionality and the Relevance of Participatory Research



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2 Power, Participation, and Positionality

A Situated Intersectional Approach to Gender Empowerment in the ReIncluGen Project

Andrea Fleckinger, Lore Van Praag, Amal Miri, and Havva Akçaoglu

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, *transtemporalitv* 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 (*transtemporalitv*).

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. *Transcascality* 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/reincluden/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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3 Power Relations, Participation, Empowerment, and Social Work

How Empowered Are Addressees Allowed to Become?

Andrea Fleckinger

3.1 Introduction

In social work theory and practice, the concept of empowerment serves as a fundamental goal that professionals strive to achieve. Indeed, empowerment has been included even in the global definition of social work (IFSW, 2014). Regardless of the various definitions that could be subsumed under the term empowerment, a common denominator is that social work promotes the flourishing of social participation by fostering an individual's self-determined ability to act within the framework of collective, interdependent responsibility (IFSW, 2014). When translating this very ambitious, and in part ambiguous, goal from a theoretical postulate into practice, several challenges arise. A particular aspect that will be explored further in this chapter is linked to the dimension of power. When exploring daily social work practices, a web of complexities surrounding power dynamics between social workers and addressees, the institutions, as well as the broader environment arise. In recognising that a holistic analysis of the various aspects would go beyond the limits of this chapter, I chose to focus on the particular aspect of the power relations between social worker and addressee, exploring in detail, by way of example, the implementation of new best practices in feminist social work practice within the institutionalised context of a women's shelter.

My activities as a social worker in a women's shelter, based in South Tyrol, northern Italy, included individual support for women and their children in situations of gender-based violence, as well as group work with the residents within the shelter in the spirit of community work, alongside public relations and awareness-raising efforts. Drawing on a two-year project on participation and empowerment that I implemented during my professional activity in the women's shelter, this chapter highlights the complexities that arise when social workers strive to redistribute power and collaborate 'at eye level'. This exploration aims to shed light on the fine line between empowerment and disempowerment (Watson, 2002), a tension that also resonates in the concept of participation, which can sometimes result in what is referred to as 'pseudo-participation' or tokenism (v. Unger, 2014). More specifically, I will address the invisible boundaries of participation and collaboration on equal

footing, which, in turn, manifest as limits to empowerment. From a theoretical perspective, I will engage with the discourses surrounding the concept of ‘othering’ and show the fine line between supportive, empowerment practices and dynamics of ‘us versus them’ (Krumer-Nevo, 2021). As critically pointed out by Krumer-Nevo (2016), among others, I will discuss the importance of the awareness on power dynamics and mechanisms of othering in the context of social work to promote solidarity and empowerment.

This chapter reflects on the concrete experiences of implementing new practices that embrace empowerment and participation within a women’s shelter. The initiative stemmed from a need to address various frustrations and resistances described in the next paragraphs. Although the new practices focused on small steps, they were viewed critically by some of my colleagues. Over the two years of implementation, I faced persistent resistance and rejection from part of the team. These discrepancies between the apparent success of the new approach and the resistance it faced led me to a deeper reflection on power and empowerment in social work.

The ReIncluGen project allowed me to analyse my practical experiences through the lens of the theoretical concept of situated intersectionality, which enabled a more holistic understanding of empowerment—capturing both its many facets and its procedural nature—and may further contribute to a context-sensitive, i.e. situated, understanding (Yuval-Davis, 2015). During the writing process I had the opportunity to revisit the newly introduced practices after six years, reconnect with former colleagues, and ask: What has happened in the meantime? Are there evident sustainable changes and development processes? This chapter will recount the development and implementation of these practices and address the following questions: What happens during the process of redistributing power to foster participation within a professional team? And how empowered are the addressees allowed to become?

3.2 Key concepts

Before delving deeper into the topic, it is important for me to clarify the meaning of the key recurring terms. This shared understanding serves as the foundation for comprehending and contextualising the following analysis. My aim is not to establish universally valid definitions, but rather to highlight the specific meanings these terms hold within the context of this discussion.

Empowerment: The term empowerment is often ambiguous and lacks a universally agreed-upon definition. According to Leonardsen (2007), empowerment can encompass either an individualistic or a relational perspective. In the ReIncluGen project, a holistic understanding of empowerment is adopted, encompassing social, cultural, economic, and gendered aspects analysed through an situated intersectional lens (Yuval-Davis, 2015). This perspective aligns with the roots of feminist thought on empowerment (Cornwall, 2016; Sardenberg, 2016). Thus, empowerment is framed as both

a personal capability and a challenge to existing power structures, aimed at fostering structural change and promoting greater equality (Sardenberg, 2016). This approach highlights both individual and collective dimensions of empowerment and, therefore, its relational elements by retaining a politicised meaning (Leonardsen, 2007). Moreover, empowerment is understood as an ongoing process, not a fixed state. As Cornwall (2016, p. 344) notes: *Empowerment becomes, within this perspective, an unfolding, iterative process that is fundamentally about shifts in power relations.* Ferguson and Lavallette (2004) emphasise the structural nature of alienation within a patriarchal, capitalist system, suggesting that empowerment must also address these larger systemic forces to be fully realised. Given the specific focus of this text, the broad concept of empowerment is primarily discussed as the ability to act, make conscious decisions, and shape relationships to rework the power imbalance between addressee and social workers. In this sense, the chapter highlights the empowerment of all those involved—social workers and addressees—while focusing on the relational aspects that are key to these processes of negotiating power.

Participation: Participation is a core concept applied within the approach presented in this chapter. Participation has become a term with almost inflationary use, and as a consequence, we often find it in contexts that stretch its meaning so extensively that it becomes quite distant from its original sense. This tendency can be observed, among other contexts, in both the theory and practice of social work. Almost every social worker embraces theoretically the concept of participation as a central element of their practice, regardless of its effective implementation. These critical reflections will guide us through the discussions provided in this chapter. Despite the broad and varied definitions present in theory and practice, throughout this chapter, participation is understood as the sharing and redistribution of power with the people social workers engage with. Therefore, participation extends beyond forms of compliant participation or directed consultation, as discussed by Unger (2014), or the forms of non-participation and tokenism addressed by Arnstein (1969). On the contrary, participation in this chapter embraces the potential for power distribution within an institutional context, in the sense of empowering actions that also grant decisional power. As shown by Boomkens et al., through participation people can acquire four central abilities: *a) directly influence the environment, b) learn new skills c) increase the social context and d) strengthen the sense of personal control* (Boomkens, Metz, Schalk, & Van Regenmortel, 2021, p. 227) This clear definition will help the reader further identify the limits of participation in the implementation of new practices.

Othering: The concept of othering along this text is used as a term to highlight the complexities that arise from social work's aim to understand and support 'the other', and the correlated risk of creating processes of dominance and control that push the person into an inferior position (Cremer-Schäfer, 2018; Krumer-Nevo & Sidi, 2012). This risk is particularly present

when the person belongs to a marginalised group, finds themselves in a vulnerable life moment, or when there are significant differences in background between social worker and addressee. Othering is associated with power dynamics present also in daily social work practice that shape the whole process of intervention and the relationship between social worker and addressee. Thus, along this text, othering is understood as: *the process of attaching moral codes of inferiority to difference, the critical discursive tool of discrimination and exclusion used against individuals on the basis of their belonging to marginalized groups* (Krumer-Nevo & Sidi, 2012, p. 300).

3.3 Developing new practices: analysing the problem

I worked as a social worker for over 13 years in a women's shelter, supporting women and children who survived gender-based violence. During this time, I developed new practices to strengthen the daily work following the principles of feminist social work, presented in the excursus (WAVE, 2004). The initiative discussed in this chapter stemmed from team frustrations about women's inconsistent participation in mandatory house meetings and lack of identification with the shelter, seen in behaviours like ignoring cleaning schedules or failing to secure the front door, essential for safety.

Despite choosing to live in the shelter voluntarily and being free to leave at any time,¹ women showed various forms of resistance. This led to the question: How could the team understand this resistance and transform it into constructive engagement, aligning with participation and empowerment goals?

Motivated to explore this, I examined alienation and power dynamics affecting women's control over their lives and daily shelter routines (Ferguson & Lavalette, 2004). My observations aligned with those of Gupta, Blumhardt, and ATD Fourth World (2018, p. 257), who noted that *resistance may be the only way families feel they can exercise power and agency*. I also drew from Boomkens et al. (2021) and their nine methodological principles to facilitate agency development: safety, meaningful relationships, acquaintance, positive motivation, needs orientation, boundaries, expanding lifeworld, talk, and social context. While developed for youth social work, these principles informed my work with adult women.

The newly developed project aimed to foster individual growth and community development. Its goals were: a) to transform resistance into constructive participation, b) to strengthen the sense of community within the shelter, and c) to empower women for future autonomy. Weekly house meetings were designed to enable residents to discuss communal matters and foster collaboration. These meetings remain dynamic and continually evolve in response to the changing composition of the group, varying interests, and linguistic barriers. Due to the group's heterogeneity and frequent turnover, both meeting schedules and participants often shifted. The efforts made to accommodate the women's needs—allowing for attendance alongside professional and caregiving responsibilities—represent a concrete translation of the concept

of situated intersectionality into social work practice, consistently creating space for diversity. Discussion topics ranged from practical communal issues to reflections on identity and community-building activities.

Over seven years, I observed four recurring issues:

- a Staff members prepared the meeting agenda and briefly asked whether the women wanted to add any topics, but the women's engagement was often minimal, leading the staff to proceed with their agenda.
- b Staff frustration grew due to inconsistent participation, leading to frequent staff changes in conducting the meetings.
- c Women initially showed interest but after some time it changed and eventually mirrored staff frustration, often avoiding meetings with excuses.
- d Conflicts over shared living arrangements, such as neglecting security measures like keeping the front door closed, highlighted women's limited identification with the shelter.

These insights highlighted the need for change and, in line with the feminist principles guiding the women's shelter, a participatory approach was adopted as the basis for this transformation. The approach aimed to enhance residents' identification with the shelter, reduce frustrations, and foster a sense of community.

3.4 Excursus: core principles of a feminist social work practice in running a women's shelter

Before presenting the new practice, it is important to provide general information about the structure of a women's shelter and the specific nature of feminist social work within such an environment. The guidelines for women's shelters are outlined in the manual 'Away from Violence' provided by WAVE (Women Against Violence Europe) (WAVE, 2004). A core aspect of a women's shelter is maintaining a balance between offering a safe and protected space for women and their children who have survived gender-based violence and avoiding an institutional environment that restricts their right to self-determination. Feminist, emancipatory, and empowerment practices are central to the work in women's shelters.

The main goals of a women's shelter can be summarised as protection, empowerment, and social change. The key principles of social work in women's shelters include: feminist analysis of violence against women, women supporting women, advocacy for women, teamwork and flat hierarchies, participation and democratic structures, the right to self-determination, confidentiality and anonymity, 24-hour service with no time limits on stays, diversity, accountability, professionalism, operation by non-governmental, non-profit, non-partisan women's associations, and the provision of free services.

In line with these goals and principles, residents in a women's shelter generally manage their daily lives independently. Each woman lives

autonomously with her children in a small apartment, engaging in activities that vary according to individual needs. Each woman receives support from a social worker or pedagogue to support rebuilding her life beyond violence. Children are similarly supported by a social worker or pedagogue to process their experiences and access further assistance if needed. Alongside individual support, there is a mandatory weekly event: the house meeting. It is important to keep these principles in mind when considering the challenges discussed later, as everyday social work practice can pose obstacles to their implementation.

3.5 Developing new practices: identifying key spheres for change

The new practice started with the aim of restructuring the weekly house meetings and to transform them into a pleasant and overall important and useful moment for all participants. I identified four key spheres to be addressed.

3.5.1 Reducing power imbalances—establishing a common ground

The weekly house meeting is a mandatory event; therefore, some women attend out of a sense of obligation rather than genuine personal interest. Moreover, a power imbalance exists between the residents and the staff members facilitating the meetings. This dynamic may inhibit women from openly expressing their needs, particularly regarding tasks they find unpleasant. The power asymmetries that shape these relationships may also prompt women to present themselves as overly eager to please the staff member, aligning their ideas and needs with perceived expectations. As such, managing power dynamics within the context of the house meeting remains a continuous challenge that must be consciously addressed in order to foster relationships based on equality. Relationships grounded in recognition—understood, following [Krumer-Nevo \(2021\)](#), as a fundamental and ongoing aspect of human experience—serve as a central means of establishing common ground. Full and open recognition of the other lays the foundation for a relationship built on trust.

3.5.2 Diverse life experiences and varied educational levels—creating a learning environment

Women in the shelter typically form a heterogeneous group, comprising individuals with vastly different life experiences as well as diverse educational backgrounds. As a result, participants in house meetings may range from academics to individuals with limited literacy skills. It is therefore essential to navigate and balance these varied backgrounds and communication abilities in order to foster an environment that encourages active participation from all. Furthermore, these meetings can serve as spaces for mutual learning and can support the empowerment and agency of (migrantised) women by

engaging with specific cultural contexts, educational trajectories, and more. In this context, an approach grounded in the concept of situated intersectionality facilitates the navigation of such diversity and complexity, becoming a consciously lived practice.

3.5.3 Cultural diversity and language barriers—building bridges

The residents include locals as well as women from various countries all over the world, each at different moments of their integration process. Some migrant women already have a broad knowledge of the local system, traditions, and language(s), while others who have been in South Tyrol for only a few months may, for example, lack proficiency in German or Italian, or in any European language that could serve as a communicative bridge. It is crucial to be aware of this diversity and to consequently rework strategies to convey participation also nonverbally.

3.5.4 Differences in personal well-being and stability—reinforcing mutual understanding

Women in a women's shelter go through different phases during their stay, and this diversity affects their willingness and ability to actively participate in shaping the house. Those in the initial arrival phase may find it difficult to focus on such projects, while women in acute crisis situations may struggle to allocate resources beyond their immediate safety concerns. Similarly, women preparing to leave may be less interested in internal house matters. Being aware of these dynamics and acknowledging that equal engagement is not always feasible for every woman is crucial to avoiding misunderstandings. This is where the importance of recognition and relationship-based knowledge (Krumer-Nevo, 2021), combined with a situated understanding, becomes evident in fostering dialogue and mutual understanding.

3.6 Power relations, participation, and empowerment: what happened within the staff

The starting point for redesigning the weekly house meetings was straightforward. I communicated my motivation to develop a new concept to my team and received unanimous approval. However, during the development process, it became clear that there was relatively little interest in engaging with the new ideas. It is important to note that staffing levels were generally tight, and employees were managing heavy workloads. Therefore, these reactions were not surprising, as I attributed them to two main motives: a) everyone was relieved to have passed on the “hot potato,” and b) it was assumed that the new approach would not directly impact their daily work.

This initial situation granted me significant freedom to develop the concept, though I would have personally appreciated more interest from my

colleagues. Overall, the initial circumstances appeared positive, as there were no evident obstacles. However, the naivety of this assumption only became clear once the project was underway. In the following sections, I will use specific examples to illustrate the challenges that arose when implementing participation with genuine power redistribution. This experience confirmed Cornwall's (2016) assertion that a nuanced and situated understanding of power and empowerment, including their structural basis, is essential to maintain their transformative potential.

I will also discuss the potential limitations in implementing the new approach, as well as the fears and uncertainties that may surface when professionals are either unfamiliar with the concepts of participation and empowerment or have only a theoretical understanding of them. These experiences highlighted elements of mostly unconscious, deficit-based thinking used as arguments to resist power redistribution (Gupta et al., 2018). The following critical analysis is mainly linked to the element of power-redistribution and touches different spheres of power.

3.6.1 Power of information: what knowledge is shared with whom?

The first tensions in redistributing power became apparent regarding power of information. This revolved around who had access to which information and from whom or where additional information could be obtained. Previously, the social worker or pedagogue leading the meeting would write brief notes afterward. These minutes were accessible to all staff but were never made available to the women who participated in the meetings. Many of these women were unaware that such notes even existed. This paradox, where non-participants had access to the minutes while the actual participants did not, became a focal point in the effort to redistribute power.

To address this, a handwritten binder accessible to all was introduced and kept in the meeting room. Each participant took turns writing the minutes, with the option to do so in their preferred language. The only requirement was that the minutes be orally translated at the next assembly so everyone could understand them. Illiterate participants were exempt from this task until they gained sufficient writing skills.

The announcement that the minutes would no longer be digital but instead kept in the meeting room caused some confusion and resistance within the team. Previously, few staff members had shown interest in regularly reading the meeting minutes, but suddenly there was a strong desire to stay informed. Consulting the binder was considered impractical, and the possibility that the notes might be written in a language the team could not read—requiring them to ask the writer for clarification—shifted the power of information, which heightened staff members' irritation and resistance. The change was intended to reduce the resistance that the women had previously shown towards the meetings by giving them an active role in writing the minutes and thus fostering more participatory, eye-level discussions. While this intervention had

a positive effect on the women, it produced the opposite effect on the staff members, whose irritation and resistance increased.

The discussion revealed that equal access to the meeting minutes was perceived—consciously or subconsciously—as a loss of power by the staff members. While initial interest in the new approach had been minimal, the issue of the minutes sparked a prolonged debate. The compromise reached required me to send an additional email to the team summarising the main points after each meeting, rather than sharing the full protocol. Critically speaking, this decision effectively re-established the exclusivity of information, once again excluding the women. The result was a continuation of two separate communication channels: official minutes accessible to everybody through the handwritten binder and a summary email circulated only among staff.

3.6.2 *Power on resources: delegate responsibilities*

The regulation of wash coins proved to be significantly more challenging. Simultaneously with the project's launch, wash coins were introduced. Due to years of various conflicts among the women over the use of the washing machines, the wash coin system was implemented as an attempt to further structure washing machine usage. With the introduction of the coins, it became necessary to create a distribution system. This sparked a discussion within the team about who should manage this responsibility and what the regulations should look like. My suggestion to organise this within the house assembly and delegate the responsibility of distribution to the women was gratefully accepted. Initially, the team felt relieved to offload this task, as everyone was already dealing with a heavy workload.

In the house meeting, we developed a system where the number of coins each woman received weekly depended on the number of children she had. Each month, a different woman was responsible for managing the coins. Within a few months, the women were organising this system entirely autonomously, and it was only discussed once a month who would take over the management next.

Some time later, a colleague asked me for details about the coin distribution, which I could not provide. I referred her to the woman currently in charge. In my view, this moment highlighted the success of the project and a true form of participation. However, my colleague had a different interpretation and expressed some irritation at my lack of knowledge. This led to discussions within the team and called for more control. My lack of detailed knowledge was seen as disorganisation, despite the fact that everything was functioning smoothly in practice and there were no conflicts regarding laundry.

A lengthy discussion followed, during which I explained that participatory practices meant my lack of detailed knowledge could be seen as a success. While some colleagues understood and supported this perspective, others found it incomprehensible. It became apparent that asking the women for information was particularly challenging for some staff members, illustrating

how power redistribution can be unsettling and how ‘participation’ is not universally understood or embraced by all professionals.

The discussions were intense and ultimately concluded with the decision to maintain the new system. This outcome was not a reflection of consensus or a shared belief in the success of the new practice but was also due to a lack of alternative solutions and the impracticality of implementing other changes amid the team’s heavy workload. Thus, different interpretations of the development of the new approach persisted, hovering somewhere between success and loss of control.

3.6.3 Power over harmony: shared spaces and living together

Following these initial developments, which I marked as successes, I sought further opportunities to integrate the women into daily activities, redistribute power, delegate responsibility, and ultimately relieve my colleagues. I focused on the cleaning schedule, which had been a constant source of discussion. Although each woman had her own independent apartment with her children, some common spaces existed, such as the staircase, a larger kitchen, and a playroom for the children. Additionally, some communal tasks needed to be organised, like taking the full garbage bins outside once a week. The colleague responsible for updating the schedule weekly or bi-weekly had to ensure it wasn’t forgotten or reassigned during absences and often found herself in a monitoring role when disagreements about cleanliness arose. Therefore, I proposed to the team that I take over the cleaning schedule, present it at the house meeting, and transfer the responsibility for task distribution and rotation to the women.

My suggestion was immediately rejected as impractical, with arguments stating that the ongoing discussions about cleaning demonstrated the women were incapable of self-organisation, and therefore, the cleaning schedule had to remain under staff control. Two main concerns were raised: a) that conflicts would escalate and disrupt communal living, and b) that the house would become filthy. From my perspective, I could only partially understand these concerns. I countered the argument about the house becoming dirty by suggesting a trial period; if after one month no cleaning took place, we could revert to the old system, leaving us in a reversible, albeit temporarily dirty, situation. Taking a meta-perspective on this discussion, we can observe several moments of othering and a lack of recognition by describing the women as ‘incapable’, although one of the core principles of admission to the shelter is the autonomy of the woman (Krumer-Nevo, 2021; WAVE, 2004). This open discrepancy evidences the difficulties that arise in enacting theoretical principles in practice and further it highlights the importance to look at concrete details to understand what challenges come along the principles of empowerment and participation.

Addressing the concern about increased conflicts was much more challenging as various attitudes towards conflicts were present in the team. Some

colleagues believed that maintaining harmonious coexistence in the women's shelter was crucial and that ensuring this harmony was a professional responsibility. However, I, along with some other colleagues, held the view that conflicts are an inherent part of communal living, including in a women's shelter. We identified two main reasons for this: a) the constant turnover of residents, with the composition rarely staying the same for one to two months. The shelter hosts diverse women from various backgrounds and life experiences, leading to significantly different lifestyles; b) all the women came from situations of violence, meaning they had experienced unresolved conflicts, felt unseen and unheard, been controlled, and had their boundaries disrespected. Therefore, their stay in the women's shelter could also serve as a learning environment for constructive conflict solving, where they could practice communicating their boundaries and recognising and respecting the boundaries of others.²

These two core considerations led me and some colleagues to believe that the goal was not to avoid conflicts and to guarantee harmony, but to provide a suitable context, turning the shelter into a kind of training ground for conflict resolution. In our discussions, we engaged with what [Cornwall \(2016\)](#) conceptualises as the relational and processual dimensions of empowerment. From this perspective, empowerment cannot be understood as a linear progression towards a predetermined goal, but rather as an open-ended and contingent process. Crucially, such a process must accommodate the possibility of failure, of encountering dead ends, or of diverging onto side routes, thereby recognising the inherently uncertain and negotiated character of empowerment.

This led to several weeks of discussion within the team about whether it was feasible to entrust the organisation of the cleaning schedule to the women. Ultimately, I prevailed, not so much because of a true consensus, but due to my persistence and the trust I had built over the many years of working together. Thus, I initiated a trial phase, beginning the process of transferring the responsibility for the cleaning schedule to the women. After a few months, the following observations emerged: the discussions around the cleaning schedule remained the same. There were always some women who diligently fulfilled their tasks and others who partially or completely ignored their duties. There was a varied understanding of cleanliness and the frequency of task rotation—whether weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly—constantly changed. Discussions frequently arose about who should check if the cleaning had been done. At first glance, it might seem that there was no real change in whether the women or the staff were responsible for the cleaning schedule.

Upon a closer look, changes aligned with the principles of participation and empowerment became evident. These changes can be described as positive or desirable developments within the context of this reflection. The staff member who had previously been responsible for the cleaning schedule felt relieved. She was able to delegate the task and, importantly, was no longer

placed in a supervisory role. While discussions within the entire team only partially subsided and the project was still viewed with considerable scepticism, this staff member saw it as a positive development.

As for the women, the following was observed: although the number and type of discussions remained more or less the same, they were now conducted within a different framework and under different conditions. It was no longer about asking the staff member for control and rules from a position of power asymmetry, which had almost created a parent-child dynamic. Instead, the focus shifted to finding solutions together. The residents were required to address and constructively resolve conflicts.

This, in turn, was very demanding for me as the moderator of the house meetings, as it involved bringing together the women's often very different conflict management styles and finding common ground. Additionally, it was crucial to ensure that no hierarchical order among the women was established, such as one where those who had lived in the shelter the longest would take the lead. Therefore, not all meetings were pleasant or harmonious. There were difficult moments, and some conflicts required several meetings to resolve. These tense moments in the meetings with the women fuelled discussions within the team, particularly due to the varying interpretations of the presence of conflicts. This, in turn, placed me in my roles as staff member and facilitator of the house meetings in a challenging position, having to both facilitate the conflict resolution process among the women and justify the overall success of the new approach within the team, despite the conflicts.

3.7 Power dynamics and empowerment: navigating participation, control, and feminist principles

The examples highlight challenges that can arise even with small new practices introduced under the principles of participatory, feminist social work in an empowerment process. They demonstrate the importance of discussing daily realities, as no social worker or pedagogue would openly oppose participation or empowerment principles. It is the examination of daily working practices that allows for a critical discussion of challenges related to power redistribution.

A key goal of feminist social work in a women's shelter is to support women's empowerment through fostering autonomy, agency, and participation in decision-making (WAVE, 2004). The central principles of a women's shelter—protection, empowerment, and social change—align with feminist social work's focus on addressing power imbalances faced by women, particularly those experiencing gender-based violence. Empowerment in shelters is ideally promoted through practices encouraging self-determination, democratic decision-making, and equal participation. At the same time, empowerment must be contextualised to reflect present needs and resources (Watson, 2002).

While staff members aligned their practice with these principles, the examples show that promoting self-determination and equal participation does not always extend to the relationship between practitioners and residents. The project uncovered blind spots within the team that can be understood as unconscious forms of othering based on deficit-thinking. As [Gupta et al. \(2018\)](#) demonstrated, even subtle deficit-thinking can negatively affect relationships.

The new approach sought to reduce these forms of othering by decentralising control and encouraging women to take responsibility for tasks such as documenting house meetings and organising communal duties like cleaning and laundry. The introduction of handwritten meeting minutes, stored in a binder accessible to all women, and delegating the wash coin system represented a shift of power from staff to residents and moved towards participatory decision-making processes.

However, some staff resistance to power redistribution became evident. Some members expressed discomfort at not having direct access to meeting minutes or control over the wash coin system. This reluctance underscores how practices that threaten traditional power structures can provoke discomfort. Empowerment and participation are often embraced in theory, but their implementation may expose professionals' fears of losing control ([Watson, 2002](#)). Why some team members were more receptive than others remains unanswered and could be explored in further research. Reflecting on such experiences can help better understand resistance in social work practice ([Gupta et al., 2018](#)) and reduce instances of othering, which risk labelling resistant women as 'unsocialisable' ([Cremer-Schäfer, 2018](#)).

The meeting minutes illustrate how informational power reinforces hierarchies. Previously, only staff had access, excluding women from information concerning them. By transferring responsibility for writing and sharing the minutes, staff relinquished control and allowed women to take ownership of outcomes. Yet staff reactions, such as demands to revert to emailed summaries, highlight a lingering need for oversight. This revealed an underlying form of informational power and a tendency to maintain distance between 'us and them' ([Cremer-Schäfer, 2018](#); [Krumer-Nevo, 2021](#)).

The introduction of the wash coin system further demonstrated the challenges of power redistribution. Delegating responsibility initially fostered autonomy and showed a successful participatory approach. Yet team discussions revealed discomfort with disrupted structures of control. Perceptions of success varied: smooth operation indicated empowerment to some, while others viewed the absence of oversight as disorganisation. This underscores how participation can be difficult to embrace and reveals the inherent tension between empowerment and control.

Tensions also emerged between maintaining harmony and allowing conflict as part of communal life. One group of staff saw harmony as a professional duty, while others believed the shelter should be a space to develop conflict-resolution skills, reflecting the educational aspect of empowerment.

These tensions align with Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed (2014), where learning and empowerment emerge through dialogue and conflict rather than passive coexistence. Feminist social work emphasises that empowerment is not about shielding women from difficulties but supporting them in navigating conflicts independently.

Empowerment ideals face further limits in practice, especially when residents have diverse backgrounds and capacities. House meetings must accommodate differences in language, education, and emotional stability. Newly arrived women or those in acute crisis may struggle to engage, while women nearing the end of their stay may be less invested in communal issues. Practices like rotating minute-taking aim to bridge these divides, but participation is not always equal. Women's varying stages of their journey reveal both the limits of empowerment and the need to respect those not interested in active participation (Cornwall, 2016). In exploring such limits, the framework of situated intersectionality can foster understanding and create new spaces where different forms of empowerment and participation might emerge.

3.8 How empowered are addressees allowed to become?

This chapter explored contradictions in empowerment practices within a women's shelter, showing that empowerment is not automatically achieved by establishing a shared stance. A critical examination reveals that it hinges on professionals granting 'permission' within boundaries they set. Consequently, empowerment within an institution is never an inherent right; it can be limited or withdrawn, highlighting an unresolved dilemma of social work. Empowerment is fostered through participatory decision-making but mediated by professionals' control and power dynamics. As Leonardsen (2007) notes, empowerment is context-dependent and reflects power relations. While feminist social work seeks to dismantle hierarchies, staff resistance to relinquishing authority can limit relational empowerment. Initiatives such as participation in house meetings succeed only when staff genuinely embrace this concept. Ultimately, residents' empowerment is linked to staff's willingness to share power and manage communal complexities, making empowerment a continuous negotiation. Implementing participatory solutions requires long-term commitment and perseverance. Both residents and staff are active learners, and participation can empower residents while serving as a reflective tool for staff. Team dynamics are crucial, as without full engagement participatory efforts risk becoming superficial. Conflicts should be seen as opportunities for growth, strengthening empowerment and self-efficacy. Despite these efforts, institutional power largely persists (Watson, 2002). Even with practices fostering empowerment, authority rests with staff, who can reverse them. Participatory practices remain fragile, vulnerable to institutional priorities, and highlight the difficulty of addressing entrenched power structures.

3.9 How did things evolve after I left the team?

After two years, I ended my involvement due to a career change, and a colleague took over facilitating the house meetings. The ReIncluGen project provided me with the opportunity to reconnect with my former colleagues and inquire about what had happened over the six years since I left the women's shelter. Due to retirements and resignations, the team composition had changed significantly. However, the colleague who had taken over the house meetings was still present and continued to lead them. We engaged in an extended discussion and evaluation of the participatory practices that had been introduced. She informed me that several changes had taken place, such as the removal of the coin-operated washing machine and the associated coin distribution system. This structural change simplified communal life, yet the participative approach to organising the cleaning schedule remained intact. The women continued to self-organise the cleaning schedule. While discussions about cleaning still arise, the significant difference now is that conflicts and discussions are resolved on an equal footing.

The most significant shift, as reported by my colleague, emerged within the staff dynamic itself. Despite the initial scepticism and resistance encountered when the participatory approach was first introduced, a culture of consultation with the women had become a lasting feature of the shelter's practice. As she explained: *What has remained is that we consult the women about house matters. If, for instance, there's an issue with the freezer, we ask them and work together to find a solution.* This represents more than a procedural change; it reflects a deeper, institutional shift towards recognising residents as active partners rather than passive recipients of support.

Women's involvement has also extended beyond day-to-day house matters into staff activities, such as public relations and awareness-raising initiatives. They now receive information on ongoing lectures, review presentation slides, and participate in discussions that foster mutual learning and respect. These discussions serve as both educational and empowering, allowing the women to share their insights and experiences while gaining knowledge about broader issues related to gender-based violence prevention and advocacy. This collaborative engagement has not only benefited the women by building their confidence and agency but has also enriched the professional practice of the team, illustrating the mutual value of participatory work.

In conclusion, fostering participatory approaches in the women's shelter has resulted in sustainable changes in the relationship between social workers and residents. This evolution demonstrates that genuine empowerment and participation are most effectively internalised through practical experience rather than theoretical study. While the process can be challenging and provoke discomfort, it ultimately encourages growth for both the professionals and the women they support. The findings emphasise that social work education should prioritise 'action-oriented preparedness' as suggested by [Leonardsen \(2007, p. 4\)](#), ensuring that

future practitioners are equipped to engage in and navigate participatory processes, thereby strengthening their impact in fostering empowerment and shared decision-making.

Notes

- 1 Some important clarifications should be made regarding the choices and opportunities for women to leave at any time. It is essential to understand that these choices do not reflect genuine freedom. All the women, along with their children, were fleeing gender-based violence. Some continued to face violence and death threats even after separation, leaving them with no alternatives but women's shelters. While they formally had a choice which women's shelter they prefer, in reality it was often limited to finding an available spot. Similarly, their decision to leave the shelter was restricted by their need for safety and the challenge of securing affordable housing. However, unlike various residential psycho-educational communities, none of these women were placed by social services, the court, or any other institution; their stay was solely based on their request for shelter.
- 2 An important note for readers: Recognising that women who have experienced gender-based violence may benefit from environments that promote constructive conflict resolution, where they can practice communicating their boundaries and recognising those of others, should not be misinterpreted as shifting responsibility for the violence they endured from the (usually male) perpetrator to the survivor.

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4 Gender Empowerment

CSO's Approaches and Experiences of Migrantised Women and Girls

Laia Narciso and Charo Reyes

4.1 Introduction

Gender empowerment has been widely recognised and promoted by policy makers and civil society as a crucial element of equity and social justice policies since the 1980s and is now a firmly established policy objective. However, its institutionalisation has diminished its political significance and transformative potential. When applied to women and girls of migrant origin, empowerment discourses often rest on problematic assumptions, framing it primarily as an instrument to facilitate integration or to enhance economic contribution to the host society. Such approaches construct a single and homogeneous narrative, representing these women and girls as a passive collective—deprived of voice, agency or leadership—and, at best, positioned as mere beneficiaries of the welfare state rather than as active agents of social transformation.

Although women and girls of immigrant origin play a key role in the economic and social sphere, defining their “empowerment” exclusively in these terms reflects a limited and utilitarian vision. Rooted in distorted representations that ignore their heterogeneity and agency, this framing reduces empowerment to a mechanism to guarantee integration or productivity, instead of recognising it as a multidimensional process and an end in itself. Social inclusion is thus tinged with utilitarianism, and empowerment conceived not as transformative but as instrumental to economic and social development.

Despite their evident contribution to social and economic reproduction, and the diverse situations arising from the intersections of mobility, globalisation and gender (Kofman & Raghuram, 2012; Parreñas, 2001; Sassen, 2000), women of migrant background continue to be rendered invisible or portrayed homogeneously as passive subjects—lacking agency, constrained by their own communities, and excluded from leadership or participation in public life, particularly in the labour market and political sphere (Anthias, 2008; Yuval-Davis, 1997).

Extensive literature on gender and migration documents the multiple and specific forms of vulnerability and oppression faced by migrant women in

different spheres of social life. They are exposed to discrimination, violence and lack of access to basic rights, while simultaneously deploying multiple strategies of resistance (Anthias, Kontos, & Morokvasic-Müller, 2013; Mahler & Pessar, 2001). Global power dynamics shape their daily lives in particular ways (Brah & Phoenix, 2004), with significant emotional and economic burdens, limited access to full citizenship and profound effects on their well-being (Kofman & Raghuram, 2012).

In response, the need for policies that address the specific circumstances of migrant women has become evident. As Bacchi (2009) suggests, this also requires deconstructing the very problematisation of their situation and re-centring analysis on the subjects themselves rather than on externally imposed assumptions. Policies should prioritise combating discrimination and violence, ensuring access to basic services and promoting full participation in society. This is reflected—albeit partially—in EU strategies such as the *Gender Equality Strategy* (2020–2025), the *Anti-Racism Action Plan* (2020–2025), the *European Agenda on Migration* or the *European Social Fund Plus (ESF+)*, as well as in international initiatives like the Council of Europe’s *Istanbul Convention* (2011).

This chapter aims to explore the nuances of “gender empowerment” beyond existing diversity and gender equality policy frameworks and to analyse the perspectives of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) working with migrantised women and girls in five EU countries (Austria, Belgium, Italy, Spain and Poland), alongside the perceptions and experiences of the women and girls themselves.

Drawing on comparative and participatory organisational ethnography (Vindrola-Padros, 2021) with 15 CSOs—including participant observation, focus groups and photo-voice interviews—this study brings forward diverse notions and practices of empowerment. The following sections reconstruct key theoretical and practical approaches to gender empowerment through CSO work, while analysing the emancipatory processes narrated by migrantised women and girls. Together, these insights build a counter-narrative that aspires to inform social policies beyond hegemonic discourses and perspectives.

4.2 Gender empowerment: a genealogy

Gender empowerment is a complex and multifaceted concept that resists a singular definition. It is understood as a multidimensional and dynamic phenomenon that has evolved across different disciplines and perspectives over time. Over recent decades, this concept has been central to various feminist theories, and it has become a cornerstone of gender equality policies (Nazneen, Darkwah, & Sultan, 2014). Emerging in the 1980s, it gained traction through specialised research, policy frameworks and CSOs, particularly within the Gender Development agenda. However, some critics argue that the concept has become overly vague and ambiguous, subject to diverse

interpretations and posing significant methodological challenges in terms of measurement (Phillips, 2015).

The roots of the concept of empowerment can be traced to various social movements of the 1960s, especially the African-American civil rights movements and the popular education movements in Latin America, which were influenced by the critical pedagogical theories of Paulo Freire. The civil rights movement, with its focus on racial equality and social justice, provided a powerful model of collective action, emphasising the need for marginalised groups to organise, resist and demand their rights. Freire introduced the concepts of “Power with” and “Power to” as key elements of an education that liberate and transform. In the context of these movements, empowerment was understood as a collective process in which marginalised groups gain awareness of their social position, actively engage in societal change, and resist and challenge the established systems of inequality (Fernández de Castro, 2012).

Focusing specifically on women, development approaches with a gender perspective offered a feminist alternative to traditional development discourse (Batliwala, 1994 in Sardenberg, 2008) confronting the notions of women as passive beneficiaries of development initiative. The Women in Development (WID) movement called for acknowledging women’s productive contributions to society. In contrast, the Women and Development (WAD) movement emphasised the need to address patriarchal structures of oppression and promoted an equity-based approach. By the 1990s, the shift towards Gender and Development (GAD) placed a strong emphasis on power dynamics challenging the prevailing capitalist system, aiming for equality, empowerment and a rights-based perspective. Within these frameworks, the concept of empowerment gained significant momentum.

The second wave of feminism was relevant for laying the theoretical foundations for women empowerment by critically analysing the mechanisms of female subordination. For example, in Kate Millett’s seminal work *Sexual Politics* (1970), although she does not explicitly define empowerment, her critique of patriarchal oppression offers key insights into the empowerment process (see Table 4.1). Millett advocates for a multidimensional approach to dismantling systemic power imbalances that restrict women’s autonomy, control over their bodies and access to opportunities. In this

Table 4.1 Kate Millett’s multidimensional approach to dismantling systemic power imbalances

Political dimension	Participation and choose capacity.
Economic dimension	Independence and control.
Social dimension	Resistance and redefinition of norms, gender roles and cultural expectations.
Personal dimension	Agency, autonomy and self-esteem to decide one’s own life goals.

Source: Own elaboration based on Millett (1979) and Valcárcel (2000).

sense, empowerment is understood as a means for women to reclaim agency, achieve self-determination and overcome the structural barriers imposed by patriarchal systems.

Transnational and postcolonial feminism highlighted the need to challenge the global rhetoric of global south women's empowerment and its colonial assumptions by revealing the diversity of women's experiences and the ways in which various forms of inequality shaped their values, meanings, desires and needs (Castellsagué & Carrasco, 2021; hooks et al., 2004). Scholars like Chandra Mohanty and Gayatri Spivak emphasised intersectionality, how gender is inseparable from race, class, colonial histories and capitalism. Empowerment, they argued, must be contextual and diverse, not a universal recipe imposed externally.

The capabilities approach to development, proposed by Amartya Sen (1999) and Martha Nussbaum (2000), emphasises measuring development through the expansion of human capabilities, rather than just economic indicators. It values freedom of choice and aims to increase people's ability to make decisions that improve their lives, free from structural barriers that limit their well-being and quality of life.

This approach permeates the concept of empowerment, and prominent authors develop conceptualisation from a processual and relational perspective. Batliwala (1997) pays attention to patriarchal power relations that constrain women's choices and autonomy, but also negatively affect their well-being, and sees the need for greater control or a redistribution of power. Longwe and Clarke (1997) also refer to access to resources, awareness, participation and taking control of one's life as circular or spiralling processes of empowerment. Women, then, "become empowered" when difficulties in accessing resources motivate them to greater awareness, and this leads to greater participation and control of resources, both material and symbolic. This framework, known as the "Women's Equality and Empowerment Framework," is part of the "bottom-up" approach to development, as it is women themselves who must recognise their strategic interests and mobilise to defend them (Murguialday, 2006).

With the aim of systematising the definition of empowerment from its use in development discourse and practice, Rowlands (1998) made significant contributions by proposing a comprehensive framework that addresses both the individual and collective dimensions of empowerment. She distinguishes between "power within," which relates to personal self-awareness and self-confidence, and "power with," which refers to collective action and solidarity among marginalised groups. Additionally, Rowlands highlights the importance of "power to," which is the ability to act and make decisions within societal structures (see Table 4.2). Her work emphasises that empowerment is not a static state, but a dynamic process that involves both internal changes and external actions aimed at challenging and transforming power relations.

In line with Kabeer's (1999) definition, which emphasises that empowerment is "the process by which those who have been denied the ability to

Table 4.2 Rowlands (1998) framework

Power within	Personal self-awareness and self-confidence
Power with	Collective action and solidarity among marginalised groups
Power to	The ability to act and make decisions within societal structures

Source: Own elaboration based on Rowlands (1998).

make strategic life choices acquire such an ability,” gender empowerment can be understood as a multidimensional process that enables individuals, particularly women and girls, to gain control over their lives, make informed choices and access the resources and opportunities needed to realise their potential (see Table 4.3). This process involves not only personal transformation but also the challenging and changing of the power structures and dynamics that limit women’s participation in society. Kabeer further deepens this understanding by conceptualising empowerment through three interrelated dimensions: agency, resources and achievements.

Kabeer’s framework suggests that these three dimensions are interdependent, where changes in one can lead to transformative shifts in the others. For instance, increased access to education can enhance agency, leading to greater economic independence, better decision-making and more substantial social participation. Moreover, changes in the agency dimension can lead to new achievements, which then create a cyclical process of empowerment that can span across generations. In this sense, empowerment is a dynamic, evolving process that requires ongoing expansion of resources, enhancement of agency and realisation of positive outcomes. By addressing these interconnected dimensions, empowerment initiatives have the potential to promote lasting social change, gender equality and the advancement of human rights.

Building on all these conceptual foundations, the idea of “gender empowerment” began to gain institutional traction and became central to the global development agenda. One significant step in its institutionalisation

Table 4.3 Kabeer’s notions of empowerment, access to resources as a precondition of choice capacity

Agency dimension	Ability to make life choices, take actions and exert control over one’s circumstances. Processes of decision-making and other manifestations such as negotiation capacity, sense of life purpose or motivation.
Resources dimension	Access to resources: material, social and political capital (such as education, economic means and social networks). Future claims to material, human and social resources.
Achievements dimension	Tangible outcomes of empowerment: well-being, autonomy and the fulfilment of individual potential.

Source: Own elaboration based on Kabeer (2003).

within the United Nations agenda was the work of feminist activists and researchers from the DAWN-MUDAR Network (Development Alternatives for a New Era). In 1985, at the Third World Conference on Women in Nairobi, the term “gender empowerment” was introduced, drawing from [Sen and Grown’s \(1987\)](#) work *Development, Crisis, and Alternative Visions*. The term was defined as a multidimensional process tied to collective action for transformation, emphasising that it should address not only gender inequality but also intersecting factors like social class, race, ethnicity and global disparities between the North and South ([Murguialday, 2006](#); [Sardenberg, 2008](#)). However, it was not until the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 that “gender empowerment” was fully recognised as a strategic objective, as articulated in paragraph 13 of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action: “Women’s empowerment and their full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society, including participation in the decision-making process and access to power, are fundamental for the achievement of equality, development and peace.”

From the 1990s onwards, the concept became integral to the development agenda, gaining prominence in international development organisations focused on poverty reduction, such as the World Economic Forum (2019) and the Millennium Development Goals (Goal 3), later reflected in the Sustainable Development Goals (Goal 5). Both frameworks viewed gender empowerment and equity as central to reducing poverty, addressing exclusion and promoting sustainable development.

The concept of gender empowerment has also permeated EU policies and strategies aimed at promoting gender equality and women’s rights, particularly since its inclusion in the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). Key documents such as the Women’s Empowerment and Gender Equality Action Plan (WE-GAP) and the EU’s External Action on Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment define gender empowerment as the capacity for women to access resources, make decisions and shape policies affecting their lives. These strategies emphasise enhancing women’s economic independence, leadership and participation in decision-making, both in private and public spheres.

EU frameworks also recognise empowerment as a dynamic, multifaceted process that involves dismantling barriers such as discrimination and unequal access to resources, while simultaneously enhancing individual agency. By supporting women’s leadership, access to justice and the elimination of gender-based violence, these strategies aim for a long-term transformation that promotes both individual autonomy and structural change, advancing gender equality. However, alongside this institutionalisation, there has been increasing pressure to measure and monitor the concept’s evolution in various contexts. One of the most prominent tools for this is the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM), developed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to assess gender gaps in economic and political spheres ([Dongre, 2012](#); [Schüler, 2006](#)).

From a critical perspective, there is consensus that the concept has shifted from being viewed as a process of collective political mobilisation to challenge unequal power structures, to a more individualistic, minimised and depoliticised notion. Critics argue that the prevailing understanding of empowerment now aligns more with the postulates of liberal feminism, focusing on equity, economic participation and individual decision-making (Mahmood, 2005, 2006). As Kabeer (1994) noted, this approach does not challenge the model of modernity itself but rather highlights that women have not benefited from it. Feminist groups like DAWN ask, *Who needs a larger share of a poisoned pie?* (Sen & Grown, 1987). Research suggests that gender empowerment has increasingly become a tool to legitimise international development policies and programs, where it is seen as a means rather than an end (Calvès, 2009). Finally, some critics argue that it has gone viral as a depoliticised concept, embracing neoliberal rhetoric, presenting empowerment as a conflict-free, technical process of redistributing resources, often framed as an individual solution rather than a collective struggle (Murguialday, 2006; Sardenberg, 2008).

4.3 Methods and analysis perspective

This chapter draws on a cross-country comparison, based on five national reports on definitions and conceptualisations of gender empowerment in implemented practices in CSOs. These five reports included the results of the fieldwork carried out with three CSOs in each country, through the implementation of a set of qualitative techniques.

As stated in the introduction of the book, detailing the project's methodology, the ethnographic fieldwork designed include participant observation in CSO activities (20 records, both planned events as well as day-to-day activities), focus group discussions (2 per CSO with staff and with participants in each country) and in-depth interviews with migrant women (30 per country, 10 women in each CSO), implementing the photo-voice technique, in different sessions.

For the ReIncluGen project, gender empowerment is understood from the perspectives of critical feminist studies as a multidimensional, holistic, relational and dynamic process and analysed from the perspective of situated intersectionality (Anthias, 2012; Yuval-Davis, 2015). This perspective considers including the sensitivity to the geographical, social and temporal power locations of the individual or collective social actors. In other words, situated intersectionality takes into account the contested, shifting and multiple meanings of specific social locations, notably historical moments (cf. transtemporality) within particular social, economic, political and cultural contexts (cf. transcalarity) in which some social divisions (gender, race, ethnicity, citizenship status, ability and age, among others) have more saliency and effect on particular people and/or society as a whole (cf. translocality) than they have on others (Yuval-Davis, 2015).

As elements of gender empowerment processes, attention to the link between their life experiences and social inclusion processes has been considered, including:

- The conditions of participation and access to resources in different spheres of social life, as factors associated with taking control, the capacity of making choices or exercising rights.
- Position or location in the social structure and awareness of the experience of inequality and social injustice, or lack thereof, linked to processes of resistance and agency.
- The individual and collective dimension.

The analysis developed has followed an inductive comparative and thematic nature, looking for emergent ideas and categories, focusing on similarities and differences through the specific national contexts.

In the following sections, we present the results obtained, divided into two parts. First, we focus on analysing the actions carried out by the CSOs and their perspectives on empowerment. Second, we present and analyse the definitions and experiences that emerge from the analysis and reflections conducted with the women participants.

4.4 CSOs and gender empowerment: from mission to practices

As we pointed out in the previous section, the institutionalisation of gender empowerment has led to its widespread adoption in European equality policies since its inclusion in the ECHR. Governments, policymakers and CSOs have championed its promotion, particularly in initiatives aimed at women and girls from immigrant backgrounds.

However, despite its widespread usage, our fieldwork shows that it has not fully reached the local level. Most CSOs do not explicitly define “gender empowerment” in their policies or programs, and the meanings and practices associated with gender empowerment remain ambiguous and, at times, inconsistent with feminist theories developed over recent decades. This ambiguity necessitates a closer examination of how CSOs working with immigrant women and girls in five EU countries conceptualise “gender empowerment.”

4.4.1 Explicit definitions

Among the 15 organisations analysed, only two entities in Spain explicitly employed the concept in the mission or organisational documents from different perspectives, influenced by their mission (development and combating forced marriage). In concrete, one organisation adopted a gender equality perspective, aimed at overcoming structural inequality, including both individual and collective dimension of the concept. In general, their documents link empowerment to capacity building and a rights-based approach.

In contrast, the other organisation presented an explicit perspective on confronting the structural, social, cultural and economic disadvantages experienced by women compared to men, emphasising freedom and autonomy/independence as a condition opposed to coercion or subtraction of freedom—such as forced marriage—and offering holistic means of support to ensure this process of empowerment, to confront and overcome gender-based violence.

Both CSOs align with international agenda language, potentially influenced by funding requirements from government and international agencies, shaping their empowerment discourse and strategies.

4.4.2 *Implicit definitions*

In most CSOs of the five countries included in the ReIncluGen project, the term “empowerment” might be just mentioned, or alternative terms with similar connotations, such as “emancipatory,” might be used. Nonetheless, the concept is often implicitly present, allowing for the identification of various approaches that are aligned, at different levels, with the observed practices. Some CSOs emphasise the need to address specific barriers encountered by women of migrant origin. In these cases, empowerment was presented as a tool to overcome sociocultural, economic, labour or political barriers to (equal) participation. The organisations work to eliminate these barriers, often in the social and economic spheres, which limit the women’s capacity to develop professional projects due to the lack of social networks. For example, an organisation in Belgium (CSO3) explicitly stated in its mission that its main objective is to support the entrepreneurial skills of migrant women.

A frequently highlighted element in these efforts is the attainment of financial independence, as articulated by a member of staff: *Empowerment arises from the autonomy of the individual, which means financial independence, having a home, and a car* (IT CSO1 FGD staff). While access to resources is essential for multidimensional perspectives such as [Kabeer’s \(2003\)](#) to challenge power structures and promote broader, long-term social change, these approaches risk falling into a neoliberal feminist perspective, where empowerment is framed as an individual rather than a collective solution.

Other organisations focused on capacity-building for migrant populations but lacked an explicit gender perspective, often emphasising gender equality less in their discourse, even when they implemented initiatives aimed at migrantised women. As a result, they may diverge from the gender equality frameworks common in organisations with a more explicit gender focus. In these cases, empowerment is understood broadly as enhancing the capacities of migrant communities. In some organisations, like CSO2 in Belgium, a gender perspective has been incorporated only recently. Initially focused on the migrant population as a whole rather than specifically on women,

these organisations typically frame empowerment in their organisational documents in broad terms, when migration narratives were predominantly male-centred. This perspective has only started to evolve in recent years, paralleling a feminisation of their target population.

When a broader mission focuses on amplifying voices and fostering emancipation, alongside an intent to incorporate a gender perspective, it implies an implicit commitment to empowering female participants. However, this commitment often remains vague, lacking a clear strategy for implementation. Empowerment discourses may permeate the narratives and even practices of many organisations, yet the absence of a structured process for integrating gender empowerment into the core actions of CSOs can result in a less consistent or more fragmented application.

This complexity is further compounded by practical constraints that shape how organisations frame gender empowerment. Some CSOs may lack explicit gender equality language in their materials due to limited resources or a generalist focus. For example, Spain's CSO2, a young organisation with a broad focus on migrants and few resources, and Austria's CSO1, which lacks documentation despite a strong intersectional commitment, illustrate how financial and institutional limitations impact the formalisation of gender-focused policies.

Finally, CSOs whose mission is problem-based related to specific gender issues, such as human trafficking or reproductive rights, often emphasise a rights perspective, linking empowerment with informing, strengthening choice, agency or freedom. In organisations with a clear feminist orientation, like certain CSOs in Poland and Spain, this stance reflects founders' commitment to gender equality, shaping both their discourse and actions.

In general, the concept of women's agency is significant for many CSOs, often supported by awareness-raising processes. However, strategies vary based on the emphasis placed on either intra-community gender mandates or the experience of racism within global capitalism. These approaches align with Putnam's (2000) typologies of social capital: bonding (strengthening ties within the community) vs. bridging (building connections with other social agents or peer groups).

Overall, gender empowerment strategies within EU CSOs appear to be strongly shaped by top-down approaches, particularly through EU policies that influence national and local practices. In Spain, for example, the two CSOs that explicitly employ the concept of gender empowerment do so in alignment with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and governmental frameworks, suggesting that external requirements shape their discourse. Yet, bottom-up dynamics also exist, although they are rarely systematised, which can lead to a loss of the insights and priorities expressed by migrant women themselves. Moreover, when CSOs are not familiar with the terminology, this lack of internal conceptualisation may leave them less equipped to respond to top-down demands and risks overlooking key elements of empowerment.

4.4.3 *Beyond explicit and implicit definitions of gender empowerment*

Our fieldwork shows that, beyond explicit or implicit definitions, all organisations revealed meaningful interpretations of gender empowerment through their practices and everyday narratives which tend to diverge from liberal perspectives and recognise the importance of overcoming structural inequalities. These interpretations, shaped by their missions, operational constraints and national contexts, provide valuable insights into how empowerment is understood and enacted across different CSOs. Their approaches align with holistic perspectives that emphasise access to resources and social participation, addressing challenges related to language proficiency, employment, citizenship and political engagement.

Many CSOs adopt a broad perspective on gender empowerment, emphasising that it should include accepting support and acknowledging trauma. As one staff member in Austria expressed: *'You are not only strong if you can do everything on your own, but you are also particularly strong if you can ask for help'* (AT CSO3 FGD staff). This perspective challenges the often individualistic and neoliberal framing of empowerment, emphasising the value of interdependence, emotional resilience and collective support as fundamental components of the process.

A recurring theme across many CSOs is the creation of "safe spaces," where migrantised women can accept this support while building confidence and resilience, reflecting their agency within cultural and societal constraints. For example, in CSO1 in Austria where some women at risk of forced marriage face decisions that could potentially lead to the loss of family support, the priority is to ensure spaces where women do not feel judged. In this type of organisation, they also conceive of these "safe" spaces as places where they can provide stepping stones to empowerment such as overcoming the trauma caused by specific forms of gender-based violence and developing the capacity to ask for help. In this sense, providing a safe space is understood as offering a place for reflection on intra-community norms that may restrict women's autonomy.

Some other organisations emphasise the need for safe spaces to distance women from systemic discrimination, such as racism and xenophobia. However, tensions emerge when organisations attempt to navigate these discussions, particularly in contexts where they risk being perceived as ethnocentric or paternalistic. In practice, this often leads to cautious strategies: some entities avoid framing empowerment in ways that might critique cultural norms. Yet, this omission can inadvertently reinforce existing power imbalances by failing to address the structural and patriarchal limitations on women's agency, which, from Millett's perspective (1970), is fundamental to achieving gender equality. Especially when staff members and participants come from different backgrounds, organisations often prioritise giving voice to participants to reduce the risk of imposing external views, even if this means leaving structural issues underexplored. This raises broader questions about

the complexities of empowerment and the need for approaches that are both cultural sensitivity and attentive to structural change. Strikingly, no organisations simultaneously address both oppression frameworks, even though many claim to adopt intersectional positions.

On the other hand, many CSOs place their efforts on raising awareness among the general population, understanding that women's empowerment requires not only individual awareness but also structural transformation and aligning with theoretical perspectives such as [Kabeer \(1999\)](#). Particularly in organisations engaged in anti-racism work, gender empowerment is intertwined with broader struggles against discrimination in housing, employment and education. This perspective challenges narratives that attribute migrantised women's subordination exclusively to intra-community gender norms and instead highlights the role of migration status and racialisation in shaping the inequalities they face. As one Italian staff member recounted, migrant women often face a difficult trade-off between newfound independence and the hardships of low-paid, precarious work, underscoring the complex realities of empowerment in migrant contexts. These kinds of organisations emphasise structural inequalities, particularly the intersections of gender, race and migration status, while challenging the notion of autonomy as an individual resource in line with authors such as [Murguialday \(2006\)](#) or [Sardenberg \(2008\)](#). Also, in line with these authors, the unequal relationship between North and South and its impact on the opportunities available to these women emerged in the reflections of staff working from this perspective. As a member of staff said in one of the focus groups, gender empowerment for migrant women also needs to consider the impact of colonial history:

I think there has to be a very strong part of recognition, and I think this may also relate to the empowerment of women and girls, their environment, and their starting point, where they come from when they are migrants or racialised people, [...] Just as we talk about historical reparations for discrimination and gender inequalities, so in the case of critical interculturality we also have to include racist colonial power relations.

(SP CSO1 FGD staff)

Finally, national policies and socio-political climates play a crucial role in shaping how CSOs operationalise gender empowerment. In countries with strong feminist and migrant rights movements, CSOs are more likely to incorporate explicit gender empowerment strategies into their frameworks. In contrast, restrictive migration policies often force organisations to prioritise immediate service provision, focusing on basic needs such as legal assistance and housing. For this reason, considering the integration context is essential for analysing the real possibilities of gender empowerment ([Crul & Schneider, 2010](#)).

Despite these variations, most CSOs face common challenges, including funding constraints, an increasingly hostile political climate fuelled by the rise of far-right movements and discriminatory rhetoric, and the urgent need to address emerging challenges, particularly for refugee women and survivors of gender-based violence. At the same time, the majority of these organisations seek to reduce barriers for migrantised women by promoting equal opportunities, access to resources and social participation. Although not free from weaknesses and contradictions, as we have highlighted, their practices tend to be much more nuanced and dynamic, often prioritising networking, mutual support and collective agency as central pillars of their work.

4.5 CSO participants: gender empowerment

Like CSOs, women rarely provide explicit definitions of gender empowerment. Most participants lacked a direct translation of the concept in both the host country's language and their community languages. If the term was not recognised in English, it was unlikely to be familiar to them. However, explicit definitions emerged in Spain, where the concept is deeply embedded in feminist and third-sector discourses.

4.5.1 *Explicit definition*

‘Don’t let them decide for me. I already have a voice for myself ...
(Mariama, Spain, participant in CSO3)

Participants in Spain's CSO3, an organisation that integrates empowerment into both its mission and activities, consistently linked it to the ability to make their own decisions, freedom and rights. They emphasised the importance of knowing their rights and distinguishing between right and wrong, aligning with CSO3's goal of equipping women to confront coercive situations within their communities. This approach is reflected in their statements, which stress the need to recognise one's rights and reject external control: *Empowerment is very important. Because without it, people cannot make their decisions, and others control you, and this is not good ...* (Nora, Spain, participant in CSO3).

The young women who participated in CSO1, although the organisation did not explicitly frame its activities with them around empowerment, also articulated clear definitions. This suggests that in Spain gender empowerment is widely internalised as a concept linked to gender equity.

Among these young women there were also reflections on freedom of choice that help to explain the apparent contradictions in other women's accounts. While they referred to “free choice,” they also described situations that, when analysed in the context of patriarchal structures, may in fact constrain rather than enable real autonomy. Specifically, one of these young women re-examined the association between empowerment and free

choice, questioning the real possibilities of free choice under certain gender mandates:

For me, it would be that we women did what we wanted and made choices without that idea being instilled in us ... From childhood, we are taught that these are “girls” things’... They tell you: “choose what you want,” but in reality it is something that they teach you from before.

(Yessi, Spain, participant in CSO1)

It is worth noting how other young women also emphasised the importance of collective struggles against discrimination: *Empowerment is closely linked to equality... I believe, above all, that gender empowerment is collective... It has to be shared and then overcome collectively* (Janice, Spain, participant in CSO1). These reflections revealed familiarity with feminist debates in Spain, while also being influenced by their mothers’ experiences of discrimination, both inside and outside the home. This led to complex and nuanced ways of rethinking empowerment. Many women recognised how their mothers’ experiences of racism often overshadowed other forms of discrimination in the home, combining this understanding with a strong awareness of the multiple barriers to their own empowerment.

Outside Spain, explicit definitions of empowerment did not emerge; instead, participants in other countries expressed implicit understandings of empowerment, which will be discussed in the following section.

4.5.2 *Implicit definitions*

While explicit definitions were rare outside Spain, implicit understandings of empowerment emerged through life stories. The way women conceptualised empowerment varied based on their social position, migration background, gendered experiences (such as forced marriage) and conditions in both their country of origin and their host society.

For some participants, particularly those in Austria from Afghanistan or Iran, empowerment was associated with fundamental freedoms such as mobility and access to education. In Spain, participants from CSO3—focused on eradicating forced marriage—connected empowerment to resisting intra-community pressures. In Italy, first-generation migrants framed empowerment around overcoming migration-related struggles, while in Belgium, where many participants were second or third generation, it was often discussed in terms of navigating competing gender expectations alongside experiences of racism.

In Poland, recent Ukrainian arrivals viewed empowerment through the immediate lens of displacement and war. These varied perspectives highlight how empowerment is shaped not only by current circumstances but also by women’s connections to their country of origin and their migration trajectory.

Nevertheless, across contexts, some recurring themes and implicit definitions emerged, echoing CSO definitions while also refining or complementing them. Many women's definitions focus on independence and autonomy, particularly financial independence. This approach was frequently adopted by women who had experienced gender-based violence:

Financial independence leads to empowerment, that's a fact.
(Leila, Austria, participant in CSO1)

Migrant women viewed labour market access as essential not only for survival but also for gaining status and avoiding stigma, as stated by a participant in Italy. Similarly, in Poland, Ukrainian women emphasised self-sufficiency as key to regaining control over their lives. However, economic independence was not always straightforward. As a Polish CSO staff member noted, *Many migrant women work for very little and without a contract... they don't know why it's important to pay ZUS [social security] and what they can get in return* (Anna, Poland, staff member of CSO1).

Other definitions emphasise gender equity and equal opportunities between men and women:

Yes, so she assumes that it's man and woman and she says that you only have to be seen as a human being. [...] there doesn't have to be a difference, they just have to be the same, because they are simply human beings. They have two eyes, two ears, two hands, two feet, that's how it has to work.

(Ayla, Austria, participant in CSO2)

Some women articulated this through their aspirations for their children's futures, advocating for equal rights regardless of gender. One participant explained: *I only have sons, I don't have any daughters now. But it's clear to me that they should have the same rights...* (Leila, Austria, participant in CSO1). The expectations they place on their children in terms of gender equity highlight how central this topic remains—even if it sometimes needs to be deferred to future generations.

Still, motherhood presents contradictions, often having to balance gender mandates with the challenges of migration and caregiving. For example, one Spanish participant reflected on how her mother, while criticising her for challenging community gender expectations, simultaneously broke traditional roles by encouraging her father to share domestic tasks. This highlights the intergenerational tensions that migration can exacerbate, as women are often pressured to uphold gender norms that they themselves may have questioned in their country of origin, a situation further exacerbated by the racism they experience.

For some participants, the relationship between empowerment and gender equality is particularly evident when comparing their lives in the receiving country to their experiences at home, especially in terms of freedom and choice. In these situations, many women connect empowerment to decision-making and personal agency:

So here I feel more free, more ... I'm not doing anything wrong either, huh? You know? I'm fine, I'm living my normal life, working and such. But I feel good. Because nobody judges how I dress, nobody judges how I walk, or how I talk, or anything else.

(Khadija, Spain, participant in CSO1)

Migrant women frequently contrasted their experiences in their country of origin with their current situation, noting how the ability to make choices—about education, travel, work or even personal appearance—was central to empowerment. Some emphasised that bodily autonomy was also a key component. Several women emphasised the fear and restrictions they had faced, even in basic interactions such as making eye contact or moving freely in public spaces. However, empowerment narratives can link both covering and revealing as expressions of personal choice. For instance, Muslim women in Belgium viewed wearing the hijab as an empowering act of identity, while others highlighted the ability to reject dress codes.

For some women, empowerment also encompassed control over their sexuality as a fundamental aspect of choice. For instance, one participant in Spain described the reconstruction of her clitoris, many years after experiencing genital mutilation as a child, as an “empowering choice” that stood in opposition to the community-imposed practices that had deprived her of agency. Similarly, in Austria, a participant from Mexico, who identified as queer, linked empowerment to the ability to live this aspect of her identity freely in the host country. Women also spoke about navigating intra-community gender expectations. Some viewed empowerment as defining their role within cultural norms on their own terms, choosing traditional roles but with a sense of agency:

Let a woman be a woman, however she defines it and how she wishes to interpret it.

(Soukaina, Belgium, participant in CSO2)

For instance, some second- and third-generation migrant women in Belgium expressed a desire to emigrate to an Arab country where they felt their religious identity would be fully accepted. Others framed empowerment as a complementary relationship between men and women, emphasising mutual support rather than rigid gender equality.

Nevertheless, these women's desires and choices need to be analysed in the context of structural inequalities. For instance, some women's reflections

highlighted the impact of racism, discrimination and negative experiences that could lead them to reconsider the balance of their migration projects, echoing the reflections of the young women mentioned earlier on the challenges faced by their mothers. For example, in Spain, a participant reflected on the machismo she had experienced in Morocco, particularly in her two marriages (the second being forced) and her two divorces. However, despite appreciating the freedom she found in Spain, she also expressed nostalgia for Morocco and described how exhausting it was to feel questioned about her religious practices, such as during Ramadan, with remarks like, “But you are modern.”

Finally, many participants link empowerment with self-determination in overcoming hindrances as a central element:

I am really aware that it is really a process. You may not see where you're going to end up, but you're going to get there eventually. It seems very far, but it is close. When I now look at what “empowerment” is, I think it really is: I am now really taking my life into my hands. A tear or two here and there, but still. You wake up in the morning, just go and just wake up. Do a little for school, do a little for your business. Do it little by little. You're not going to see that progress immediately, but at least you've done a little today. Tomorrow again a little bit. Ah you went to class? Literally I sent a message to [friend's name] saying “Hey, I went to class for the first time!” And she would reply “I'm proud of you girl!”

(Olivia, Belgium, participant in CSO3)

This perspective was particularly strong among those who had experienced significant obstacles, such as systemic racism, economic exclusion or gender based violence. Others describe empowerment as gradual self-determination, emphasising the importance of resilience in the face of ongoing challenges. This approach links empowerment to the process and not so much to the final objectives, a perspective that is seen in most women as they navigate multiple barriers. In a system that continuously places obstacles in their way, valuing the process itself might be the only available option.

These diverse perspectives reflect how empowerment is understood in practice, shaped by women's lived experiences and the intersecting barriers they face. While the term itself may not always be explicitly used, the ways in which women navigate their realities demonstrate deeply embedded notions of empowerment that extend beyond institutional definitions. To fully grasp empowerment, it is necessary to account for the specific barriers, expectations and lived experiences that shape migrant women's choices and agency, recognising both the constraints and the strategies they develop to assert control over their lives.

4.6 Re-defining gender empowerment: towards inclusive and transformative approaches

The findings of this research reveal that the conceptualisation of gender empowerment among CSOs and participating women remains, in many cases, limited and fragmented, particularly regarding its collective dimension and transformative potential to address structural inequalities. Despite critical frameworks that emphasise the need for structural change, the dominant approach tends to focus on a single aspect of empowerment—such as overcoming specific barriers to integration, like language acquisition, access to employment or addressing structural forms of exclusion such as gender-based violence or racism—without addressing the phenomenon in a holistic or multidimensional manner. This results in a more constrained and often depoliticised understanding of the concept.

Among the women participants, familiarity with the term “gender empowerment” varies significantly depending on national context and previous exposure to feminist discourses. In countries like Spain, where the concept is embedded in the everyday language of organisations and social movements, women demonstrated a greater capacity to recognise and articulate its meaning. In other contexts, even when the term itself was unfamiliar, many women described key components of empowerment drawn from their lived experiences, such as autonomy, decision-making capacity and access to fundamental rights.

An intersectional perspective is essential to understanding these processes. Empowerment experiences are shaped not only by gender but also by migration status, generation, racialisation, social class and other axes of inequality that uniquely position each woman within social hierarchies. This intersectional stratification creates specific barriers that influence agency, resource access and opportunities for political and social participation. The way in which women define or emphasise empowerment is also closely linked to their specific social location and the particular moment they are living through, reflecting how their understanding of empowerment is situated, contextual and shaped by their lived realities.

In this regard, women often define empowerment as a process deeply connected to overcoming structural barriers derived from gender subordination, migration exclusion and racial discrimination. The most prominent challenges identified include difficulties in obtaining citizenship, language barriers, labour market precarity, gender-based violence and lack of social support networks. Addressing these challenges is vital for advancing towards a truly transformative conception of empowerment.

Despite these constraints, many participants described meaningful experiences of empowerment through their engagement with CSOs. Motherhood, for instance, emerged as a site of negotiation between traditional gender roles and new opportunities for agency. In other cases, direct confrontation with racism or the act of migration itself was experienced as a form of

emancipation. For many women, migration was not only a geographic transition but also an opportunity to asset dignity and autonomy in the face of oppressive power structures.

Overall, women expressed high appreciation for the role of CSOs in their empowerment journeys. Organisations were seen as spaces of support, learning, care and community-building, as well as facilitators of rights access. Through their practices, these organisations hold the potential to promote more inclusive understandings of empowerment—ones that recognise the complexity of migratory trajectories, the weight of structural inequalities and the importance of collective struggle.

In conclusion, gender empowerment should be understood as a dynamic, situated and relational process. It requires a rethinking of both institutional strategies and intervention methodologies. Beyond individualistic or economic frameworks, there is an urgent need to advance towards integrated approaches that combine the recognition of rights with the transformation of power relations, paving the way for more just and equitable forms of coexistence and citizenship.

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5 (Un)Knowing and Understanding

Artistic Practices as Modes of Research

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and Amal Miri*

5.1 Introduction

The foundations and aims of certain forms of science, particularly classical, objectifying approaches, have long been rooted in methods designed to keep the world at a distance. As Dougald [Hine \(2023\)](#) writes in *At Work in the Ruins*, this stance is a conscious effort “to hold [the world] at arm’s length” ([Hine, 2023](#), p. 42). From this position, researchers claim a kind of separation from the very environment they study. Hine further challenges the dominance of this mode of knowing when he argues that “the end of the world as we know it is also the end of a way of knowing the world” ([Hine, 2023](#), p. 42). In this chapter, we reflect on participatory arts-based research as an organic way of knowing, one that resists the researchers’ distance. By calling it organic, we underscore research’s responsiveness and recognise that participatory research is situated in human relationships, which are themselves dynamic and evolving. Rather than treating research as a detached act of observing and defining, we approach it as a living process: a movement between knowing and unknowing, between opening ourselves to encounters and creating spaces for open-ended interaction. Real life, after all, is made of encounters, of how we meet and are moved by what and who we encounter. [Reason and Bradbury \(2008\)](#) argue that participatory action research is a *living inquiry*, where knowledge emerges through cycles of reflection and action, embedded in real-world contexts. Similarly, [Cahill \(2007\)](#) emphasises that participatory research is not just a method but a political and ethical stance—one that must remain responsive to context, positionality, and power relations. We believe, within the participatory artistic methods, both researchers and participants engage in reciprocal learning, transforming research from a pursuit of fixed objectives into the co-creation of new relationalities. As such, we think this helps to reflect about a multitude of forms of ethical arts-based research methods and artistic research that balance power relations, such as collaborative art and design practices.

Based on our personal backgrounds and professional experiences as researches, artists, and migrant(ised) women, we have understood that

migrant(ised) women—particularly those navigating linguistic barriers, trauma, or non-linear narratives of belonging—may find richer modes of expression and creation through arts-based practices. These practices include co-design, textile arts, storytelling circles, or performances, rather than deductive enquiries through questionnaires, photos, and similar research methods. These collaborative practices can shift the focus from representation to process, enabling spaces where knowledge is not only communicated but *made together*. Reflecting from our own positionalities as migrantised researchers and artists, we will provide insights based on two case studies of previous participatory and arts-based research with migrantised women in the context of Belgium and Iran. Central to our own research is doing research with the participants instead of only knowing about them by working on them.

The first case study will elaborate on how artistic research and practices can rely on participants' already existing forms of knowledge and skills, instead of extracting knowledge and transmitting it to a researcher-authorised (re)presentation, which gives the researcher power over the researched. By highlighting the participants' expertise and exploring new applications of their skills, we believe participants' powers also enrich the (artistic) research process. The first case study, a research with carpet and rug-weavers participants in northern Iran, builds further on insights from the first author, Golnesa Rezanezhad Pishkhani.

The second case study is based on how a Dutch docu-film called “When Mom Left for Mars” (2017)—or abbreviated as “WMLFM”—created by so-called second generation Dutch-Moroccan producers was used as a methodological tool by the second author, Amal Miri, in participatory research with first-generation mothers in Flanders. Using this documentary film—on the life story of a first-generation Moroccan immigrant mother in the Netherlands—thus becomes a way of not only sharing an issue or shedding light on what already exists, but of examining how it can be (re)viewed while creating multiple entry points for new investigations and understandings (Miri & Emmery, 2024).

Therefore, in this chapter, we will draw on both our own experiences and the broader theoretical frameworks that inform our research. While traditional academic writing often emphasises so-called objectivity and distance, we believe that embracing a first-person approach allows for a more nuanced and transparent exploration of this subject. This means that we will apply a first-person approach when discussing the positionalities and also this focus will be shifted per case study, as the first author will focus on the first case study and the second author on the second case study. By reflecting on our own journeys and how our insights have evolved, we aim to offer a more intimate and dynamic perspective on the role arts-based research methods can play in knowledge-production, exchanging positionalities, and understanding and sharing perspectives.

5.2 Situating our positionalities as researchers and cultural producers

Speaking as the first author, I, Golnesa Rezanezhad Pishkhani, am trained as an artist and ethnographer. As an artist, similar to many artists, my private workplace has been where my works were shaped, and artistic institutions have been the ultimate places for artistic producers to communicate with visitors. However, working within institutions always left me with questions such as *How come institutions with narrowed criteria grant more visibility to a certain group of people with specific artistic works? Aren't they creating a certain intellectual elite sphere that reproduces binaries, divisions, and categories between people and the objects they produce? Do those policies increase alienation (not only between people and things but also between different groups of people) rather than mediate social transformation?* and more importantly, *Why is the creation and valorisation of art and knowledge in the hands of a specific group of people?* The artistic productive role that I am trained in has been based on Western academic tradition, based on “the assertion of an independent and private space” (Bourriaud, 2002, p. 14). In that method, the artist is the only one who controls the artistic production from the beginning to the end result, through their personal imaginations. At first glance, those questions may seem like individual questions and struggles within artistic and intellectual institutions, but I believe they are also questions with ethical, cultural, and social implications that affect a wide range of populations.

To address these concerns, I began incorporating a collaborative method into my creative practice: one that arose from my need, as an immigrant, to connect and shape relations with the new environment and people. Moreover, my experiences studying art in Iran and Belgium prompted me to question the exclusivity of traditional artistic approaches. I started collaborative artistic practices in 2016 with collaborative quilt-making with immigrant women in Belgium whom I reached through non-governmental organisations (NGOs), which resulted in projects such as “It’s not a Fiction”. Through these projects I’ve learned how everyday practices such as textile crafting can be included as an artistic practice and how artistic practices can be a form of research. These collaborative projects with immigrant women in Belgium allowed me to experience bridging between craft and art, and rethinking these categories as well as my personal identity categories of being local and being immigrant. These experiences and new insights led me, in 2019, to return to my hometown, where many immigrant women from the western and northwestern regions of the country had brought with them their traditions of rug and carpet weaving. As a result, I conducted a collaborative artistic research project with these women, for whom weaving is not only a means of economic survival but also a powerful medium of personal and cultural expression. In this chapter, I focus on the methodology of this research, which explored the weavers’ perceptions of womanhood.

As the second author and social anthropologist, I, Amal Miri, also want to start by positioning myself before we continue to further explore our research. Many years before I started my PhD journey, I lost my heart in the Belgian culture scene where I met my husband who has been a cultural producer for around fifteen years. As his wife and later as a board member of a cultural organisation—where I have spent many hours both in the audience as well as in board meetings and backstage—I was always fascinated by how Flemish cultural institutions claimed they did not succeed in reaching (many) minoritised and racialised audiences. In my ethnographic PhD research titled “Working ‘with’ or ‘on’ Moroccan Migrant Mothers, mediating structure versus agency in the study of marriage migration, gender and integration”, I started to explore participatory and arts-based research. As my doctoral research was based on several critical feminist theories and approaches, I took it to heart to account for the agency of my research participants, who were Moroccan migrant mothers living in Belgium (Miri, 2021). I further build on feminist standpoint theory (Harding, 2004), which has been significant in making sense of the research process and questions. In doing so, I took into account my own position and reflexivity as a researcher and their influence on the analyses that were made but most important on the research participants.

On a personal level, as a migrantised Belgian and daughter of Moroccan immigrants, the context of this research topic was very familiar to me in many different ways. Growing up as a second-generation Belgian-Moroccan and losing my father at the age of eight, I always admired my mother’s strength and perseverance in raising four small children by herself in a political and societal climate that was rife with harmful cultural and gendered stereotypes, discrimination, and racism. Like many other first-generation migrant women, my mother tried to transcend loneliness and hardship by building a social network and forging friendships. Despite the many constraints and hardships, I also hold many memories of how she *cared for* others and used her position as a settled (widowed) marriage-migrant woman to support her growing network of friends and family, many of whom also immigrated to Belgium through family reunification. As an academic I often reminisce and reflect on how she used to, and still does, facilitate migration for family and friends by emotionally and materially supporting them, helping them to find a job or assisting them in getting their “papers” (Miri, 2021). These lived experiences informed my decision to include the documentary film in the study that would be familiar and meaningful to my research participants: its central character is a first-generation mother navigating challenges akin to those faced by my own mother, while its producers, as so-called second-generation Moroccans raised in the Netherlands, occupy a positionality similar to my own, thereby allowing the film to simultaneously engage participants’ experiences and reflect my embodied standpoint as a researcher.

In doing so, our aim for this chapter is to further explore not only how embodied sensibilities shape our research but also how they entail an

empowering solidarity as human beings. In what follows, we will delve deeper into the different artistic participatory projects in which we have been involved throughout our careers and voluntary work, and examine how these promote a solidarity between our participants and ourselves as researchers, artists, and beyond.

5.3 From Iranian carpet weavers in Iran to Moroccan migrant mothers in Belgium

Before initiating the details of our collaborative projects, we want to elaborate on how both projects took the necessary time to identify participants, understand their social locations in society, and define the most suitable research intervention.

5.3.1 *Weaving the past into the present*

My project “Weaving the past into the present” ([Rezanezhad Pishkhani, 2023](#)) questions how Iranian rug and carpet weavers imagine their womanhood through embodied practices of weaving and beyond. Another research question is centred around how they reflect their experiences of womanhood on their carpets and rugs. These questions are both related to feminist and anthropological fields. Instead of examining these questions only through traditional methods such as observations and interviews, collaborative designing and weaving were the main core of this research methodology and a considerable part of research output.

I started my research from theory towards practice, building on critical feminist theories. As artistic research is mainly conducted within a framework of a PhD or under an academic intellectual rhetoric, theory is usually imposed on the artistic process rather than (artistic) practices having its own ways of thinking and exerting transformative impact on everyday life. Rather than solely putting theory into action, this project aims to engage in collaborative action. Given that traditional methods of note-taking and interviewing have little impact on the research participants, I focused on what I call “form-giving” as an active way of social reproduction ([Murphy, 2016](#)). In the act of co-working and co-creation, we create a social form, similar to what people experience in their everyday lives.

5.3.2 *Working “with” or “on” Moroccan migrant mothers*

My PhD research is the first ethnographic study on (marriage) migrant women and mothers in Belgium that centralised their narratives, agency, and lived experiences ([Miri, 2021](#)). Dominant immigration discourse and the related gendered assumptions view migrant women as passive victims of men, patriarchy, religion, and promote the need for them to be liberated, empowered, or educated in order to better fit into society ([Miri, 2021](#)).

These representations have given rise to a consensus in the West: that Muslim women need to be rescued, which is propagated by human rights groups, liberal feminists, right-wing politics, and the media (Farris, 2017). In the Belgian national context of family reunification and marriage migration, it holds that marriage migrant women are believed to be held back or constrained by their husbands, family, and/or religion from integrating and partaking in (regular) citizenisation and Dutch courses, which denies their agency both as wives and citizens. Additionally, their personal choices to become mothers are believed to exacerbate their position as passive citizens (Miri, 2021). Furthermore, it is believed that becoming a mother supposedly leaves them little time to invest in integration courses, especially since day-care services are an important financial and cultural threshold. As these representations and policies are often not based on rigorous research that consults these migrant women directly, this research aimed to fill this knowledge gap by bringing together the gendered representations and policy views on marriage migration *and* the narratives of lived experiences and desires, as articulated by migrant women themselves. Another aim was to find out how exactly Moroccan migrant women navigate these structures as affective migrant mothers, and the role of religion in this.

In doing so, I used the collective screening of the docu-film “WMLFM” (El-Fassi & El-Fassi, 2017) as a facilitator for the interviews and discussions with my participants as this docu-film helped break the ice and recall many feelings and lived experiences due to the many similarities between the protagonist and the research participants (Figure 5.1). In order to make the women feel welcome and at ease, I also wanted to end the focus group discussion with a collective moment of sharing food.



Figure 5.1 Promotion flyer of the docu-film screening in Arenberg, Antwerp 2018

The following part of the chapter will elaborate on these two arts-based research projects to highlight several aspects that demonstrate the convergence between art and anthropology/social sciences. For example, these aspects include the project content, which emphasises the ethics of representation through interdisciplinary inquiry; the engagement with methodology, particularly the ethnographic method; and the application of anthropological conceptual tools for analysing our findings. Additionally, the similarities and differences between art and anthropology make it crucial to explore the ethical limitations and possibilities of each field.

5.4 Where art and anthropology converge

The relationship between art and anthropology is not new. This relationship has been a means for reinventing both fields (Leavy, 2017; Sansi, 2015). For a long time, since the 19th century, artists and anthropologists have had this similar need to leave their workshops or libraries to experience the real world—what artists call “everyday life” and anthropologists call “the field” (Sansi, 2015). This outside world allows anthropologists and artists to address questions and problems that have to do with concepts of exchange, personhood, work, and the relationship between people and things (Sansi, 2015, p. 20). In the artistic field, the traditional approach of creating and displaying art often fostered a sense of separation between people and the art objects, and between the public and the creative process. It also reinforced a divide between those who create, those who understand art, and those who feel excluded from it.

As the second author and as an anthropologist, this criticism was also true for my doctoral study. During my research with Moroccan migrant mothers I used to question who would benefit from my research considering that my research participants due to their limited literacy skills are very unlikely to consult academic articles or attend academic conferences. It is this reflection that was the main rationale to use arts-based research methods and to look for ways to make my research accessible to a wider public in general and to my research participants in particular.

In recent decades, anthropology and ethnography have faced criticism for the power dynamics inherent in the relationship between researchers and their subjects, particularly in the production of monographs as research outcomes (Ingold, 2018). Tim Ingold argues that anthropological ethnography is committed to “descriptive accuracy”, where researchers represent their subjects in a text-based format that leaves little room for interpretation (Ingold, 2018). He highlights how this approach can create a power imbalance, reinforcing a one-sided relationship between the researcher and the researched (Ingold, 2018). Traditional anthropological fieldwork relies on empirical methods such as observation and interviews, with results analysed using conceptual tools to examine social relations in context. However, these methods often perpetuate hierarchical power structures. Ingold contrasts

this with art practice, which he views as allowing for multiple interpretations and open-ended meanings, offering a more inclusive and dynamic approach to understanding human experiences. However, in his famous article “Artist as Ethnographer” (1998), Hall Foster (1995) emphasises the position of alterity that artists, similar to anthropologists, are interested in ethnographic research (or practices). Alterity lets both groups keep distance from the community they are interested in representing (Foster, 1995). Foster criticises the distant position of artists, who try to mimic anthropologists in their cultural alterity.

But with different methods that artists apply in co-creating artistic practices, these practices can mediate for solidarities, empowerments, building communities, and other means of collectiveness and support. For example, collaborative methods have been broadly applied to empowering practices. However, some scholars criticise this translation as being a projection of a specific view (mainly Western hegemonic perspective) with negligence about individual agency (Mohanty, 1988), or as a method for applying structural models that may serve to essentialise identities and relations (Cornwall, 2003). Since the 1970s, the rhetoric of emancipation and empowerment has also been part of the rhetoric of art practices, first employed by the old avant-garde that promoted the wish for the union of art and life (Bishop, 2004), then by curatorial programmes. One prominent example was led by Nicolas Bourriaud in 1990 which supported the works of artists who criticised the existing institutions and wanted to transform them by engaging audiences and visitors to the arts. In the artwork supported by Bourriaud, collaboration is a crucial segment that plays an important role in shaping artistic outputs. The artistic output (of those works) is what happened between visitors and artists inside the gallery(s) and between people who were animated through the installations/interactions organised by the artist(s).

Rirkrit Tiravanija is an example of an artist whose work was supported by Bourriaud but has been criticised (Bishop, 2004). In his hybrid installation-performance, Tiravanija cooked for people attending the gallery where he had been invited to show his work. In *Untitled (Still)* (1992) at 303 Gallery, New York, Tiravanija moved everything he found in the gallery office and store-room into the main exhibition space, including the director, who was obliged to work in public, among cooking smells and diners, with food packages becoming the art exhibit whenever the artist was absent (Bishop, 2004, p. 56). The involvement of the audience is the focus of his work: the food allowed for the development of a convivial relationship between audience and artist. Tiravanija’s practice blurs the line between audience and artist and prompts questions such as: *Who are the participants? What is the medium that relates people to one another? Where is the site of practice?* Yet his work has also been criticised for transforming the gallery into a laboratory or studio for art-making that remained accessible primarily to those already embedded in art world spaces. As Bishop (2004) argues, relational aesthetics often celebrate conviviality without interrogating who is included or excluded from participation, or

how power circulates within these temporary communities. In this sense, participation in Tiravanija's work was limited to a self-selecting group of gallery visitors who engaged as cultural consumers rather than as diverse publics. This example illustrates that collaborative or participatory methods do not inherently guarantee democratic or inclusive outcomes, nor do they automatically produce solidarity. Instead, they highlight the need—central in both contemporary art and anthropology—to ask how they attend to unequal distributions of power, and under what conditions they can foster meaningful solidarity and empowerment rather than reproduce existing exclusions. In the following sections, by elaborating on different forms of collaboration and discussing two projects in depth, we highlight how art and anthropology can converge in ways that not only enable solidarities but also remain critically attuned to the structural asymmetries that shape participatory practice.

5.5 Different types of collaboration and power relations in collaborations: two case studies

Helguera (2011) introduces three different types of collaborations. In voluntary collaboration, participants choose to engage in the event out of their own interests. In non-voluntary collaboration, participants find themselves involved in the work without prior invitation or agreement. In in-voluntary collaboration, participants also find themselves unexpectedly involved, but they respond to an invitation, are encountered at the event, or are animated during the event (Helguera, 2011).

While non-voluntary and in-voluntary collaboration do not need long-term investigation and negotiation to come to an agreement, in collaborative art practices with congenial experiences, the dialogues and conversations are, in the long term, a means for finding agreement on a specific type of collaboration and for sharing responsibilities based on different parties' expertise and skills. In fact, this collaborative form needs some time for trust to be built and consensus to be found. Prior to the actual artistic production, this method provides the qualitative process for defining the collaboration format in detail.

Artists can approach their participants with barriers that may create (greater) alienation or give a feeling of being instrumentalised or patronised. Therefore, before starting a collaborative work it is ethically and practically important to know what type of collaboration we want to situate our participants and ourselves in and how we want to involve both their skills and/or expertise and our own in the work. In the project with rug weavers, the regular meetings and conversations were one of mediatory elements which had important roles in making me and participants familiar with our perceptions of womanhood, what artistic and creative works mean for us, and the socio-political context that they conducted their life and work in. It helped us to find common ground for collaborative practice by considering the differences in our perceptions or presumptions about art, as well as womanhood. Important to mention here is the fact that the pre-co-creation meetings

and conversations took place without any intention to gain any output but mainly to build trust between researcher and participant. Our exchanges in the meetings in different places, such as each other's homes, cafes, and markets led to transformations in both sides' perceptions about artistic and creative work, and about womanhood as well which in turn influenced our co-creation process.

5.5.1 *Weaving knowledge and co-creation altogether*

For me, Golnesa, the first author, working with participants in “Weaving the Past into the Present” meant engaging with pre-existing connecting threads—shared language, memories of weaving, ethnicity, gender, and similar social backgrounds—that fostered a sense of belonging to the same community. This common ground shifted the research away from merely “knowing about” the participants, opening instead a space for mutual inquiries, transformation, and co-creation by both researcher and participants (Figure 5.2). However, there are also signifiers that highlight differences and potential power imbalances. For example, as someone living and studying in Europe, I might be perceived as belonging to a more privileged class. Additionally, my training and work as an artist/researcher could unintentionally emphasise disparities in access to certain types of knowledge and training among the participants.



Figure 5.2 Transforming the sketches into a weaving map



Figure 5.3 Transforming the sketches into a weaving map with one of the research participants, Azar Aghaee. Rasht, Iran, December 2019

To address these assumed differences and mitigate hierarchical dynamics, I made conscious choices to balance the power relations between myself and the participants. For instance, by conducting the collaborative creation in the artisans' own space, I aimed to equalise our roles (Figure 5.3). Furthermore, designing a rug requires an understanding of weaving techniques, which I sought to learn directly from the participants. This apprenticeship position as an artist-researcher not only facilitated empirical research but also allowed me to be taught by the artisans, thereby further balancing our relationship.

The first phase of actual collaboration for making rugs began in a space owned by a workshop manager who had a network of weavers producing rugs for her shop. Working in the shop provided her with emotional support, allowing her to share many stories about her work and the challenges it brought to her life. Additionally, she noted that the gatherings and group work not only reactivated her workshop but also valorised rug and carpet weaving, potentially benefiting her business. As pointed out before, our working process in the shop also challenged the spatial binary that keeps producers at home and the salesperson at the market. I initially invited ten interested participants to our weekly events, but ultimately, only five regularly attended. Occasionally, there were seven weavers present in the public rug shop, which attracted visitors, including customers and neighbouring

shopkeepers who would enter to view the rugs or observe our activities. In the first session, I provided a detailed explanation of the project and shared images of rug motifs I had improvised to narrate everyday life stories. I used visual references from my previous work and similar projects by other artists to clarify the project's concepts. The participants were enthusiastic, and the events created a space for them to exchange thoughts, with their ideas being listened to, appreciated, and understood.

Despite efforts to establish an equal footing between artists and collaborators, differences in womanhood, aesthetic perceptions, and preferences were evident. These differences became a central topic of conversation and exchange during the collaboration, both between myself and the artisans, and among the artisans themselves, who varied in class and age. This raised the question: *What new dynamics can emerge between artists, participants, and audiences?* For example, there are artistic works, like Tiravanija's work, while creating communal spaces, often reconciles with the existing institutional framework, facilitating gatherings mainly among art-world insiders (Bishop, 2004). In contrast, the rug-making events involved five to seven weavers working in a public rug shop, a space where visitors included customers and neighbouring shopkeepers. This collaboration, taking place in continual sessions, not only fostered encounters between the weavers and passers-by who expected weaving to happen at home but also had empowering and transformative effects on both the participants and myself.

In the project with the rug-weavers, the process of redesigning and weaving the rugs sparked meaningful conversations about the participants' private and public lives, and their gendered roles as women, mothers, daughters, or sisters. The project, therefore, has two distinct components: the collaborative process and the resulting artwork. Additionally, this project challenged the dominance of academic or modern artistic vocabularies, which often overlook the visual languages and voices of those being studied. For the participants, the journey of creating and then exhibiting their work became a process of reflection, empowerment, and a chance to be listened to and seen.

5.5.2 *Entangled personal and professional experiences and expertise*

For me, Amal, the second author of this chapter, in "Working with or on Moroccan Migrant Mothers", I initiated my thesis with the following sentence: *I did not choose this subject; it has (long ago) chosen me* (Rich, 1976). It is no coincidence that I "chose" to conduct ethnographic research and focus on female marriage migrants' lived realities and their agency as wives, mothers, and citizens. Both the experiences and memories that I carry as the child of a first-generation migrant woman and the experiences of becoming a migrantised mother inspired and gave direction to my doctoral research. Doing fieldwork being a first-time mother and with all the insecurities that come along with it, I gave my participants the feeling that I can and want to learn from them which also created more trust and balanced out our relationship.

Methodologically I build on Patricia Hill Collin's "outsider within" (1999) by which she argues that the combination of these positions can provide the researcher with unique insights into examining the social group to which the researcher belongs.

As part of my ethnographic fieldwork, I went to the women's homes and met their children and families. I also did my best to assist them when they needed help translating or understanding a letter or email regarding their residency status or with other administrative questions. Central here was that I cared and showed genuine interest in their private lives. During my fieldwork insider and outsider positions existed simultaneously: I shared the language (Moroccan-Arabic), ethnic and religious background, gender, age, and motherhood experiences, which proved to be significant for the confidence and ease with which the participants shared (parts of) their lives and stories with me. However, I am not a "marriage" migrant myself, I have a higher education degree, and I do not share the same socioeconomic status. Assumptions regarding the participants' and researchers' positions require careful examination as they reveal thought processes and, as such, are part of academic analysis (Lisiak, 2015). The research process thus became twofold: my own personal experiences as a young mother of Moroccan descent as well as my experiences with migration, motherhood, and care were academically challenged and legitimised, which led to a reflection and more transparency about my own positionality. Reflecting on my own researcher's position I became more aware both of the power differences (on different levels) and of my own prejudices as well. As a result I found it important to give back to my research participants. It was at this stage that the idea of arts-based action research saw light. Central in this arts-based research was the collective screening of the docu-film "WMLFM".

As part of the arts-based participatory research, I organised collective screenings of the docu-film "WMLFM", followed by group conversations with three different groups of Moroccan mothers living in Antwerp, all of whom had migrated to Belgium through marriage. In total, thirty women from both first- and later generations of immigrants participated in the screenings. Central to my approach was that I did not want to impose predetermined research questions but rather explore these questions collaboratively with the participants. This commitment to collaboration was expressed not only in the dialogical method, but also in the way the research process was organised. The women themselves chose the location of the screenings and conversations, which resulted in gatherings taking place in a local mosque, a community centre, and a theatre venue. Moreover, participants were encouraged to speak in whichever language they felt most comfortable—Darija, Amazigh, or Dutch (often interspersed with other languages). Since Darija and Dutch are my mother tongues, I was able to facilitate in those languages and arranged a translator to support communication in Amazigh.

The screenings were accompanied by the sharing of food, which served both as a means of creating conviviality and as a way of collectively reminiscing,

given the centrality of food practices in Moroccan history and everyday life. In addition, I also actively sought to lower the thresholds of participation for mothers who were often structurally excluded from cultural venues. For the screening that took place in the theatre, this meant negotiating with the staff of the venue to provide childcare services on site. Initially, the staff resisted this request, noting that they had never offered childcare before and feared it would be too difficult to arrange. I therefore had to advocate strongly for its necessity, emphasising that without such support, many of the women—particularly grandmothers who were less mobile and often depended on their daughters or sons to accompany them—would be unable to attend. Because these children frequently brought their own children along, several participants also arrived with grandchildren. Insisting on the provision of childcare thus became an important methodological and ethical intervention that directly enabled participation.

Attending these caregiving responsibilities resonates with Tronto's (1993) *ethics of care*, which emphasises responsiveness to the lived realities and interdependencies that shape people's capacity to participate. It also reflects broader critiques in participatory research (Cornwall, 2003) that warn against overlooking the structural barriers that silence or exclude certain groups. By persuading the staff to re-imagine their own practices and by arranging childcare as part of the research process, participation was reframed not as an individual responsibility but as a collective and relational endeavour—one that acknowledged women's roles as carers, their intergenerational dependencies, and the structural conditions necessary to create more equitable opportunities for their voices to be heard. Additionally flexibility in temporality was also crucial: allowing women to arrive late or leave early as needed, while ensuring ample time for those present to immerse themselves in the discussion, helped foster an inclusive environment in which all voices could be heard. In this sense, the process not only valued the diversity of experiences but also acknowledged the importance of cultural practices, linguistic plurality, and temporal flexibility in creating conditions for meaningful participation (Heron & Reason, 2006).

In doing so, the participating women and I co-created the topics of our conversations using the docu-film as a facilitator. During my fieldwork with these migrant mothers, I realised the different power imbalances that shaped our interactions on multiple levels. These differences weren't just about the socio-political aspects of migration but also about the ways we connected as women, as mothers, and as individuals navigating different cultural spaces. I was working with women who had experienced the complex realities of family migration, often without the privileges of citizenship or the ease of cultural integration. Yet, I was also conscious of how I, as a researcher, held a certain position of power—academically, professionally, and even culturally—while they occupied more marginalised spaces. What lasted with me most was how these dynamics weren't just external; they were internal, too. As a first-time mother with a migrant background, I found myself reflecting

on my own vulnerabilities. I could feel the challenges of balancing motherhood, identity, and belonging. This personal connection made me acutely aware of my own prejudices and assumptions, particularly as I witnessed these women's stories, their resilience, and their struggles. At times, I felt torn between my role as a researcher and my own experiences, as both a daughter of immigrants and a mother. These moments of reflection forced me to confront the biases I didn't fully realise I carried. The fieldwork became not just an exploration of others' experiences but also a journey into my own vulnerabilities and the complexities of my own identity. It was a rich experience that sparked both solidarity and empowerment between the participants and myself as a researcher. One that taught me to approach the research with even more empathy and humility, and to challenge my own preconceived notions of power, identity, and motherhood.

This experience set the foundation for a new collaboration with "Arenberg", the same venue that facilitated our docu-film screening, this time in a co-creative art-science project called "(Un)Certain Mothers¹" (2023) (Figure 5.4). This opportunity didn't just come to me by chance. It was the result of many years of voluntary work in the Flemish cultural sector, where people at the venue became familiar with both my research and personal background. This art-science project called CURIOUS involved co-creating an augmented lecture that would merge both scientific and artistic perspectives on gender empowerment, migration, and integration. Arenberg paired me with a talented young theatre maker and spoken word artist, Anna Khina, whose roots are in Kazakhstan. Together, we experienced a solidary relationship and explored key questions like: *what are the connections between mothers and daughters with a migration background? What are the generational differences, and what ties these two generations together and what connects us, as two women who are part of the so-called second generation of migrants in Belgium?*

Drawing on the concepts central to my doctoral research, such as "affective citizenship" and "care work", we sought answers to these generational questions. After weeks of conversations, writing, and rehearsing, we created an art-science performance aimed at empowering first-generation mothers through the amplification of their voices. Through dialogue, theatre, and poetry, we sought to explore the meaning of what is passed on and exchanged between generations of immigrants in Belgium. With "(Un)certain Mothers", my aim was to inspire and reach out to both first-generation migrant mothers and later generations, while offering a more nuanced and critical perspective to the general public of CURIOUS and Arenberg theatre. Importantly, some of the migrant mothers I had worked with during my doctoral study also attended the screening of the art-science performance, fostering a deeper sense of solidarity. Significantly, the performance did not only resonate with them on a personal level but also sparked their own creative ambitions: several of these mothers became inspired to explore theatre and storytelling as tools for self-expression, eventually initiating their own theatre project with the support of the Flemish socio-cultural CSO Empact vzw.

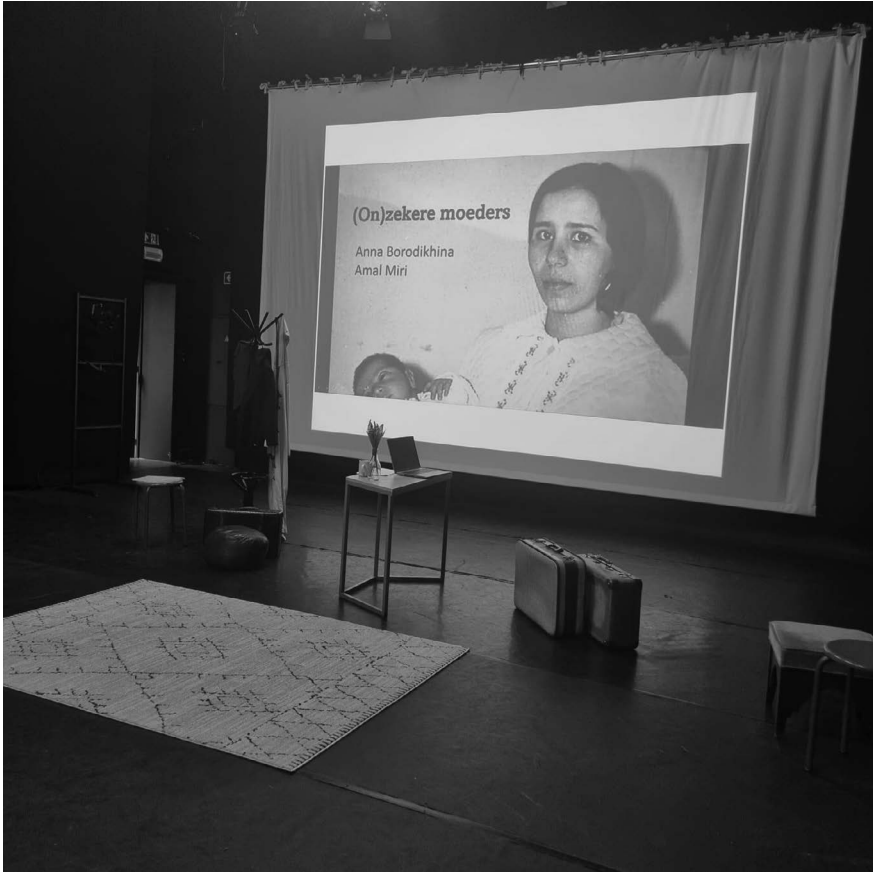


Figure 5.4 Stage set of “(Un)Certain Mothers” in Arenberg, December 2022

5.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, we have traced how participatory artistic research—rooted in an organic, relational epistemology—offers a vibrant alternative to the classical, objectifying approaches that Dougald Hine describes as methods for holding the world “at arm’s length” (Hine, 2023, p. 42). Rather than treating research as a distanced act of observation, our practice with migrant women, Iranian carpet weavers, and Moroccan mothers has embraced Reason and Bradbury’s (2008) notion of living inquiry, in which we (as two researchers) share much in common with the research participants, including similar concerns and/or curiosity. Therefore, the knowledge emerges through iterative cycles of reflection and action, embedded in concrete contexts (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). Similarly, drawing on Cahill’s framing of participatory research as inherently political and ethical, we intentionally embedded our

methods within shifting power dynamics by creating spaces where participants led the co-creation using their own artistic or other cultural skills. In doing so, responsiveness to context, positionality, and relationships remained central at every phase of the project (Cahill, 2007).

Our two case studies demonstrate that when researchers and participants co-create—whether through co-designing and weaving or the staging of a community film screening—they engage in reciprocal learning that disrupts the pursuit of fixed objectives and instead generates new forms of relationality. In the weaving workshops, shared language and embodied practice became “connecting threads” that fostered collective agency; in the documentary film project, collaborative curation moved beyond singular authorship to foreground the mothers’ own narratives. In both instances, Appadurai’s insight that co-creation “designs new social relations” holds true: our participants and we, as researchers, remapped roles, authorship, and authority in the very act of making (Appadurai, 2013).

These experiments in co-creation also answer longstanding critiques within anthropology about hierarchical power imbalances and the tyranny of descriptive accuracy (Foster, 1998; Ingold, 2018). While Ingold cautions that text-based ethnography can perpetuate distance and a one-sided gaze (Ingold, 2013/2018), our arts-based process—like the hybrid installations championed by Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics—embraced open-ended interpretation and multiple authorship (Bishop, 2004; Bourriaud, 2002). At the same time, we remained mindful of Cornwall’s warning against essentialising identities through collaborative methods (Cornwall, 2003) and Mohanty’s critique of prescriptive notions of empowerment that overlook individual agency (Mohanty, 1988). In practice, this meant continually negotiating consent, honouring each woman’s self-definition, and refusing any one model of participation. For example, in *Weaving the Past into the Present*, we explored two modes of collaboration. Co-design and co-weaving: the researcher and participants worked side-by-side to redesign traditional motifs and weave rugs that embodied stories resonant for many of the women involved. Responsive re-weaving: the researcher-artist then created her own rug based on the motifs the local weavers had already produced—amplifying their visual expressions and staging a visual dialogue between her work and theirs. Similarly, in “WMLFM”, collaboration extended beyond the film itself to include decisions about the venues of the screenings, the languages spoken during discussions, and the convivial sharing of food and time, which became both methodological and cultural tools for building solidarity. Here, participation was not only about responding to a film but about shaping the conditions of dialogue, ensuring care and accessibility across linguistic and cultural differences, and foregrounding the voices of women often marginalised in public discourse.

Ultimately, our work confirms that the boundaries between art, anthropology, and empowerment are porous. By treating research as an encounter—as a basket set adrift on the currents of mutual trust, doubt, and creation—we

open spaces where personal memory, political histories, and collective imagination can intertwine. In Hine's words, transcending the old "way of knowing the world" is not a rejection of rigor but a call to re-embed our inquiries within the living networks we study (Hine, 2023, p. 42). As we move forward, we envision artistic research as a site of knowledge production that is simultaneously bottom-up, in-between-ness, and world-making—one in which solidarity, reflexivity, and creative possibility become the very hallmarks of ethical research-practice.

Note

- 1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0x5-iD0fWxk&t=1644s>

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Part II

Situated Attitudes, Discourses and Implementation of Gender Empowerment in Europe



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6 Migration as a Gender Equality Issue?

A Comparative Study on Gender Attitudes across Europe

Martina Cvajner and Margherita Odasso

6.1 Introduction

In recent decades, gender equality has become a core value within European societies, shaping both public opinion and institutional frameworks (Inglehart & Norris, 2003). Across Europe, gender equality is recognised not only as a social ideal but also as a principle essential for fostering inclusive and democratic societies (Esping-Andersen, 2009). National and EU policies have increasingly promoted gender parity in domains such as the workplace and family life, reflecting a broader commitment to ensuring equal rights and opportunities for men and women. However, public attitudes towards gender equality remain diverse across European countries, shaped by cultural, historical, and socioeconomic contexts (Lewis, 2006).

In recent decades, a growing body of research has examined how gender attitudes evolve in relation to broader processes of social change, modernisation, and welfare state development. Early contributions in the field emphasised the link between economic development and the diffusion of egalitarian gender norms (Inglehart & Norris, 2003), while more recent studies have highlighted the role of welfare regimes and institutional configurations in shaping public attitudes (Esping-Andersen, 1999; Fortin, 2005; Pfau-Effinger, 2004). Scholars have also explored how cultural legacies, religion, generational change, and political contexts influence gender norms across societies (Grunow, Begall, & Buchler, 2018). Comparative studies, particularly those drawing on large-scale surveys such as the European Values Study (EVS) and the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP), have documented both convergence and persistent cross-national differences in gender attitudes across Europe (Keizer, Dykstra, & Poortman, 2010; Oláh, Kotowska, & Richter, 2014). While many European countries have seen growing support for gender equality, patterns of change remain uneven, with Southern and Eastern European societies generally lagging behind their Northern and Western counterparts (Fortin, 2005; Grunow et al., 2018).

This chapter examines how these attitudes have shifted across Europe, focusing on Austria, Belgium, Italy, Poland, and Spain, while also investigating

how migration intersects with these views in Italy, where social change has been comparatively slower (Saraceno, 2011).

Through a comparative lens, the chapter addresses two critical dimensions of gender equality: the evolution of public attitudes towards gender roles over time and the perspectives of individuals with a migrant background, particularly in Italy, to assess how migration influences these attitudes. These two aspects provide a nuanced understanding of how societal values around gender equality evolve within national contexts and how they interact with the beliefs held by migrant communities. This dual approach offers valuable insights into cross-national variations and the specific case of Italy, a country characterised by a growing migrant population and persistent traditional gender roles.

First, drawing on data from the EVS this chapter employs a longitudinal framework to analyse trends and divergences in public attitudes towards gender equality. How have gender inequalities changed over the past 30 years? What are the differences and commonalities among European countries? Are women systematically more supportive of gender equality than men? These are some of the questions that guide the analysis. Survey responses related to working mothers, women's participation in the labour market, and women's roles in family and society are examined to reveal how attitudes towards gender roles have evolved in Austria, Belgium, Italy, Poland, and Spain between 1990 and 2017.

Each country presents a unique socio-cultural and institutional context, contributing to a diverse landscape of public opinion. The selection of these five countries reflects their varied welfare and family policy models, which shape expectations around gender roles (Esping-Andersen, 1999). Austria and Belgium, for example, have well-established welfare states that support dual-income households through measures such as childcare subsidies and parental leave, facilitating higher rates of female workforce participation. Spain has experienced a marked shift towards gender equality since its transition from authoritarianism to democracy in the late 20th century, supported by policies aimed at balancing work and family life (Ramos, Perera, & Duque, 2017). Poland represents a unique case, transitioning from a socialist to a capitalist economy while undergoing significant social and economic transformations upon joining the European Union (Matysiak & Steinmetz, 2008). Italy, with its strong emphasis on family roles and limited state support for work-life balance, remains more conservative, offering a compelling backdrop to explore how migration influences gender attitudes.

In the Italian context, while gender equality has become a prominent topic in public and political discourse, systematic analyses of gender attitudes remain relatively fragmented. Seminal work by Saraceno (2011) and Naldini and Jurado (2013) has highlighted the persistence of familistic welfare arrangements and the slow pace of change in gender norms. Other studies have explored generational and regional variations in gender attitudes (Rosina & Fraboni, 2004), and the enduring gap between normative support for gender equality and the division of unpaid care work (Bettio, Verashchagina, Mairhuber, & Kanjoo-Mrčela, 2009). Meanwhile, migration scholars have

begun to address how migrant populations contribute to Italy's gender dynamics, particularly in relation to the care sector and domestic work (Am-brosini, 2020; Marchetti, 2013), yet much less is known about migrants' evolving attitudes towards gender roles and their interaction with prevailing Italian values. By integrating these strands of research, this chapter seeks to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the Italian case.

Second, a significant component of this chapter is the focused analysis of migrant perspectives on gender equality in Italy. Migrant communities have increasingly shaped debates on cultural integration and gender norms. There is a prevalent belief in many European societies, including Italy, that migrants bring more traditional attitudes towards gender roles, potentially challenging efforts to promote gender parity (Ridgeway, 2011). Such views often raise concerns about how migrants might influence societal gender dynamics. However, migrant attitudes are diverse and may shift over time as individuals integrate into host societies (Esping-Andersen, 2009). This analysis contributes to ongoing debates in migration studies and gender equality discourse by addressing whether migrant beliefs align with or diverge from prevailing attitudes in their host societies. This section of the chapter draws on data from the 2011–2012 Survey on the Social Conditions and Integration of Foreigners in Italy, which was conducted by the Italian National Statistics Institute (ISTAT).

Our findings regarding the change of gender attitudes in Europe underscores the intricate relationship between welfare regimes, cultural legacies, and public attitudes. Overall, public support for gender equality in all its different dimensions has increased in the last three decades in the five European countries considered; however, every national context presents its own specificity. In this regard, the theories of Esping-Andersen (1999) and Pfau-Effinger (2004) shed light on these differences, providing a critical framework for understanding how state intervention can reinforce or challenge traditional gender norms. While modernisation and economic growth are critical drivers of progress, they are not sufficient to guarantee widespread attitudinal change. Effective policies must address the structural and cultural dimensions of inequality, ensuring that progress in one domain reinforces advancements in the other.

Regarding the views on gender roles of migrants in Italy, this chapter shows that, over time, migrants' attitudes tend to converge with those of the host society, particularly among women. This gradual shift in attitudes underscores the transformative potential of prolonged exposure to the host country's societal norms. Therefore, it is not reasonable to consider migrants' supposedly traditional views on gender roles to be a long-term obstacle to gender equality in destination countries. Overall, this chapter highlights the multifaceted nature of gender equality, showing that it is neither a universal ideal nor a straightforward trajectory. Rather, it is a dynamic process shaped by the interplay of demographic factors, institutional frameworks, economic conditions, and cultural legacies. As Europe continues to grapple with these

challenges, the findings presented here underscore the importance of tailored, multi-dimensional approaches to fostering gender parity.

6.2 Data and methods

This chapter analyses attitudes towards gender roles and gender equality using two primary data sources: the EVS—and a national dataset from the ISTAT on the social conditions and integration of foreigners. These complementary datasets allow for an exploration of the factors influencing public perceptions and behaviours related to gender equality across diverse national and migratory contexts.

The EVS is a large-scale, cross-national, longitudinal research program on fundamental human values (<https://europeanvaluesstudy.eu/>). It began in 1981 when a thousand citizens in the then European Member States were interviewed using standardised questionnaires. The survey is repeated every nine years in a varying number of countries. EVS provides insights into the ideas, beliefs, preferences, attitudes, values, and opinions of citizens across Europe. It is a unique research project on how Europeans think about life, family, work, religion, politics, and society. The EVS forms the basis of the chapter's examination of gender equality attitudes in Austria, Belgium, Italy, Poland, and Spain. This chapter provides longitudinal insights into European social values from 1990 to 2017. The total sample size is over 31,000 individuals. By focusing on responses related to employment rights for men and women, the role of working mothers, and women's broader societal roles, the EVS enables a comparative analysis of how attitudes evolve within distinct national contexts.

This chapter analyses three specific questions. Respondents are asked to indicate whether they agree or disagree with the following statements. (1) When jobs are scarce, men have more rights to a job than women. (2) A preschool child is likely to suffer if their mother works. (3) A job is alright but what most women really want is a home and children. The variables were recoded as dichotomous: a value of 1 indicates a person in favour of gender equality, and a value of 0 indicates a person who is not. Finally, the average response in favour of gender equality was calculated for the five countries and for different years, broken down by gender.

The second part of the chapter draws on the 2011–2012 ISTAT Survey on the Social Conditions and Integration of Foreigners in Italy (<https://www.istat.it/en/microdata/social-condition-and-integration-of-foreign-citizens/>). This dataset includes responses from over 25,000 individuals and 9,500 households, focusing on first- and second-generation migrants aged 18 and older. It examines attitudes towards gender roles through three questions related to women's caregiving responsibilities, men's involvement in household tasks, and family decision-making. Specifically, individuals are asked to indicate whether they agree or disagree with the following statements: (1) Women should only take care of the home and family. (2) Men should help women with household chores. (3) The man should make the most important

decisions concerning the family. Regrettably, the questions and wording in the EVS and the ISTAT survey are not entirely consistent, meaning it is not possible to draw any direct comparisons between the views of the general population in various European countries and those of migrants in Italy. Additional key factors considered in the analysis of migrants' attitudes towards gender include age at arrival, length of stay, and country of origin. The latter focuses on four major migrant groups in Italy: Romanians, Albanians, Chinese, and Moroccans. These variables provide insights into how acculturation processes and cultural backgrounds shape migrants' perspectives on gender roles.

6.3 Gender equality in the workplace: a shared story or just an idea?

To what extent do societies truly embrace the principle of gender equality in the workplace, and how do sociopolitical contexts shape its realisation? While gender equality in the workplace is widely endorsed as an ideal, the realities across Austria, Belgium, Italy, Poland, and Spain reveal significant differences. [Figure 6.1](#) compares male and female attitudes towards workplace

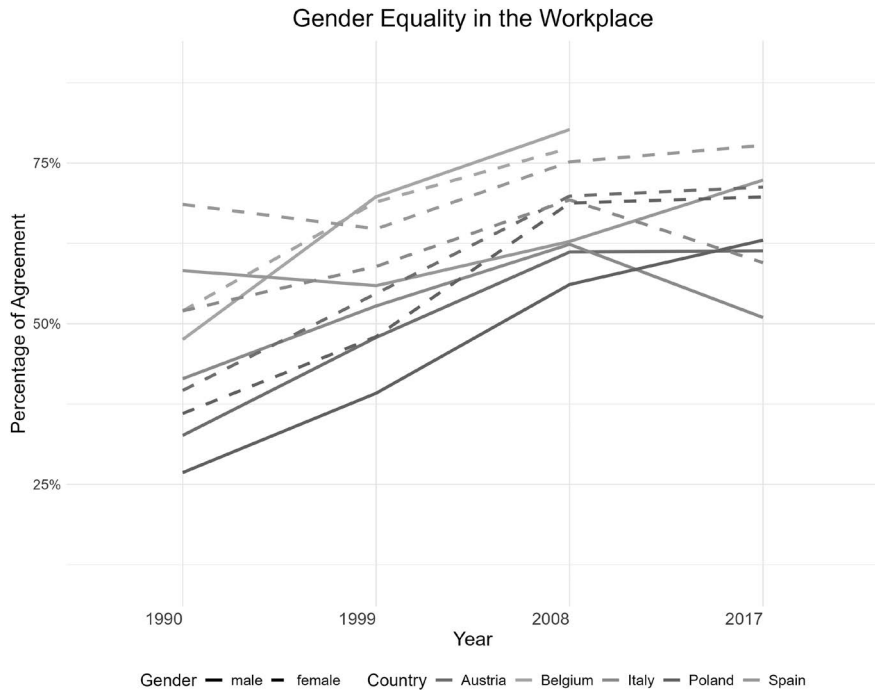


Figure 6.1 Opinions on gender equality in the workplace, by gender and country; percentages

Source: European Values Study (EVS), 1990–2017.

equality in the European countries considered. It shows that support for gender equality in the workplace is increasing in all the countries considered. However, the rate of change has slowed down in the last decade. In Italy, for example, support for gender equality has even decreased from 2008 to 2017. Although there are significant national variations in the level of support for gender equality and its historical evolution, a common feature is that women tend to support gender equality more than men do. These findings raise critical questions: Are national discrepancies rooted in cultural preferences, or do they stem from the structural influence of policy frameworks and welfare regimes? This paragraph explores these dynamics through the lens of cross-national data, interrogating how public attitudes are shaped by institutional contexts and historical legacies.

As shown, Belgium consistently ranks among the most supportive nation for gender equality in the workplace, with high levels of support reported by both men and women. This trend aligns closely with [Esping-Andersen's \(1999\)](#) concept of the “de-familialised” welfare state, where public provisions, such as subsidised childcare and paid parental leave, reduce reliance on women's unpaid domestic labour. These policies enable higher female workforce participation and reinforce gender equality as both a social norm and a policy priority. Belgium offers a particularly illustrative case of how state intervention can influence societal attitudes. As [Lewis \(2006\)](#) and [Pfau-Effinger \(2004\)](#) argue, welfare regimes that actively alleviate domestic responsibilities create conditions for gender equality by reshaping public perceptions of gender roles. For example, Belgium's comprehensive family policies—ranging from affordable childcare to flexible parental leave—have facilitated high female workforce participation, contributing to societal consensus on workplace parity. [Figure 6.1](#) underscores this trend, showing robust support for gender equality among both men and women. However, [Esping-Andersen's \(1999\)](#) insights prompt further reflection: even in de-familialised welfare regimes, deeply ingrained cultural norms around masculinity may limit full attitudinal convergence.

Italy's trajectory reflects the challenges of fostering gender equality within a “familialist” welfare regime. [Figure 6.1](#) illustrates the structural barriers rooted in Italy's limited state support for working families, including inadequate childcare provisions and inflexible employment policies ([Saraceno, 2011](#)). Without robust institutional supports, caregiving responsibilities remain disproportionately assigned to women, reinforcing traditional gender roles and limiting women's economic participation. [Pfau-Effinger's \(2004\)](#) theory of gendered welfare regimes aptly describes this dynamic, emphasising how welfare policies—or their absence—shape societal norms. [Ridgeway's \(2011\)](#) “gender framing” theory further explains how traditional expectations around masculinity and femininity perpetuate these roles in patriarchal contexts like Italy, where caregiving is widely seen as a woman's responsibility.

Poland presents a contrasting narrative, offering insights into how economic pressures can drive attitudinal shifts. Historically among the most

conservative countries regarding gender roles, Poland has seen significant changes since its transition to a market economy and integration into the EU. [Matysiak and Steinmetz \(2008\)](#) argue that economic liberalisation and EU labour mobility have catalysed these shifts, challenged traditional norms, and fostered a re-evaluation of gender roles. [Fortin's \(2005\)](#) findings further suggest that economic necessity, combined with labour market opportunities, can prompt progressive changes in public opinion. However, Poland's limited family support infrastructure—such as the absence of comprehensive childcare policies—continues to constrain women's ability to balance work and family life. This highlights a key limitation of economic pressures: while they can initiate shifts in attitudes, structural supports are essential to sustain and deepen these changes.

Spain has experienced substantial progress in workplace equality, driven by a combination of socioeconomic development and state intervention. As [Figure 6.1](#) demonstrates, Spanish men and women report increasing support for gender parity, reflecting broader societal changes linked to modernisation and welfare policies. [Inglehart and Norris's \(2003\)](#) modernisation theory helps contextualise Spain's advancements, linking economic growth and social development to shifts in cultural values. However, disparities persist, particularly in rural regions and among older populations, suggesting that progress is uneven. Spain's case illustrates the multifaceted nature of societal change, where structural policies must interact with cultural dynamics to achieve lasting equality.

6.4 Attitudes towards working mothers: a changing landscape?

Building on the previous discussion of workplace gender equality, a pertinent question arises: How do societies perceive the role of working mothers, and how do these perceptions align with broader shifts in gender norms? [Figure 6.2](#) offers a comparative look at male and female attitudes in the five countries we concentrate on, revealing divergent views shaped by welfare policies, economic conditions, and cultural frameworks. Interestingly, support for gender equality is lower when it comes to working mothers than it is for equality in the workplace. The data illustrate that while acceptance of maternal employment is increasing, the pace and depth of change vary significantly across these countries.

The evolving perspectives on working mothers in Europe provide a lens to examine the intersection of economic necessity, family policies, and societal norms. Among the five nations under study, Belgium and Spain stand out for their progressive attitudes. By 2017, nearly 75% of Spanish respondents believed that a mother's employment does not inherently conflict with her children's well-being. This shift, and particularly the steep rise in the last decade, is striking when you consider Spain's relatively traditional starting point in the late 20th century. As [Ramos et al. \(2017\)](#) note, Spain's democratic transition catalysed profound social changes, including family policy

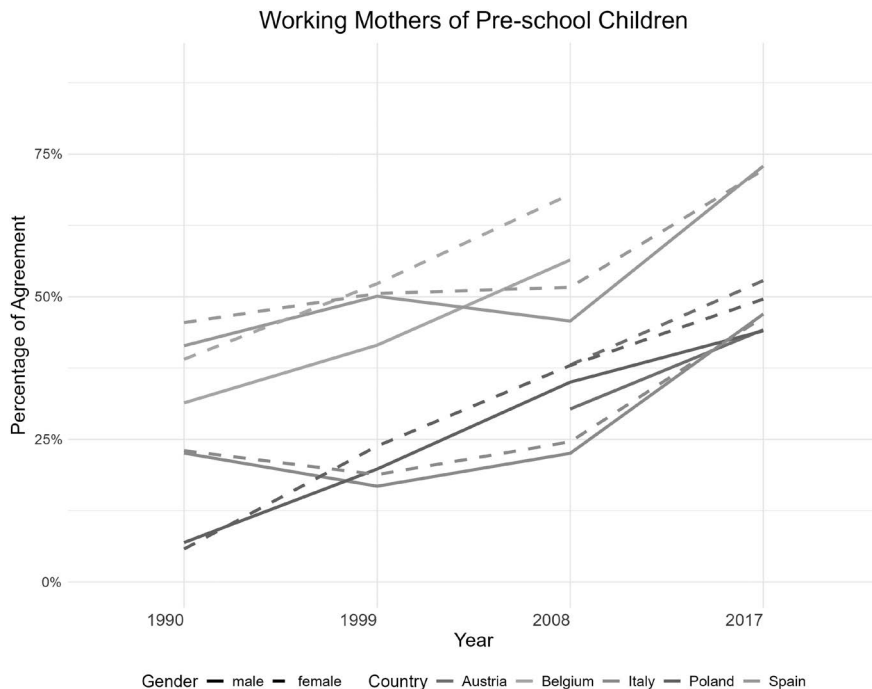


Figure 6.2 Opinions on working mothers of pre-school children, by gender and country; percentages

Source: European Values Study (EVS), 1990–2017.

reforms that redefined gender roles. Expanded childcare provisions and paid parental leave laid the foundation for a dual-income family model (Gerson, 2010; Hochschild and Machung, 1989), normalising maternal employment as both socially acceptable and economically essential. Belgium mirrors this trend, with consistently high public support for maternal employment. This acceptance is strongly linked to the country's well-established de-familialised welfare state, characterised by extensive childcare services and parental leave policies (Esping-Andersen, 1999). These institutional supports alleviate the caregiving burden on families, enabling both parents to participate fully in the workforce.

Poland offers an intriguing case of cultural adaptation driven by economic pressures. In 1990, only 6% of Polish women believed working mothers could maintain a positive relationship with their children, a figure that grew to over 50% by 2017, as shown in Figure 6.2. This dramatic change aligns with Poland's integration into the European Union and its associated labour market opportunities. As Matysiak and Steinmetz (2008) suggest, economic liberalisation and increased female workforce participation have been instrumental in challenging traditional gender roles. Fortin's (2005) findings

further support the idea that economic necessity often compels societies to re-evaluate entrenched norms. Yet, Poland's limited family support policies, such as inadequate childcare services, temper this progress, highlighting the limitations of economic change without robust institutional backing.

Along with Poland, Italy has one of the lowest levels of agreement for gender equality. Only 45% of Italian men and 55% of Italian women express support for working mothers, reflecting persistent societal conservatism. Italy's reliance on a family-centred welfare model, as described by [Naldini and Jurado \(2013\)](#), reinforces traditional caregiving roles by failing to provide sufficient institutional support, such as affordable childcare or flexible work arrangements. [Pfau-Effinger's \(2004\)](#) framework aptly describes this dynamic, where the absence of public provisions perpetuates reliance on women's unpaid labour, thereby sustaining traditional norms. [Ridgeway's \(2011\)](#) theory of "gender framing" offers further insight, suggesting that societal expectations around masculinity and femininity are particularly resistant to change in patriarchal settings like Italy. Without significant policy shifts, these traditional attitudes towards maternal employment are likely to persist.

Austria occupies a middle ground, demonstrating moderate support for working mothers. While Austria's welfare policies provide some support for dual-income families, cultural expectations often lag behind structural advancements. While institutional supports can facilitate change, cultural norms require a longer timeline to adapt fully. [Esping-Andersen's \(1999\)](#) concept of de-familialisation partially applies to Austria, but the country's relatively conservative cultural backdrop continues to moderate the pace of attitudinal shifts.

These emerging patterns highlight the critical role of policy in shaping societal attitudes towards working mothers. In countries like Belgium and Spain, where institutional supports actively promote gender equality, maternal employment has become broadly accepted. These cases affirm [Lewis's \(2006\)](#) argument that policies fostering work-life balance are instrumental in embedding gender equality into societal norms. Conversely, Italy's and, to a lesser extent, Austria's conservative attitudes illustrate the limitations of cultural change in the absence of robust structural supports. Poland's case, meanwhile, demonstrates how economic pressures can drive significant shifts, even without comprehensive welfare policies, though such progress may lack depth without sustained institutional investment.

6.5 Women's societal roles: public attitudes and persistent challenges

Building on the evolving attitudes towards workplace equality and maternal employment discussed earlier, another fundamental question emerges: How do societies perceive women's broader societal roles, particularly within families and communities? [Figure 6.3](#) examines male and female perspectives on gender parity in societal roles across the five countries revealing significant

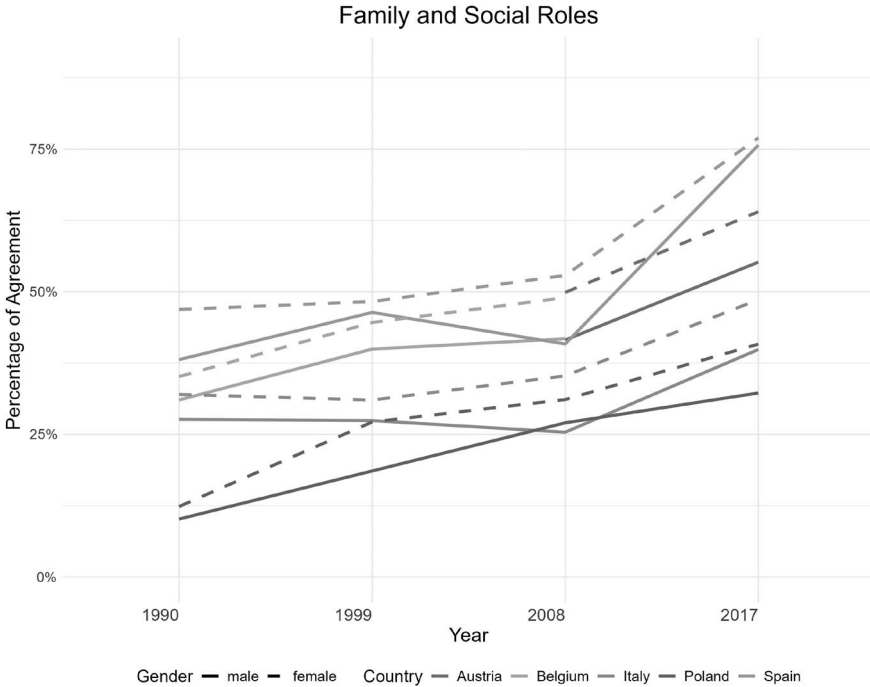


Figure 6.3 Opinions on family and social roles, by gender and country; percentages
Source: European Values Study (EVS), 1990–2017.

variation shaped by cultural legacies, welfare systems, and economic structures. The data illustrate that while public opinion in some countries has shifted towards greater equality, deeply entrenched norms continue to constrain progress in others. What drives these differences, and how can institutional and cultural changes align to reshape public perceptions?

Belgium and Spain are notable for their progressive attitudes; by the mid-2010s, around 80% of respondents in Spain supported gender parity in family roles. This change is particularly significant in Spain when considering the period from 2008 to 2017. [Figure 6.3](#) highlights this broad acceptance of shared responsibilities between men and women in domestic life, reflecting the influence of policies that promote dual-income households and equitable caregiving. As [Lewis \(2006\)](#) and [Pfau-Effinger \(2004\)](#) argue, welfare systems that alleviate domestic burdens on women contribute significantly to fostering egalitarian public attitudes. In Spain, these shifts are rooted in the country's democratisation and subsequent policy reforms, which expanded access to childcare, parental leave, and flexible work arrangements ([Ramos et al., 2017](#)).

Belgium's case similarly demonstrates how comprehensive welfare policies create an environment conducive to gender equality. As shown, Belgium maintains high levels of public support for gender parity in societal

roles, underpinned by accessible childcare, extensive parental leave, and strong work-life balance measures. These policies not only facilitate women's economic participation but also encourage men's involvement in domestic responsibilities. Hook's (2006) research highlights the importance of such institutional supports in promoting shared household labour, suggesting that policies enabling men to participate actively in caregiving contribute to broader societal acceptance of egalitarian family roles. This alignment between policy and public attitudes positions Belgium as a model for integrating gender equality into societal norms.

In stark contrast, Italy continues to exhibit low levels of support for gender parity in family roles. [Figure 6.3](#) reveals that only 40% of Italian men endorse equal roles within the family, reflecting the persistence of traditional expectations around masculinity and femininity. [Ridgeway's \(2011\)](#) theory of "gender framing" provides a compelling explanation, suggesting that deeply rooted social expectations about male breadwinning hinder shifts in attitudes. Italy's welfare state, characterised by minimal public support for caregiving, further reinforces these norms. Without accessible childcare or policies supporting dual-income households, caregiving remains predominantly a woman's responsibility, perpetuating traditional family structures ([Naldini & Jurado, 2013](#)). This dynamic not only limits women's societal engagement but also curtails progress towards gender equality in Italy's public and private spheres.

Poland presents a more nuanced case. While public attitudes towards women's roles remain conservative, there has been a gradual shift towards egalitarianism. Economic liberalisation and integration into the European Union have played pivotal roles in this transformation, exposing Polish society to new labour market dynamics and gender norms. [Fortin's \(2005\)](#) findings suggest that economic necessity often compels societies to re-evaluate traditional roles, particularly in contexts like Poland, where dual-income households have become increasingly common. However, without robust family policies to support work-life balance, these shifts remain incomplete. The absence of comprehensive childcare provisions and flexible work arrangements limits women's ability to engage fully in the workforce, curbing societal acceptance of gender parity.

Austria occupies an intermediate position. Austria's welfare policies provide moderate support for dual-income families, yet cultural expectations around domestic responsibilities remain slow to evolve. [Aboim's \(2010\)](#) research on the cultural resistance to gender equality within private family life offers insights into this dynamic, suggesting that while public attitudes may shift towards parity, deeply ingrained norms around caregiving often persist, especially in contexts lacking robust policy frameworks.

The patterns observed illustrate the critical interplay between cultural norms, institutional frameworks, and economic conditions in shaping public attitudes towards women's societal roles. Belgium and Spain highlight how progressive policies can foster societal acceptance of gender parity, while

Italy demonstrates the enduring influence of traditional norms in the absence of structural support. Poland's case underscores the role of economic pressures in driving incremental change, though without complementary policies, these shifts remain limited. Austria occupies a transitional space, reflecting both progress and persistent cultural barriers.

6.6 And what about migrants?

How do the patterns of gender equality we have observed resonate with the experiences and views of first- and second-generation migrants? [Table 6.1](#) offers a comparative look at attitudes towards gender roles among migrants in Italy, disaggregated by their age at arrival. The generational divide is striking. First-generation migrants—those who arrived as adults—are more likely to hold traditional views, with over 40% agreeing or strongly agreeing that women should focus solely on home and childcare. By contrast, second-generation migrants, those born in Italy or arriving during early childhood, are 10 percentage points less likely to endorse this perspective, reflecting a more egalitarian outlook. What accounts for these differences, and what do they tell us about the processes of integration and cultural adaptation?

Table 6.1 Opinions on gender roles, by age at arrival in Italy; percentages

	<i>Born in Italy or arrived aged 0–5</i>	<i>Arrived in Italy aged 6–12</i>	<i>Arrived in Italy aged 13–17</i>	<i>Arrived in Italy aged +18</i>
Women should only look after the home and children				
Strongly agree	12.5	10.7	15.7	17.4
Agree	20.0	21.4	23.6	24.6
Disagree	29.2	32.2	31.5	31.2
Strongly Disagree	38.4	35.8	29.3	26.8
N	305	562	1,077	14,042
Men should help with housework				
Strongly agree	48.5	47.1	43.0	41.8
Agree	38.7	41.0	39.9	40.4
Disagree	10.5	8.7	12.6	13.1
Strongly Disagree	2.3	3.2	4.5	4.7
N	305	561	1,079	14,037
Men should make decisions about the family				
Strongly agree	12.6	11.8	17.3	18.2
Agree	26.5	25.0	27.8	27.1
Disagree	22.5	31.7	25.7	27.3
Strongly Disagree	38.4	31.6	29.2	27.3
N	302	561	1,079	14,033

Source: Survey on Social Condition and Integration of Foreign Citizens, 2011–2012.

The younger the age at arrival, the more egalitarian the views—a pattern that emphasises the significance of early exposure to the host country's cultural and social norms. Migrants who arrive as children or adolescents experience key developmental stages in the destination country, allowing Italian socialisation to influence their worldviews. Schools, in particular, play a crucial role as spaces of integration, where migrant children interact with peers and encounter values that challenge traditional norms. This aligns with [Portes and Rumbaut's \(2001\)](#) analysis of the second generation as cultural intermediaries, navigating between the traditions of their family and the norms of the host society. Education emerges here not only as a mechanism for social mobility but also as a key driver of attitudinal change, fostering exposure to and internalisation of less traditional views on gender roles.

Interestingly, [Table 6.1](#) shows that attitudes towards men's involvement in housework are relatively egalitarian across all groups. Agreement is high even among first-generation migrants, with fewer than 15% expressing disagreement. Among second-generation migrants, disagreement drops to around 10%, suggesting a consensus that men should play a role in domestic responsibilities. These findings align with broader trends in modern societies, where dual-income households are increasingly normalised, challenging the traditional gender division of labour ([Esping-Andersen, 2009](#)). However, [Figure 6.4](#) also underscores the persistence of patriarchal norms in decision-making roles. One in four second-generation migrants still agrees or strongly agrees that men should make family decisions—a sentiment even more pronounced among first-generation migrants. [Ridgeway's \(2011\)](#) “gender framing” theory offers a useful lens here, highlighting the resilience of cultural expectations around authority and leadership within families, which are often the slowest aspects of gender roles to evolve.

Crucially, the data reveal no substantial differences between men and women in how age at arrival affects attitudes. This challenges the common assumption—observed in native populations—that women are typically more progressive than men regarding gender equality ([Inglehart & Norris, 2003](#)). The absence of such a gender gap among migrants suggests that integration into the host society's norms, rather than gender itself, is the dominant factor shaping views. This finding also reflects Berry's (1997) acculturation framework, which emphasises the interplay between cultural retention and adaptation in shaping migrants' values.

Yet, the persistence of traditional views among first-generation migrants raises important questions. Adult migrants bring with them deeply rooted beliefs formed in their countries of origin, where traditional gender roles may be more entrenched. These norms, as [Phalet and Kosic \(2006\)](#) argue, can be resistant to change, particularly in contexts where integration opportunities are limited. On the other hand, the second generation's exposure to Italian norms, particularly through education and peer interaction, facilitates the adoption of more egalitarian perspectives. Nevertheless, even among the second generation, the relatively high agreement with traditional views on

family decision-making indicates that certain norms remain resilient. This underscores the importance of targeted initiatives to address patriarchal attitudes that persist even in contexts of integration.

[Table 6.1](#) paints a nuanced picture of change and continuity. On one hand, the generational shift towards egalitarianism is evident, driven by the integration of second-generation migrants into a society where traditional gender norms are less dominant. On the other hand, the enduring patriarchal views around family decision-making signal that integration alone may not be sufficient to challenge deeply ingrained cultural norms. Policies that promote not only access to education but also the active engagement of migrants in broader societal discussions around gender equality are crucial. Community-based initiatives and public campaigns, aimed at challenging traditional norms and fostering inclusive dialogues, could play an essential role in this regard.

In conclusion, the attitudes reflected in [Table 6.1](#) suggest that migrants' perspectives on gender roles are influenced by their age at arrival and their subsequent opportunity to engage with Italian societal norms. Second-generation migrants and those who arrived as children are more likely to hold egalitarian views, which highlights the potential impact of integration during the formative years. However, the persistence of patriarchal attitudes in certain areas, such as family decision-making, underscores the need for continued efforts to challenge traditional norms within migrant communities. Integration is not a one-way process but a dynamic interaction between individuals and their new cultural contexts, requiring sustained structural and societal support to foster genuine shifts towards gender equality.

The dynamics of integration and shifting gender attitudes among migrants become even more pronounced when considering the length of time migrants have spent in Italy and their country of origin. [Figure 6.4](#) illustrates how opinions on women's roles in the family evolve based on years since arrival, with notable differences between male and female migrants. Among women, the likelihood of disagreeing with traditional views on gender roles increases significantly over time, with a 10-percentage-point difference between those who have been in Italy for less than three years and those who have lived there for more than nine years. In contrast, men show only a modest shift, with a mere 3-percentage-point difference across the same categories. This disparity underscores the gendered nature of integration processes, where women are more likely to encounter opportunities for cultural interaction and exposure to Italian norms, leading to shifts in their perceptions of gender roles. These findings align with [Phalet and Kosic's \(2006\)](#) argument that gender-specific acculturation experiences often shape how migrants adapt to host society norms.

Interestingly, [Figures 6.5](#) and [6.6](#) indicate that views on men's roles—such as their involvement in housework and decision-making responsibilities—show similar patterns of change for both genders. While the evolution of attitudes towards women's roles demonstrates marked gendered differences in acculturation, the data on men's roles suggest that shared societal influences

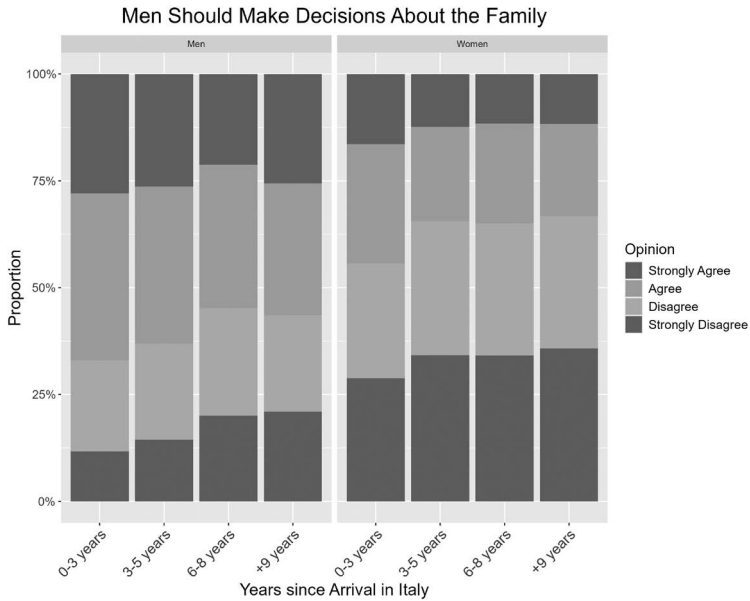


Figure 6.4 Opinions on gender roles, by gender and years since arrival in Italy; percentages

Source: Survey on Social Condition and Integration of Foreign Citizens, 2011–2012.

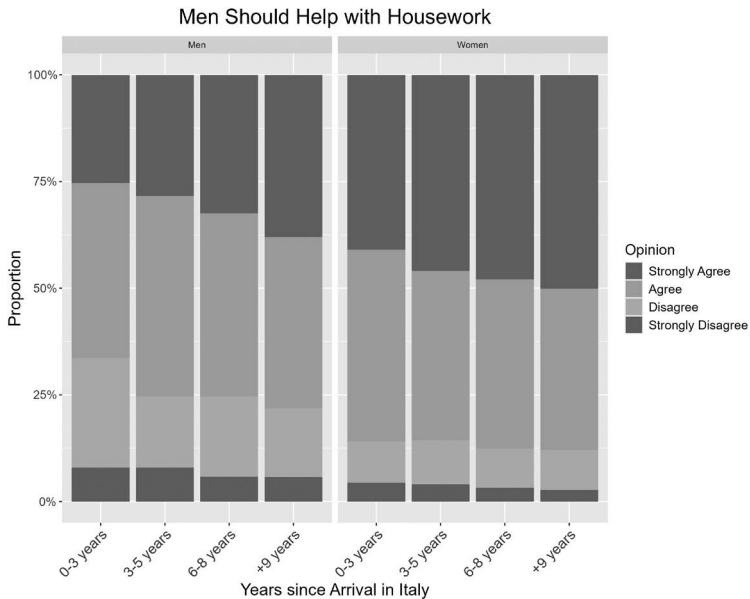


Figure 6.5 Opinions on gender roles, by gender and years since arrival in Italy; percentages

Source: Survey on Social Condition and Integration of Foreign Citizens, 2011–2012.

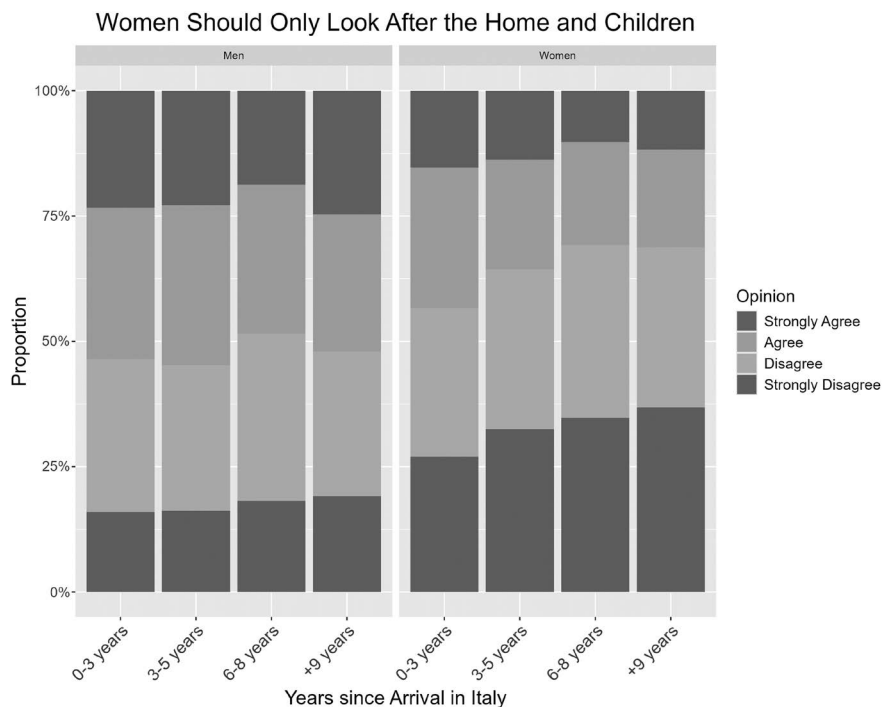


Figure 6.6 Opinions on gender roles, by gender and years since arrival in Italy; percentages

Source: Survey on Social Condition and Integration of Foreign Citizens, 2011–2012.

may moderate these changes more uniformly across genders. This reflects [Esping-Andersen's \(2009\)](#) observation that contemporary economic and social pressures increasingly challenge traditional divisions of labour, making gender equity in family roles a growing normative expectation, even for migrants with conservative origins.

Further complexity arises when considering the impact of migrants' countries of origin on their views. [Figure 6.7](#) reveals significant variations in attitudes towards gender roles among migrants from different countries. Romanian and Albanian migrants exhibit comparatively egalitarian perspectives, which may reflect the longer history of migration from these countries to Italy and their relatively higher levels of integration. These groups often develop stronger ties to the host society, as [Portes and Rumbaut \(2001\)](#) note, internalising local norms and values over time. This process of gradual alignment with host country norms, often facilitated by education and workplace interactions, supports DiMaggio and Mohr's (1985) assertion that institutional engagement plays a critical role in shaping cultural adaptation.

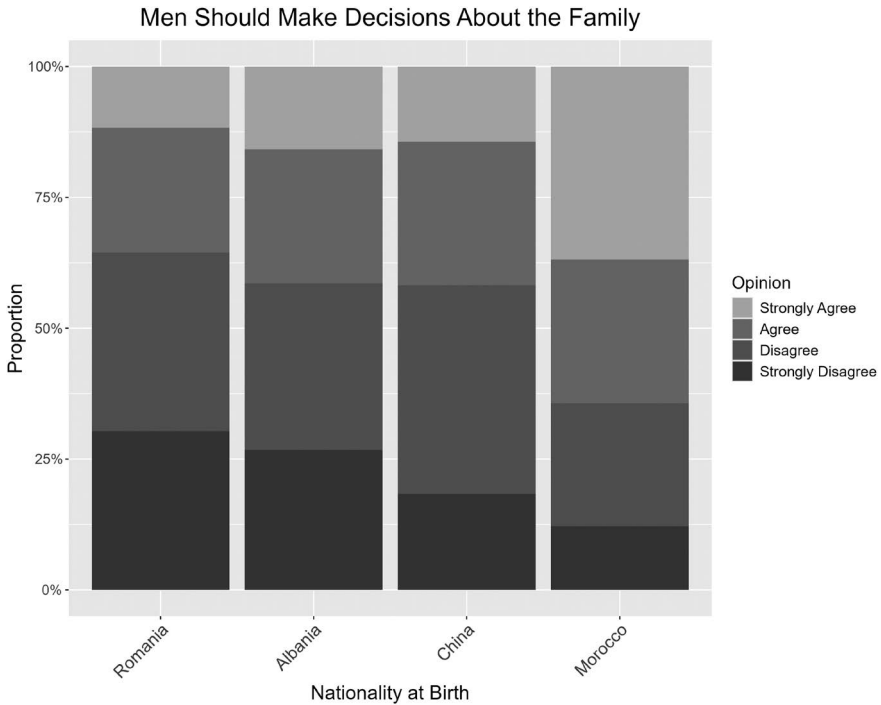


Figure 6.7 Opinions on gender roles, by nationality at birth

Source: Survey on Social Condition and Integration of Foreign Citizens, 2011–2012.

Conversely, migrants from China and Morocco tend to hold more traditional views. Nearly 70% of Moroccan respondents agree or strongly agree that women should only stay at home and care for the family, a sentiment echoed in their attitudes towards men's roles. These findings likely reflect the cultural norms and expectations prevalent in their countries of origin, which may persist even after migration. Berry's (1997) acculturation model provides a useful framework for interpreting these trends, emphasising the interplay between cultural retention and adaptation. Migrants from countries with pronounced patriarchal norms may face greater difficulty in reconciling these values with the relatively more egalitarian context of Italy, particularly when integration opportunities are limited. Notably, views on gender equality can vary significantly depending on the migrant's rural or urban background, level of education, and occupation. Migrant communities are very diverse internally, and gender norms vary significantly within them. This analysis is intended as a general reflection, not as a suggestion that migrants always become more in favour of gender equality through integration into Italian society.

The observed differences in attitudes by country of origin and duration of stay highlight the diverse trajectories of integration and the critical role

of cultural heritage in shaping initial perspectives. Yet, over time, exposure to Italian societal norms fosters greater alignment with egalitarian views, particularly among women. This reinforces Pfau-Effinger's (2004) theory of gendered welfare regimes, which suggests that the institutional and cultural context of the host society plays a decisive role in reshaping gender norms. Policies promoting intercultural exchange and facilitating migrant integration, particularly through education and labour market access, can help accelerate these shifts, ensuring that all migrant groups have the opportunity to engage fully with the societal values of the host country.

6.7 Conclusion

This chapter provides an analysis of changes in public opinion in Europe regarding gender equality over the last three decades, from 1990 to 2017, based on EVS data. Taking a comparative perspective on Belgium, Austria, Italy, Poland, and Spain, it considers how people's attitudes change according to a country's specific structural context, public policies, economic factors, and cultural aspects. Moreover, the second section of the chapter examines perspectives on gender roles among immigrants in Italy. Compared to other considered European countries, Italy presents particularly conservative positions, with slow and often stagnant progress towards gender equality. In this context, the chapter uses ISTAT data to explore public opinion on gender roles within the migrant community, revealing how factors such as age upon arrival in Italy, length of time spent in the host country, and gender shape these attitudes.

Collectively, the findings of the first section of the chapter underscore the complex and multi-layered nature of gender equality in Europe, illustrating that while progress towards gender parity is discernible, the degree and speed of change vary significantly across national context. Structural supports, such as family policies that facilitate work-life balance, play an instrumental role in shaping public attitudes, but deeply embedded cultural expectations continue to influence perceptions of women's roles within the family. As illustrated by the differing experiences of Belgium, Spain, Italy, and Poland, the journey towards gender equality in Europe is influenced by an intricate blend of economic conditions, institutional frameworks, and cultural values. These cases highlight the importance of state intervention in accelerating attitudinal change, particularly in settings where traditional norms remain strong. Pfau-Effinger's (2004) model of gendered welfare regimes proves essential in understanding these dynamics, emphasising the critical role of policy in creating conditions that support or hinder gender parity. As such, the pace of progress in advancing gender equality across Europe remains uneven, shaped by each nation's unique combination of social, economic, and cultural factors.

With respect to the attitudes of migrants in Italy, even if the data do not allow for a direct comparison between natives and migrants, some conclusions can still be drawn. The main pattern that emerges is that migrants tend to hold more equal views on gender equality if they arrived in Italy at a

young age or were born in the country than if they arrived as adults. Furthermore, the longer migrants have been in Italy, the more likely they are to support gender equality. This appears to be particularly evident among migrant women. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that migrants' integration into the host country also extends to their values and attitudes regarding gender roles. This highlights that the argument that migrants' relatively conservative views are an obstacle to gender equality in the long term is not supported by empirical evidence but is mainly a piece of political rhetoric.

In this regard, it is important to emphasise some of the limitations of this analysis. First, it uses a very broad definition of 'migrant', failing to consider factors such as educational level, urban or rural background, and circumstances of arrival in Italy, among others. This simplification risks conveying the message that migrants are a homogeneous group with homogeneous views on gender roles. Clearly, this is not the case, and future research, perhaps of a qualitative nature, may help shed light on this complexity and take into consideration specific migrant communities. Similarly, this chapter does not suggest that immigrants arrive in the host country with traditional views that become more progressive after integration into host society. Rather, what the chapter has highlighted is that migrants tend, over time, to become more and more similar to natives, in terms of, as previous research (e.g. [Portes & Rumbaut, 2001](#)) has shown, behaviours, values and, as the analysis reveals, even views on gender roles. This is not to suggest that European countries do not have a long way to go in terms of gender equality nor that all migrants behave as described earlier. What is being presented here is one specific aspect of a broad pattern of integration.

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7 Reinforcing Gender and Migration-Related Stereotypes

A Discourse Analysis of Five Topics in Printed Media Articles in Belgium and the Netherlands

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7.1 Introduction

“Mass media” reinforces existing stereotypes about gender, migration and empowerment (Dixon, 2019; Kroon, Trilling, & Raats, 2021). Claims like these recur often in existing research. This could range from portrayals in series and films (Cuelenaere, Willems, & Joye, 2019); TV news and talk shows (Ichau & d’Haenens, 2016); printed newspapers and magazines (Dixon, 2019; Hoops, 2020); and online discourses (Rahbari, 2021). The way in which these stereotypes are reproduced is subject to study. Recent research highlights that mass media, by linking specific ethnic groups to particular attributes, not only perpetuates existing stereotypes but also actively constructs and normalises them (e.g., Arendt & Northup, 2015; Atwell Seate & Mastro, 2017). For instance, Kroon et al. (2021) note that ethnic stereotypes are being reproduced by continuously referencing them when discussing specific topics, such as criminality. This way, imaginaries about particular ethnic groups are further reinforced, hereby “othering” certain ethnic (out)groups. This dynamic highlights a more complex role for the media, not merely as a passive mirror of stereotypes but as an active force in shaping and/or influencing public perceptions. Furthermore, Kroon et al. (2021) argue that it is not the stereotyping nature of mass media that changes over time, but rather the actual topic and group that is stereotyped that change. Hence, this gives mass media the potential to set the agenda and further reproduce existing stereotypes and imaginaries about specific migrant groups and their descendants.

Gender-specific stereotypes are often worsened when discussing their intersection with ethnicity (Dixon, 2019). Particularly, various studies highlight how media construct narratives around migration and inclusion from a gender perspective. Migrant women are often represented through gendered stereotypes, frequently portrayed either as victims in need of protection or as threats in the context of national security and cultural assimilation. Rahbari (2021), for instance, demonstrates how migrant women—particularly Muslim

women—are instrumentalised in exclusionary political discourses, where their perceived oppression is emphasised to justify xenophobic or anti-immigration policies. Similarly, the representation of Black migrant women in Belgian media reflects mechanisms of coloniality and racialisation. [Amponsah \(2021\)](#) finds that Black women’s voices are often co-opted and framed within narratives of radical Black activism, which limits the diversity of their engagement and agency in public debates. Additionally, their labour conditions remain largely invisible in media portrayals. Content analyses of Belgian television reveal the underrepresentation of ethnic minority women in both high-status and low-status professions ([Storme, 2021](#)), reflecting their broader exclusion from the labour market, while being pushed into feminised and racialised sectors such as domestic and caregiving work. Research further emphasises how migrant women are predominantly depicted as either vulnerable subjects in need of support or as potential threats, while positive and empowering representations remain scarce ([Azeez, 2019](#); [De Coninck et al., 2018](#)). As a result, their agency and self-determination are often overlooked, reinforcing existing stereotypes and exclusionary mechanisms in media narratives.

It was exactly there that in our research project, the ReIncluGen project, we were looking to assess “which stereotypes prevail on which topics”. By selecting five so-called “hot debates” or topics that are high on the political or media agenda from the past year in at least one of the countries involved in our project, we thought we would find an abundance of these stereotypes – especially related to female Muslims with a migration history – as this intersection is highly debated and sensationalised in Belgium and the Netherlands ([Cinalli & Giugni, 2013](#); [Rahbari, 2021](#)). These expectations result from social and political interactions and therefore reflect and further influence the media reporting and debates as well ([Dixon, 2019](#)). By starting from five broadly defined topics, we also wish to look at associations made between ethnic and gender-specific stereotypes (and their intersection) and the selected theme (see also [Kroon et al., 2021](#)). Examining the representation of gender and migration in high-profile media debates is crucial because it reveals how intersecting stereotypes may shape public perceptions, policy discussions and social attitudes. Media portrayals often influence how migrant women are perceived (whether as vulnerable figures in need of protection or as individuals challenging cultural norms), which in turn impacts their social and political inclusion. These representations reflect broader societal power structures, reinforcing or contesting existing biases related to ethnicity, gender and migration. Understanding how these narratives evolve in response to political climates and media framing is essential for assessing the role of mass media in shaping public discourse and either fostering inclusion or deepening divisions.

7.2 Methods

We focused on five debates: “paid domestic work”, “islamophobia”, “femicide”, “abortion” and “citizenship and rights” that are relevant in the media

debates in the countries involved in the ReIncluGen project. While some topics, such as paid domestic work and abortion, are not immediately trending in Flanders and the Netherlands, they were, for instance, very relevant in Poland and Spain. These topics were chosen because they touch upon key intersections of gender, migration and inclusion, while also reflecting broader societal and political discussions. We focused on printed news articles in 2024, a year full of political debates due to elections and the formation of new governments in both countries. We focused on two types of newspapers, contrasting more sensationalist newspapers (“het Laatste Nieuws” (HLN) in Belgium, and “De Telegraaf” in the Netherlands), with more professional newspapers (“De Morgen” in Belgium and “De Volkskrant” in the Netherlands) (Brouwer et al., 2017; Hallin & Mancini, 2004). In a pillarised society, these newspapers have roots in political traditions, but their political colours are less pronounced in recent years. Nonetheless, we considered this during the analysis. This selection allows us to explore differences in journalistic style, framing and the potential impact of media sensationalism on gender and migration narratives. Overall, it seemed that the polarisation and the use of stereotypical terminology was slightly stronger in the Netherlands and reflected greater polarisation or different news audiences. For instance, when discussing citizenship and rights, De Telegraaf often (explicitly and implicitly) portrays migrants as burdens, rarely depicting them as empowered individuals. Stories often reinforce a narrative of control and restriction. De Volkskrant highlights the voices of migrantised persons at times, thereby presenting stories of migrants or their descendants contributing to society and overcoming systemic barriers. Empowerment is portrayed through narratives of self-reliance, employment and civic engagement.

Table 7.1 reflects the frequency of specific search terms related to the different debates in Flanders (Belgium) as identified in De Morgen and HLN, and De Volkskrant and De Telegraaf in the Netherlands. The search terms were operationalised using a combination of keywords in both Dutch and their relevant synonyms, ensuring a broad representation of each topic. Although both focused on Dutch search terms, slight changes were made in both regions, due to local debates and distinct Dutch language use.

The frequency counts presented in the table reflect the total number of articles within each newspaper that were found under the relevant themes for each hot topic. For example, the search term related to Abortion resulted in 246 articles in De Morgen, 218 in HLN and a total of 464 occurrences across both newspapers. This process was similarly applied to the other issues, with articles categorised according to their relevance to Citizenship & Rights, Femicide, Islamophobia and Paid Domestic Work.

To analyse the data for both the newspapers in Flanders (Belgium) as the Netherlands, a qualitative content analysis approach was employed. Articles that matched the selected search terms were individually reviewed and coded in NVivo (for the Belgian data) and Atlas.ti (for the Dutch data). Each coded article was carefully read, and relevant passages were identified

Table 7.1 Frequency of media coverage on selected social debates in De Morgen (DM) and HLN based on search terms in Flanders (BE), and De Volkskrant (DV) and De Telegraaf (DT) based on search terms in the Netherlands (NL)

<i>Selected debate</i>	<i>Search terms (BE)</i>	<i>Search terms (NL)</i>	<i>DM</i>	<i>HLN</i>	<i>DV</i>	<i>DT</i>
Abortion	(“Abortus”) OR (“Pro-Life”) OR (“Pro-Choice”) OR (“Pro-Leven”) OR (“Zwangerschapsafbreking”)	(“abortus”) OR (“Abortusrecht”) OR (“Pro-Choice”) OR (“Pro-Life”) OR (“zwangerschapsafbreking”) OR (“baas in eigen buik”)	246	218	353	126
Citizen-ship & Rights	(“Burgerschap en rechten”) OR (“juridische status”) OR (“staatsburgerschap”) OR (“naturalisatie”) OR (“Verblijfsvergunning”) OR, (“illegaal” AND “migrant”) OR (“Burgerschap”))	(“verblijfsvergunning”) OR (“illegale immigratie”) OR (“illegale immigranten”) OR (“illegaal” AND “migrant”) OR (“verblijfsstatus”) OR (“statushouders”)	164	245	444	485
Femicide	(“Femicide”) OR (“Moord op vrouwen”) OR (“Eerwraak”)	(“Femicide”) OR (“Gendercide”) OR (“Partnergeweld”) OR (“Huishoudelijk geweld”) OR (“Eerwraak”)	14	30	20	60
Islamophobia	(“Islamofobie”) OR (“Islamvijandig”) OR (“islamhaat”) OR (“Antimoslim”) OR (“Religieuze Intolerantie”) OR (“anti-islam”) OR (“hoofddoek”) OR (“Hijabverbod”) OR (“hoofddoekenverbod”) OR (“discriminatie tegen moslims”) OR (“halal-discussie”) OR (“Xenofobie”))	(“Islamofobie”) OR (“Moslimhaat”) OR (“Discriminatie” AND “Moslims”) OR (“Religieuze Intolerantie”) OR (“Anti-Islam”) OR (“Hijabverbod”) OR (“Hoofddoekverbod”) OR (“Hoofddoek”) OR (“Xenofobie” AND “Islam”)	187	188	203	222
Paid-domestic work	(“dienstencheques”) OR (“huishoudelijke zorgverlening”) OR (“betaald huishoudelijk werk”) OR (“zwart werk in huishoudelijke sector”))	(“Betaald huishoudelijk werk”) OR (“Betaalde mantelzorg”) OR (“Huishoudelijk werk”) OR (“mantelzorg”*)	53	100	161	152

and assigned codes related to the central themes. These codes were then grouped into broader themes that were linked to the specific social debate under investigation. For instance, articles mentioning terms related to Islamophobia were coded under themes such as hijab ban, framing of criminals by name, Anti-Islamic political discourses, discrimination against Muslims, stereotyping of Muslims, media coverage of terrorism, integration of Muslims into society and hijab in workplace or education. This methodological approach provided a systematic means of analysing media coverage, allowing for an in-depth analysis of how these five issues were framed and discussed in the four selected media outlets. By coding and categorising the articles in software, it was possible to identify emerging patterns and trends in the way these topics were portrayed, offering valuable insights and comparisons into the public discourse surrounding these important issues in Flanders and the Netherlands. Given the different number of articles retrieved per search term, in the Netherlands, in some debates, only a selection of newspaper articles was analysed in depth in some debates. This was due to the high saturation observed during the analysis, after all articles had been screened.

7.3 Media discourse analysis of five topics in print media

7.3.1 Agenda setting by association and testimonies

While going through all newspaper articles, we expected larger contrasts in stereotyping between the popular and quality newspapers. Popular newspapers tend to adopt a more individualised and emotionally driven approach, often emphasising personal narratives and real-life testimonies (Schaap & Pleijter, 2012). In both countries, this was visible in discussions concerning domestic work, where newspapers shared testimonies of people who were robbed by their domestic household worker. Another example in Flanders concerns stories of people who witnessed femicide – or violence against women at home – and discussed personal experiences about the years prior. Such discussions were then followed by a reference to a governmental body or organisation you can contact if this news article triggers distress or emotional responses that need additional care. In contrast, quality newspapers were more likely to contextualise such topics within broader societal and political frameworks. Rather than focusing solely on personal narratives, they tend to provide analytical perspectives, expert opinions and statistical data to explore the structural dimensions of gender-based violence, labour rights or migration policies. For example, they place a stronger emphasis on issues such as Islamophobia by exploring the role of social media in exacerbating extremism and hate. This suggests a critical stance towards the current media landscape and its influence on public opinion regarding Islam and Muslims, shifting the focus from isolated incidents to systemic mechanisms that fuel discrimination and exclusion.

Some themes reflect existing political climates and election periods. This was the case in both the Netherlands and Flanders, where periods of avid political debates were covered by the media. For instance, in the Dutch newspapers, citizenship and rights were major topic. The search terms related to this debate yielded the most results out of all five hot debates: almost a thousand articles have been published about the subject in 2024. Themes related to civil rights and legal frameworks included topics such as naturalisation procedures, visa applications, the asylum process and the legal and social status of refugees in Belgium. This debate is centred mainly around migration and includes a lot of articles that discuss changes in policy making. In contrast to debates around abortion, the citizenship and rights debate focuses mainly on the Dutch context, and sometimes on the United States. This can be explained by the political changes in both countries, where politicians with strong anti-immigration stances (i.e., Geert Wilders and Donald Trump) have caused significant shifts in policy and national debates. Looking at the actors cited in the two newspapers, it becomes clear that experts who emphasise different points are invited to speak in the two newspapers. In *De Volkskrant*, experts on migration or civil society organisations involved with refugees are invited to share facts and viewpoints – oftentimes viewpoints that go against the governments’ framing of migration as a big problem. For example, in the discussion of the governments’ aim to reduce migration by hindering family reunification, *De Volkskrant* writes that *Following family members are not the biggest group of immigrants by far* (De Lange, 2024, p. 1). On the other hand, *De Telegraaf* is more likely to cite experts who insist that migration is a national problem that should be solved. For example, the newspaper cites a demographer who says that *The Netherlands should immediately stop the reception of asylum seekers from non-European countries like Eritrea* (Van Eijk & Kossen, 2024, p.1). This shows that the media does not fully control agenda setting. Political actors and societal changes can also put topics on the agenda. This can have political repercussions, since it provides support to political parties who put these themes high on the agenda and problematise them (Damstra, Jacobs, Boukes, & Vliegthart, 2021).

Our research brought to light some unexpected results, with some topics appearing surprisingly often in the media, in contrast to what we had perceived ourselves as media consumers. This suggests that media coverage does not always align with general public awareness, as certain issues gain traction due to political developments, policy changes or societal shifts that may not always be immediately noticeable in day-to-day news consumption. Some topics, such as the topic “paid domestic work”, seemed to be more relevant in Belgium, as the governmental changes also impacted the remuneration of so-called “service vouchers” (“dienstencques”) in Flanders, largely impacting salaries of paid domestic workers but also touching upon the wallets of the white middle class members who often use these vouchers to pay for ironing services or cleaning at home. In the Netherlands, the so-called “participation society” resulted in the reduction of elderly homes, childcare services and

other support systems (Grootegeod, 2013; Kelders et al., 2016), making everyone a care worker (or “mantelzorger”). This resulted in discussions on the role conflicts and stressors people are confronted with. Within the topic of femicide, personal stories dominated news coverage in sensationalist newspapers, while the more professional papers focused more on scientific evidence and numbers. The sensationalist nature of De Telegraaf and HLN is reflected in their reporting on femicide. These newspapers constantly mentioned the ethnic background of perpetrators of femicide – but only if this background was non-Western. This detail was rarely reported in De Volkskrant and De Morgen. Moreover, these newspapers sometimes explicitly called against the framing of femicide as a non-Western or Muslim issue – a frame which was often reproduced in De Telegraaf. This shows a difference in reporting between the two types of newspapers, whereby personal characteristics (e.g., ethnicity) play a more dominant role in sensationalist newspapers.

7.3.2 Stereotyping and “jokes”: opinion makers reinforcing societal biases

As newspaper articles are often relatively short, some topics offer little to no opportunity for further stereotyping in the actual reporting. Rather, stereotypes emerged more prominently in how certain issues were framed, particularly in opinion-based content. The most stereotypical framing, comments and references to the intersection between gender and migration were found when studying one specific topic, namely “islamophobia”, which also adds “religion” to the intersection. For the other topics, stereotyping did not necessarily appear that much in the news articles but rather emerged in commentaries and reflective opinion pieces. A striking finding is how popular newspapers, especially through opinion pieces, tend to reinforce stereotypes more explicitly than quality newspapers. This is particularly evident in how stories are told: when journalists take an individual perspective, their pieces often reflect everyday social interactions and spoken language, making implicit biases more visible.

In the Dutch newspapers, ample examples can be found. For instance, in a commentary article (De Volkskrant, 8th of April 2024), the commentator “jokes” about a colleague that has hit “a Moroccan” with her car and now, every time that colleague has a broken window, he asks if she has “hit a Moroccan”. Additionally, by referring to people by their heritage, the journalists implicitly assume that they don’t have a Dutch nationality, and that it is normal to hit *Moroccans on a fatbike*. Concerning the topic of femicide, articles in De Telegraaf are sometimes framed in a divisive manner (i.e., perpetuating stereotypes or dismissing rights of marginalised groups). For instance, in some of the opinion pieces, where femicide is framed as a non-Dutch issue, the opinion makers put the blame on other cultural or religious groups (mainly Islamic).

Opinion pieces focused on islamophobia are where the contrast between De Telegraaf and De Volkskrant are more prevalent. Notably, these pieces

are generally divisive and conservative in *De Telegraaf*. Writers for *De Telegraaf* are often highly critical of Islam throughout the major themes in this “hot debate”. Authors critique Islam in general, and female Muslims specifically. In the latter case, this happens as a form of criticism on their decision to wear hijabs. The voices of these women often remain unheard, unless they align with the framing of Islam as repressive. In their justification of Islamophobia, opinion pieces from *De Telegraaf* make use of different frames. Authors of opinion pieces express themselves negatively about wearing hijabs. This is sometimes framed as a gender justice issue, portraying Muslim women who wear hijabs as submissive and the religion as repressive. Authors’ critique on hijabs is thereby seen as a progressive viewpoint, in contrast to conservative Islam:

... cultural relativism closes the doors towards a future where girls are free and without hijabs. [...] This way, the rights of all women are in danger. ...When will we pay attention to our daughters here in Europe? Forced integration? Make sure that people aren’t treated differently based on their sex. That religion can never be placed above our laws.

(Kanko, 2024, pp. 1–2)

Similarly, in Flemish newspapers, most racist or discriminatory comments on topics such as femicide occur in columns or letters from readers and are non-existent in other types of articles. For example, in the Flemish newspaper *HLN*, the commentator, a well-known soccer player and analyst, refers to femicide in a piece that discusses the potential transfer of Belgian soccer star player Kevin De Bruyne to Saudi Arabia (*Het Laatste Nieuws*, 26th of February 2024, columnist Jan Mulders). The commentator lists all the pros and cons of this transfer (financially), and – out of nowhere – he mentions the occurrence of femicide and Salafist courses for his children, drawing an unnecessary and problematic link between gender-based violence and an entire religious culture. This shows how opinion-based content can trivialise or misrepresent serious social issues by embedding them in unrelated discussions.

This suggests that the stereotyping in news media does not always occur in direct reporting but often emerges in broader discursive framing and opinion-based content. For example, in abortion coverage, quality/professional newspapers tended to frame religious leaders as inherently opposed to women’s rights, especially in opinion pieces, which risks reinforcing stereotypes about religious communities as uniformly patriarchal. Popular newspapers, meanwhile, often suggested a conflict between religious beliefs and gender equality, potentially oversimplifying a complex debate. On the topic of citizenship and rights, both types of newspapers sometimes provided a platform for controversial statements without critically analysing them, which can contribute to the spread of harmful narratives. In femicide, qualitative newspapers focused more on structural issues, while popular newspapers often associated femicide with honour killings and specific ethnic or religious

backgrounds, reinforcing culturalised stereotypes rather than addressing the issue as a broader societal problem. For islamophobia, qualitative newspapers tended to adopt a more analytical approach, challenging dominant narratives, whereas popular newspapers often focused on sensationalised stories that portrayed Muslim women as passive victims and migrant men as threats, reinforcing negative stereotypes. Finally, in paid domestic work, stereotypes were more implicit, with domestic workers being framed as “indispensable” but still positioned in a hierarchical relationship with middle-class employers.

7.3.3 Mentioning social positions: intersectional discourses varying across topics

Considering the nature of the topic, from all the topics under study in our project, two topics had a clear gender component – namely “abortion” and “femicide” – one topic focused clearly on “migration”, namely “citizenship and rights”; one topic, namely “paid domestic work”, did not focus on “gender” or “migration”; and one topic addressed cultural differences and exclusion as a consequences of migration, namely “islamophobia”. Across these topics, media coverage varies in its recognition of intersectionality, whether acknowledging the compounded effects of gender, race, religion, migration status and class, or focusing narrowly on gender alone. The acknowledgement of intersectionality, or the systematic focus on specific groups (e.g., Muslim women), depends on the topic in both countries. As we noted that huge differences in intersectional approaches, often including stereotyping, were found across newspapers especially related to debates on islamophobia, we will first discuss the other themes in general and then focus specifically on this topic.

7.3.4 Intersectionality in gender and migration debates

For some themes, the terminology used to describe a phenomenon, such as femicide, varies depending on the group being discussed. In Dutch newspapers, the terminology used changes depending on the so-called perpetrator. “Femicide” or “honour killing” are oftentimes framed as non-Dutch or non-Western problems, as shown in this example from the Telegraaf:

Honour killing is mainly a cultural issue. It mainly happens in the Middle East and South-Asia but also plays a painful role in the Netherlands as a “motive” for the murder of women. In many cultures, the honour of the family is so important, that they apparently feel justified to kill when they think their honour is damaged.

(Aafjes-van Aalst, 2024, p. 2)

When the perpetrators have a non-Western migration background, this is explicitly mentioned: De Telegraaf speaks of “Syrian brothers” rather than

just brothers. If the perpetrator is (deemed) Western or Dutch, their ethnicity or nationality are not shared. Furthermore, in such cases where the perpetrator is ‘non-Dutch’, the crime is sometimes described as “honour killing” (“*eerwraak*” in Dutch). This never happens in cases with a Dutch and/or Western perpetrator. In such cases, it is sometimes even described as a “family drama”, thereby downplaying the severity of the crime. As such, people referred to as “migrants” and/or “Muslims” (used interchangeably by the newspaper) are implicitly made responsible for femicide in the descriptive reports, while they are often explicitly blamed in the opinion pieces. However, they are not the only groups held responsible. Articles also blame politicians and institutions for inaction on the matter. This trend does not hold for *De Volkskrant*, where femicide is more often framed as a broader societal issue. In their opinion pieces, authors actively challenge the migrant-blame frame. For example, one article states: *Still, in the Netherlands, femicide is seen as a typical immigrants’ disease, or honour killing in the vernacular. But that could not be further from the truth* (Candan, 2024, p. 1).

For the other themes, we note that the differences between the newspapers are less notable, as is the case for the topic “abortion”. In both newspapers, articles about abortion are mostly descriptive. Abortion is often used as an illustration to explain changing political landscapes around the globe. The topic is much more rarely discussed in a Dutch context, which emphasises the point that this subject seems to be largely uncontroversial in Dutch society and Dutch media.. Some of the articles in *De Telegraaf* also concern experience stories, which does not really happen in *De Volkskrant*. These experience stories are both from women who underwent an abortion and from women who refrained from doing so. Hereby, both are framed in a fairly empathetic manner, whereby there is no case of judgment for either choice. In the Flemish newspapers, the extent to which the media acknowledge these intersections between gender and ethnicity/migration varies. In abortion debates, the quality newspaper tends to highlight the disproportionate impact of restrictive policies on racialised and lower-income women, whereas popular newspapers focus more on political controversies and personal testimonies, often overlooking structural inequalities. For citizenship and rights, the quality newspaper more frequently discusses structural exclusion and postcolonial legacies, framing migration within broader socio-economic and historical contexts. The popular newspaper, on the other hand, often emphasises local political issues, such as representation or access to housing, without necessarily linking them to systemic discrimination. In reporting on femicide, the quality newspaper frequently frames it as a global issue, referencing high rates in other countries, whereas the popular newspaper is more likely to associate cases of honour killings with specific ethnic backgrounds, thereby reinforcing culturalised narratives. For paid domestic work, discussions in both types of newspapers focus more on labour market issues, such as language barriers and job precarity, rather than the structural exploitation faced

by migrant women. While the quality newspaper sometimes highlights broader socio-economic trends, the popular newspaper tends to frame domestic workers as “indispensable”, while maintaining a hierarchical framing in relation to their employers.

7.3.5 *When religion enters the media: the case of islamophobia*

Only when it comes to the fifth topic, namely “islamophobia”, the intersection with “religion” is added. When examining Islamophobia more closely, it becomes clear that discrimination plays a crucial role in how the issue is framed in media and public discourse. As mentioned by [Dixon \(2019\)](#), media items reflect social and political interactions, which are highly politicised and – by definition – more subject to stereotyping. More specifically, discrimination refers to the unjust or prejudicial treatment of different categories of people, especially based on characteristics such as race, gender, age, religion, disability or sexual orientation. This already tackles unfair actions, biases or policies that disadvantage certain individuals or groups. This discrimination occurs in various settings – including workplaces, schools, housing and public services – where Muslims may face exclusion, biased policies or unequal treatment. It can take both direct and indirect forms: direct discrimination involves explicit exclusion or mistreatment, such as denying a job or service to someone because they are Muslim, while indirect discrimination occurs through seemingly “neutral” policies that disproportionately disadvantage Muslim individuals or communities.

In the Netherlands, Islamophobia is one of the debates within which the differences between *De Telegraaf* and *De Volkskrant* become most visible. This can be seen immediately when looking at the tone of the two newspapers: in *De Telegraaf*, the majority of articles are written in a divisive and/or conservative manner, while most articles in *De Volkskrant* have a progressive and/or inclusive frame. Hijabs are a large point of discussion in Dutch media. The political reports in both newspapers include decisions made by government officials as well as opinions on these decisions voiced by stakeholders, such as the police. As such, the most common actors are government officials, institutions and sometimes the media. Such reports differ somewhat between the two newspapers but are generally descriptive in their framing.

The differences in media discourses in Dutch newspapers are closely tied to the polarising debates and political climate in the Netherlands. In discussing themes related to Islam, many articles in *De Telegraaf* call for political action concerning the fact that “Islam has infiltrated all layers of society” ([Lobby hindoes ontbreekt, 2024](#), p. 1). Hereby, left-wing politicians are at times held responsible: *PvdA/GL politician Esmah Lahlah [socialist/Green political party] sticks her head in the sand with her plea for the headscarf. Sure, all women can choose whether they wear a headscarf or not. Go tell that in Iran* ([Boer, 2024](#), p. 1). Here, we clearly see aspects of the conflict frame, whereby leftist politicians together with Muslim communities are portrayed almost

as enemies of right-wing politicians and the larger Dutch population. The image drawn from the articles in *De Volkskrant* is very different. While the common themes are the same, the framing of these themes is more progressive. Rather than contributing to stigmatisation and stereotyping, *Volkskrant* articles often actively call out against such frames, and instead call for anti-discrimination efforts. To illustrate, where *De Telegraaf* holds all Muslims accountable for Antisemitism in the Netherlands, articles from *De Volkskrant* discuss both forms of discrimination as a problem, thereby refraining from blaming one cultural or religious group. Instead, pieces call out right-wing politicians like Geert Wilders [PVV, Party for Freedom] for contributing to antisemitism themselves. The debate around hijabs is also notably less divisive in *De Volkskrant*. However, it is still an issue. Like in *De Telegraaf*, it is sometimes framed as a gender justice issue, whereby the freedom of (migrant) women to choose is held in high regards. Furthermore, the question of allowing police to wear hijabs is salient, and *De Volkskrant* also presents arguments against it. A notable difference between the two newspapers, however, is that the discussion is more nuanced in *De Volkskrant*. Both newspapers discuss the importance of the so-called “neutral” appearance of government officials (i.e., not wearing religious expressions while working). However, *De Telegraaf* solely covers this side of the discussion, highlighting the importance of “neutrality”, while *De Volkskrant* also includes articles which discuss potential advantages of a more lenient policy regarding religious clothing.

In both Flanders and the Netherlands, it is exactly in the discussion of the so-called “neutrality” of the government and policies that disproportionately affect groups. This topic resurges systematically in the media, as it reflects political discussions in society – certainly in times of elections. This topic is different for men and women, highlighting the importance of intersectionality in conducting media discourse analyses on stereotyping in the media. For women, the neutrality of the government is discussed with regards to the wearing of the hijab (“headscarf”) that is intrinsically interwoven with gender-related assumptions and stereotypes. The media often portrays the neutrality debate as a clash between secularism and religious expression rather than as an issue of discrimination. Women wearing the hijab are frequently depicted as subjects of controversy, with their agency often overlooked. The voices of Muslim women themselves are underrepresented, while politicians, experts or commentators dominate the discussion, shaping the narrative in a way that reinforces stereotypes rather than challenging them. By emphasising the importance of government “neutrality”, journalists portray this as a relevant topic and sketch the idea that the government needs to be neutral by definition. In doing so, they fail to recognise that policies impact different groups unequally and therefore often are not unbiased or without unfair treatment. Therefore, the focus on having people wear religious symbols when sitting in public places and representing the government are biased and represent political discourses – which are not necessarily aiming to be inclusive.

For men, islamophobia was especially remarked upon when mentioning criminality rates, reinforcing long-standing stereotypes that associate Muslim men (particularly those with a migration background) with violence, radicalisation and deviant behaviour. Rather than addressing systemic inequalities or socio-economic conditions that may influence crime statistics, media narratives often overemphasise ethnic and religious identity when reporting on crime, contributing to a broader climate of exclusion. In our media analysis, we observed that a common pattern in crime reporting is the selective emphasis on the ethnic or religious background of suspects, particularly when they are of non-Western descent. While crimes committed by native-born Belgians are often framed as isolated incidents, cases involving Muslim men or men with a migration background are frequently linked to broader narratives of “immigrant crime” or deeper “cultural problems”. This trend is especially noticeable in coverage of the drug trade and extremism, where the suspect’s background is highlighted in a way that reinforces stereotypes. By consistently associating these issues with specific communities, media discourse contributes to a perception that crime and radicalisation are inherent to Muslim communities rather than being complex societal challenges that transcend ethnic and religious boundaries.

7.4 Discussion

In 2024, a year marked by significant political shifts, media coverage of key societal debates (paid domestic work, Islamophobia, femicide, abortion and citizenship and rights) offered a lens into how different newspapers in Flanders and the Netherlands framed debated issues. Despite their shared language and historical ties, the media landscapes of these regions are shaped by distinct journalistic traditions and political climates. By comparing sensationalist newspapers (Het Laatste Nieuws and De Telegraaf) with professional ones (De Morgen and De Volkskrant), our study explored how differences in journalistic style and framing strategies influenced public discourse. This comparison is particularly relevant given the growing role of the media in shaping polarised debates. Building on our media discourse analysis, we highlight three key reflections that shed light on the ways in which media coverage differed across highly debated societal issues, national contexts and distinct journalistic approaches. By examining how various newspapers framed these topics, we highlight the broader implications of media representation in shaping public discourse, reinforcing or challenging dominant narratives, and reflecting underlying political and ideological biases.

First, newspapers play a key role in shaping public agendas (see overview [Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2016](#)) and framing of news items (see also [Scheufele, 1999](#)). The role they play by framing can be seen in whether and how the media handles various topics, often contributing to political and ideological divides. In the Netherlands, for instance, media coverage of migration was polarised. Some outlets focused on themes of control and

restriction, while others emphasised migrant empowerment. This divide in coverage is not just about differing opinions but also reflects a broader political climate around issues, like citizenship and rights, where immigration is a central point of contention. News media's framing of migration issues reiterates political and ideological divides about the topic within Dutch society. In Flanders, the media focused more on paid domestic work, largely because of recent legislative changes regarding service vouchers. This shift in attention illustrates how new policies can bring certain issues to the forefront of public discourse. While the media in the Netherlands concentrated on migration, the Belgian focus on domestic work demonstrates how local legislative changes can drive public debate in different directions, depending on the context. The study also revealed that while both countries occasionally covered femicide, sensationalist newspapers often highlighted the ethnicity of perpetrators, a framing that was avoided by more professional outlets.

Second, stereotyping in news media often appears in opinion-based content rather than direct reporting, especially regarding gender and migration. The most explicit stereotyping was observed in discussions on Islamophobia, which reflects how media can reinforce social divisions by framing a religious group in monolithic and negative terms. By portraying Islam as repressive and hijabs as symbols of female oppression, newspapers perpetuate a narrow and damaging narrative that fails to account for the diversity of experiences and perspectives within Muslim communities. Muslim women's voices were largely absent unless they aligned with this narrative. In Dutch newspapers, stereotyping was evident in commentaries using discriminatory language, such as joking about hitting Moroccans or trivialising LGBTQ+ identities. Similarly, *De Telegraaf* sometimes framed femicide as a "non-Dutch" issue, blaming certain cultural or religious groups. In Flemish media, racist comments were mostly found in columns or reader letters. Overall, popular newspapers relied more on cultural stereotypes, while quality newspapers provided structural analysis, though both occasionally contributed to biased representations in discussions on gender, migration and Islam.

Third, the extent to which the media acknowledges intersectionality varies by topic and newspaper. Differences were found in framing between popular and quality newspapers. This was visible in the words used to describe the same phenomenon but depended on the actor. Although quality newspapers highlighted how structural inequalities impacted specific socio-demographic groups, popular newspapers focus on political controversies and personal stories. The latter could perpetuate social divisions rather than addressing the root causes of inequality. For example, when discussing citizenship and rights, *quality newspapers* contextualise migration within socio-economic and historical perspectives, whereas *popular newspapers* centre on immediate political issues like housing and representation, often without addressing systemic discrimination. One topic that stood out in terms of different media

coverage and stereotyping is islamophobia, which introduces an additional layer of discrimination, shaping media narratives through stereotypes and political agendas. The topic of “Islamophobia” was particularly subject to stereotyping because of the intersection of migration with religion. Since 9/11, religion has become an increasingly sensitive and contested marker of in- and exclusion in European societies (Foner & Alba, 2008). Such societal biases and framings were earlier found by Kroon and colleagues (2021).

To conclude, the media often reflects and reinforces existing stereotypes in society, doing so in subtle but powerful ways. This stereotyping is not necessarily reproduced in all articles but are often explicitly mentioned in opinion pieces. As the huge impact of media articles shape debates, and political agendas, it is not only important to look at associations made in articles, additional framing in opinion pieces, but also at the number of topics that are discussed. Media outlets could systematically analyse their own topics and framings, and better support opinion makers in using inclusive language. Future research should expand beyond textual analysis by incorporating visual content, as images are equally powerful in shaping stereotypes and influencing the way specific topics are perceived by the public.

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8 How Civil Society Organisations Approach Empowerment in Flanders (Belgium)

The Role of Positioning, Organisational Cultures and Identities

Kaya Klaver, Lore Van Praag, and Amal Miri

8.1 Introduction

Many governments, civil society organisations (CSOs) and policy makers promote ‘gender empowerment’ as part of larger policies on gender equality, inclusion and equal opportunities in society.¹ In Belgium, CSOs are prominent actors to help realise such empowerment. Although the term gender empowerment is not common in Dutch (language spoken in Flanders, northern part of Belgium), nonetheless, it is implemented in various CSO practices and policy documents by Flemish local governments. When we look at policy documents and dictionaries, it is mainly used when mentioning gender equality or women’s empowerment.^{2,3} Women empowerment and gender equality also have a strong connection in local policies and media discourses. In this chapter, we will study in depth how two Flemish CSOs that work with ethnic minorities or migrantised⁴ women approach the notion of ‘gender empowerment’ in their everyday practices and discourses. Hence, this chapter builds on document analysis, participant observations of activities within specific projects in each of the CSOs, ethnographic research of the internal structure, such as team meetings and events, as well as focus group discussions with staff members and interviews with their target audience. In doing so, we will analyse and discuss how CSOs approach and conceptualise gender empowerment, and how they implement it in everyday practices, towards their target group. Additionally, we will discuss this using insights gained by their target group, focusing on how this group perceives the CSO practices and organisation related to supporting gender empowerment.

Using participatory action research, working closely together with the CSOs involved, this chapter aims to provide a better understanding of how the notion of gender empowerment is implemented and evaluated in civil society by relevant actors. Combining three perspectives together, namely that of the researcher through ethnographic observations, that of the CSOs using FGDs and that of the interlocutors through consecutive in-depth interviews, we aim to gain an all-encompassing view on the concept of ‘empowerment’.

This is innovative as it unfolds a more situated meaning of its usage in everyday life, how it is framed by organisations and policies and the related discourses, as well as the pitfalls of using this concept. Focusing on the discourses and actions of gender empowerment by CSOs is of particular importance in Belgium as they take up a prominent place in the implementation of governmental policies on this matter. Although many are subsidised by the government, they remain a considerate level of independence when implementing their actions.

8.2 The key role of civil society to endorse gender empowerment in Flanders (Belgium)

In Flanders, a third-party government regime is active, meaning non-profit is given a significant amount of agency by the government while maintaining a synergetic and multidimensional relationship (Verschuere & De Corte, 2012). In the context of policies concerning gender empowerment, this means that through the funding of CSOs and subsidies, the Flemish government aims to implement guidelines and policies that foster gender empowerment and reduce gender inequalities. Numerous examples can be found where CSOs see it as their central aim to accommodate gender empowerment. Nonetheless, despite their relative agency, given the third-party government regime, the government has considerable power in deciding the agenda of CSOs.

When looking at public opinion and policies concerning gender empowerment, there seems to be a discursive tension between, on the one hand, referring to those belonging to majority society as being in need of equal rights and, on the other hand, framing minoritised or migrantised people as needing ‘saving’ or ‘education’ (De Brabander, 2022). In doing so, the discourses on gender empowerment and gender equality often build upon capitalist rationales, referring mostly to minoritised or migrantised women and girls. This train of thought can be brought back to a white neo-liberal feminist understanding of gender equality causing many gendered, culturalised and racist discursive assumptions about minoritised and migrantised women.

With doctrines like New Public Management being present, CSOs can be pressured by the government to ‘improve’ their work by implementing principles from the businesses or private sector (Pauly, De Rynck, & Verschuere, 2017). This new management philosophy aspires to make CSOs more efficient and effective by applying principles from the private sector such as emphasising efficiency, accountability and results through performance metrics and evaluation. Using two CSOs as case studies that focus on social-cultural adult work will help us to understand their rationales, strategies and practices in light of these public management doctrines. Studying their organisational structure and daily activities aimed at promoting gender empowerment among minoritised or migrantised people, or women specifically, can help us understand their rationales, strategies and good practices in light of both existing neo-liberal feminist discourses concerning these specific target

groups and rising public management demands. As minoritised women often face unique challenges and barriers due to intersecting identities – such as race, ethnicity, religion, and socio-economic status – understanding their perspectives and how CSOs work from these specific intersections can reveal insights that are often overlooked in mainstream political or public discussions about gender empowerment. Additionally, this can help enrich the broader discourses on gender equality by incorporating a variety of cultural viewpoints and CSO practices.

8.3 Methods

This study is part of the larger Horizon Europe project ReIncluGen (Re-thinking Inclusion and Gender empowerment), a participatory research that aims to study the different conceptualisations of gender empowerment from a ‘situated intersectional’ approach and evaluate empowering and inclusive practices of European CSOs, and how these are embedded in policies and media discourses in order to co-design a digital networking platform and other innovative tools to further support these CSOs.

Although this research project spans more research settings and datasets, this chapter focuses on the data collected in Belgium, specifically from two CSOs. These two CSOs are chosen as they work on similar topics, with similar target groups (or at least for some of their activities), but have different organisational structures, roots and practices. This results in having two organisations that, in some cases, compete with each other when searching for funds to subsidise projects, while also meeting regularly as they work in similar areas in Belgium. The different ways in which gender empowering practices are approached and embedded in other organisational activities makes these organisations useful for comparison.

Within these organisations, we combined participatory observations, analysis of policy documents, interviews, informal conversations, photo-eliciting methods and focus group discussions with interlocutors and staff members of the CSOs. Throughout the research process, including the consortium work and data collection, we closely worked together with one of the CSOs in Belgium, and received feedback from other CSOs in the project, based in Italy, Poland, Spain and Austria, regarding the research process, experiences and needs of the research participants.

8.3.1 Data collection

Over the course of April 2023 and February 2024, three CSOs that work on gender empowerment in Flanders were selected to conduct fieldwork. Out of these three CSOs, for this chapter, we focus on two CSOs (CSO1 and CSO2) that are more comparable in size and scope. Both have a general mission that focuses on the entire society, from a socio-cultural perspective, and implement practices targeting migrantised groups and people who identify

as women. Social inclusion and participation are recurring themes in both CSOs. Their focus is regional, where CSO1 is active in 13 settings across Flanders and Brussels, part of the Dutch-speaking community and thus Flemish government, and CSO2 is active in 3: Antwerp, Brussels and Ghent. All the fieldwork has been done in Antwerp, with the exception of one visit to the Ghent branch of CSO2. In both CSOs, we selected two trajectories/projects, in which we conducted the most ethnographic field observations. Besides these projects, additional field observations were conducted to get a sense of the management of the CSOs and the type of activities they organise.

In CSO1, we selected a project aimed at overcoming thresholds and barriers in the social work landscape, which was subsidised through a funding call by the municipality of Antwerp. Within this project, two separate groups participated in two different trajectories organised by this CSO: 1) migrant and migrantised women (MW), and 2) aid and care workers (ACWs) working, among others, with MW. The latter consisted of employees from: the public centre for social welfare, the public centre for job placement and training, the Antwerp municipality centre for integration, centre for mental well-being, health insurance fund, the firefighters, a centre to fight against female genital mutilation, the community healthcare workers, the centre of general welfare, a social housing company, childcare centre, a secondary school and an organisation that organises activities for women. The MW and ACWs groups met twice as separate groups and twice as a mixed group. In both groups, thresholds for gender empowerment and inclusion, stereotypes and prejudices were discussed. This was bundled in themes that were discussed in groups at different phases of the project, consisting of both migrant and migrantised women and the aid and care workers: future of the project, culturally sensitive work, language and reception, taboos and choice, inclusion and headscarves.

For CSO2, we selected a sewing course. The aim of this sewing course was twofold: to mobilise and bring vulnerable migrantised women together and to teach them a new skill. The course was given by a migrantised volunteer of CSO2 that recently graduated as a fashion designer. The course started during the fieldwork, and the first author participated in six of these classes, which were given every Friday morning. The course does not have an end date and will continue as long as there are people interested. This project was a pilot project for this organisation that – as the main goal – focused on supporting migrant-led associations, guiding them in their professionalisation, providing assistance and network opportunities, and providing spaces to organise activities and workshops for their members.

The first author conducted at least 20 fieldwork observations of activities within both CSOs. Afterwards, four focus group discussions (FGDs) were organised (two in each CSO), resulting in seven staff members and five target group participants participating in CSO1; and four staff members and five target group participants in CSO2. The aim of these FGDs was to reflect upon the functioning of the CSO and their vision on gender empowerment

in general. Consequently, in each CSO, ten target group participants were invited to participate for three consecutive interviews to discuss individual definitions, interpretations and experiences of (gender) empowerment, using photo-eliciting methods. This resulted in 20 participants from both CSOs taking part in the first interview and 18 who participated in all three consecutive interviews.

The fieldwork observations and the FGDs with the staff members were focused on the functioning of the CSOs, whereas the participants' interviews and FGDs were focused on the conceptualisation and meaning of gender empowerment through photovoicing trajectories. During these interviews, the target group participants were asked about how the CSOs supported them in their lives, what empowering experiences and processes they have encountered, and their views on what the CSOs could do to improve gender empowerment in society in general as well as in their personal lives.

All data was analysed using a thematic analysis (Dusi & Stevens, 2022) and facilitated by the software Nvivo.

8.3.2 Ethical reflections

Ethics clearance was received from the Ethics Committee for the Social Sciences and Humanities (EASHW), under the SHW_2023_60_1 and the ethical challenge was followed-up by an Independent Ethics Advisor throughout the research. All researchers followed a training on stress- and trauma-sensitive approach to research. During the interviews, several ethical questions arose, particularly regarding the anonymity of participants. In CSO1, interviews were sometimes scheduled right before activities, making it obvious who the participants were, which could influence their evaluations of the CSOs. In CSO2, participants were often recruited with the help of the CSO, due to the absence of activities and direct contact. To protect the privacy of our participants, CSOs will thus not be used by their name in this chapter. Nonetheless, some did not necessarily demand anonymity as it did not recognise their participation and engagement.

Participants frequently shared personal, sensitive and traumatic stories of assault, violence or discrimination. These stories were often difficult for the first author to process during the fieldwork, especially given that in a research setting, the idea is to listen but not to immediately provide appropriate support. After the interview, the researcher provided options to search for professional support, in line with her background as a social care worker. Less sensitive stories were shared in the fieldwork conducted by the third researcher. One participant requested data deletion after feeling 'tricked' into sharing more than intended at first, which may have been triggered by the feelings that arose after the interview. The researcher discussed the findings with the participant, and removed all data. Most participants shared that reflecting on their empowerment journeys felt helpful, reassuring and, in some cases, empowering.

Both field researchers are migrantised in society due to their ethnic background. They experienced a positive connection with participants, particularly regarding shared struggles related to feelings of (non-)belonging in Belgian society. For the first author, this connection was reinforced through the use of the participatory research approach, in which the researcher immersed herself in the activities and, for instance, also tried to improve her sewing skills. Nevertheless, she remained cautious about sharing too much personal experiences about the same topic to avoid bias on how to formulate gender empowerment or define inclusive practices during the interviews or observations. At the same time, during the observations, a relationship of mutual trust was built up and information about other topics were shared and discussed.

8.4 Results

At first, we aimed to provide an overview of the distinct approaches of two CSOs on practices that stimulate gender empowerment of migrantised women in Belgium. During our analyses, we noted that the ethnic and gender composition of both organisations seemed to shape and structure a wide variety of practices and responses from their participants. The gender composition of both organisations is mainly female, which is comparable and crucial in its intersection with ethnicity. The professional composition differed. All paid members are professionally trained. Nonetheless, CSO2 is, due to its core objectives as an umbrella organisation supporting volunteers, also supported by volunteers. However, the fieldwork was conducted with trained professionals. The ethnic composition varied however, revealing insightful findings for the CSOs' approaches towards gender empowerment and inclusion. Because of this, in the following section, we will discuss how the different ethnicities of the staff members, resulting in a specific ethnic staff composition in each CSO, was found to play a role in the approaches to gender empowerment and inclusion. We will first start by how the ethnic background of staff members played a pivotal role in the origins and creation of the organisation, impacting their funding strategies and the ideological positions they take up in broader civil society. Afterwards, we will look at how this further shapes their organisational cultures and practices. We will do so by first discussing the position of CSOs in the broader civil society in Flanders, followed by the organisational cultures and empowering and inclusive practices in the CSOs.

8.4.1 *The position of CSOs in the broader civil society in Flanders (Belgium)*

The organisational histories and funding bodies of the CSOs already explain partially the different approaches towards gender empowerment between the two organisations, especially in the activities they organise or trajectories they set up. CSO1 is subsidised to focus on every citizen in Flanders

and, thus, does not focus solely on women or migrantised people. However, within our research, we studied one project of this CSO that was focused explicitly on the position of migrantised women. This focus was inspired by the rationale or aim of the funding call by the municipality of Antwerp. To be precise, the trajectory studied *thresholds and levers for the social and societal participation of women from migration backgrounds*. Following this objective, social participation is key to strengthening the position of migrantised women in Flemish society.

CSO2 is an organisation that started after the rise of a far-right party in Flanders in the 1990s, especially in Antwerp. This explains their strong focus on social inequality, social inclusion and participation, starting from migrant-led initiatives and communities themselves, embracing their multiple (ethnic) identities. Initially, they focused on people from Moroccan descent, which is also reflected in their previous name, which recently changed after three decades. They changed this name to reflect the diverse ethnicities that are now part of the organisation, and no longer just Moroccans. CSO2 has members with origins from all over the world. This initial focus stemmed from the fact that Moroccans were one of the first and largest migration ethnic minority communities in Flanders due to labour migration agreements in the 1960s. Even though CSO2 is an umbrella organisation supporting migrant-led associations, they also set up their own projects that are open for both their members and other interested people (e.g., the previously mentioned sewing project). Within this framework, CSO2 organises activities for women, even though this is not their sole target group. Rather, they see gender as an intertwining facet of identity that plays a significant role in the life of women, together with other social identities like class, religion, education, etc. Gender empowerment is not specifically mentioned in their documents but empowerment is. On their website, they explicitly mention their objective *to empower these groups so that they are strong enough to build bridges to other groups and the broader society*.

When looking at the objectives of both organisations, concerning (gender) empowerment, we already see a different starting point to frame this concept. Although CSO1 starts from a broader societal perspective – including an ethnic majority lens – this differs for CSO2 in that it begins with migrant and migrantised communities ‘to build bridges’ between communities and strengthen society.

Both CSO1 and CSO2 are socio-cultural organisations that are active at multiple sites in Flanders and are thus funded by the Flemish government. CSOs have traditionally been strong actors in Flanders, but the rise of right-wing policy makers jeopardises the freedom of this civil society landscape. Usually, this results in a decrease of funding opportunities. CSO2 mentioned in the FGD that they receive around 400,000 euros a year, but they fear they will be targeted more because their work, which focuses on migrants, could be seen as segregation. CSO1, however, stated during the FGD that they are quite comfortable in terms of financing. Each year they get 1.07 euro for

every adult in their region. In 2019, the arrondissement of Antwerp consisted of 1,053 million people. Even if we assumed one-third of them would be under 18, this still means CSO1 gets almost double the amount CSO2 gets. The lack of funding CSO2 is a sore point, which is reflected in their size. Once, this organisation had approximately 12 employees for their Antwerp branch alone. Currently, they have 4 employees in Antwerp, and less than 15 employees in all of their sites together. CSO1 admits that they are in a rare and lucky position in terms of funding, whereas CSO2 is still in a more precarious position, even after downsizing. These insecurities are strengthened by fears of the rise of the far-right forces in local and regional elections. Although CSO1 is concerned about the general state of the world, for CSO2 these concerns seem to immediately impact their funding and are personally felt by the staff members of CSO2.

These different sets of organisational features are related to the approaches both CSOs have in expressing politicising of their CSOs. We noted that CSO2 works more on raising the political consciousness of their members compared to CSO1. When discussing this politicising work with CSO1, they mentioned their funding as both a curse and a blessing.

Having a subsidy ‘pot’ is an opportunity, but at the same time it is also a weakness of ours, because we can politicize much less strongly to the employer. If you have things you want to raise ... voila, you can be less critical because you get those subsidies from the employer.

–(CSO1)

However, CSO2 is also subsidised by that same employer (the Flemish government) and, concerning funding resources, they find themselves in a precarious position. Yet, it is clear that they are more outspoken on political matters and feel it is their responsibility to take up this role in society. The causality between being more politically outspoken and focusing more on migrantised communities (vs. the general population) remains complex and requires careful analysis.

The relationship between dependency on funding and political action is not always so clear to determine, but according to the staff members, it appears to be connected. This becomes, for instance, clear in the context of the genocide in Palestine that started just before the fieldwork was conducted in 2023. The CSOs referred to actions undertaken by the Minister of Culture who suggested that CSOs should not speak out in favour of Palestine. These statements are felt heavily by the CSO2 members as they are very much aware of the consequences it can have for their own organisation and Flemish civil society in general. More specifically, they indicated that *you are threatened as a civil society organization to openly criticize domestic and foreign policy* (CSO2). Nonetheless, CSO2 has made it very clear on numerous occasions through their communication (social media posts, signature in email, new year’s postcard) that they stand in favour of the people of Palestine.

While similar concerns about Palestine were voiced by CSO1, their stance on the matter has not been made clear on their social media. Additionally, during an observation of a team meeting, the staff members organised a debate around speaking out. The topic at the time was different, as it was about a climate march, but some employees were irritated that their organisation did not take a clearer stance and support a call for action (made by another CSO in Belgium). The argument of the management team was that they could not support this because that specific call was ‘against’ certain climate policies. As an organisation, CSO1 mentions that they are not ‘against’ anything but prefer to put it differently, as they are ‘for the climate’.

These different approaches to funding and encouraging (geo)political engagement do not necessarily need to be related to the ethnic composition of the organisation. However, the field observations and focus group discussions revealed that this may be due to differences in how they – as CSOs – feel they should position themselves in society, the roles they have to take up and how this is in line with their personal position in society. Although we do see patterns that suggest that these differences are intertwined with ethnic position in society, it was especially in the more specific practices concerning gender empowerment and inclusion that this compositional effect became even more pronounced. We want to stress that both organisations have put considerable effort into the design and follow-up of their activities and trajectories, are eager to learn about how to improve their work, and their trajectories are positively evaluated by their participants. In what follows, we want to highlight some pitfalls, strengths and organisational cultures noted during the fieldwork, and how this relates to ethnic composition – in predominantly female organisations.

8.4.2 Organisational cultures, empowering and inclusive practices

After discussing the context in which both CSOs operate, and how this relates to the position they take up in the civil society landscape in Flanders, we want to delve deeper into how ethnic composition is translated into the functioning of the CSOs and the design and implementation of their goals. Starting from two observation extracts, on top of FGDs and other observations, we will highlight their differences in composition, implicit forms of gender empowerment and their stance regarding temporality and flexibility.

8.4.2.1 Observation 1 (CSO1)

During the ‘mixed sessions’ (i.e., where both Aid and Care Workers (ACW) and Migrantised Women (MW) were grouped together), one of the topics that was going to be discussed was ‘wearing a hijab’. The debate concerning wearing a hijab is already for many years on the political agenda in Flanders, and several public instances have argued to not allow the wearing hereof in public functions (e.g., civil servants, teachers, etc.) or in public institutions

(e.g., swimming pools, schools, etc.) in name of ‘neutrality’ (e.g., Coene & Longman, 2008). The aim of CSO1 was to let some women who wear a hijab (from the MW group) share their experience to start the discussion with the group of women. Given the sensitivity of this debate and the polarising views many people have on this topic, asking people to ‘defend’ why they wear a hijab may also be sensitive as such.

During the session, one of these speakers did not show up. While sitting in this session, one employee asked H. (who wears a hijab but was part of the ACW group) whether she would mind sharing her insights due to the absence of the foreseen speaker. While observing this group, the author noted that this put H. very much on the spot, since she got the question in front of everyone, placing her in a vulnerable position. Despite some hesitation, H. started to share her experiences but got interrupted by her fellow participant. The conversation felt unsafe when another woman interrupted her story by stating that wearing a hijab is all about free will until you decide to take it off. After this, other people also started discussing this topic, and H. did not manage to finish her story. Later, during an interview, she expressed how this experience was for her. She mentioned that she felt that she was invited first for being a woman with a migration background, but it turned out that she suddenly needed to advocate for all women wearing a hijab.

I immediately got a counterargument before I even started. The counterargument was: ‘I wore a hijab and then I took it off, then I experienced a lot of resistance and negativity’. At that moment, the group of people sitting there, [It felt like] they already got a tainted image. Whatever I would say after, they would all think the same ‘H. wears it because she has to, and she just doesn’t dare to take it off’.

As shown in the quote, she mentioned that she felt that there were many stereotypical assumptions concerning her motivation to wear a hijab. As she was sitting there in her professional role, she indicated that *I didn’t know whether I was there as a social worker or a woman with a hijab*. She regretted this incident because she felt judged, as *certain people thought that my hijab ruined everything and that they didn’t know why I still wear it*. This incident illustrates how ‘being a migrantised woman in a minority position’ within an organisation is reflected in everyday practices and in the lack of consideration for employees’ positionality and religious choices in both workplace settings and during empowerment trajectories. This incident highlights the group dynamics of a specific trajectory focused on empowerment. As mentioned in the interview, the safeguarding of a safe space for H. – who participated in her professional role – was reduced to a focus on specific religious symbols, such as her wearing a hijab, which felt uncomfortable. Also the silence of the employee during this uncomfortable intrusion could imply that, at least for the employee – and in extension maybe for the CSO in general – wearing a hijab was interpreted solely in one way. Less attention was given to the fact that

wearing hijabs could be seen as a situated practice of which the motivation and practice of veiling could differ based on political and religio-cultural contexts. Important to note is that during evaluation meetings of staff members in CSO1, this incident was never brought up, demonstrating the difficulties of discussing such microaggressions.

8.4.2.2 *Observation 2 (CSO2)*

CSO2 offers a lot of activities and services to other member CSOs and sets up specific trajectories for some of its members. They started with a sewing project. During the course of the ReIncluGen project, they started with a new project, a theatre project (see also [Chapter 12](#)), in which they want to provide a setting for migrantised women to share and discuss trauma, in a safe space, and find ways to express themselves about their experiences with and views on trauma. As both theatre and sewing project ran simultaneously, the idea would be that after learning how to sew, participants of the sewing course could create the costumes for the theatre group. The organisers of CSO2 thought this synergy could support both trajectories. However, they did not consider how participants interpreted their participation in the sewing trajectory, and how this was framed at home, as shown by this observation made by the first author:

We were all sitting in an informal circle while an employee explained the aim of the course and shared the idea to use their work for the theatre group. One woman asked the group how she was supposed to explain to her husband that she was doing something as strange as making costumes for a theatre group. My personal and initial reaction was feeling some sort of aversion, not being able to imagine that one would need permission from her husband to do something for herself. None of the employees nor the participants told her that she didn't need permission from her husband to do something. Instead they offered her suggestions on how she could justify this to her husband. They offered that she could only mention the sewing course, since learning a skill where she could make clothes for the family was something that could easily be justified. Afterall, if she didn't feel comfortable making costumes she would not have to do this, so adding this bit of information should not be necessary. Later if she would feel like she wants to make costumes, she could mention this information when her husband is already more accustomed to the idea of her joining a sewing class.

In this observation, the organisers followed the reasoning of the participants and started to further reflect on the ways in which this participant should frame it to her husband. Gradually, this urged them to move away from their initial idea and made them realise that the set-up of their activities was not born out of an idea of the participants themselves. In doing so,

they did not judge the participant, but rather followed her reasoning. This observation illustrates how good intentions and ideas about trajectories and courses are not always supported by the participants. The approach of the CSO was to take on a relativist approach and follow the reason of thought of the participant. While the participant's views and approaches were not foreseen, the lived experiences of the staff members did indicate that they found it important to understand the frame of reference of the participant, instead of promoting their own points of view.

Both observations aim to demonstrate how these organisations – and especially when implementing their activities focused on migrantised women – respond differently to their participants. Interestingly, since both activities organised by the CSOs are group activities, this also involves the monitoring of the group dynamics and following up on the course of events. First, when being asked about the ethnic diversity of the CSOs and their views on it, both CSOs mentioned it as important. However, CSO1 and CSO2 are very different in terms of employees. During the fieldwork and interviews, CSO1 mentioned that they sometimes struggle with their staff composition, as in some cases they see themselves as ‘being too white’. By contrast, CSO2 has only one white employee in all three of their fractions, with the Antwerp fraction consisting solely of migrantised employees, originating from Turkey and Morocco. Both compositional features of these organisations seem to impact their approaches towards empowering practices and their social networks. However, this also works the other way around: it seems that because of their specific vision and approaches, they will attract and hire more employees with a migration background. Both, however, encounter some pitfalls related to the organisation and staff members. For CSO1, the challenge mainly relates to building trust, selection of participants and staff members' familiarity and identification with their target group. For CSO2, this is related to work-life balance, and creating boundaries between their professional roles and activities, as well as the impact of their lived experiences on their work activities. We will discuss the case-study organisations in more depth in the following sections.

Second, both CSOs centralise inclusion and empowerment in their projects: CSO1 does this by providing the participants with a space to share their voice and concerns, and CSO2 by mobilising women and bringing them together to learn a skill. This is something that is clearly and explicitly stated. Nonetheless, these approaches do go hand in hand with implicit forms of empowerment.

8.4.2.3 *CSO1: in search for more familiarity and identification with the target group*

CSO1 mentions it as a weakness that their organisation is fairly white, highly educated and female, not showing a lot of ethnic, educational and gender diversity. While their positions as such are not considered problematic, they

feel the lack of diversity complicates reaching out to a more diverse group of people in society, as well as to familiarise with the thoughts of their participants. This is, according to the CSO, also visible in the less ethnically diverse group of participants they attract for their activities, and certainly not reaching the most vulnerable groups in society (e.g., less formal educational qualifications). They mention that the lack of identification of participants with the staff members causes a selection effect. In general, they refer to their HR policy as a weakness. Having specific educational qualifications is not required, but they mainly attract highly educated profiles. During the focus group discussions, staff members mentioned that they are still figuring out how to attract more diverse profiles. In the local Flemish context – with a lot of emphasis on speaking Dutch – they always hired people that are proficient in Dutch. They debated on what their organisations' stance is regarding hiring people with limited Dutch proficiency but with other linguistic skills. One employee argues that they should take on a more proactive role if they actually want to be diverse and inclusive:

‘Well, and I think right now we’re still ... actually we don’t know so well’ [...] ‘I think in the diversity, inclusion and equity trajectory there are already very good steps being taken, but it’s more ‘we’ll see what’s coming, and then we’ll adapt’. That’s kind of the attitude we’re in now, but that’s not how you change a [organizational] culture. You should do that more proactively, so that people also feel welcome the moment they get here. And that we then don’t have to think, ‘Uh, a prayer room. Can we organize that or not?’

(CSO1)

This quote highlights that even when actively focusing on hiring more racialised people or people with a migration background, a change in organisational culture is needed to fully and wholeheartedly strive for this.

Despite their lack of diversity, CSO1 seems hopeful to some extent that through partnerships they manage to involve harder-to-reach communities for civil society, such as members from the Roma community. However, one could argue that just reaching these groups loses its effect if this could result in microaggressions when failing to understand each other's perspectives.

When discussing several points of views, including individual staff members, group discussions and participants, it turned out to be very revealing for this research. As all staff members showed a lot of interest in reaching out to minoritised groups and in promoting ethnically diverse staff compositions, some observations (see observation 1) indicated that this also requires adopting a more critical stance towards their own positionalities and the impact of their everyday practices (e.g., putting the employee on the spot during a group trajectory and time management). The homogeneity of staff's positions and the organisations' lack of situated and intersectional approach were evident in the everyday practices and in the ways these practices were implemented.

The lack of awareness of sensitive issues and ability to safeguard a safe space for all participants were mentioned as resulting in cases where participants felt unheard and uncomfortable. While the trajectories were generally appreciated, they were not open for last minute changes based on the needs of their target group. Leaving more space – even in tightly scheduled sessions – to alter the schedule during trajectories to better correspond to the needs of the participants was mentioned as a solution.

In addition to these incidences in which not all voices were being heard, the more rigid notions of time were also mentioned during data collection. Their trajectories were carefully planned out beforehand and based on previous stages of literature review and workout methods. This also meant a tight agenda where time was closely monitored. If a topic sparked a discussion and time was running out, you could sense staff members becoming stressed. In numerous cases, a topic was cut off because of a tight schedule. During their evaluation by participants, ‘lack of depth’ was therefore mentioned as a point for improvement. Once a participant of the MW group mentioned that the timing of the groups was not working out for her due to her work schedule. CSO1 acknowledged this struggle; however, they never considered altering the timing of the sessions. On the positive side, their structure has also led to fruitful sessions based on the development of a strong methodology. This tight scheduling has profited the organisation as they have proven to be a valuable partner in projects with the local government. This, in turn, can be considered as a reason for maintaining a tight schedule, since they have to deliver their outcomes on time.

8.4.2.4 CSO2: *reconciling professional lives and personal engagement*

In contrast to CSO1, CSO2 is a relatively small grassroots organisation that hires mainly migrantised employees and is composed of smaller teams. Despite the previous professional expertise (e.g., working in similar organisations), educational backgrounds of many employees (e.g., being trained as social scientists or social workers) and ethnic origins, they state that their hiring strategy is based more on ‘lived experiential’ expertise and cultural sensitivity. This brings along an interesting mix of people with different expertise, backgrounds, linguistic, religious and cultural backgrounds, skills and networks. They see this as their strength:

CSO2: We can really move into different frames of references, because of that experience by expertise. We have years of experience working with that target group, but also from our own background. [...] Really, we get emails from school asking, ‘we cannot reach those parents, how are you reaching them’.

The ethnic staff composition also impacts their daily practices which could function as empowering. As mentioned in observation 2, the starting

point of their work are the concerns of their participants – which does not impose a specific (working) definition of ‘inclusion’ and ‘empowerment’. Rather, by offering suggestions, the staff members aim to look at the individuals’ needs and points of reference. Instead of imposing gender views on family relations, and to put it in their own words, staff tried to ‘put women in their own strength’ using a more situated stance. Nonetheless, empowerment is seen as not having the same meaning for everyone. When reflecting on observation 2, CSO2 took a clearly situated stance, showing understanding and focussing on how to help to remove that barrier for her, without questioning, judging or wanting to alter the dynamics of her marriage.

However, the abovementioned advantages can lead to role confusion, between friend and social worker, resulting in a poor work-life balance as well as a lack of professionalisation. CSO2 is a professional organisation that supports other organisations that often do this as a volunteer. For instance, they support an organisation that brings Muslims together that work on sustainability in their free time. These diverging roles and time result in role confusions:

You are working with volunteers in their spare time, we are a professional organization, but sometimes there is friction between professionalism and friends’ services. They feel like they can call you every moment of the day or on the weekend. You constantly must draw that line and then sometimes you get a lack of understanding from your target group.

(CSO2)

The citation shows that professional staff who also have lived expertise on the topics they work on can sometimes blur the boundaries between their professional activities and those of closer inner circles. This seems to result, in some cases, in a more ad hoc approach, where they insufficiently protect their own work-life balance and risk never fully meeting all needs of their participants. The need to be flexible and familiar with participants’ living conditions, which results in more ad hoc responses, was, for instance, visible when discussing the idea of making costumes for the theatre group in the sewing group (observation 2). This, in turn, could also result in the withdrawal of participants and cause stress for the staff members. The sewing group and the theatre group did not necessarily need to be connected to each other, since the main goal is the gathering of women and making them feel comfortable, either through theatre or sewing clothes in a small group. After this discussion, the woman in question did not return to the sewing group. As we are not aware of the true reason for her absence, there is a chance that this is because she was wary of participating in something that suddenly was not just about sewing anymore but also about theatre. This contrasts with the experiences in CSO1, where there was a clearer division of roles.

This noticeable distinction in organisational cultures between both CSOs also concerned their views on time, structure and flexibility. Although it is important to not essentialise, the differences in ethnic composition lead to different ways of working that were especially visible when contrasting both CSOs. These views do not necessarily solely focus on the structures and time-related matters of the organisation themselves but mainly mattered in understanding different concepts and notions of time. This resulted in the field observation that CSO1 is more rigid and structured, whereas CSO2 can come across as more chaotic but flexible, following the lives and interpretations of time of their participants. This can also be demonstrated by field reflections of the first author:

During my fieldwork with CSO2, I scheduled to work from there so I could observe their daily functioning. When I arrived my contact person was not there and the other employees would also soon leave for other obligations, leaving me frustrated. On the contrary, I felt relieved going to CSO1, where not I but they planned in all the moments to do the observations, sometimes months in advance. I knew I could just show up, without sending a reminder, and they would be expecting my arrival. During the end of my fieldwork, I grew anxious because I didn't observe enough at CSO2, which also implied I did not find enough participants to interview. Sharing my concerns with my contact person, she suggested coming that week to see what activities I could further observe and calling some participants to ask if they would be willing to be interviewed. After expressing my gratitude she responded 'you are always welcome, you knew that from the moment we met each other. Just come and you can ask me those questions and in the meantime we make some calls'. In the end, I had enough observations and interviews from both CSOs. My frustrations when conducting fieldwork in CSO2, namely their lack of formal structure, turned out to be extremely valuable in the functioning of their organization: their flexibility and hands-on approach. This allowed for a more holistic approach for their members.

The flexibility to follow their participants' lead resulted in the usage of a more holistic approach to supporting their members and organising activities, but did not necessarily align with the more strict and rigid notion of time followed by the surrounding organisations. Nonetheless, as noted during the fieldwork, notions of time matter when working with migrantised women – not only to 'reach out' and 'recruit' participants but also to 'keep them engaged' on the long run, as shown below in the observation notes of the first author:

The day I went to CSO2 to make those calls was also the day before the sewing classes were supposed to start. The volunteer who was going to

teach the classes called in to say she was sick. It was after 5 pm, and everyone was about to go home. The sewing course already started later than planned because of practical reasons (scheduling issues, material that was not ready) and CSO2 felt wary about delaying again because ‘if we delay we are going to lose these women’. After some brainstorming they decided to do an informal elaborate breakfast instead and they divided tasks about who would buy what. This example does not only show the fast flexibility CSO2 has, but also the knowledge they have about their target group. During the courses itself flexibility remained prominent and participants always had a say. For example, if a lot of the women wanted to stay home with their children during public holidays, a lesson could get cancelled.

Being part of the organisation and content of trajectories can also be part of voicing people’s needs and wishes. However, the flexibility of the CSO in considering the needs and agendas of their participants can, in turn, come across as chaotic and the set goals can fade in the spirit of being considerate. For example, a couple of sewing courses fell through because participants kept cancelling at the last minute or did not inform about their absence at all. At one point, the instructor had to be more strict and request better communication, because she had spent time preparing these lessons. This switch from informal to formal could again result in role confusion for the participants. This further demonstrates that both organisations handle time differently. CSO2 has an approach that could be considered very flexible, whereas CSO1 values structure. Both ways are valuable and come with their own strengths and weaknesses.

8.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, we focused on how CSOs in Flanders approach empowerment – especially when applied to migrantised women. Literature in this field has repeatedly shown that inequalities of gender, ethnicity, race and ability are present in the workforce (Bourabain, 2021; Elloukmani, Oosterlynck, & Raeymaeckers, 2024, 2025; Zanoni & Janssens, 2015). This demands not only an analysis of how CSOs work and position themselves within the broader CSO landscape, given the third-party government regime (Verschuere & De Corte, 2012), but also a better understanding of their organisational cultures and how these are institutionally shaped (Zanoni & Janssens, 2015).

As already shown by Elloukmani and colleagues (2024, 2025), despite leaders and managers in CSOs repeatedly stressing the importance of ‘diversity’ at the workplace, this is not necessarily reflected in governance, organisational structures or practices. While Elloukmani and colleagues focused on nonprofit organisations as a starting point for their study, our data collection selected CSOs based on their inspiring and diverse practices concerning inclusion and gender empowerment. Many CSOs see it as their central aim to

accommodate gender empowerment, which is further fuelled by policy foci, but this is not always reflected in their daily practices. By starting from CSO's practices, we aim to focus on two CSOs that already implement policies and set up practices aimed at empowering migrantised women – or supporting them in their own empowering processes in Belgium. Both follow a grassroots approach (see [Elloukmani et al., 2024](#)) in which the focus is on community mobilisation and on empowering their participants' voices who are often marginalised or stereotyped in dominant (media and policy) discourses.

Building on elaborate fieldwork conducted over several months, we claim that both CSOs play a crucial role in promoting gender empowerment in Flanders. CSO1 shows itself as a reliable partner, with their structure and thought-out methodology aligning well with governmental expectations. They offer a soundboard to women, validating their experiences within a well-defined framework while translating these needs to the government. However, we found that this approach leaves less room for a situated intersectional approach, carrying the risk of falling into colonial feminist and thus limited understandings of gender empowerment. The combination of this grassroots discourse with a more professionalist discourse present in this CSO (see [Elloukmani et al., 2024](#)) also entails more standardised procedures, working hours and predefined outcomes.

CSO2's approach is different, being more flexible and centred around the needs and preferences of the participating women. This adaptability can create a more inclusive and empowering environment, as it acknowledges the situatedness of social positions and integrates the participants' voices and choices into their projects. Such flexibility, although sometimes perceived as less professional, demonstrates a deep understanding of the target group's social realities and fosters a sense of ownership and relevance among the participants. Aside from this grassroots discourse present in the CSO, a more civic discourse was noted, which calls for more social advocacy ([Elloukmani et al., 2024](#)).

In conclusion, we stress the importance of CSOs to balance a reliable framework with flexibility and a feminist situated approach to ensure they resonate with those they aim to support. Based on these findings, we can formulate some future research recommendations and policy implications.

Future research could systematically follow-up changes over time in CSO practices and attitudes. In addition, future research systematically mapping how intersectionality can be applied across contexts in CSO practices working on empowerment could help provide tools for practitioners and enhance understand of its situatedness.

Future policies promoting gender empowerment should first of all define more precisely their desired outcomes. In doing so, they should focus on how people themselves feel empowered and avoid top-down definitions of empowerment – as this goes against the nature of the concept. In addition, in a third-party government regime ([Verschuere & De Corte, 2012](#)), governments could define and develop more concrete demands to institutionalise

intersectional approaches to empowerment, ensuring that empowerment is accessible to all. This is especially valid for migrantised and minoritised groups – often seen as the ones that are largest in need of empowerment but also the ones’ whose empowerment is not recognised in society and CSOs. The institutional embeddedness of intersectionality is needed to avoid reinforcing existing power dynamics in society.

Notes

- 1 <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/countries/belgium>
- 2 <https://publicaties.vlaanderen.be/view-file/31741>
- 3 <https://www.antwerpen.be/info/gemma>
- 4 We refer to ‘migrant women’ when talking about women that have migrated during their lifetime. We refer to the broader group of ‘migrantised women’ that are frequently seen by society as ‘migrant’ but have not necessarily migrated themselves. Oftentimes, by referring to people as migrants, they are also excluded in society, or not regarded as belonging to it.

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9 Navigating the Institutional Tightrope

The Case of Polish Women's Organisations

Dagmara Szczepańska and Renata Siemieńska-Żochowska

9.1 Introduction

As a result of Russia's military attack on Ukraine on February 24th, 2022, millions of people were displaced within the country itself, as well as outside of its borders. According to the UN Refugee Agency's estimates ([UNHCR, 2024](#)), the number of Ukrainian refugees and asylum-seekers rose to 6.3 million by the end of 2023, most of them residing in the neighbouring countries. The Polish society and institutions responded to this crisis immediately, with a readiness to support Ukrainian forced migrants by launching social protection programs, establishing collective housing sites, and offering immediate assistance to those crossing the Ukrainian border. This required a collective effort and involvement of not only state actors but also of the civil society, whose activities were mostly coordinated by nongovernmental organisations ([Charycka, Bednarek, & Gumkowska, 2024](#)). Although the role of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in migration governance on the international level has been studied before (see [Schrover, Vosters, & Glynn, 2019](#)), here we would like to focus on the way in which organisations adapted or even reoriented their programs to address migrants' needs. Importantly, doing so required from civil society a certain degree of flexibility and openness, which can sometimes be constrained by the institutional framework within which they function. Despite the potential rigidity resulting from the process of NGO institutionalisation, Polish civil society was able to overcome this obstacle and include new beneficiary groups in their projects. In this chapter, we will respond to the following questions: What concrete steps and strategies allowed this process to take shape? Did institutionalisation make it harder for CSOs to carry out their everyday activities, or did it create practical opportunities to expand their services, strengthen their staff, and secure more stable resources?

To answer these questions, we adopted a situated intersectional approach, which allowed us to scrutinise the way in which civil society organisations (CSOs) interacted with migrants' identities within the specific context of an ongoing war and the process of NGO institutionalisation.

Specifically, we looked at CSOs, whose primary focus has been on supporting women and who have been gradually extending their organic activities to support migrant women as well. This is particularly relevant within the current context for two reasons. First, 77% of the adult Ukrainian population who received temporary residence status in Poland until February 2025 were women (USC, 2025). Second, migrant women often face unique challenges that are compounded by their gender and migration status. They are frequently at risk of discrimination, exploitation, and violence, leading to a heightened necessity for targeted interventions (Nolin, 2006). By employing the framework of situated intersectionality, this chapter investigates how institutionalisation affects the ability of CSOs to address the multifaceted vulnerabilities faced by migrant women. This perspective allows for a nuanced examination of how various social identities, such as ethnicity, class, and gender, intersect and influence the experiences of migrant women, thereby shaping the responses of CSOs.

By critically examining the interplay between institutionalisation and civil society action, this chapter aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how to enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of support for migrant women across diverse European contexts. Ultimately, it aspires to inform future policies and practices that not only recognise the importance of institutionalisation but also promote an adaptive, inclusive approach that empowers CSOs to remain responsive to the complexities of the communities they serve. In doing so, the chapter seeks to illuminate pathways for more effective interventions and ultimately foster a more equitable support system for migrant women in Poland and beyond.

9.2 Institutionalising civil society

Institutionalisation is commonly regarded as one of the stages of development in the lifecycle of social movements and CSOs. Social movements often begin as informal, grassroots efforts that seek to challenge existing power structures, raise awareness, and mobilise collective action. Over time, as movements grow and seek to expand their influence, they often face pressures to adopt more formal structures, professionalise their operations, and align with existing institutional frameworks to achieve legitimacy, funding, and broader public impact (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Yngve, 2025). This process of institutionalisation, while providing certain operational benefits, also introduces new complexities and challenges, particularly for organisations that began with flexible and community-centred approaches. Understanding institutionalisation in this context offers valuable insight into how CSOs navigate and adapt within established social, legal, and financial systems to sustain their mission and influence (Anheier, 2014).

Within the context of NGOs and CSOs, institutionalisation refers to the formalisation and standardisation of their structures, practices, and operational

processes to align with established frameworks and regulatory expectations. This process typically involves adopting stable governance structures, implementing consistent procedural rules, and establishing formalised mechanisms for decision-making, communication, and accountability. Institutionalisation can enhance the legitimacy, visibility, and operational effectiveness of NGOs and CSOs, allowing them to secure funding, access resources, and build partnerships with other entities, including governmental bodies and international organisations. However, it can also introduce challenges by potentially reducing flexibility, increasing bureaucratic demands, and sometimes shifting focus away from grassroots engagement, thus altering the original mission and responsiveness of these organisations (Minkoff, 2002).

One of the primary drivers of institutionalisation in NGOs and CSOs is the need to secure funding and resources, often tied to compliance with donor expectations or regulatory frameworks. Many funders require grantees to demonstrate formalised structures, reliable accounting procedures, and measurable outcomes, which necessitates that organisations adapt to institutional norms to maintain financial sustainability. Scholars such as DiMaggio and Powell (1983) argue that this alignment process is part of “isomorphic” pressures, where organisations begin to resemble each other to maintain legitimacy and gain access to similar resources. This homogeneity, while facilitating resource acquisition, can lead NGOs and CSOs to prioritise activities that align with funders’ expectations over those that meet community needs, potentially resulting in a phenomenon known as “mission drift” (Ebrahim, 2003).

Institutionalisation also facilitates professionalisation within NGOs and CSOs, a process that can increase efficiency and accountability through the adoption of formal policies, trained staff, and specialised roles (Anheier & Salamon, 2006). Professionalisation can improve the quality and consistency of service delivery and provide a basis for systematic evaluation and improvement. According to Hwang and Powell (2009), professionalisation encourages the use of formal structures and expertise within NGOs and CSOs, allowing them to operate on par with larger, more established organisations. However, this shift can lead to bureaucratic rigidity, where complex rules and hierarchical processes limit the flexibility that often enables NGOs and CSOs to respond quickly to emerging social issues (Edwards & Hulme, 1996).

Moreover, while institutionalisation can enhance public credibility and legitimacy, it may come at the cost of grassroots involvement. Edwards and Hulme (1996) argue that institutionalised organisations often experience a decline in community-based participation, as their increasing complexity and formalism create barriers to local involvement. This trend is especially concerning for CSOs and NGOs whose missions are community-centred, as the shift away from grassroots networks towards institutional relationships can limit the organisation’s capacity to remain responsive to the communities they serve. Local participants may feel alienated by the organisation’s formal structures, thereby diminishing the grassroots legitimacy that is often a core strength of civil society organisations (Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

Overall, while institutionalisation can enhance legitimacy, access to funding, and professionalism, it also presents significant challenges for NGOs and CSOs, particularly regarding flexibility, community engagement, and mission alignment. The balancing act between institutionalising for stability and maintaining grassroots authenticity remains a key consideration for these organisations as they navigate evolving social and political landscapes. For many NGOs and CSOs, finding an equilibrium that preserves responsiveness to local needs while meeting institutional demands is crucial to sustaining their relevance and effectiveness in the civil society sector (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Ebrahim, 2003; Yngve, 2025).

9.3 Polish civil society organisations' landscape

The landscape of Polish CSOs has been shaped by historical legacies, socio-political transformations, and shifting policy frameworks. Following the democratic transition of the early 1990s, Poland witnessed a significant surge in the number of CSOs, which played a crucial role in addressing social, cultural, and economic challenges (Siemieńska, 2014). Over the past three decades, the Polish third sector has undergone considerable changes, influenced by political shifts, fluctuating public trust, and evolving funding structures (Norris, 2022). While some organisations have flourished, others have struggled with sustainability due to financial and institutional constraints.

A defining feature of Polish CSOs is their diverse origins and areas of activity. Some were established in response to emerging social needs, others were reactivated after being dissolved during the communist era, and yet others were formed as branches of international organisations. These organisations operate across multiple domains, including education, human rights, gender equality, environmental protection, and labour rights (Charycka, Gumkowska, & Bednarek, 2022). However, their development has been uneven, with access to funding and institutional support often dictated by political alignments. Between 2015 and 2023, during the tenure of the Law and Justice (PiS) government, CSOs experienced an increasingly constrained operating environment, with preferential treatment given to organisations aligned with the ruling party's agenda, while independent and progressive initiatives faced financial and legal limitations (Marczewski, 2018).

One of the key challenges facing Polish CSOs is public perception and engagement. Research indicates that in 2023 the level of trust placed by Polish society in NGOs reached 63%, surpassing the world average of 59% and marking the highest level recorded since 2014, when the Klon/Jawor Association began systematically measuring public trust in the sector (Charycka, Bednarek, & Gumkowska, 2023). The authors of the report also noted that factors contributing to this result included increased direct personal contact with NGOs since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, greater financial transparency, and reports presenting the tangible results of their work. Nevertheless, participation in CSOs in Poland remains relatively low compared

to other European countries, with many citizens perceiving other forms of civic engagement, such as protests or direct action, as more effective means of influencing political decisions (European Commission, 2013). At the same time, grassroots activism has played a crucial role in shaping civil society, with many informal initiatives eventually transitioning into formalised organisations to secure funding and expand their activities. Notably, Poland's history of social movements, as exemplified by the Solidarity movement, an independent trade union founded in 1980 that evolved into a broad social campaign for workers' rights and democratic change, has left a lasting imprint on civic activism, fostering a culture of bottom-up engagement (Norris, 2022). This could be seen in 2020, when the Polish society showed mass support for the Polish Women's Strike's initiative opposing the Constitutional Tribunal's ruling restricting abortion law (Szczeńska & Marchlewska, 2023).

9.4 Refugees included – the CSO perspective

Until February 2022, only a small number of Polish CSOs focused specifically on addressing the needs of migrants, including refugees. However, this changed rapidly in response to the political crisis triggered by the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. According to the Klon/Jawor Association, which periodically monitors the condition of Polish civil society, the number of such organisations was so small before 2022 that this category was not even distinguished in their previous reports (Charycka et al., 2022). In turn, in 2022, data from the Polish Central Statistical Office revealed that already 23% of all formally registered Polish CSOs engaged in activities supporting refugees (GUS, 2022, as cited in Charycka et al., 2024). This rapid growth underscores the need to examine these organisations from a broader perspective, identifying some general characteristics before delving into specific case studies later in the text.

The most comprehensive study of Polish CSOs assisting refugees to date was conducted by the Klon/Jawor Association in 2024 (Charycka et al., 2024). The report highlighted significant changes in the organisations' operations, driven by the urgent need to expand the repertoire of services offered to refugees. Notably, only 14% of the surveyed CSOs were established after the war in Ukraine began, indicating that most refugee support activities were undertaken by pre-existing organisations or private individuals. Furthermore, 31% CSOs founded before 2022 reported adjusting their missions to include refugee assistance. Although the study's results were not representative of all Polish CSOs working with refugees, they offered valuable insights into the structural aspects of their functioning. These findings provide a foundation for further investigation into the evolving roles of CSOs in this area.

First, the report highlighted the context's impact on the organisations' resources. Specifically, in comparison to the average Polish CSO, those that worked with refugees in 2024 had a relatively large financial and human

capital at their disposal. Thirty-three percent of CSOs possessed an annual budget of over 230 thousand euros, although the average was around 4 thousand euros (Charycka et al., 2022). Additionally, 83% hired paid employees, compared to an average of 65% (Charycka et al., 2022). In 2024, the researched CSOs received funds mainly from international organisations, such as UNICEF (20%), or from different foreign nongovernmental organisations (18%). At the same time, qualitative study participants highlighted the decreasing number of funds coming from national institutions, which they identified as a significant challenge in securing resources for long-term projects. Seventy-five percent of the CSOs marked that lack of financial stability was the key problem they faced on an everyday basis and stipulated that it would only deepen with time. Moreover, comparing 2023 to 2021 in terms of resources allocated to cater to the refugees' needs, 72% of the organisations declared their financial budget increased, and 49% stated the number of their staff grew. However, most predicted that this trend would revert in 2024 and result in compulsory redundancies, which may negatively impact not only the organisation's functioning but the wellbeing of its members as well. This is especially relevant given the high levels of vocational burnout among individuals working in social justice and human rights non-profit organisations (Chen & Gorski, 2015).

Second, according to the report, the need to include refugees among the organisations' beneficiaries resulted in significant changes to their usual offer. Most of the surveyed organisations reported having altered their activities after 2022 and more than a third (37%) needed to reformulate their overarching missions or objectives. Importantly, this referred not only to the repertoire's expansion but also to the fact that existing activities were sometimes replaced by those addressed at refugees. This suggests that the outbreak of the war in Ukraine significantly impacted Poland's non-governmental sector, reshaping the distribution of services available to different groups. Since the situation was evolving rapidly, the CSOs were required to continually adjust their forms of support to align with the refugees' changing needs. In 2022, these mainly included providing material goods and finding accommodation, while at the time of the study (early 2024), the most common activities supporting refugees involved fostering integration with Polish communities and providing informational assistance. Other prevalent efforts included psychological support and educational and language classes. It must be noted that these require expert knowledge, which had to be either acquired by the regular staff or the organisations needed to hire new personnel. Indeed, a third of the surveyed organisations called for more workshops and training, which would allow them to develop a structure able to sustain their long-term objectives. Still, despite operating under challenging and uncertain conditions, they remained determined to continue supporting refugees. Most of the surveyed CSOs planned to maintain their refugee assistance efforts over the following two years, although a fourth of them anticipated having to reduce such activities.

Finally, the most positively evaluated aspect of the changes in the Polish CSO landscape after 2022, as consistently highlighted by the surveyed organisations, was networking. As previously noted, the activities undertaken in response to the outbreak of the war in Ukraine required the collaborative efforts of institutional, civil society, and individual actors. This cooperation fostered partnerships that not only enabled the joint organisation of projects and events, as well as financial and material support, but also facilitated the information exchange and knowledge development. Notably, 90% of the surveyed organisations reported receiving non-material support from their partners, which they highly valued for its long-term impact. Unlike financial aid, which is finite, the transfer of knowledge and skills was seen as a durable resource that could sustain their operations in the future. The opportunity to establish connections with other CSOs was especially appreciated, as it allowed them to share experiences and access support during challenging situations. Still, many noticed that without the material resources, they will be unable to put this knowledge further into practice.

9.5 The case of three Polish women's organisations

These three women's organisations exemplify different pathways of institutionalisation: from long-standing, professionalised CSOs (CSO1 and CSO2) to newer, grassroots initiatives experimenting with hybrid organisational models (CSO3). Together, they reflect the opportunities and tensions discussed in the earlier theoretical sections. Having outlined the overarching challenges faced by Polish CSOs after 2022, we now shift to a focused analysis of the experiences of three Polish women's organisations participating in the ReIncluGen project. This section seeks to present the most prominent institutionalisation-related challenges these organisations encountered. Additionally, we evaluate, through a participatory process, whether these challenges were effectively addressed over time and examine the strategies implemented to overcome them. It is important to emphasise that the organisations selected for participation in the project were primarily chosen based on their involvement in supporting migrant women, aligning with the project's primary objectives. The purposive sampling process led to the inclusion of three organisations that can be classified as women's organisations, not only because they focus on addressing women's needs but also due to their predominantly female staff composition (Molyneux, 2001).

This observation aligns with the broader trend in Poland, where women's organisations have historically had a stronger presence and longer-standing activity than organisations specifically dedicated to assisting migrants. This relative longevity and prominence have translated into greater visibility and broader scopes of operation, also allowing for more flexibility in including new beneficiary groups and activities in their agenda. Still, we invited two large, well-established women's organisations, working on a national level – CSO1 and CSO2 – and a smaller, younger initiative

focusing on supporting specifically migrant women – CSO3. Each of these organisations reflects a unique approach to addressing gender and social justice issues in Poland, making them invaluable actors in the country’s civil society landscape.

CSO1 is one of Poland’s leading feminist organisations, founded in the early 2000s, with a primary mission to combat violence against women and promote gender equality. It provides multifaceted support, including psychological and legal aid for survivors of domestic violence, sexual harassment, and gender-based violence. CSO1 is well known for its awareness campaigns, workshops, and educational initiatives aimed at deconstructing harmful gender stereotypes and fostering a culture of respect and inclusivity. The organisation also actively engages in lobbying for legislative reforms to strengthen women’s rights in Poland. Over the years, it has developed partnerships with international NGOs and local grassroots organisations to amplify its impact. Its initiatives often address systemic issues such as workplace discrimination, reproductive rights, and the intersectionality of gender with other forms of oppression, such as race and economic inequality. Notably, CSO1 launched a support centre for survivors of sexual violence in 2023, modelled after successful centres in Ireland and the UK. It also coordinates international awareness campaigns and provides training for institutions dealing with gender-based violence.

CSO2, founded in the early 1990s, focuses on safeguarding women’s sexual and reproductive rights in Poland, a topic of growing importance given the country’s restrictive abortion laws. The organisation provides vital support, including legal advice and information on accessing abortion services abroad, especially in light of the Polish Constitutional Tribunal’s 2020 ruling further limiting abortion rights. CSO2 conducts extensive advocacy work, striving to influence public policy to promote comprehensive sexual education, accessible contraception, and improved healthcare for women. The foundation collaborates with international bodies such as the United Nations and the European Parliament to report on Poland’s adherence to global human rights standards. Through its research and public campaigns, CSO2 raises awareness about the challenges Polish women face regarding bodily autonomy, positioning itself as a critical voice for reproductive justice in Poland.

CSO3, established in the 2010s, is a grassroots organisation dedicated to supporting migrant and refugee women in Poland. It operates on the principles of empowerment, integration, and cultural exchange. The organisation offers language courses, professional development workshops, and psychological support to help migrant women navigate the challenges of settling into a new society. CSO3 also emphasises storytelling and community-building, providing a platform for migrant women to share their experiences and foster mutual understanding with the local Polish population. The organisation actively addresses issues such as xenophobia, labor exploitation, and access to healthcare, often working in collaboration with local NGOs

and international networks. One of its hallmark projects, a community hub in a major Polish city, serves as a grassroots support hub for refugees. Another unique initiative by CSO3 is its community eatery, located in Warsaw. This eatery is not only a culinary venue but also a social enterprise aimed at empowering migrant women. The space provides training opportunities in the culinary arts, offering migrant women a chance to gain employment skills and financial independence while sharing their cultural heritage. Visitors can enjoy authentic dishes from various regions, which also serve as a medium for cultural exchange and understanding. The eatery hosts events such as storytelling evenings, cooking workshops, and discussions on migration and integration, creating a vibrant space for dialogue and connection. By focusing on the intersection of gender and migration, CSO3 plays a vital role in advocating for policies that promote inclusivity and equality for migrant women in Poland.

9.5.1 Participatory evaluation

The research method employed in the ReIncluGen project – participatory evaluation – is detailed in the introductory chapter of this book. Here, we provide an overview of its application in the Polish context. Data on the organisations’ adaptation to changing structural demands, driven by institutionalisation and the crisis triggered by the war in Ukraine, were collected through participant observations and focus group discussions conducted between July 2023 and June 2024. Participant observations encompassed a variety of organisational activities, including workshops, training, routine operations, and staff meetings. This approach enabled the research team to observe and engage directly with the organisations’ practices, offering a nuanced understanding of their daily operations and insights into their culture, norms, and informal practices. The focus group discussions, conducted with organisational staff at different intervals, aimed to explore structural aspects of managing civil society organisations in this specific context. These discussions focused on identifying internal and external barriers to their functioning and conceptualising how these organisations framed their activities. The extended duration of data collection facilitated the development of trust and rapport with organisational members, fostering more candid and in-depth interactions. Additionally, this longitudinal approach allowed the research team to observe organisational changes, adaptations, and responses to emerging challenges over time. This comprehensive methodology was instrumental in producing robust, high-quality data and advancing a deeper understanding of the organisations’ developmental trajectories.

9.5.2 Navigating institutionalisation – resources

The main change that Polish CSOs noted after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine was related to how they acquired and allocated resources. Therefore,

we aimed to analyse how this aspect intersected with the ongoing process of NGO institutionalisation in Poland. Two out of the three CSOs participating in the ReIncluGen project reported substantial growth since the start of the war in Ukraine, both in the number and scope of their projects and in staff recruitment. These projects primarily included language and work-related courses, legal advice, psychological assistance, and information provision, necessitating the hiring of expert personnel fluent in the refugees' language. The third organisation, however, despite experiencing a short-term increase in the number of *ad hoc* activities they were involved in, did not access more external funding to significantly expand their profile. Still, they noted a long-term shift in the geographical origin of its beneficiaries, which highlighted how the crisis had expanded their reach and necessitated adjustments in their approach.

As noted earlier, following the initial, spontaneous grassroots efforts to assist refugees, a more structured approach emerged, funded by national and international agencies. Importantly, such institutions allocate resources through formalised procedures requiring applicants to meet specific eligibility criteria and demonstrate the ability to complete projects successfully and efficiently. Therefore, based on the results of the current project, we conclude that the organisations that had previously engaged in externally funded projects and employed permanent, specialised staff were better positioned to secure new funding and expand their activities, especially in the face of a sudden event like a war. Their prior experience and infrastructure allowed them to quickly secure new funding and scale their operations. Importantly, for the purpose of this analysis, these organisations can be characterised as more institutionalised, which might have provided them with a leverage to use this unfortunate opportunity to grow as an organisation.

However, representatives from the growing CSOs expressed concerns about the long-term sustainability of this surge in resources, given their temporary nature. To sustain their activities and retain staff after the specific projects' conclusion, they would need to seek additional funding, a task that is both time-consuming and uncertain. Furthermore, external funding opportunities are often issue-specific, like the ReIncluGen project for that matter, which may not align with the organisations' established missions. This misalignment can either leave them with limited resources or pressure them to enter new areas of activity that may not fit their original goals. This dynamic highlights the tension between institutionalisation, with its structured and often rigid frameworks, and the need for contextual flexibility in CSO activities, which constitutes the next challenge we identified.

9.5.3 *Navigating institutionalisation – activities*

Another aspect that relates to the level of CSO institutionalisation and responsiveness to a crisis, such as the war, is the organisation's profile and the scope of activities it offers. Throughout the fieldwork, we observed that the

activities that were continued and further developed in the long-term perspective were the ones that were somehow related to the CSO's organic mission. For instance, in the case of CSO1, which focuses on gender-based violence, the practices that the researchers deemed as most successful, i.e., most attended, with lasting effects and strengthening the relationship with the clients, were those that were building on the organisation's profile. For example, the "Independence" programme, aimed at a multifaceted assistance in women's process of gaining autonomy by addressing their individual needs, the weekly pottery and yoga classes, the self-defence workshops, as well as the psychological and legal support offered. In turn, some other activities, whose organisation might have been directly linked to the context of the ongoing war, such as the language courses or some non-recurring workshops, were either temporary or did not attract wider attention of the potential beneficiaries. Such activities were possible because of the additional external funding opportunities that became available at the time, and they were carried out thanks to the organisation's institutional capacity. However, their long-term effect was limited. We believe that one of the reasons for this was the fact that they were not directly related to the organisation's primary mission.

According to the results of the report discussed previously in this chapter (Charycka et al., 2022), more than half of the surveyed NGOs declared having to alter their activities after 2022 and more than a third had to reformulate their organic mission. Although neither of the Polish organisations participating in the ReIncluGen project mentioned having ever to completely give an old activity up to be able to conduct a new one, aimed at supporting war refugees, such cases are indeed presented in the report. This decision may be connected to at least two factors. The first is related to the lack of long-term funding sources that would support a CSOs' mission for an extended period of time and not make it project-dependent, which points to the precarious situation of CSOs in Poland. The second draws attention to the organisations' ability to adapt their previous, well-established activities to a new beneficiary group, which all three of the Polish ReIncluGen CSOs did. For example, they involved translators and cultural assistants to adapt their informational materials to the needs of Ukrainian refugee women and gained specific legal knowledge linking their area of expertise (reproductive and economic rights, gender-based violence) and their clients' situation to provide quality services. This practice allowed them to maintain the primary profile of their organisations, while also extending their activities to include a new group of beneficiaries. Still, during the participatory research process, professionals working at the CSOs identified a series of obstacles related to this procedure, like the cultural and social differences related to gender norms present within the Ukrainian context. For instance, the deeply internalised compliance with the socially ascribed gender roles. This lack of awareness then translates into a normalisation of certain behaviours, such as violence, and a conviction that they should not be discussed in a public space, which makes women less likely to reach out to CSOs for support.

Nevertheless, the possibility to extend existing practices in such an inclusive way meant that CSOs could further develop the activities related to their organic mission, while also acquiring new skills and experience, also through cooperation with other entities, which brings us to our last point – the role of networking.

9.5.4 Navigating institutionalisation – relations

It needs to be noted that the nature of the relationships forged between CSOs often depends on the availability of funding and the socio-political context in which they operate. This project allowed us to distinguish two important trends delineated by funding availability and the type of cooperation between organisations: competition during resource scarcity and collaboration during resource influx. When funding resources are limited, competition among CSOs often intensifies, impeding opportunities for collaboration. Organisations seeking financial support may need to compete for the same limited pools of funding, whether provided by local governments, international institutions, or private donors. This competitive environment discourages partnership-building, as organisations focus on maximising their individual chances of securing resources. In fact, competition between CSOs was the third most frequently mentioned threat that organisations noted in a survey in 2021, after funding acquisition and state bureaucracy ([Stowarzyszenie Klon/Jawor, 2024](#)).

However, the outbreak of the war in Ukraine altered this pattern, as the sudden influx of resources necessitated and facilitated cooperation among CSOs. The increased availability of funding and support from a wide range of donors created an environment in which organisations could expand their efforts and partner more readily with others. For instance, the urgent need to provide comprehensive support for refugees led to the formation of *ad hoc* coalitions and partnerships among Polish CSOs, as they recognised the value of pooling expertise, sharing experiences, and leveraging complementary skill sets. This cooperation not only enhanced the capacity of individual organisations to respond effectively to the crisis but also fostered the development of durable networks that have the potential to endure beyond the immediate emergency. Moreover, these partnerships provided opportunities for smaller or less-established organisations to gain visibility and credibility by aligning themselves with more institutionalised and experienced counterparts. Such networks could serve as a foundation for future initiatives, enabling a more cohesive and resilient civil society landscape in Poland.

In the ReIncluGen project, this issue appeared in the case of CSO3. It was noted that for a small and issue-specific organisation like theirs, which needs to constantly look for funding sources to secure their regular activities, each invitation for cooperation had to be carefully evaluated, to identify the potential advantages and disadvantages of their participation. Still, given the organisation's profile and engagement in supporting migrant communities,

their public recognition has grown since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in 2022, which allowed them to establish new connections and carry out projects in cooperation with both private donors, such as Deloitte, and other CSOs, such as the Polish Migration Forum.

9.6 Navigating institutionalisation – final remarks

The analysis of institutionalisation processes in Polish women's organisations highlights the ambivalent nature of this trajectory for civil society. On the one hand, institutionalisation has enabled organisations to secure stability, professionalise their activities, and establish long-term partnerships with funders and international actors. On the other hand, it has also introduced significant constraints, particularly in terms of flexibility, grassroots responsiveness, and the risk of mission drift. These tensions echo broader debates within the literature on civil society and democracy, which have long identified the double-edged role of institutionalisation in shaping organisational capacity and autonomy (Anheier, 2014; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

As recent scholarship has argued, Polish civil society operates under conditions of increasing institutional pluralism and political contestation (Domaradzka, 2025). The changing dynamic of the European civic space, alongside the rise of illiberal politics, heightens the need for organisations to both adapt and resist (Negri & Pazderski, 2021). Polish women's organisations exemplify these dynamics: they operate at the intersection of grassroots mobilisation, service provision, and transnational advocacy, while simultaneously navigating pressures of professionalisation and political hostility. At the European level, these challenges resonate with ongoing debates on how to protect and strengthen civil society as a democratic pillar. In January 2024, following years of advocacy by networks such as Civil Society Europe, the European Commission announced its commitment to develop the first EU Civil Society Strategy, with the aim of protecting, supporting, and empowering CSOs as key actors in inclusive democracies (Civic Forum, 2024). This initiative reflects growing recognition at EU level that civil society is indispensable not only for service delivery but also for ensuring accountability, pluralism, and citizen engagement in European governance.

Building on this development, several policy recommendations can be advanced. First, funding frameworks at both EU and national levels should safeguard diverse and long-term support mechanisms, reducing reliance on project-based grants that exacerbate mission drift. Second, the EU should establish monitoring and accountability mechanisms to track and respond to restrictions on civic space, ensuring that organisations can operate freely across member states. Third, targeted capacity-building measures are needed to support smaller and less institutionalised organisations, particularly those working with marginalised groups, so that funding opportunities do not disproportionately benefit large, established CSOs. Fourth, an intersectional approach should be integrated into EU funding and policy guidelines,

requiring attention to gender, migration, class, and other social inequalities to ensure that vulnerable groups, such as migrant women, are not excluded from organisational priorities. Finally, greater investment in transnational CSO networks and coalitions can help overcome fragmentation and enhance the collective capacity of organisations to engage in European policymaking.

Taken together, these reflections suggest that institutionalisation should not be understood solely as a constraint or an opportunity but as a process that requires careful negotiation between stability and autonomy, professionalisation and grassroots responsiveness. The forthcoming EU Civil Society Strategy represents a critical opening to rethink how European institutions can not only recognise but actively sustain the democratic role of civil society. Ensuring that national experiences, such as those of Polish women's organisations, are integrated into this European framework will be essential for building inclusive and participatory democracies.

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Part III

Practices and Pathways of Gender Empowerment and Inclusion in Civil Society



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10 Empowering Women with Migration Background in Italy

Experts and Resource Centres on Their Own Journey

Marica Balestrieri and Jessica Fabbro

10.1 Women's issues and challenges in Italy

The situation of women in Italy is complex and varied, with significant socio-economic, cultural, and geographical differences. Despite the progress achieved in terms of rights and gender equality, women continue to face structural and social inequalities that penalise their full and equal participation in society. The main issues that Italian women face include gender-based violence. For instance, 31.5% of women in Italy have suffered at least once from forms of physical or psychological violence like cyberbullying and revenge porn, and different forms of inequality—economic, labour, and salary (ISTAT, 2014). A woman's salary in Italy remains on average 5.7% lower than that of men. In addition to the gender pay gap, gender inequality also translates into unequal roles and tasks (Eurostat, 2021). There is an over-representation of women in the medium- to low-paid sectors (health, education, care, and social services) and they are also under-represented in positions of high responsibility, political offices, and management roles (Imperatore & Mancini, 2025). The reconciliation of work and family life, and work-life balance in general, still remain a challenge, as women predominantly play the role of caregiver and nurturer in the family sphere for reasons that are not only cultural but also systemic (lack of childcare facilities, lack of support for parental leave, gender pay-gap, etc.). Greater discontinuity in employment also causes consequent pension penalties and fewer career opportunities (ISTAT, 2022).

In addition to this situation of structural imbalance and disadvantage, being a migrant or having a migration history further challenges these gender inequalities and differential treatment while pursuing one's existential goals. Migrant women in Italy face particularly complex problems that overlap with general difficulties but are made worse by possible linguistic, cultural, legal, (subscription to temporary residence permits, fear of deportation and general lack of documents) and socio-economic barriers linked to their migrant status. These factors increase the risk of being subjected to intersecting discriminations linked to gender, ethnicity, country of origin, or professed religion (Bonini, Facchetti, & Ortensi, 2024).

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Migrant women may also be particularly vulnerable to gender-based violence, both during the migration journey and in the country of destination. They are more susceptible to human trafficking, sexual exploitation, unpaid domestic work, and sexual violence by traffickers, employers, or community members. Refugee and asylum-seeking women are particularly vulnerable to physical and psychological violence in refugee camps or reception facilities, often due to their precarious status and difficulty in reporting due to language barriers and fear of deportation ([Osservatorio Domina, 2024–2025](#)). Migrant women are often concentrated in precarious and poorly paid jobs, such as domestic helpers, caregivers, agricultural workers, or in other informal sectors where they are more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. In many areas, migrant women do not have access to regular employment contracts and live in economic insecurity ([Slaves No More, 2023](#)). Moreover, the difficulty of accessing health services and social rights limits their empowerment and well-being. Precarious legal conditions that limit access to basic rights such as healthcare, education, and regular employment only worsen this picture. Unfortunately, Italian migration policies and European regulations do not always guarantee them adequate protection and create obstacles to accessing rights and services ([European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights \(FRA\), 2017](#)).

These factors call for action to support and sustain migrant women and women with a migrant background to help overcome difficulties and re-establish equity.

10.2 The civil society organisation ‘La Strada-Der Weg Association’

It is within this context that the civil society organisation (CSO) La Strada-Der Weg Association operates in the Autonomous Province Bozen/Bolzano, South Tyrol. This province is located in northern Italy, on the border with Austria, and is characterised by its unique historical and territorial circumstances. As a result, three languages are officially spoken in the province: Italian, German, and Ladin. The province has a population of just over 530,000 inhabitants. According to the most recent linguistic census (ASTAT, 2024), approximately 68.6% of residents declared themselves as German speakers, 27% as Italian speakers, and 4.4% as Ladin speakers. This multilingual and multicultural context shapes the social fabric in which the Association develops its activities and interventions.

Specifically, the CSO ‘La Strada-Der Weg Association’ is based in the main city of the province, Bolzano, and has been operating since 1978 with the initial aim of addressing drug addiction and associated hardships. Having grown over the following decades, today the association manages a series of personal services scattered throughout the territory of South Tyrol, with a high degree of specificity and personalisation in an attempt to reconcile efficiency, ethics, and quality of service ([La Strada - Der Weg Association,](#)

2017–2024). The desire to respond to the needs of people in particularly vulnerable situations is combined with the desire to contribute to a more equitable and supportive society, where every individual can enjoy their rights without suffering discrimination or violence, regardless of their gender, origin, or social condition.

The broad spectrum of services offered ranges from direct support to victims to prevention and awareness-raising, with a particular focus on the protection of victims of violence and exploitation, especially women and children. Commitment to women takes the form of support for women—Italian, migrant, or with a migration background—who find themselves in situations of social disadvantage, often multifactorial (victims of trafficking, early motherhood, and/or single parenthood).

The mission of ‘La Strada-Der Weg’ is to protect and promote the rights of vulnerable people through an integrated approach combining social, psycho-sanitary, and legal support. The association aims to prevent and combat conditions of inequality and need by promoting the autonomy of the assisted persons and their integration into society. Through its numerous projects and its work with other social service organisations, the association contributes to creating a network of protection and empowerment, addressing issues related to violence, discrimination, trafficking, and inequality, providing concrete responses to protect the rights and improve the quality of life of the people it assists.

In 2024, it is estimated that the Association reached a total of approximately 16,296 users, with 358 employees and 269 volunteers working across its numerous areas and fields of intervention. In the same year, the Association counted a total of 90 operational units—understood as active services and projects—across its various areas of activity.

Talking about the intersection between gender and migration experience and personal history/background, in this chapter we found relevant to highlight the impact of two very important projects of the Association within the Area Women and Equal Opportunities: the ALBA project and the Young Mothers–Assisted residences project. In doing so, we list some methodological approaches we use as well as (future) challenges related to these projects, which strive to reduce gender-based inequalities in South Tyrol.

10.3 The women and equal opportunities area

In this chapter, we focus on the Women and Equal Opportunities Area within the organisation, which is specifically dedicated to women’s empowerment and to working with women with a migratory background. This Area comprises 13 of these operational units, including the ReIncluGen project as well as the two services/projects that will be discussed in the following sections: the ALBA project and the Young Mothers project. The main and several objectives pursued by this Area are: providing support to women and men experiencing bio-psycho-social distress, exploitation, or vulnerability and offering

protected apartments and personalised pathways towards autonomy, including bureaucratic assistance, employment counselling, and vocational guidance. It also operates on a broader social level through awareness-raising, training, and monitoring activities. Furthermore, it seeks to promote the achievement of sustainable autonomy and empowerment, with particular attention to mothers in relation to their children, and to foster the inclusion of young people with non-conforming gender identities and sexual orientations by combating stigma and supporting meaningful relationships, even in conflictual contexts. The activities of the Area include ensuring and managing protected apartments for individuals in conditions of extreme fragility, as well as developing tailored programmes towards independence, with targeted support for administrative requirements, job orientation, and training opportunities. On the social level, it engages in awareness-raising initiatives, education, and systematic monitoring. The effort of this Area are specifically addressed to a target group that includes: victims of trafficking and exploitation, especially foreign women; young people between 16 and 21 years old in residential or community-based pathways towards sustainable autonomy; and young mothers with children, through customised projects designed for family units. Once the Women and Equal Opportunities Area has been presented, it seems relevant to introduce the two main projects on which the research work of the ReIncluGen project has been conducted, namely the ALBA Project and the Young Mothers Project.

10.4 The ALBA project

The ALBA project ([Progetto ALBA, 2024](#)) is an Italian initiative created to respond to the phenomenon of human trafficking, particularly in favour of victims of trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation and other forms of abuse. The ALBA project was developed in Italy thanks to the collaboration between public and private organisations, NGOs, and institutions, with the support of international organisations working against trafficking. The main principles of this project are:

- 1 Protection and dignity of victims: The project places at the centre the idea that the person is never at fault for their situation and any intervention must be respectful of their rights.
- 2 Access to justice and legal support: The project ensures that victims have access to the legal system, offering them qualified legal assistance so that they can assert their rights and denounce those responsible for the crimes they have suffered. Legal assistance is crucial to enable victims to get out of the exploitative situation.
- 3 Reception and social reintegration: The ALBA project encourages the creation of paths of reception and psychological, social, and economic recovery of victims, promoting their reintegration into society. Victims are accompanied on a path that aims at their autonomy and security.

- 4 Cooperation between institutions and NGOs: A key principle of the project is the cooperation between different institutional actors (such as the police, the judiciary, and social services) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), which provide direct assistance, shelter, protection, and counselling to victims.
- 5 Awareness-raising and prevention: ALBA does not only intervene in established trafficking situations but also aims to raise awareness in the local community and to prevent the phenomenon through information campaigns, especially on the risks of trafficking and exploitation.
- 6 Integrated and multidisciplinary approach: The project adopts an approach that combines legal, social, psychological, medical, and economic support. Networking with professionals from different fields (lawyers, psychologists, educators, social workers) is a key element to ensure comprehensive support for victims.

The main objective of the project is to accompany and support the victims, accompanying them from the very first stages of the process of emerging from the exploitative situation to the recovery of a condition of freedom and 'normality'. This also means supporting the social and economic reintegration of trafficked persons. Support action alone is not enough. In fact, it is also necessary to work on awareness-raising and information actions among citizens, as well as on the strengthening of international cooperation channels. The working methodology is integrated, centred on the person, their resources, and needs. The ALBA project makes use of a network that involves the Autonomous Province of Bolzano (institutional coordination) and three private organisations that deal with hooking up (Volontarius Association), reception (La Strada - Der Weg Association), literacy, and socio-occupational integration (Consis).

During the first years of the project, the women who were supported mainly originated from Eastern Europe (Balkans, Albania, Romania) and were victims of severe exploitation. Protection also required engaging in legal battles in defence of the victims. In the following years, the target group shifted primarily towards exploited women originating from the African continent (Nigeria, Congo, Ivory Coast, Guinea, ...). The type of approach in the ALBA project is mainly ethnographic, during which continuous training and updating are required. The problems of the users have in fact evolved from sexual exploitation with a very high degree of violence to a type of exploitation involving more subtle forms of violence, linked to beliefs and rituals. For women who suffer this type of violence, this means seeing not only themselves but also their families threatened. The impact of the violence they have experienced and the threats to which they feel they are still subjected, combined with low or absent levels of education and arrival in a social system completely different from their country of origin, often makes it difficult to prioritise personal development. For some users, pressured by debts and the need to support their families, working on themselves, their traumas,

and the enhancement of their skills is often perceived as unnecessary and/or superfluous, undermining the success of the proposed integration pathways.

10.5 Young Mothers—Assisted residences for young mothers

The ‘Young Mothers’ project constitutes the formal proposal of a socio-educational residential and territorial intervention aimed at young and adolescent mothers, a target that very often includes young mothers originating from foreign countries, particularly from Africa and non-EU countries. Vulnerability situations are multifactorial, involving multiple forms of inequality like poverty, lack of adequate family support, single parenthood, and precariousness. Women in this condition need a safe environment and a support network. The chosen approach is based on promoting mothers’ autonomy, supporting them not only in their daily needs but also in accessing education, work, and social opportunities. A person-centred approach is required, focusing on the person, her resources, her culture, and her different socialisation.

According to experience, specialised residential facilities do not give priority to the mother over her autonomous social life. Some young mothers, unlike adult women, have not had the opportunity to deal with the world of work, find a home, etc., and thus lack the social skills that are essential for achieving sustainable autonomy for themselves and their children. In recent years, the number of requests has grown steadily, with many requests coming from families with a migrant background, mostly first-generation families with needs attributable to the bio-psycho-social areas (the issue of housing is relevant). The variation of the phenomenon has stimulated a review of the socio-educational approach, favouring an approach that allows sustainable autonomisation for the users. The indispensable points for possible inclusion are:

- The existence of an alternative to our project by the sending social service, if the project prerequisites are not met (to be clarified in preliminary interviews);
- Language learning;
- Learning courses in ‘citizenship and Constitution’

The opportunity to live in accommodation within a programme designed for a gradual path towards independence and autonomy allows adolescent and young mothers to receive support both in their parenting skills and their personal development. This includes psychological maturation and the identification of concrete, specific, and personal goals in the areas of education, employment, and housing, which can facilitate their integration into social life. In this way, a more appropriate evolutionary development and a process of social inclusion for their children are fostered. The focus of the educational intervention is thus divided between the assessment of parenting and the gradual process of independence and integration of women and mothers.

The main objectives are psycho-social and educational accompaniment, parenting support, educational and professional support, and the promotion of autonomy and independence.

The general aim of the project is to provide a socio-educational service to mothers, families, and their children, both in residential and territorial formula (home-based education), enabling them to experiment in order to achieve sustainable personal and social autonomy. The specific objectives are listed below:

- testing of parenting skills in the care and nurturing of children in a semi-protected but open context;
- support to mothers and families in managing the relationship appropriate to the developmental stage of their children;
- accompanying mothers and their families in acquiring social skills, enabling them to achieve an autonomous life in terms of training and/or work, housing, relationships, and logistics (linked to the performance of daily tasks, such as opening a bank account, enrolling the child in child-care services, getting to know the area, and accessing services).

The long-term objective of the assisted residences is to enable young mothers to achieve full autonomy, both economically and emotionally, by facilitating their reintegration into society through work, training and the strengthening of parenting skills, thus helping to reduce the risk of marginalisation and poverty. In addition, the project aims to prevent situations of ill-treatment or intergenerational transmission of difficulties, guaranteeing children a healthy environment in which to grow up.

To sum up, the service takes on the characteristics of a specialised service, reconciling parenting support with social support for mothers and families, in a non-institutionalised context, as it is offered in housing or in a territorial formula. The support takes the form of global accompaniment of women who are provided with the resources to rebuild their lives and those of their children, promoting their independence and reintegration into society. This offers a concrete response to the need for protection and support for young women in a delicate phase of life, such as that of becoming a mother, while at the same time promoting the construction of a better future for the new generations.

10.6 Social-pedagogical approach of La Strada-Der Weg Association

The associative approach in socio-pedagogical work with women in difficult situations is based on a series of methodologies that are adapted to the specific needs of each woman, taking into account factors such as the type of difficulty (violence, poverty, discrimination, social isolation, addiction, etc.), cultural context, and available resources (capability approach). In particular, the

aim is to strengthen self-efficacy and autonomy (empowerment), helping each woman regain control of her own life and decisions. In a socio-pedagogical context, this may mean providing women with the tools they need to cope with difficult situations (e.g. training, counselling, access to resources) and to foster a change in their perception of themselves and their role in society.

The work is relationship-based (Rogers, 1961), the person is placed at the centre and listened to as an expert on their own life condition (Thiersch, 2020). This active listening without judgement allows the person to feel understood and supported. The ground is thus prepared for exploring one's emotions, identifying personal resources and difficulties, and stimulating the reflection process and the search for solutions. This methodological approach makes it possible to support resilience, which is necessary for the development of positive adaptation even in situations of stress or trauma that may arise in the future. This strengthens the person's capacity for autonomy and prepares them to face life with their own resources, internal and external, with self-esteem, self-confidence, and a sense of competence (Bandura, 1997).

In many cases, women facing difficulties find themselves in need of support at multiple levels: psychological, social, legal, health, and economic. A multidisciplinary approach involves different professionals, such as social workers, psychologists, educators, lawyers, doctors, and other specialists, working together to offer comprehensive and coordinated support. This method ensures that all the woman's needs are addressed in a harmonious manner. Socio-educational work does not only cover practical skills but also aspects of self-awareness, emotion management (psycho-education), and building a support network. Literacy programmes, vocational training, and work orientation are useful tools in this regard. The complexity and heterogeneity of the users' situations require a multidisciplinary and network approach. This implies the creation of links between the various services (social, health, educational, legal, etc.) and the involvement of several professionals. This approach helps women feel part of a network that supports them and helps them navigate their daily difficulties. Networks may also include informal support groups, such as friends or neighbours. In many difficult situations, women are also mothers. Parenting support programmes aim at improving childcare skills, strengthening the mother-child relationship, and preventing situations of intergenerational transmission of trauma. Such programmes may include training in parenting skills, psychological support, or social work services.

10.7 What current and future challenges?

Socio-educational work with women is confronted daily with a series of complex challenges involving various levels of intervention: micro, meso, and macro. At the micro level, women educators and professionals have to deal with the diversity of individual experiences, family dynamics, and psychological difficulties that each woman brings with her. At the meso level, socio-educational work is embedded within broader social contexts, such

as communities or support groups, where cultural norms, discrimination, and gender expectations can influence women's well-being and autonomy. Finally, at the macro level, public policies, laws, and social structures continue to present significant obstacles, from a lack of adequate resources to the persistence of gender inequalities. Based on the work of our association, we have identified some of the most urgent challenges that require concrete solutions, concerted with all actors at all levels.

10.7.1 Intersectional and multifactorial vulnerability

The socio-pedagogical work of supporting women in vulnerable situations is an extremely complex and delicate task. Women in difficult situations—such as domestic violence, sexual exploitation, poverty, social exclusion, forced migration, mental illness, etc.—frequently live in contexts of high emotional and psychological stress, and their path to recovery or empowerment is influenced by multiple individual, family, social, and economic factors. Social and educational practitioners face several challenges, both of a practical and theoretical nature, which require a highly professional, empathic, and adaptive approach. Many women in distress have experienced significant traumatic experiences, such as physical violence, sexual violence, exploitation, discrimination, and loss (of family members, work, home, etc.). These traumas leave deep scars that can negatively affect their ability to trust others, to relate in a healthy way, and to make autonomous choices. Complex trauma can manifest itself in psychological disorders (such as anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress), and women who experience them may have difficulty managing emotions and communicating effectively. Working with women who have experienced trauma requires expertise in psychological support and emotion management. Practitioners must be trained to recognise the signs of trauma and know how to respond appropriately. Empowerment support translates into helping the woman to rebuild her self-confidence and to challenge the mechanisms of submission, fear, and shame that may have trapped her.

10.7.2 Complexity of socio-economic conditions

Many women in distress experience situations of poverty, unemployment, insufficient access to social services, or find themselves dependent on precarious social networks. Their daily lives are marked by lack of economic resources, inadequate housing, difficulties in accessing health or educational services, and they often face social isolation. Supporting economic autonomy means helping women to become independent. This may involve support in re-entering employment, accessing benefits, or pursuing educational pathways that enable them to acquire skills. For this, it is necessary to improve access to services that are often unknown or not easily accessible due to language, cultural, or bureaucratic barriers. Socio-educational work involves helping women navigate the service system and ensuring that they can access crucial resources.

10.7.3 Gender stereotypes and discrimination

Women living in vulnerable circumstances are often subject to gender discrimination, which may manifest itself in cultural bias, stigmatisation, or marginalisation. Their social position is often influenced by gender stereotypes that limit their freedom of choice and possibility to lead independent lives. Countering gender stereotypes requires a commitment to promote cultural change and raise awareness among women themselves about their rights and freedom of choice. It also involves raising awareness in the surrounding community on issues such as equality and mutual respect. Women from traditional cultural or family backgrounds may find themselves in conflict with the expectations of the wider society. This conflict can generate feelings of guilt, confusion, and insecurity.

10.7.4 Difficulties in building a support network

Many women in vulnerable situations have weak or completely absent social networks, due to lack of trust, isolation, or broken family ties. In some cases, women may be totally isolated, with few or no social reference points. Socio-pedagogical work requires constant attention in fostering the building of positive bonds and a support network. This could mean helping them to reactivate family contacts, or to integrate support groups, such as women's associations, self-help groups, or other community networks. Many women also experience a sense of shame that leads them to give up asking for help or confiding in others. The practitioner must be able to create a welcoming and non-judgmental environment in which the woman feels safe to seek help.

10.7.5 Cultural and linguistic differences

Migrant or ethnic minority women face language and cultural barriers that can further complicate their support. In these cases, the problems are amplified by the difficulty of adapting to the new social context, which can lead to increased stress. Social and educational work with migrant or refugee women implies great cultural sensitivity and often involves the use of cultural mediators or professionals with a good knowledge of the language and traditions of origin. Fostering the integration of vulnerable women into the host society is essential, and this requires interventions that promote mutual understanding, language training, and integration into social and work activities.

10.7.6 Managing continuity of support

Many women, especially those coming from traumatic experiences or precarious life paths, find it difficult to maintain continuity of support over time. There may be sudden interruptions, such as a relocation, a psychological crisis, or a downturn in the cycle of dependency or abuse. One of the main difficulties is to maintain the bond with the woman even in times of crisis or

regression. Caregivers must be able to support the woman even during times of difficulty and uncertainty, and not abandon her in times of need, respecting her time and rhythm. Some women may feel tempted to return to the old dynamics of exploitation or violence. Social workers must be prepared to intervene promptly in case of regressions.

10.8 An ‘intersectional’ approach seen from practice

Situated intersectionality helps to understand and address the social inequalities and multiple, intersecting oppressions that women in vulnerable conditions may face. Applied to socio-pedagogical work, situated intersectionality allows people to see the person as a set of complex identities (of gender, ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, ability, religion, etc.), which interact with each other and influence their access to opportunities, rights, and resources, as well as experiences of discrimination and oppression. This approach emphasises the importance of contextualising the analysis of inequalities within the local specificities and individual experiences of each woman, while also highlighting structural power inequality and the role of ‘society’ as a whole.

Intersectionality recognises that experiences of oppression and discrimination are never one-dimensional. In the socio-pedagogical context, the situated approach implies that every intervention is constructed taking into account the concrete and specific situation of women. It is not a matter of applying a one-size-fits-all view of oppression, but of examining how different forms of inequality interact and manifest themselves in the socio-cultural, historical, and economic context in which women live.

The cornerstones of this approach are:

- Recognition of the multiple and intertwining dimensions of identity: The intersectional approach implies that the socio-pedagogical practitioner never considers only one aspect of a woman’s identity (e.g. only her gender or only her migrant status) but takes into account the different overlapping and interacting identities. This means addressing, for example, how poverty is intertwined with refugee status, creating a particular experience of social exclusion that requires targeted and sensitive support. It also involves acknowledging how structural societal inequalities, stemming from legal frameworks or policy contexts, shape these experiences, ensuring that responsibility is not attributed solely to the women themselves.
- Valuing individual experiences: Every woman in a vulnerable condition lives her own unique experience of oppression and resistance. The situated approach emphasises the importance of listening to and valuing the woman’s voice, seeking to understand her perspective, her life context, and her specific needs. Such an approach must be person-centred, taking into account not only her condition as a victim but also the resources she can mobilise and the aspirations or goals she seeks to pursue. In this sense, it is crucial to acknowledge women’s agency, which may take diverse and non-mainstream forms.

For example, what may appear as compliance or obedience can in fact reflect a deliberate strategy, such as prioritising a larger plan for the well-being of one's children. Recognising these nuanced expressions of agency challenges the perception of women as merely 'helpless' and instead foregrounds their capacity to act, even within constrained circumstances. This inevitably links to the positionality of the caregiver or practitioner, whose own subjectivity inevitably shapes the angle and quality of the support provided.

- Consider the multidimensionality of the phenomenon: Instead of limiting an intervention to one dimension of the problem, the intersectional situated approach requires addressing women's difficulties on several fronts. For example, in the case of an immigrant woman, the practitioner needs to take into account psychological support for her experience of trauma related to migration, legal assistance for access to rights, orientation to work and training to ensure economic autonomy, and support for parenting.
- Seeking and promoting active participation with a view to empowerment: An intersectional approach emphasises the empowerment of women, seeking to build pathways that do not see them as passive objects of intervention but as active participants in decisions concerning their lives. Recognising the multiple intersecting and reinforcing forms of oppression and allowing the woman to reflect on them, to recognise her strengths and to build new internal and external resources, is fundamental. Decisions must be made together with the woman, respecting her political and social agency, and helping her to develop the capacity to challenge and navigate oppressive power structures.
- Do not forget the dynamics of power and oppression: Intersectionality also involves a critical analysis of the power dynamics that operate at the social, political, and economic level, and that influence women's existence. Social and educational workers need to be aware of the institutionalised structures of discrimination and exploitation that vulnerable women face and know how to deal with them appropriately, while also doing awareness-raising work on structural inequalities in the community and social services.
- Attention to cultural diversity and sensitivity: Women in vulnerable situations are often part of different ethnic and cultural groups, with experiences of migration, refugee, or other situations that can generate significant cultural diversity. Socio-pedagogical work must be sensitive to the diverse traditions, cultural values, and communication modes of these women, in order to avoid imposing a Western or patriarchal view on welfare, and to ensure an approach that respects the dignity and self-determination of women from all backgrounds.

10.9 Conclusion

Adopting an intersectional and situated approach in socio-pedagogical work with vulnerable women requires acknowledging the complexity of their lived experiences and creating support pathways that are tailored to the multiple

dimensions of their identities. Such an approach not only seeks to respond to immediate needs but also to foster self-determination, respect for cultural diversity, and genuine empowerment. By addressing structural inequalities and systemic barriers, it becomes possible to design pathways of recovery and reintegration that aim not at temporary relief but at lasting emancipation.

Equally important is the participatory dimension of this work. Empowerment cannot be something ‘delivered’ from the outside, but must involve women themselves as active agents in the process. This means ensuring that their voices are heard in shaping the support they receive, whether in choosing activities, identifying personal goals, or determining the pace of their own growth. Recognising their capacity to participate in decisions that affect their lives not only strengthens their autonomy but also fosters a sense of ownership and agency in the journey towards healing and integration. Ultimately, the intersectional and participatory perspectives converge in highlighting that working with vulnerable women means working with them rather than for them. It is about creating spaces where personal resources, aspirations, and resilience are valued, and where recovery and empowerment emerge as collaborative processes rooted in dignity, respect, and shared responsibility.

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11 The Path to Identify, Dismantle and Act

The Importance of Approaching Educational Practice from an Intersectional Perspective

Elena Alfageme, Marta Casanova, Anna Celda, Neus Garriga, Idoia Landaluce, and Emilio Romero

11.1 InteRed's work and approaches

InteRed¹ is an organisation promoted by the Teresian Association and is committed to transformative education in favour of justice, gender equity and social and environmental sustainability. Therefore, InteRed promotes educational processes for personal and collective change, ensuring participation and dialogue with groups and organisations from different countries. Education can make people aware of the interdependence and eco-dependence of their actions and behaviours, and, therefore, of co-responsibility.

InteRed's approach conceives education as a right for all people throughout their lives from a socio-educational approach, whose objectives are to promote transformative education for social change; to favour the training of educators; and to seek an inclusive and diverse education system that guarantees the rights of the most vulnerable groups.

InteRed incorporates a gender approach within our interventions, with the goal of transforming gender relations by eliminating inequalities, gender roles, gender norms and stereotypes between men and women, which are social constructions. From this logic of work, we conceptualise gender empowerment as the expansion of freedom of choice and action and women and girls taking over control over the decisions affecting their lives. Therefore, empowerment is both a process and an end, it is personal but also collective and it has been fundamental to put power at the centre of the debate and to propose a clear strategy for the transformation of gender relations (understood as unequal power relations of men over women and the patriarchal construction of these relations). Feminist movements in their conceptualisation of power went beyond the concept of *power over*, of men over women, also called zero-sum power in which if one person increases their power, it implies that another person must lose it. Thus, feminisms have proposed alternative types of power: *power to* (generator of possibilities), *power with*

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(multiplication of personal power by joining with others) and *power from within* (inner power) (Villanueva, 2014).

As an organisation working on inclusive educational projects with migrant students (mentoring projects with newly arrived migrant students, funded by the European Union), and with students who are racialised or migrantised, InteRed incorporates key approaches in its transformative educational practice:

- *Inclusive education*: UNESCO (2017) defines inclusion as the process that helps overcome obstacles that limit students' access, presence, participation and achievement, and defines inclusive education as a process of strengthening educational systems to reach all students while leaving no one behind.
- *Intersectional approach*: this approach, developed by Kimberlee Crenshaw, helps to analyse the phenomenon whereby each individual suffers oppression or privilege based on their membership in multiple social categories (Landaluce, 2022). These categories include dimensions such as gender, race, class, functional diversity, sexual orientation, gender identity and age. Each of these dimensions intersect differently in each subject and social group, and therefore must be analysed and addressed in a particular way. Educational systems and curricula are no strangers to these categories, which is why it is important to identify and dismantle them in their educational practices. At InteRed we believe that intersectionality provides a fundamental framework of analysis when analysing migratory processes, and how these factors, in turn, influence and determine unequal educational contexts (Vázquez, 2020).
- *Critical interculturality approach*: a critical intercultural approach puts the colonial difference at the centre of the debate. That is, it questions both power relations and the socio-economic and cultural hierarchy based on the racialisation of people (Walsh, 2009). Critical interculturality focuses on disparities, recognising that the starting point of some groups compared to others when establishing a relationship is not the same. It questions the structural and institutional power patterns that maintain inequality in order to build equitable relationships.

In addition to them, at InteRed we are increasingly approaching our work from the reflections brought to us by both anti-racist education and decolonial education (Izquierdo, García, & Páez, 2022). The former emphasises educational practice and how racism permeates the existence of all people since the era of modernity-coloniality, and the latter emphasises pedagogical narratives that enable education outside of the coloniality of knowledge. Coloniality of knowledge is the dimension of the colonial matrix that concerns the modes of production, circulation and hierarchisation of knowledge; the definition of 'knowledge'; the processes of subjectification and objectification that determine who produces knowledge and who is its object of that knowledge (Avignon, 2021).

11.2 Insights from our practice

All of these approaches are part of our theoretical framework, which has been confirmed by practical experience and analysis inside our teams. The reflections that follow in this chapter are not intended to cover all of them, but they do include some of the questions and answers that we are asking ourselves as educators, after many years of work in classrooms in Spain. These are the following:

- 1 How do we think that gender, race and class affect inclusive processes in the classroom, or rather than inclusion, diversity?
- 2 From an intersectional approach, what should be done in the classroom to consider diversity (migrant origin, migrants, racialised people) that is not being done yet?
- 3 What intersectional tools are useful for it in the classroom?
- 4 Which are teachers' needs? What are the barriers of the educational system from an intersectional approach?
- 5 Are associations/collectives key actors to discuss intersectionality in education?

The reflections and learnings shared in the following sections depict a structural level of analysis, that is, the power structures of the world-system and how they are intertwined in the daily life of educational systems and more specifically in the classroom (formal education), where part of the focus of our organisation's work is located.

In addition, the reflections shared are the result of a dialogue with colleagues from InteRed's Catalonia delegation through one focus group and one interview in October, which were subsequently systematised and analysed as a team, as well as the result of work experiences of other regional delegations. The objective of these questions was to reflect on the need to approach educational praxis in the educational system from an intersectional approach.

One of the first things we realised was recognising that InteRed in the last 5 years has done a strong work on coeducation (education by and for equality), thanks in part to the institutional campaign 'Toca Igualdad' (translation: It's time for equality), a framework educational campaign for the prevention of male violence through education, designed to ensure that educational teams develop a strong awareness of the need to apply a gender perspective to all educational practice. However, this has not always gone hand in hand with a situated intersectionality approach, which requires not analysing the gender variable isolated, but in its interaction with others, and in the case of migrant or migrantised girls and women, it is essential to analyse it in its interaction with race or access to citizenship status (regular or irregular situation of students and their families).

Toca Igualdad Campaign, from 2018 to the present, put the focus on the prevention of male violence; from this co-educational work process that is now coming to an end, we conclude that the Campaign has been very

important, especially for the youth to learn to name the violence that they suffer: it enabled them to identify violences in their lives and bodies, dismantle their structural causes from a feminist approach (emphasising their structural component) and take action to promote both individual and collective transformation (in several educational centres, campaign driving groups of motivated girls who became activists were formed, such as the Violet Amazons, or group Eco Lourdes). Despite recognising the importance of this campaign, we have learned that it had a binary approach to gender, with which non-binary people did not feel so identified (although they did actively participate) and that the gender approach was not sufficient to explain the violence and situations of inequality that the groups of adolescents with whom we worked were experiencing. We learned that all of our work and co-educational praxis must be traversed by a situated intersectional approach, which helps us to address any issue from the root and awareness of the existence of deep power relations, a system of oppression that grants privileges to some people and oppresses others. It is, therefore, essential that we approach educational practice from this full awareness of the unequal starting points that cross our lives and world, and that the gender approach, although extremely important, is not capable of responding to all of them.

11.3 Working from an intersectional approach in the context of diversity

The following are the reflections and learnings that the InteRed team has developed from practice, as mentioned earlier. All of them have been grouped by axes, ranging from public to thematic, but they are all interrelated, so this classification is just a way to organise and develop the reflections.

11.3.1 Students

Students are the main target group with whom we work. Among the students, there is little awareness of what it means to suffer violence for reasons of race (understood as social construction of race) or ethnicity. For example, it is common for them to accept violence in an attempt to 'fit in'. One of our fellow educators told us about the case of a Hindu boy who was laughed at by his classmates, and where he himself did not interpret that he was suffering bullying, a type of violence, because it was carried out in the form of jokes or humour.

There is a perception among students that racist violence exists in countries such as the United States but is absent in Spain. However, what our team observes in the classroom and what the data confirm is a very different reality. In Spain, hate crimes have increased in 2023 by 21.35% over the previous year. Hate crimes due to racism and xenophobia, with 856 facts in 2023, are the most numerous, representing 41.84% of the total number of complaints. These are followed by hate crimes based on sexual orientation and gender identity, which account for 25.5% of the total (OBERAXE, 2024).

It's important to abandon the idea that racism is a moral issue, a matter of people's individual values. Understanding that racism is something structural has taken time for us, the InteRed team, consisting of mostly white Spanish nationals; it has been a process of resistances and a lot of active listening. The reading of racism as a purely individual issue is very dangerous. Understanding racism as something structural is key.

In the words of Waquel Javier Drullard,

structural racism is a founding and constitutive element of coloniality which translates into a way of organising the world in economic, socio-cultural, epistemic and ontological terms, which hierarchises populations on the basis of racial prejudice, naturalising inequality and legitimising the oppression of certain people who, because of their racialised, non-Westernised and non-white constitution, are conceived as non-central subjects and, therefore, as less human.

(Drullard Marquez, 2020)

Reflections from our colleagues highlight confrontation from a group of children who rebelled against them as teachers, because they felt there were continuous workshops on gender issues, without paying attention to the racism they are experiencing. Our colleague pointed out that this feeling was very strong because the boys felt that their problems were not being addressed because of gender issues.

When workshops on discrimination have been carried out in classrooms, some of the topics that emerged related to discrimination and inequalities have been those related to the construction of race, skin colour, nationality or country of origin: discrimination for being Moroccan, facing societal prejudices that young Moroccan boys are criminals and burglars, hearing phrases shouted in the street telling them to go back to their country, or that they do not belong here and experiencing sinophobia (associations between Chinese people and the consumption of animals such as dogs), among other forms.

Another of our colleagues highlighted the need for young people (of Latin American and North African descent) to talk about the discrimination they suffer. This claim by racialised students has been shared in more spaces by InteRed colleagues, who point out how there has often been a questioning of the organisation's workshops because they tackled gender violence and not racist violence.

This sense of indignation has been analysed very well by anthropologist María Rodó Zárate, who speaks of the intersectional wound, meaning

having to confront a privilege when you accumulate suffering, accepting a position of oppressor or privileged person when you feel oppressed. Intersectionality shows that all this is part of the simultaneous experience of oppression and privilege and that the existence of one position does not deny the other.

(Rodó-Zárate, 2021, p. 116)

The management of privilege, as she says, is a complex issue that requires the ability to listen, empathy, understanding and omission of value judgments, without falling into competitive logics to see who is more of a victim, or who accumulates more oppression on their back. And these are some of the reflections that we at InteRed have had in recent years, and that we believe it is important to share with the teachers with whom we work.

Privileges are not always a conscious action aimed at subordinating another person, sometimes they are given by specific historical processes and we benefit from them daily, although not intentionally. Recognising the privileges that are given is important because it can bring a change in behaviour, a renouncement of the privilege and an awareness of the structural oppression suffered by other people.

As we pointed out at the beginning of this section, our observation and work in education have shown that it is difficult for students to identify that some of the violence they experience has structural roots and is not a question of individual values. Students who suffer racial discrimination find it difficult to identify it. They recount incidents of violence such as being stopped multiple times in the subway over a weekend along with their friends or family, yet they do not identify these actions as racial profiling or as examples of institutional racism. However, when we reflect with them on the violence, they begin to make a critical analysis and relate these scenes of violence within the framework of a racial system. It is therefore complicated even for those who are subject to this violence to identify it. Many instances occur within the educational system, such as the absence of diverse references and the Eurocentric perspective of the educational curriculum. Other examples include teachers and educators mispronouncing the name of students from diverse backgrounds or belittle their prospects to pursuing higher education or accessing university.

11.3.2 How race and gender intersect for girls

On some occasions, we have also been complicit in classroom situations that illustrate how race and gender operate, not necessarily due to cultural limitations themselves, but because of the expectations that Spanish society places on migrantised girls and women. By limitations of the culture itself, we refer to situations often labelled as purely cultural. However, these cultural practices are also traversed by structural and systemic colonial, patriarchal and racist issues.

One of our colleagues relates a very illustrative situation in this regard:

I have on tape a strong case of a Muslim student, who comes from a Muslim family. In a conversation with this student and a teacher, the teacher told the student that it would be a disappointment and unexpected for her if the student decided to wear the veil.

Our colleague recounts how she was paralysed by this comment but nevertheless did not do or say anything about it to the teacher.

We have reflected a lot on some issues pointed out by Sirin Adlbi Sibai, who emphasises that hegemonic (white) feminism has been directed to a subject, which are white, western, bourgeois women, recognising their experiences as universal, and excluding other women from other cultures or civilisations whose experiences and needs have been different or more complex (Adlbi, 2022).

On many occasions, we read the reality of the classroom from a white feminist perspective, we question and judge an issue such as the veil, but do not question Western cultural practices that objectify young adolescent women, such as makeup, the use of heels, etc., or if we do, we give it much less importance than covering the head.

11.3.3 *Teachers and context of educational institution*

One of the things that have been mentioned a lot in our teams is the essential role played by both the teachers and the school team (management). They point out that in many cases the situations that students may experience change a lot depending on the teachers and their motivation: how schools are set up and structured greatly affects their inclusion policies.

They also point out that things change depending on the neighbourhood where the school is located, making the context essential and highlighting the importance of understanding the educational community beyond the physical boundary of the school: the groups are different (there is a greater or lesser concentration of migrants or racialised people), the resources available to the school (and whether it is public, subsidised or private), the boundaries of the neighbourhood in which the school is located or the construction of the school itself (aesthetics and architecture).

One of our colleagues mentions the issue of classism in education:

I do see the issue of classism here, in Catalonia there are schools that are called highly complex, they are schools that have a high number of young people with difficulties or families with vulnerable situations... so the system itself for me is classist

pointing out that there is a stigmatisation by singling out schools as such ('highly complex'), instead of including the most vulnerable students in all schools.

According to the report *School segregation, an unresolved problem of social justice: analysis and proposals*, both the extension and development of the private and subsidised system, as well as schooling regulations, where policies aimed at promoting freedom of choice for families implemented by some local governments, encourage and protect school segregation. Immigrant students who arrive during the school year and sometimes do not know the language, which can slow down the pace of classes, are received only by public schools. This creates an *image problem*, leading many families in the neighbourhood opt for other schools (subsidised and private) (CC.OO., 2024). For instance, in 2013, the Community of Madrid approved the decree on freedom of choice

of school, introducing a novelty: the so-called Schooling Support Services Commissions. These commissions work in an opaque way and decide to send students with special needs to the same schools, creating ghettos.

As Save the Children warned, recently school segregation has become an increasing problem for the quality of Spanish education. The study states that *studies show that beyond the residential structure of cities and regions and the dual public versus subsidized network, educational policies play an essential role in school segregation* (Ferrer & Gortázar, 2021, p. 1).

Another issue that one of our colleagues highlighted is that reception classrooms are being eliminated, which means that students are moved from their reference school to another centre where there are reception classrooms. Reception classrooms are those classrooms in which newly arrived migrant students are placed to learn Spanish. Currently, in addition to their dismantling, many voices denounce the fact that they are used for purposes other than those initially attributed by law, while others question their existence and advocate their elimination due to the high degree of segregation they represent.

Along the same lines, the reality of teachers, who are overloaded with hours of classes and administrative work, with few resources to deal with diversity, is mentioned. It is very difficult to motivate teachers to do capacity building if they are exhausted, have no resources and have a high ratio of students per classroom, and many bureaucratic tasks. This analysis led us to a deeper reflection on a macro analysis of the situation of the educational system in Spain, which greatly affects the reality of inclusive educational practices.

Committed teachers mention that in their day-to-day teaching practice they have to dehumanise in order to be able to produce, feeling like in a factory. The educational system is overloaded, being dismantled and becoming more and more privatised, which affect the capacity and time of teachers when it comes to attending to diversity. The comment made by one of the teachers is linked to another major issue plaguing education systems, the commodification of education.

11.3.4 Commodification of education

In Spain, as well as worldwide, we are witnessing the dismantling of the public sector and the tendency to privatise education is not an exception, but rather a global trend. Kishore Singh, UN Special Rapporteur on the right to education, pointed out that education as a sector was increasingly opening up to profit activities, trade and commercial interests that conceive the student as a consumer and education as a consumer good, as well as

several scholars have critically examined the neoliberal model of education, characterised by the ‘withdrawal of the state in favour of privatisation’ and ‘market-oriented conceptions of education’, which is a big change from the welfare state model that has been in place for decades.

(UNHRC, 2015, p. 6)

Our colleagues reiterate that the education system seeks to take care of children, maintaining them in a classroom, while their families are working, without encouraging critical thinking. In this sense, educational practice cannot be transformative.

This tendency to commodify education does not facilitate attention to diversity in the classroom, nor does it facilitate an intersectional approach to education. As we mentioned before in this chapter, for our teams, education should be transformative and bring about social change, guaranteeing the rights of the most vulnerable groups. For us, critical thinking and a humanistic approach to education make it possible to listen to those voices that are generally unheard, and it is there where diversity takes centre stage in the form of demands, needs, realities, situated knowledge; they make these voices protagonists so that the responses are adjusted to their demands and needs in such a way that the strategies for rethinking inclusion and generating inclusive education are carried out in a joint, collaborative way. It enables the construction of new narratives in relation to migration and inclusion; it facilitates the how, using participatory, collaborative, experiential, listening methodologies and allows us to question inequalities.

11.3.5 Work tools and socio-affective methodology

One of the key issues that has emerged from our reflections is the need to address all these issues collectively and with innovative methodologies, using co-creative tools, such as media, art or storytelling. One example is the creation of a short film where we tackle diverse topics or experiences of adolescents but it would appear that we are going to teach just audiovisual contents and topics. This kind of methodologies work well. Addressing the subject directly (*we are here to conduct a workshop on gender-based violence*) has undesired side-effects, such as rejection and mockery. It is better not to go directly into the specific subject and to conduct a workshop about non-violent communication, with games and exercises. We approach the topic in a different way to avoid resistance, even though sometimes it is difficult. It's also very important to deal with those resistances that we encounter from an emotional and not only rational perspective. Western society has become polarised because of instrumentalisation of emotions. It is necessary to consider this when you deal with the resistance.

We found that these resistances are partly the result of the rise of discourses in political spaces, the media and social networks that legitimise attacks on feminism and proposals for gender equality education in Spain. The manosphere and the rise of negationist discourse (denial speeches) has made many young people today more comfortable in criticising the advances of gender equality of recent years. Many of these young people, without agreeing with anti-feminist or extreme right-wing discourses, feel that they are blamed for something they have not done, and that in the face of the coverage they find in feminist and equality discourses present in institutions and in many public

policies in the last 5 years, the needs of these young people, both material and affective, are not being covered by the media or public policy programs. They end up finding in these closed spaces and reduced groups of the manosphere (forums, chats, online men's groups) an understanding and emotional support that progressively leads them to turn more to the far right or to anti-feminism (also to racism) movements ([García-Mingo & Díaz Fernández, 2022](#)).

Far right groups have proved to be very smart using digital spaces for sharing these negationist discourses and hate speeches against gender equality, feminisms, migration, climate change and other social phenomena, connecting to boys and men who feel isolated and a little bit abandoned by the system and institutions. Some far right political parties and also digital media and influencers create these simplified narratives and mental frames which connect with emotions and values such as loneliness, frustration, lack of understanding, rage or hate. Therefore, working on new or counter hegemonic narratives is also key, since it makes it possible to address systemic and structural issues connecting with values and emotions. This is the strategy that we are following as an organisation. Moreover, this makes it possible to address many issues in an interconnected way.

However, teachers have pointed out that they feel overwhelmed confronting the rise of hate speeches, and therefore they ask for tools.

TikTok is mentioned as another tool that can be used with students to reflect about several social discriminations, listening and analysing influencers and TikTokers together with adolescents. One of the key issues we point out is to let adolescents decide what they want to work on, starting from the topic they propose and connecting them with what we want to work on, not saying what we have to do but letting it emerge in the classroom.

Experience has taught us that addressing education from an intersectionality approach requires transformative methodologies. At InteRed, we propose a reflection-action roadmap that we have been applying in the framework of our work, which is combined with these innovative tools (audiovisuals, emotional education and the design of new/counter hegemonic narratives). This roadmap, which we develop within the framework of the Toca Igualdad Campaign, consists of three stages, namely: Identify, Dismantle and Act against violence.

Identify:

- We begin by identifying gender-based and sexist violences in our daily lives. The first step is to break the silent complicity that makes it possible.
- It is also key to identify structural racism and the violence it generates in the daily lives of millions of people, not naturalising it, and instead, naming it, but identifying the situations in which it is exercised and produced. Deconstructing our imaginaries about violence, which frequently normalise it instead of being outraged and against it. We start with each person's own experiences of violence and their exercise of power, and then ask how it makes them feel. We carry out this work with groups of 20 students during several sessions.

Dismantle:

- Dismantle how gender-based violence and its roots work structurally. Until we see the roots, we will not be able to change them.
- It is also important to understand how racism operates and look into its historical and global causes. Becoming aware of their existence and asking why they think these acts of violence occur can allow us to change them.

To act:

- Act individually and collectively starting from our educational communities, to participate in the construction of a world free of gender-based violence. If we want a different reality, we have to be able to imagine and build that reality.
- Broaden the focus and act from the individual, but also from the collective perspective, in the classroom with an anti-racist approach.

11.4 Resistances, it is difficult to check ourselves

Addressing certain issues in the classroom is complicated because it requires us to review many of the racist, sexist and classist patterns of thought in which we have been educated and with which we have grown up. Talking about diversity from an intersectional perspective generates a lot of resistance. For us, as educators, it has meant, and continues to mean, a process of revision, because it is not easy to stop and say 'I am a racist and as such, I have reproduced a racist system in my educational practice sometimes'; it is difficult to reach this point, but it is necessary that we do it. And it is difficult precisely because there is a tendency for us to see racism as something individual, a tendency and at the same time an intentionality, when racism is a structural issue.

We realised that teachers find it difficult to review themselves. It is very difficult for them to understand that their practice may not favour all people and that they may also be racist. Just like us, it is very difficult for them to question their privileges. One of the interesting issues that also came up in a meeting with teachers is that they pointed out that they had attended a meeting to be trained in anti-racism issues, and that the management team of one of the schools did not understand why they had to be trained without the students, which contrasts precisely with the vision that education is a lifelong process. It also assumes that teachers do not need to be trained in dealing with diversity.

Reflecting on ourselves also involves holding and embracing discomfort, as we question the privileges that we as teachers and white people have.

White privilege is the advantage that people universally recognise as human (white or read as white) when accessing rights, resources and benefits, compared to dehumanised (non-white) people, and whiteness

is therefore a historical and ideological phenomenon, a political system that racially marks non-Western peoples as inferior.

(Guerra, 2022)

Whiteness and white privilege are central issues in our education systems, given that the teaching teams lack diversity, consisting of mostly white teams. The same happens in our organisation, whose educational staff does not represent diversity, which accentuates our whiteness and perpetuates the fact that we reproduce racism in the classroom on many occasions. Our constant review of white privilege is therefore a key to dealing with education from an intersectional approach but so is having teams of teachers and educators who represent diversity.

On many occasions, resistance goes hand-in-hand with the absence of training and the lack of mechanisms committed to diversity and equality, such as anti-racist protocols, or when they exist, their non-implementation; this speaks of how far we are from implementing preventive measures, reparation and justice in the face of the violence that the educational system reproduces. The absence of anti-racist protocols hinders the visibilisation and prevention of discrimination. The realities of racialised and migrantised people are completely invisible. In the case protocols exist, there is usually a lack of accompaniment and implementation. As an organisation, we should look beyond the classroom and check what already exists. Sometimes there is no articulation of the educational centres with organisations that are well aware of the existing mechanisms for the prevention and reporting of racist aggressions. It is necessary to articulate community networks with organisations of migrants. At the same time, it is necessary for institutions to disseminate existing protocols in schools.

11.5 Hidden curriculum

To rethink diversity, it is necessary to analyse the hidden curriculum, which makes everything related to ethnic and cultural characteristics in the classroom invisible, and to add representation of historically underrepresented groups and minorised groups, who are very often left out of textbooks, teaching materials and programmes. If it is already difficult to find content or references to women, it is even more difficult to find content or references to non-white women. On the contrary, when they are mentioned, it is in a stigmatising, stereotyped or biased way. The same happens with the contents, which are generally approached by perspectives that do not really consider diversity and the richness of contributions that diverse groups of people have on the curriculum. Underrepresented and racialised groups are the absent voices in the curriculum. Keeping this in mind when addressing the inclusion of migrant students, together with the approaches and elements mentioned earlier, can be key when considering any activities, materials or methodologies in schools and educational centres (Landaluce, 2022). The drop-out rates of students from migrant or migrant backgrounds in

post-compulsory education are quite high and all these factors mentioned are having an impact on it.

11.6 Incomprehension of intersectionality

The lack of understanding of the intersectionality approach means that many teachers have difficulties to see that inclusion in the current world-system is selective. Many teachers wonder if they are being inclusive in the classroom; if they are not able to see that the structural part of the system generates inequalities and oppressions that go through everything, including their own bodies, power relations, subordination, etc., they will hardly see that the answer to the question they ask themselves is 'no'. We start from a premise that everyone enters the classroom with the same conditions, but unfortunately this is not the case. The colonial-racist, patriarchal and capitalist system of oppression is also present in the classroom and it affects us, both the teachers and the students; it places us once again in a dual system that grants privileges to some people and oppresses others. Duality is paradigmatic, and it does not cease to be so, because it is a characteristic of the oppressive world-system.

The result of the lack of understanding of this approach is that we have not developed the ability to question and review ourselves, which is something necessary when implementing education with an intersectional approach.

11.7 Conclusions and recommendations

In this chapter, we focused on the importance of approaching educational praxis from an intersectional perspective, including gender, racial and other inequalities. To achieve this, we provide key recommendations:

- To understand and analyse racism as a structural issue to address education from an intersectional approach. Only in this way can we be aware that the starting contexts of students in classrooms are very different.
- The intersectional approach is a way of understanding and analysing the complexity of the world from the different inequalities and social categories that people fall into. The different social, cultural, educational, political and economic inequalities suffered by students intersect diverse moments and situations in their lives, generating discrimination and exclusion or experiences and situations of privilege. Teachers' understanding of this is essential in order to respond to the diversity of the classroom.
- It is also difficult for students themselves to identify that some of the violence they suffer has a structural root and is not a question of individual values. Students who suffer racial discrimination find it difficult to identify it. Students need to strengthen their analytical skills and foster critical thinking to identify, dismantle and act against the violence that has normalised.

- An intersectional approach to educational practice can prevent situations of racial discrimination in education, reduce school drop-out rates among migrantised or racialised students, ensure the continuity of certain educational pathways to higher education for these same students (the recognition they receive and what is expected of them) or the implementation by teachers of an anti-racist curriculum.
- We need a curriculum that promotes participatory methodologies and helps students and teachers to develop critical thinking. Critical thinking is essential to understand the roots of the colonial, racist and patriarchal system. Understanding this in turn is essential to address intersectional education.
- It is necessary for organisations, whose majority of members are predominantly white, to reflect on our privilege, however uncomfortable this may be. We need to do this and recognise this fact when working in the educational system. Doing so is also a good practice of accompanying teachers on the path to push for an intersectional educational praxis.
- Addressing interventions only from a gender perspective is insufficient. We need that all the projects and interventions are implemented considering other inequalities, such as race, class, capacities, gender identity ... Socio-affective methodologies, starting from one's own experiences of discrimination and violence and moving to structural causes.

The reflections and learnings shared help to unveil how the power structures are present in our educational system and more specifically in our schools. If we want to understand the complexity of the world and to transform it in a positive and fair way for all people, we need to broaden our perspective and apply an intersectional approach using practices and methodologies that do not make students feel guilty, but feel heard, seen and supported.

Note

- 1 See: <https://intered.org/es>

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12 Theatre as Empowering

From Remembering to Healing with Migrant(ised) Women in Flanders

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12.1 Introduction

Migration is a deeply personal and transformative experience, often filled with challenges and resilience. For many people, the journey of leaving one's homeland and settling in a new place involves not only physical relocation but also profound emotional and social-cultural shifts. In the context of Flanders which has been increasingly shaped through migration and asylum (Crine, Flamand, & Raimondo, 2025; Martiniello, 2003), stories of migration are powerful tools for understanding these experiences and the complexities of belonging—not only for migrants themselves but also for their (grand)children (Kazmierska, 2003; Klaver, Miri, & Van Praag, 2025; Miri, 2021).

Narratives of migration—whether they are about fleeing conflict, seeking better opportunities, escaping persecution, or a combination of these and other incentives—can offer a window into the lived realities of migrants and their descendants (Bönisch-Brednich, Christou, Meyer, Karner, & Escher, 2024; Gómez-Estern & de la Mata Benítez, 2013). These stories are not just about the challenges of settling into new environments; they are also about identity, politics, and the search for belonging in society (Bönisch-Brednich et al., 2024). The way migration stories are shared, whether through personal accounts, art, or theatre, plays a key role in shaping how migrants and their descendants—in Belgium often referred to as second- and third-generation migrants—view themselves and their potentials, how they are viewed by others in society, and how they navigate the process of integration and citizenship (Timmerman, Vanderwaeren, & Crul, 2003).

Especially for migrantised women, these stories can be particularly complex. Similar to “minoritisation” (Selvarajah et al., 2020), *migrantised women* refers to women who are seen as migrants by majority members in society but did not necessarily migrate themselves and may have parents or grandparents that have migrated (Maâ, 2024). They may contend with multiple layers of identity—being a woman, a mother, a migrant, and often belonging to a marginalised or minority group in the host country. In many cases, sharing these stories can be both a form of empowerment and a means

of healing, offering an opportunity to reclaim agency, break silences, and connect with others who may have experienced similar struggles.

The act of storytelling—especially through playback theatre and poetry—has emerged as a vital practice used by civil society organisations (CSOs) to support migrantised women (Damery & Mescoli, 2019; Garny & Murru, 2024). By bringing their narratives to the stage, these women not only recount their personal experiences but also engage in a process of remembering, healing, and redefining their place in society. Theatre offers a space for their voices to be heard, for their struggles to be voiced and acknowledged, and for their stories to become part of the collective narrative of a superdiverse community (Garny & Murru, 2024; Geldof, 2018). In this chapter, we will focus on one specific theatre project, developed by Empact vzw, a CSO active in Flanders and Brussels (Belgium), as part of their activities and evaluated as a practice within the ReIncluGen project. We aim to describe and critically reflect on this theatre project to understand its value and to provide a safe space for discussing specific topics.

Through the act of sharing stories as migrants or (grand)daughters of migrants, whether on stage or in conversation, we can better understand the intersecting emotional, social, and cultural dimensions of migration, belonging, and identity. Recent research increasingly highlights how migrantised women's storytelling practices not only articulate individual experiences but also function as collective acts of empowerment. Vacchelli and Peyrefitte (2018) demonstrate, through participatory action research, how digital storytelling offers migrantised women in London a feminist and intersectional framework to narrate their experiences of migration, exclusion, and belonging. In the Belgian context, Garny and Murru (2024) explore how *The Sisters' House* in Brussels employs storytelling as a form of “constructive resistance”, enabling migrantised women to renegotiate their position within a postcolonial reception system (Garny & Murru, 2024). Both studies underscore that storytelling is not merely reflective, but a strategic practice of self-representation, community-building, and social intervention.

Before we delve deeper into the theatre project “Unbreakable”, we will first situate the project by setting out the organisation that organised it, namely Empact vzw.

12.2 Empact's role and discourses of migration

Empact vzw is a socio-cultural umbrella organisation supporting migrant-led associations focussing on migrantised communities in Flanders and Brussels. The word Empact is formed by the words “to empower”, “to act”, and “impact”, which are key terms within the organisation. These terms reflect both the organisation's main mission and goal and what its member associations and volunteers aspire to on a daily basis. Empact vzw started as a grassroots initiative by a few Moroccan immigrants who sought to mobilise their community—which in the early 90s was one of the few and largest non-European

migrant communities—in the face of a political turning point in Belgian politics due to the elections on what is called “Zwarte Zondag” (“Black Sunday”) (Cammaerts, 2009). “Zwarte Zondag” contributed to the political and social marginalisation of Moroccan immigrants in Flanders and especially in Antwerp where Empact vzw originated from. The far-right’s success created an environment where discrimination and anti-immigrant rhetoric became more widespread, which had long-term effects on the integration and social cohesion of Moroccan communities in the region. With over thirty years of experience in socio-cultural work in Flanders, Empact vzw is convinced that societal change is best achieved in groups and views associative life as the ultimate lever in a diverse society (Empact, 2024). In doing so, Empact vzw perceives the power of a group as more than just the sum of the participating individuals. Rather they see it as a fusion of different experiences and expertise that can lead to a dynamic group focused on integrity, sustainability, and growth. Building on this philosophy, Empact vzw has developed a program to introduce migrantised women to theatre and storytelling. We use the term “migrantised” to refer to many of these women as second and third Belgians with Moroccan, Turkish, Ghanaian, Afghan, and other backgrounds.

12.3 Unbreakable: theatre as an empowering practice

Building on a growing body of literature that frames theatre as a transformative space for migrant expression, empowerment, and resistance (Erel, Reynolds, & Kaptani, 2017; Vacchelli & Peyrefitte, 2018), this chapter aims to focus on the intersection of migration memory and narratives, trauma, and empowerment focussing on Empact vzw’s participatory theatre project called *Unbreakable*.

This theatre project foregrounds migrantised women not only as performers but as co-authors of the creative process from inception, disrupting hierarchies often present in community arts projects. By centring the affective and embodied dimensions of storytelling, this project aligns with feminist and decolonial frameworks that understands storytelling as both epistemological and political (Collins, 2000; Haraway, 1988). In their work, Erel et al. (2017) describe storytelling, embodied memory, and collective staging function as forms of what they call “world-making”, that resist dominant narratives not by attacking them but by cultivating new spaces of belonging, voice, and recognition. Theatre, in this light, becomes a form of what Mona Lilja calls “constructive resistance”: it reconfigures social relations, disrupts marginalisation through creative expression, and builds towards alternative futures in ways that are deeply emotional, affective, and relational. In doing so, it expands the understanding of theatre beyond the performative or creative, highlighting its capacity to function as empowerment where migrant women collectively process lived experiences of migration, reclaim narrative authority on (labour) migration, and assert belonging in ways that challenge dominant (labour) migration discourses.

In participatory performances by migrantised women—such as those explored by Erel et al. (2017)—Lilja’s attention to repetition, temporality, and emotion further underscores how these practices, though often small in scale, have the potential to generate lasting shifts in how migrant women experience themselves as political and social actors and reclaim their affective citizenship (Erel et al., 2017; Miri, 2021). As such, Lilja’s (2021) theorisation of “constructive resistance” offers a valuable lens for the theatre project *Unbreakable* as it helps to understand this participatory theatre project as a transformative and implicitly political practice, particularly in the context of migration. This is particularly interesting when accounting for the actual mission of Empact vzw as a CSO and the creation of this project.

The name of the theatre project, chosen by the participants themselves, is “OnBreekBaar”, which means ‘Unbreakable’ in Dutch. The underlying notion is that theatre techniques and skills can help them to tell their own stories and deal with potential traumas (Hanson, 2020), which can have an empowering effect. Throughout a series of sessions, the participants are taught about the merits of storytelling and provided with basic skills of acting, writing, and directing to tell their own stories, initially in a closed group, and later with the option to prepare a performance. Moreover, Empact vzw believes the process of making to be more important than the output, meaning that developments in the learning process such as reclaiming their own (migration related) narratives, trauma-processing, exploring new talents, breaking boundaries, and personal growth are the actual goal, not a final theatre performance. In doing so, the project challenges prevailing assumptions about migrantised women as passive or voiceless, asserting instead that these women are already empowered but lack societal recognition and structural support (Klaver et al., 2025). On a societal level, Empact vzw highlights who these women are, their impact on society, and how society influences them in return. On a personal level, Empact vzw empowers these women to challenge themselves, expand their horizons, develop their talents, and discover their true potential. In doing so, the stories of women are at the heart of this theatre project, exploring how their experiences of being both women and members of ethnic minorities intersect within society.

The *Unbreakable* theatre project as such embodies Lilja’s (2021) “constructive resistance”: a mode of resistance that does not confront dominant structures through explicit opposition, but instead builds alternative narratives of being, relating, and knowing as migrantised women. By placing full narrative and creative authority in the hands of migrantised women, *Unbreakable* shifts the locus of power away from institutional scripts of belonging and towards a self-authored, participatory meaning-making process. The emphasis on process over product—where storytelling, trauma-processing, and self-discovery are valued more than a final performance—reflects Lilja’s view that resistance is often slow, affective, and rooted in repetition and relationality. Theatre, in this context, becomes a site of gender empowerment, where the reclaiming of migration narratives and the performance of

intersectional identities constitute a reimagining of social belonging itself. As such, Empact vzw as an organisation enacts “constructive resistance” (Lilja, 2021) not only by creating space for migrantised women to narrate their own stories, but also by creating a space where their experiences matter and their agency is visible.

Saida, an Empact vzw member and founder of “Vrouwkracht” (or literally translated: “WomenPower”), an association of Empact vzw, participated in and co-developed this theatre project. The incentive for Saida to engage in theatre practices was that she *noticed that many people of the second generation¹ have traumas, that there are big gaps between generations, and that some women can talk about it, even laugh about it, while others can't*. An important aspect of these traumas is that they are often not spoken about, and this was also something Saida experienced herself, making her to question: *Why can some women speak so openly, while others cannot? Why can they laugh about it, and I can not?*

This caused Saida to start exploring storytelling and later theatre, participating in different workshops and engaging in other performances. As part of her association “Vrouwkracht”, she then created a platform that gave women a voice and provided them with the space to share their stories. Within “Vrouwkracht”, she organised salon tables, where migration stories were not only told but also brought to life again. It was in these intimate gatherings that she discovered the power of stories—the way they connect, heal, and inspire. Saida noticed during these gatherings how telling each other funny yet painful stories, inviting both laughter and tears, had a healing effect. Once women started talking among themselves, they initially expressed how terrible the trauma was, and afterwards started laughing about it. This she believed is true in private groups but could also be on stage. In conversations with Empact vzw’s educational staff member Hanane El Fikri (third author), they exchanged ideas about how during other plays that included migrantised women, they witnessed the powerful effect theatre had by sharing painful stories and turning them into laughter. These conversations and events gave rise to the idea of co-creating a project or trajectory with migrantised women in which trauma-processing and theatre were combined.

The projects’ initial goal was to reach isolated women and get them out of their comfort zone. For this reason, Empact vzw simultaneously started a sewing class. In doing so, Empact vzw reached out to women who were already familiar with the organisation but who stayed in their familiar environment, several of whom do not speak Dutch well. Through repeated sewing classes, they became more and more comfortable with each other and shared their stories. After this positive experience, Empact vzw envisioned this could raise their willingness to try out new things and lessen their distrust towards unfamiliar territory such as theatre. Importantly, these stories could be a start for a theatre script and the designs could inspire the costumes worn by the theatre group. In other words: these simultaneous trajectories with women served the purpose of potentially reinforcing each other in the longer term.

Interesting to note is that this first theatre group had a slightly different profile than aimed. All of the participating women spoke Dutch, and some had been involved in public performances before. They were neither the most isolated women in society, nor did they shy away from new experiences. Making theatre more accessible and adapting it to these women's needs would promote their participation. In doing so, Empact vzw took into account elements such as timing and location, being flexible enough to adapt the planning where needed. For example, many women had jobs and/or children, which meant that the sessions couldn't be organised around school or working hours. As a result, the group settled on Tuesdays from 18:30 to 21:00. This demonstrates the need to be constantly in touch with the changing needs of the participants.

12.4 Behind the scenes of "OnBreekbaar"

For the Unbreakable theatre project, Empact vzw wanted to work with a professional theatre maker who centralises creating a safe space in storytelling and theatre, making sure participants can overcome and discuss their own traumas in a safe environment with only women. Also Empact vzw highlighted the importance of safety and trust, emphasising ethical aspects such as respecting privacy (e.g., what is said in the group stays in the group) and being supportive and respectful towards each other. Another important aspect for Empact vzw was the ethnic or racial background of the theatre coach. Empact vzw decided to work with Aïcha Cissé, a Belgian-Senegalese theatre director, actress, and theatre coach from Antwerp. Aïcha is active in various theatre projects that focus on youth and community building, often emphasising empowerment and inclusivity. She is also known for her work in the Antwerp arts and culture scene, where she uses theatre as a tool to explore personal expression and social issues. These methods are used in a safe space so participants can overcome and discuss their own traumas in closed groups. Aïcha is someone participants can recognise themselves in: a woman with a migration background herself, who wears the hijab, and is therefore visibly Muslim (like many of the participants). This allowed the participants to feel more at ease doing an activity they are not familiar with.

An important asset of theatre as a method for healing is that theatre allows one to speak in an abstract way. If a participant struggles with complex emotions, it can be difficult to talk about when asked directly. However, through theatre one can use portrayals and other techniques to share these experiences differently, and perhaps more easily. Also the aspect of role play allows the women to create some distance when engaging with a painful emotion or experience.

The theatre project was split into three different phases (Figure 12.1). The first phase includes sessions introducing storytelling and acting. The second phase focuses on trauma processing using techniques of roleplay and theatre

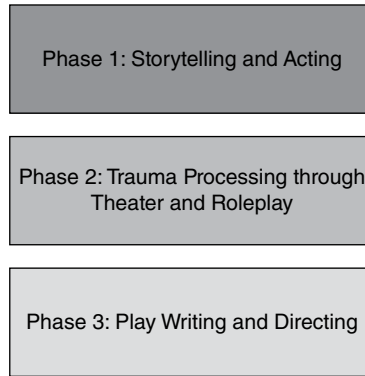


Figure 12.1 Phases of the theatre project “Unbreakable”

play. The third phase is dedicated to writing plays and directing. Not everyone participated in all three phases, which was not necessary.

12.4.1 *Methods used during the setting up of the theatre*

The theatre coach used a range of methods: psychodrama, role-playing, playback theatre, drama therapy, and narrative therapy. In psychodrama, participants reenact scenes from their own lives. In this method, they take on roles, playing themselves or others, and through this interaction, they learn to look at their problems in a different way. The beauty of it is that they can observe their own behaviour “from the outside” or through another woman, which helps them to better understand their emotions and relationships. However, psychodrama goes beyond reenacting situations. Its goal is to explore and process deeply rooted emotions and underlying conflicts. It revolves around understanding a person’s inner world by reliving certain events (Jones, 2007; Nijmanning, 2008).

“Role-playing” is another, more accessible method. Here, participants reenact a conversation or situation from their own lives. It gives them the chance to experiment with different behaviours and see what happens when they approach things differently. It is a safe, less intense way to discover new reactions and emotions. The focus is more practical, in the sense that people, for instance, learn to handle challenging situations, such as a conflict at work or a difficult conversation. It is less about emotional processing and more about experimenting with behaviour.

Another method is “playback theatre”. While one participant shares a personal story, others act it out. This allows them to see their experiences from a different perspective. The purpose of this method is for participants to process their emotions and confirm that their story is being heard and understood. “Playback theatre” allows participants to revisit moments of trauma or joy, creating a therapeutic opportunity to process these emotions

in a safe, controlled setting. The re-enactment by others can provide a sense of emotional release, helping individuals understand and perhaps even re-frame their experiences.

With “dramatherapy”, the group went even deeper, using techniques like improvisation, storytelling, or reenacting situations that are difficult to talk about. Often, they created fictional stories together that symbolised their inner worlds. This method helps people to express their feelings and work through painful or complicated emotions in a safe environment.

Finally, the teacher also used “narrative therapy”. In this approach, participants rewrite their own life story in a way that gives them more power and control over their experiences. It’s about how they view what they have been through and how they might want to reinterpret it in line with the desired output or result. This helps them to bring about positive changes in how they see themselves and their past. With all of these techniques, the participants were able to gradually explore their emotions and develop new perspectives on their lives.

Impact vzw centralises the agency of the participants, which means the decision to turn the lessons into a final theatre or other production lies with them. In other words: the process of the project is more important than the final result which can help broaden their horizons. Impact vzw believes this to be a more beneficial way of motivating women to participate in activities out of their comfort zone, without being forced to share their achievements in public. Different from many other social-artistic projects in Belgium, the participants of Impact vzw have authority over the entire process. The core belief is that these women are already talented and empowered, and Impact vzw can support them by providing a professional, safe, and inclusive environment to explore new things and hone their talents. Another way in which Impact vzw highlighted the women’s agency is by providing them the space and time to come up with the title for this project, which resulted in the name “OnBreekBaar” or “UnBreakable”, a reference to their own resilience.

12.5 Discussion: challenges and future venues

During the execution of the project, a number of challenges rose for both the staff as well as the members. These do not pose a threat to the continuation of the project, but instead offer opportunities to develop it further. In this section, we will discuss both the challenges from an organisational perspective, as well as for the participants during the sessions themselves. The participants provided feedback throughout the phases, so the staff could take them into account while improving the project.

For the organisation and its staff, this theatre project presented a number of challenges, particularly in engaging migrantised women who had varying degrees of interest and personal circumstances. While some women expressed enthusiasm for the opportunity, others were either uninterested or struggled to see the relevance of the theatre project within the broader context of their

lives. For some, the demands of everyday survival, including work, family, and other pressing priorities, made participation in the project feel frivolous or secondary. Additionally, for some women, the concept of theatre itself was difficult to grasp. One participant noted that it was an unfamiliar practice in her family and culture, leading to concerns about potential judgment or prejudice from family members. This hesitation points to a broader cultural barrier that influenced participation, as the theatre project was perceived as a departure from traditional norms and expectations.

The timing of the project also created challenges for many participants. Since the majority of participants were Muslim, the group decided to take a break during Ramadan, respecting the religious practices of the participants. However, this break inadvertently led to a decline in participation once the sessions resumed. The break, though well-intentioned, created a disruption in continuity, and for various reasons, many participants did not return. This highlighted the fragility of commitment to the project when other external factors, such as religious observances or personal circumstances, intervened. When evaluating this break, many participants actually agreed that the break was not necessary and that in the future they would like to continue and include a collective iftar during the sessions. They even believed it may have promoted the group dynamic. In terms of facilitation, Empact vzw aimed to provide guidance while maintaining a respectful distance, avoiding interference with the participants' personal space. Saida, who was both a peer to the participants (as a second-generation mother) and an instructor (as one of the project's driving forces), found herself in a complex position. While her deep personal connections with the participants allowed her to engage more intimately and effectively, her dual role sometimes created tension. Her strong presence and leadership within the project were valuable in fostering trust and communication, but for some participants, it occasionally felt as though she was taking up too much space and exerting too much control. This dynamic led to occasional frustrations on both sides: Saida struggled with balancing her role as a facilitator and a peer, while participants at times felt their autonomy was being compromised. Ultimately, the challenges in participation reflect the delicate balance between cultural sensitivities, personal priorities, and the role of leadership within a project. For this theatre initiative to thrive, it was crucial to navigate these complexities with greater sensitivity to the participants' diverse needs, concerns, and circumstances.

As of the writing of this chapter, the first edition of "Unbreakable" is still ongoing. Although the initial sessions have concluded, the participants have expressed a strong desire to continue the project, a sentiment that Empact vzw wholeheartedly supports. The participants, empowered by the control they have over their own stories, are currently in discussions about whether to create a public performance that incorporates the skills they have developed over the past year. Should they choose to proceed, the planning and preparation of this performance would be led by the participants themselves, with Empact vzw providing technical and logistical support. A performance

is in the making for the final conference of the ReIncluGen project in Antwerp; however, the staff members are working out how to facilitate requests put forward by the participants, such as limiting access for men, adjusting the duration of the performance, and so on.

Looking towards the future, Empact vzw is optimistic about expanding the reach of the project, particularly once the initial phase with the first group concludes. The organisation is hopeful that the success of this pilot group will serve as a gateway to engage more isolated and vulnerable women, starting with those from the sewing classes. The first group's experience and accomplishments can help bridge the gap for others who might find it more difficult to join the theatre initiative, creating a ripple effect of engagement and empowerment. One of the key opportunities lies in the potential for peer-to-peer learning and mentorship. The participants from the first edition can play an important role in training and supporting future groups. By transferring their knowledge and skills, they can foster a culture of empowerment, confidence, and mutual support within the theatre project. This peer-led approach not only strengthens the project's sustainability but also builds leadership within the community. Furthermore, participants can invite others from their social circles to join, which could lead to the formation of multiple theatre groups. This grassroots expansion would allow for the project to reach a broader audience, enhancing the sense of community and collective ownership. In time, stronger participants could also take on roles as future instructors, passing on their theatre skills to new groups, thus creating a cycle of growth and empowerment. In this way, "OnBreekbaar" has the potential to evolve from a singular project into a dynamic network of interconnected groups, with participants at its heart driving the ongoing process of learning, healing, and community-building.

A noteworthy development that underscores the sustainability of the "OnBreekbaar" project is the growing interest from other CSOs to adapt and implement the project with their own target populations. One such organisation, which works with neurodivergent individuals, people with disabilities, and their close relatives and caregivers in a culturally sensitive manner, has expressed a desire to hire the same theatre coach and create a similar program tailored to the specific needs of their audience. Other organisations could learn from this project, not just in terms of theatre to theatre but also in terms of accessibility, granting autonomy, and sustainability. By allowing grassroot expansion, in the sense that older participants teach newer participants, the project becomes sustainable while keeping its accessibility. Participants can volunteer to teach future groups, or put part of the performance together (by acting, directing, script writing) and also find new participants themselves by talking about the project in their own social networks, therefore bringing together people who might have not met otherwise. These examples of continuous engagement and peer-to-peer learning can strengthen the sense of community and ownership of the project, while bridging the gap between social groups.

Given Impact vzw's lack of expertise in working with people with disabilities, this collaboration allows the organisation to maintain a supportive role without taking over the preparation process. The CSO will have full autonomy over the development and implementation of the program, while still benefiting from the foundational framework and resources provided by "OnBreekbaar". This collaborative model enables the project to expand while respecting the unique needs of each target group, ensuring the approach remains relevant and impactful. The partnership highlights the adaptability of the theatre project, showcasing its potential for cross-sectoral collaboration and the capacity to reach diverse communities in meaningful ways.

12.6 Conclusion

Impact vzw initiated a theatre project designed to introduce migrantised women to the art of storytelling through theatre, with the goal of creating a safe space where they could share their personal experiences and traumas related to their migration experiences (or those of their parents). The project's core aim was to equip these women with theatre skills, allowing them to express and process complex emotions, particularly those related to past migration-related traumas, in a supportive and confidential environment. Through storytelling, the participants not only confront their past but also embrace new experiences using theatre as a tool for self-expression.

Impact vzw's theatre project offers more than a creative outlet—it constitutes a powerful form of *constructive resistance* (Lilja, 2021). By centring migrantised women as authors and performers of their own stories, the project resists dominant narratives that often render them voiceless or marginal. Through a carefully structured process that combines acting, trauma processing, and directing, participants engage in what Collins (2000) and Haraway (1988) describe as *epistemic storytelling*: a form of knowledge production rooted in lived experience. Techniques drawn from narrative therapy, psychodrama, playback theatre, and dramatherapy allow for an embodied and affective exploration of complex migration-related emotions, creating space not only for personal healing but also for collective reimagining. Crucially, the women retain full narrative control—deciding what to share, how, and with whom—which echoes Klaver et al.'s (2025) insight that migrantised women are already empowered, and what they often lack is recognition and structural support. Like in the work of Erel et al. (2017), the process itself becomes the locus of transformation. The final performance, while meaningful, is secondary to the journey of reclaiming voice, agency, and belonging. In this way, Impact vzw's project embodies the quiet yet radical work of constructive resistance: it builds new cultural and emotional landscapes in which migrantised women are not only seen and heard but recognised as creators of meaning and agents of change.

Note

- 1 In this case, the main participants of the theatre project were so-called “second-generation” women, which means that they were born in Belgium from immigrant parents. This second generation went to Belgian schools and now have children of their own, who form the third generation.

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13 The Power of Intersectoral Collaboration, Innovation and Art-Based Tools in Promoting Gender Equality and Awareness

Lessons from Feminoteka

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13.1 Introduction

The world is changing rapidly and we face many challenges such as the post-pandemic crisis, armed conflict and wars with even stronger violation of human rights, gender inequalities, social and political tensions. We cannot follow old patterns, models, and theories in our actions, as they simply may not apply to new conditions. Many concepts and our attitudes often require ongoing rethinking, as Darwin's already observed, the fittest will survive. The COVID-19 pandemic made the term "VUCA world", coined by Bennis and Nanus ([Liu, 2020](#)), hover around with a substantial intensity. Originally used in the context of business leadership, the notion encompasses volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity, and assumes mental fitness and agility, openness to new experience and otherness in approaching new, difficult situations and people involved. At the same time, it is also not possible to face large-scale challenges on your own as an organisation and regular partnerships may not stand the chance either. Therefore, more complex alliances need to be formed for the sake of a more adequate impact. The diversity of perspectives and assets, or capitals from different fields, to apply Bourdieu's terminology ([Social Capital Research, n.d.](#)), becomes an asset in itself.

The "Cross-Sectoral Cooperation for Sustainable Futures" report by Jana Arbeiter and Maja Bučar from 2021 builds on the assumption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that SDG 17 "specifically proposes multi-stakeholder cooperation across sectors to strengthen the mobilisation of all available resources needed to achieve all 17 SDGs" and that "single-sector, short-term and top-down approaches, where knowledge, skills, expertise and even resources are not shared and multiplied, cannot deliver long-term effects" ([SLOGA Platform, 2021](#)).

In Poland, the outbreak of war in neighbouring Ukraine brought about significant changes in the functioning of the domestic CSO sector. The data provided by UNHCR and updated on a regular basis ([UNHCR, n.d.](#)) show

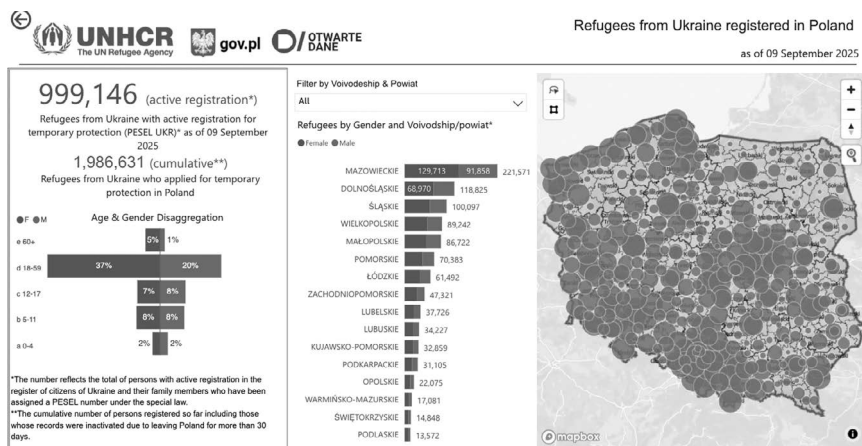


Figure 13.1 Ukrainian war refugees in Poland

Source: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine/location/10781>

that between 24 February 2022 and 10 October 2024, the number of border crossings from Ukraine was 25,172,868, while those into Ukraine were 23,203,713. Figure 13.1 presents the situation as of 9 September 2025, clearly showing that women constitute the majority of the Ukrainian refugees.

Feminoteka Foundation was one of numerous Polish CSOs that became instantly engaged in humanitarian support. Feminoteka, founded in 2005, is one of the major women-led organisations (WLO) in Poland focused on women's rights and offering services for gender-based violence (GBV) survivors. Due to the organisation's profile, the support was aimed at Ukrainian women. Feminoteka was approached by international actors, like Americares, Urgent Action Fund, Catalan Funds, International Rescue Committee (IRC), Oxfam, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) to name only a few, who offered partnerships as a way to provide help to refugee women, often with children, who were escaping the atrocities of war. Thanks to the external financial support, Feminoteka's services, including psychological counselling and a helpline, were soon offered in the Ukrainian language. The question was how to reach the women experiencing violence so that they could benefit from the offered services. These activities were embedded in the regular work of the foundation of supporting women and women's rights in Poland.

The aim of this chapter is to share some lessons learned by Feminoteka in recent years, particularly the intense period after the escalation of war in Ukraine, in terms of new methods in reaching out to beneficiaries and raising social awareness of GBV. The experience spans cross-sectional and international collaboration, social innovation, such as Samo Dobro (Pure Good), a cosmetic brand developed to support women survivors of violence, and

art-based solutions, including a mobile art exhibition and art therapy workshops, all aimed at promoting the helpline for Ukrainian women. In this context, Feminoteka's partnership in the EU-funded ReIncluGen project will also be highlighted, specifically addressing collaboration with academia and CSOs from other countries, as well as the photo-voicing exhibition. To better understand the Polish context and Feminoteka's role, a brief overview of Poland's background in terms of women's rights will be presented in the first place.

13.2 Feminoteka in the Polish context

Poland has a long herstory of women striving together for equality across different areas, including social, political status, education, or work. The fact that in years 1795–1918 the Polish state vanished from the world map made the emancipation movement even harder than in other countries at that time, as the state's territory was divided among three neighbouring countries, Russia, Prussia, and the Austria ([Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.](#)). Still, the Polish women were actively advocating for their rights and making women from different regions of the former Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania fight for a better future. This struggle also united women from different social backgrounds. The most recognised activists included Narcyza Żmichowska and her women-led group “Enthusiasts” in the 19th century, followed by Maria Dułębiana, Paulina Kuczalska-Reinschmit, Kazimiera Bujwidowa to name just a few names behind the change to come in the early 20th century ([Culture.pl, 2019](#)). Thanks to the joint efforts and decades of grassroots work, just 17 days after regaining independence, Polish women made the new authorities grant them the voting right, which came into force on 28 November 1918. Against all hopes and expectations of progress, after more than a hundred years, the situation of Polish women and their rights remains urgent and calls for international attention. To provide an example, in August 2024, the press release regarding the report published by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) states that:

“Women in Poland are facing severe human rights violations due to restrictive abortion laws, with many forced to carry unwanted pregnancies to term, seek unsafe clandestine procedures, or travel abroad for legal abortions. The harsh restriction had reportedly contributed to several preventable deaths”. We can also read there that “the criminalisation of assisting women in obtaining abortions, coupled with the very minimal legal exceptions and frequent practical inaccessibility of services, results in the denial of safe and legal abortion to the majority of women in Poland seeking an abortion.” In the words of Genoveva Tisheva, the CEDAW Vice-Chair, “The situation in Poland constitutes gender-based violence against women and may rise to the level of torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment.”

(OHCHR, 2024)

Feminoteka Foundation is one of the most active CSOs in Poland that addresses the issue of women's rights with specific focus on preventing and responding to gender based violence. The organisation's origin dates back to 2001, yet in 2005 it gained the status of a foundation. It is the only organisation in Poland expressly prioritising and specialising in the issue of sexual violence, serving a population of over 37 million. Also, the following three key areas are clearly defined:

- *vision*: a world where women live safe and independent lives free from violence, inequality, and oppression;
- *mission*: to contribute towards ending the harm done to women whose lives have been affected by sexual violence or other forms of violence against women;
- *work*: grounded in feminist, intersectional, anti-oppressive, trauma-informed, and survivor-centred principles and practices.

Feminoteka's main scope of expertise is counteracting violence against women and supporting survivors to recover from violence, be empowered, integrate, and regain their independence from the perpetrator and the abusive situation. To serve this purpose, the organisation offers psychological and social consultations, therapy and trauma therapy, legal aid, financial support, and shelter for migrant and Polish women. Another focus is on advocacy and public education on preventing GBV and supporting GBV survivors, providing training to professionals, mobilising communities, engaging with wider society, including through research and collaboration with other agents. The organisation takes active part in networks and movements and facilitates public discussion on equality, discrimination, and GBV.

In 2023, in the attempts to bring about systemic change and raise awareness of standards in providing support to GBV survivors, Feminoteka opened the first rape crisis centre in Poland to serve as a model of best practices that should be provided by the state, offering holistic services to women who experienced sexual violence. Simultaneously, together with the World Health Organisation (WHO), the foundation works on developing core standards of practice tailored to the Polish context to provide better support to women after experiencing sexual violence and intimate partner violence.

As stated earlier, the outbreak of war in Ukraine had a substantial impact on Feminoteka's activities and the scope of work. Since February 2022, the team has grown fivefold by 2024 and includes specialists in psychology, law, therapy and art therapy, fundraising, and communication, as well as experienced social workers, educators, project managers, coordinators, and administrators.

13.3 Cross-sectoral collaboration

Collaboration among various sectors often poses a challenge. It is often due to obstacles faced at the attempts to find a common ground and a

shared language, as the communication between different organisations has, in fact, features of intercultural communication. Our experience shows that these aspects may become even more difficult when communicating between entities representing various walks of life, like business, a state-run institution, or a CSO, due to differing organisational cultures, including factors such as organisational aim and objectives, mission, structure, and funding. Still, as mentioned in the introduction, more complex alliances are not only worth the effort but are also strongly encouraged to achieve a greater impact in the grassroots work of a CSO. Therefore, in order to get to the point where we successfully collaborate with multiple partners on a given issue or project, it is crucial to analyse and evaluate one's own experience of the collaborations up to date as well as to share this knowledge and learn from one another. Some of our lessons are presented in the following sections, while more examples follow in the part devoted to the exhibitions.

13.3.1 International organisations

Russia's full-scale invasion on Ukraine in February 2022 had a massive influence on Poland. Roughly one million people left their homeland to find refuge in Poland. This has been brought to international non-governmental organisations' (INGO's) attention, which quickly opened their offices in Poland and started collaborations with local CSOs. Feminoteka has been approached by actors like Urgent Action Fund, Action Aid, Care International, Oxfam, and IRC. This situation was a precedent in the history of the country. INGOs brought the funding required to provide direct aid, but also their own language, bureaucracy, requirements and policies. Feminoteka has used this opportunity to provide survivor-centred, needs-oriented support tailored to the needs of migrant women from Ukraine. We have opened a shelter, started providing language classes, multicultural assistance, social assistance, and started a social enterprise to provide them with work. We helped women survivors of violence move to Poland from Ukraine and assisted them in the relocation process. All of our services were based on conversations with women to make sure the steps we take are actually needed and sought for. We tried adapting to the requirements of the INGOs, but the road was a bit bumpy. Being an expert organisation providing services for almost 20 years, we had to compromise a lot and change as an organisation. As a WLO, with a feminist and activist approach, it was sometimes hard to have conversations about cost cuts or numbers – as in our work we focus on individual stories and experiences. What also proved to be a challenge, was the fact that most of the INGOs left the country in 2024, leaving no further funding opportunities for the local actors, while the war was ongoing and continued aid was needed.

Apart from INGOs, we have also received support from UN agencies, such as UNHCR – the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees or the United Nations Population Fund, UNFPA. These type of partnerships are also very valuable to us, as they can support us a lot in our

advocacy efforts (just to give an example, they are helping us in organising trainings for the police, judges and prosecutors, and medical staff – groups that are in general less likely to cooperate with CSOs). These partnerships also come with a lot of bureaucracy, which can be very challenging, especially for small organisations which are unable to employ too many people without taking a risk of having to let them go as the financing finishes.

13.3.2 *Business*

Feminoteka has a substantial record of intersectional collaboration that involves business partners who support us in various ways, though, in some cases, help may be mutual. We see a lot of potential in cooperation with businesses. As was mentioned earlier, the support from INGOs has mostly ended in 2024. Feminoteka, like many other Polish CSOs, has grown and expanded a lot within the last two years. We constantly seek ways to diversify our funding and develop stronger relationships with corporate donors too. We have hired a specialist for fundraising, whose task is, among others, to start more partnerships like that. Support from businesses can be very valuable, as it is not bound to meticulous reporting or other formal requirements.

Occasionally, businesses support us with donating a percentage from the sales of their products for our core work. There may be one-time projects and long-term cooperations. Some partners approach us with their own ideas, whereas some rely on our suggestions on how to fit within their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) policy or bring about social change thanks to other funds. The range of possible collaboration methods is provided on our page *Dla biznesu* (EN: For business; feminoteka.pl/wspolpraca-z-biznesem), while a few examples in the following sections illustrate how it may look in practice.

13.3.2.1 *Avon*

“More than a beauty company, we’re a global movement for women embracing their power”(Avon Products, Inc., n.d.). That is how Avon is introducing their brand. It dates back to 1886, taking pride in facilitating women’s financial independence and supporting gender empowerment from the very start. In Poland, the company has been present since 1992 (Avon, n.d.) and Feminoteka’s partnership with Avon started in 2009, when the brand supported Feminoteka’s anti-violence campaign by donating part of their income from selling jewellery (Feminoteka & Avon, n.d.). Ten years later, Avon and Feminoteka launched the first app in Poland AVON ALERT for reporting abusive behaviours and harassment, which includes the foundation’s helpline as well as educational material on GBV. Donations from Avon have covered expenses of many projects, including the mobile exhibition 888 88 33 79 88, promoting our Ukrainian helpline, described in detail further.

13.3.2.2 Bolt

Bolt is an Estonian-based mobility application that offers mainly rides and food delivery services and operates in more than 50 countries (Bolt, n.d.). Following numerous incidents of sexual abuse and rapes by Bolt drivers in Poland, the company approached Feminoteka to work together towards increasing women's safety in Bolt cars. The partnership has lasted since 2021 and has included training for the helpline operators and women drivers, as Bolt introduced the "Women for women" option to their services. Since 2022, when Bolt faced a crisis involving their drivers as perpetrators (Onet, 2023), Feminoteka has been a regular anti-violence consultant, helping to come up with relevant solutions, preventive measures, and producing topic-related training materials for the employees and drivers. Bolt, on the other hand, contributes to the foundation's activities by offering a number of free rides on a monthly basis. Moreover, in 2024 the products from the foundation's brand Samo Dobro (English: Pure Good; details below) were added to the Bolt Market online platform, extending the scope of collaboration and increasing the reach of the social economy aimed at collecting funds for GBV survivors.

13.3.2.3 L'Oréal Poland

Joining efforts with L'Oreal is another, more recent example of collaboration with an international brand. Similarly to Avon, L'Oréal has been operating in Poland since 1992 (L'Oréal, n.d.) and engaging in social actions for the sake of women. In 2024, we were approached by L'Oréal Poland to run workshop within their global campaign Stand Up Against Street Harassment that involves 5D methodology, launched in 2020 in collaboration with Right To Be (Feminoteka, n.d.). Between August and December 2024, Feminoteka's instructors delivered training sessions for around 3,000 participants and the collaboration was extended over the following year.

The selected examples above provide a brief insight into practical aspects of a WLO focused on women's rights and GBV. As Jolanta Gawęda, the vice-president of Feminoteka, said about collaboration with Bolt: it is a good example of bringing an anti-violence perspective to business that is sensitive to gender-based violence issues (Pap MediaRoom, 2023). This kind of cooperation also offers new perspectives and helps each partner to see the situations from the other stakeholder's angle. For business actors, it is an opportunity to show extra care to their key target audience, which is particularly evident in the case of the beauty sector. Also, the social sector may learn a lot from business, for example, in terms of strategic planning and internal procedures, while business may benefit a lot by partnering with CSOs not only in the context of CSR and SGE.

13.3.3 Academia

In 2022, the foundation was invited by the University of Warsaw to represent Polish WLO to an international project *Rethinking Inclusion and Gender*

Empowerment (RencluGen), funded by the EU within the Horizon Europe programme. This project opened a new chapter for Feminoteka's collaboration with academic partners, expanding it outside Poland to include academic institutions from Austria, Belgium, Italy, and Spain. The partnership with the University of Warsaw has also been strengthened, and Feminoteka has been invited to various events, such as to the Gender, Technology and Power conference, to provide the non-academic perspective in the topic-related discussions. In addition, within the ReIncluGen project, another Warsaw-based university was involved. The SWPS University offered us cost-free space to host photo workshops to encourage their women international students to take part in the photo contest about gender empowerment and migratory experiences. This collaboration was in line with the university's diversity and inclusion policy, filling a gap in extracurricular activities for English-speaking students and refugees from Ukraine studying there.

The key lessons learnt from the interactions with academic partners include our increased awareness of the differences in communication, such as the use of scientific jargon, as well as the approach to organisation of activities. While academic partners tend to be a part of a larger and much more complex structure, some action may take longer to be executed. In our case, we are action-oriented and spend less time in meetings, as, for obvious reasons, we do not need to work on the scientific or theoretical evidence or framework. On the other hand, it proved very beneficial for us to have the University of Warsaw, a recognised institution with extensive previous experience around EU-funded projects, as a partner, since their specialist financial assistance extended to our collaborative activities on the exhibition. More details on the latter in the section devoted to art-based interventions.

13.3.4 Social innovation: Samo Dobro

Samo Dobro (Pure Good) is a brand created by Feminoteka that offers natural cosmetics and beauty products that are sustainable, mostly vegan, and eco-friendly. It is an example of social economy, promoted within the EU ([European Commission, n.d.](#)), as the whole income is redirected to support a special fund run by Feminoteka for women survivors of violence. The brand's inception was due to the COVID-19 pandemic, when numerous organisations faced serious financial challenges. It is also an alternative way for us to facilitate interest in violence against women among new stakeholders for whom the violation of women's rights might not be a prior concern, but who are interested in a sustainable economy, products made domestically from natural ingredients, and initiatives that provide employment to socially vulnerable groups. In terms of the latter, after the outbreak of war, the workshop of Samo Dobro, run locally in Warsaw, offered employment to refugee women from Ukraine. As of November 2024, five out of seven Samo Dobro's staff are Ukrainian women.

13.4 Art-based interventions

The popular anonymous quote “Earth without art is just eh...” illustrates the gap that a lack of broadly understood creative activities may have on us. Margaretha Häggström, relying on the theoretical framework of June King McFee, emphasises the significance of the art-based approach to societal issues and education in difficult times: “In today’s world, marked by successive global crises, alternative modes of expression gain significance. Creating art can support people’s perceptions of their culture and foster the capacity to envision alternative futures” (Häggström, 2024). In line with this approach, Feminoteka looked for less conventional and accessible methods to provide additional care to our clients and other women, especially war refugees, under prolonged stress who had lost their homes and networks, finding themselves among foreigners. We relied on art as a tool of empowerment, wellbeing, and integration, as well as a means of spreading awareness to make a social impact and reach those in need of our support.

13.4.1 *Art therapy workshops*

Art therapy, as the productive fruit of intersecting psychology and broadly understood art, helps to unleash individual and group potential, and is a tool to facilitate personal and professional growth, integration, and creativity. More importantly, it has its basic, widely documented therapeutic effect. The American Association of Art Therapy emphasises that this methodology is “particularly effective during times of crisis, changes in circumstance, trauma, and grief. According to research, art therapy helps people feel more in control of their own lives (Gussak, 2009), and helps relieve anxiety and depression, including among others military veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Beans, 2019). In addition, art therapy assists in managing pain by moving mental focus away from the painful stimulus (Harvard Health Publishing, 2018). For these reasons, Feminoteka decided to rely on interventions involving art therapy workshops aimed at Ukrainian women, but open to other participants as well, depending on the particular project that would secure funding for our activities.

13.4.1.1 *Art therapy weekly meetings: creativity, integration, and safety zone*

In March 2023, Feminoteka launched a series of regular workshops that continues to be available in the same format as for the end of 2024. These are three-hour weekly ceramic workshops focused on the experience of the creative process rather than mastering specific techniques. Participants include mostly Ukrainian women, with a few exceptions of male participants and occasionally Polish women with seven to eight people per session with more than 50 participants in total as of the end of 2024. In the words of the

instructor, Katarzyna Borowska, her aim from the very beginning was to help participants forget about their everyday struggles by entering the fairyland, world of fantasy, in order to find a sphere where they can “recharge their batteries”, feel good, and get stronger to be able to face stressors with new energy and inner balance.

The themes are never imposed and the works come from their own inspiration and invention, highly encouraged by the instructor. This approach provides opportunity for participants’ self-reflection and insight, for hearing their inner voice, which is usually far from everyday commotion of being a mother, an employee, often juggling a few underpaid jobs to make ends meet. Conversations on art-related topics, jewellery, exotic cultures, travels while working in clay was another way to distract the participants’ attention from the daily concerns. In addition, participants are typically asked to choose the background music, which further contributes to their self-efficacy.

The participants often recognise the therapeutic value of the workshops. They appreciate the non-invasive mode and the time spent together in this loose community that owes its dynamic character to the fact that people migrate to and from Ukraine or Poland is a stopover for them in the further journey to the west. Still, many of them come back to the class, as they know that practically each Thursday from 5 to 8 pm the “safe zone” is there. The only thing they need to do is to call or text the Instructor to double-check if there is an available spot on that very day. This also provides a sense of security – a reliable aspect of the constantly changing reality of a war refugee, with the everyday uncertainties, fears about the family members, other relatives, friends, both the military and civilians in Ukraine, and their homes. However, there are also concerns and stresses of being a visitor in a foreign country against one’s will, facing challenges such as employment, or the educational and social hardships of one’s own children in the new school environment.

One of the participants who came back to Ukraine called the Instructor and recorded the message that she missed the classes and the space for daydreaming, the safe zone. This is one of the key takeaways from these regular workshops – the safe space a person under huge stress may rely on. Katarzyna Borowska, who is Feminoteka’s employee also responsible for the women’s shelter, describes the key observed and reported outcomes for participants as follows: finding new perspectives, building individual resilience, noticing that people start smiling and learning to be sensitive and gentle, taking others’ feelings into consideration.

13.4.1.2 Art therapy workshops: self-growth, empowerment, and wellbeing

Apart from the regular ceramic workshop, art therapy sessions, encompassing methodology from drama, choreotherapy, music therapy, and visual arts,



Figure 13.2 Art therapy workshops with Ukrainian women in Ostróda in 2023 (on the left) and the cross-generational audience of the Pol'and'Rock Festival in 2024

are offered depending on the needs and often accompany various events organised by Feminoteka and partners, for instance:

- mobile exhibitions in various locations, for example, Warsaw (Oct 2022), Zamość (Mar 2023), and Ostróda (Jun 2023; see [Figure 13.2](#)),
- Pol'and'Rock Music Festival in Jarocin (July/August 2024; see [Figure 13.3](#))

The meetings are aimed at women's self-development and self-awareness regarding their assets and potential, helping them recognise their worth and set boundaries in a healthy, sustainable way. The key techniques applied include visualisation, guided meditation, graphic representation by means of crayons, markers, paint, body movement, dance, and music.

The participants often share their appreciation for the workshops and gain a new perspective. Incidentally, the feedback received was particularly interesting among activists and event co-organisers in Zamość, who also took part in a workshop. For some of them, this was an opportunity to “catch a breath” and realise how much time they had devoted to humanitarian aid, forgetting about their own needs and wellbeing.

This type of work carried out by Feminoteka provides additional evidence to the findings quoted earlier in that section. They also may support Häggström's claim that “visual narration serves as a catalyst for intercultural dialogue, fostering a sense of belonging to a global community. It creates a feeling of being a part of a larger collective ‘we’” ([Häggström, 2024](#), p. 34). Yet, the visual narration here may be understood broader, including non-verbal communication, as its significance is often overlooked, while contact



Figure 13.3 The local part of the ReIncluGen exhibition visiting Zamość in March 2025. The members of the Lapigua Foundation are pointing at their contribution to the patchwork

with one's own body facilitates self-awareness and contributes to both physical and mental wellbeing. It also helps to regain balance, especially after a traumatic experience, and bond with others. Thus, we still continue our work with this methodology, hoping to encourage others to learn from our experience in this area.

13.4.1.3 *Exhibition 888 88 33 79 88*

In 2022, Feminoteka launched the helpline for Ukrainian women who experienced violence. The challenge was how to spread the word about this form of support. The innovative idea was to organise a mobile exhibition that would tour around Poland, and maybe beyond, to promote the helpline. A commercial marketing agency, Feeders, provided substantial support in this respect, coming up with their network and solutions on the pro bono basis.

As a result of the collaborative effort at that stage, the installation was created, featuring photos by Yulia Krivich and three specially designed land-line phones with recordings in Polish and Ukrainian based on real stories of women who had contacted the Foundation, illustrating the type of support Feminoteka provides. The exhibition was complemented by an LED neon sign displaying the helpline number.

Thus, the exhibition contributors included a number of stakeholders:

- Feeders Agency, as a business partner;
- Yulia Krivich, a visual artist born in Ukraine, curator in Za*Grupa, and activist;
- PanGenerator, an innovative media art and design collective based in Warsaw that explores interaction with the audience; another commercial partner;
- writers and activists: Sylwia Chutnik, Agnieszka Szpila, Agata Napiórska, Ilona Maruga, Jasmina Polak, Olena Turbal, Lubava Grishnowa, Kateryna Motrycz, Maria Pastuszok, Olena Borozenets, and Marta Mach.

From November 2022 to June 2023, our mobile exhibition 888 88 33 79 88 visited 16 Polish cities and towns. The installation was available for 146 days and was seen by over 3,000 people. The project was supported by over 50 local organisations and institutions in total. Not only did the local entities and individuals coordinate the organisation of the exhibition in a given town, but they also took care of accompanying events. Some of the latter, mainly workshops for women, were co-organised by Feminoteka. The mobile exhibition project took collaboration to a completely new level for us, adding a new dimension to our work. We built on this experience very quickly, as the network of contacts accumulated during this long-term endeavour had an effect on further activities, especially the organisation of the travelling exhibition within the international project that followed in 2024.

13.4.1.4 *ReIncluGen: FemPower exhibition and photobook*

The ReIncluGen project assumed from the start an innovative, co-creative approach to the research on gender empowerment and inclusion. As stated

on the consortium website, there are two pillars contributing to the projects' impact.

Theoretically, it builds on the innovative framework of 'situated' intersectionality by introducing new understandings of gender empowerment considering the diversity and agency of migrantised women all over different contexts in Europe. Methodologically, it uses participatory action research, visual/artistic participatory research methods and discourse analysis on timely and rapidly changing topics which could inspire future academic research and projects.

(University of Antwerp, n.d.).

The art-based solution included a photo exhibition and a photobook that were made possible thanks to previous application of photo-voicing as a complementary research method among study participants, mainly beneficiaries of three CSO, including Feminoteka. The other tool, to explore the notion of empowerment among a wider public, was an open photo-contest. As for the exhibition, the project proposal defined it as a travelling one, to be showcased in each of the partner countries in the same format in years 2024–25.

The first exhibition show was planned to coincide with the project consortium meeting in Warsaw in September 2024 and was organised by the Polish team from the Institute of Social Studies at the University of Warsaw and the Feminoteka Foundation, and it was supported by a number of CSOs: Fundacja Kobiety Wędrownie, Fundacja na rzecz Kobiet i Planowania Rodziny FEDERA, Fundacja Współpracy Międzynarodowej Polsko-Ukraińskiej FREE DOM, Fundacja Studio M6, Fundacja Lapigua, Centrum Wielokulturowe w Warszawie Dunaj Instytut Dialogu, Komuna Warszawa. However, there was also a business partner, CottonBee, that printed the photos on canvas commercially and donated the fabrics. The media partners included both profit and non-profit organisations: the Ukraine-focused news platform [Sestry.eu](https://sestry.eu), the private portal Damosfera as well as Polish Women Photographers (CSO).

The FemPower exhibition was held at Komuna Warszawa Theatre, showcasing almost 50 works in the form of photographs and narratives by participants in the competition and research. The works submitted during the spring photo contest will run in all five partner countries in 2024 and 2025, aiming to capture moments and objects that the authors associate with their own power and self-determination. The pictures represent personal stories of striving for independence, building community, or overcoming the difficulties of living in a new country.

As organisers, we aimed to highlight:

- Migrant Women's Perspective – a unique way of looking at the daily life and challenges of migration;
- Authentic Herstories where each photo was accompanied by a description that explains why the moment or object is important to the author;

- Power of Community to emphasise that the exhibition was to celebrate both the collaboration of women and the organisations that support women and migrants, helping them to build new lives and empower themselves in society.

The FemPower exhibition included two key components:

- The international part consisted of 20 works, including those selected by the international jury and the photos gathered via the photo-voicing research method in our project. It is a wooden panel of approximately 2.5 × 2.5 m, on which the framed photos are hung, accompanied by a set of printed essays, each referring to one of the photos on display with framed works.

Author of the concept: Nicolas Hermansen

- The local part – i.e., 26 of 27 works submitted to the Polish edition of the competition – consisted of photographs with descriptions by the authors in the form of a digital presentation and an installation. This installation alluded to women's solidarity and cooperation across divides, handicrafts, and drew inspiration from the work of Sonia Delaunay.

Authors of the concept: Marta Popławska and Katarzyna Szczepaniak

13.5 Conclusions

The challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and the outbreak of war in Ukraine with its extreme threats have been the key external factors in the recent years that strongly affected the work of the Feminoteka Foundation as a major WLO in Poland focused on women's rights and female GBV survivors. The need to adapt to new conditions and offer quality support to the women, regardless of their origin, age, or status, in the changing environment has been a driving force for finding new measures to cope with scarcity of resources at different stages and influx of Ukrainian women since the Russian attack on their country in February 2022.

As an organisation, we have learnt that broadly understood collaboration as well as innovations with ability to combine resources from various sectors and fields is vital and inevitable in the long run. Varied partnerships provide a broader picture, helping to see the issue in question through the lens of the organisational partner that represents a different country, culture, or another sector. The latter, i.e., the intersectoral collaboration, is of particular importance, as it allows domestic partners to unite in the work towards the shared local goals. On the other hand, our experience shows that it may pose a number of challenges, since we represent different organisational cultures, structures, and communication

patterns as well as power dynamics, which sometimes affects the collaborative processes. This is still a growth area for Poland, in general, considering the communist past and relatively new democracy that came back to life in 1989. Still, the partnerships with companies like Bolt, Avon, and L'Oreal turned not only to be very productive in terms of achieving our common objectives for the benefit of women, but they have also provided us with invaluable insight and experience that we apply in contact with other non-CSO partners.

Similarly, the innovative and creative aspects of Feminoteka's activities to meet our mission and goals in the volatile and challenging circumstances have proved effective, attracting new audiences, including women with migratory experience, art loving individuals, or music festival participants. Social economy, art therapy workshops, and exhibitions were our novel projects and discoveries that we observed and evaluated. They helped us build communities and meet individual needs of safety, belonging, and personal growth.

Diversity, equality, and inclusion are factors facilitating creative, innovative solutions in teams and within organisations, and that is why they are advocated globally and locally in business. For example, the Global Parity Alliance in 2022 launched the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Lighthouse programme to promote the knowledge among business leaders worldwide. Also, the project work on social issues, such as gender equality, inclusion, and empowerment, is no longer the domain of only the non-governmental sector. Diversity is the factor facilitating creative, innovative solutions in organisations. However, the concept may be applied to project work as well, helping to bring more impact, as shown in Feminoteka's experience shared above and, hopefully, to the benefit of others.

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14 The Inherent Power Dynamics in Empowering Spaces

CSOs Working with Migrantised Women in Austria

Neda Deneva and Sarah Häckel

14.1 Introduction

Intersecting structural, social, economic, and institutional factors shape the dynamic and multi-dimensional processes of empowerment of migrantised women in Austria. Civil society organisations (CSOs) play a vital role in facilitating these processes by offering a range of services and activities, such as legal and social counselling, educational programs, creating supportive spaces for social interaction, among others. These programs respond to the diverse needs of their target groups, consisting of migrantised women who are educationally disadvantaged, in need of social counselling, and/or affected by family violence and other experiences of discrimination. These services, however, exist within the broader societal and policy framework in Austria characterised by competing priorities. Civil society actors' empowerment efforts often focus on fostering autonomy, agency, and community-building. Yet, policy agendas often emphasise measurable outcomes like employability and integration into the labour market. Civil society programs must therefore navigate this discrepancy to determine how to reconcile public directives with practical implementation. In this chapter, we look at how Austrian CSOs working with migrantised women first approach empowerment processes of this group of women, and second, how the women participating in their activities conceptualise their own empowerment processes and experience the support of the activities offered by the CSOs.

By examining the daily experiences of CSO staff on the one hand, and the testimonies of their clients on the other, we aimed to answer the key question: *How is empowerment defined, enacted, and negotiated by CSO staff and migrantised women in Austria, and how do these processes reflect and navigate tensions between personal aspirations, institutional expectations, and structural inequalities?* By asking these questions, we were faced with the inherent divergence of ideas and practices intertwining in a complex web of power relations. What is more, we sought to unpack how can the tensions arising from the inherent power relations in educational and counselling services (even when they are participatory and programmatically anti-hierarchical) be tolerated and, if not resolved, perhaps even be constructive?

Our research was conducted among CSOs working with women who, for the most part, have migrated to Austria in the last 10 to 15 years. These organisations serve target groups composed of women from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, many of whom are educationally disadvantaged and face multiple forms of structural exclusion. In this chapter, we use the term “migrantised women” to reflect both the lived experiences of women who have migrated and the broader social processes through which individuals are categorised and positioned as “migrants”, regardless of their legal status (see [Chapters 1 and 2](#)). This framing allows us to address both the categorical and experiential dimensions of migrantisation ([Charsley & Hoellerer, 2025](#)). At the same time, it is important to note that the majority of the women who participated in our research are themselves first-generation migrants currently living in Austria. The women who participate in CSO programmes bring with them rich and complex life experiences shaped by their countries of origin, migration trajectories, and educational backgrounds. Drawing on qualitative data, including participant observation, interviews, and focus group discussions (FGD), this chapter explores their lived experiences and critically examines the strategies adopted by the selected CSOs to address their educational and empowerment needs. The arguments presented in this chapter are grounded in this dual perspective, drawing on the insights and experiences of both CSO staff and the migrantised women they work with.

14.2 Empowerment as a process and as an experience

Empowerment is a complex and multidimensional process, shaped by the interplay between personal aspirations, structural constraints, and the support offered by CSOs. Women engaging with CSOs often arrive with deeply personal definitions of empowerment, rooted in their cultural, social, and economic contexts. These aspirations may range from achieving financial independence and learning a new language to simply feeling a sense of dignity and belonging in their new environment. Yet, these desires frequently collide with the limitations of the available support systems, or with the political discourses and policies only a limited version of “empowerment”. These conflicting meanings expose the profound tensions between various individual expectations and institutional capacities.

We situate these tensions within a critical framework grounded in intersectionality ([Crenshaw, 1989](#); [Yuval-Davis, 2015](#)) that recognises and analytically incorporates the multiplied experiences of discrimination that migrantised women face. This also entails acknowledging the power asymmetries inherent in any discussion of (gender) empowerment. The examination is further based on an engagement with theoretical perspectives on feminist self-empowerment ([Batliwala, 2007](#); [Rowlands, 1995](#)) which are essential for critically reflecting on the inherent power dynamics embedded in feminist civil society work and professional practice. The services provided

by the CSOs in our study frequently bring these tensions to the surface, confronting different notions and practices of self-empowerment.

Drawing on Spivak's double bind theory of representation (Spivak, 1994), this chapter highlights the complexities and contradictions inherent in empowerment processes. We examine how CSOs work towards empowering migrantised women, while simultaneously navigating systemic constraints and structural inequalities. These perceived tensions are more clearly spelled out by the observers (in this case: the researchers), and the CSO employees, engaged in critical and reflexive work as part of their jobs. At the same time, our research with migrantised women revealed how empowerment is variously understood and experienced: as a process of gaining concrete skills, accessing new opportunities, acquiring knowledge, and reclaiming a sense of self and agency within their lived realities. These multiple meanings not only reflect the diversity of women's experiences but also reveal the need to embrace empowerment as a dynamic, relational, and contextually situated process.

Our research highlighted the multiple versions of what empowerment means: empowerment means something different for every person who is empowered, who wants to be empowered, or who is involved in any process of empowerment. It is not a single act, a single story, or a single choice or development, but rather an ongoing process involving many small steps. This multiplicity is not only expected, it is central to how empowerment unfolds in practice. Yet, this plurality also raises important tensions: one person's understanding of empowerment might be experienced as limiting by someone else, which is also rooted in an inherent power dynamic. From a feminist perspective, recognising such contradictions can itself become a form of double bind. These tensions, once acknowledged, may prove impossible to fully resolve or ease. In fields of work rooted in solidarity, such as those led by civil society organisations, this can lead to discomfort, especially when immediate, practical solutions are set as expectations by policy formulations and funding principles. The challenge of withstanding the urge to resolve these tensions is felt not only in the CSOs' day-to-day work but also in the reflective labour of researchers, such as the authors of this chapter.

The interviews analysed in this chapter reflect this diversity of perspectives, demonstrating the multiplicity of voices both within CSOs and among the migrantised women they support. In response, we apply an intersectional lens to trace the different and sometimes overlapping or contradictory positions that emerge. Building on this, we conceptualise empowerment as shaped simultaneously by institutional frameworks, programmatic goals, personal aspirations, and everyday experiences. Depending on the standpoint—CSO staff, participants, or researchers and the differences within each of these categories—empowerment may be understood as a goal (something to achieve), a state (a condition of being), a process (something unfolding over time), or an experience (an embodied and emotional reality). In this chapter, drawing on the points of view of the CSO staff and the migrantised women, we focus primarily on how empowerment is articulated as a process and as an

experience. The former highlights empowerment's developmental and temporal dimensions, while the latter foregrounds how it is felt and enacted in everyday life, through small acts of confidence, self-expression, and agency. Rather than choosing one understanding over another, we hold these meanings together, treating empowerment as something produced relationally between people, institutions, and the shifting social conditions they navigate.

In what follows, we situate our argument in a conceptual framework of recent literature on theories of the double bind and self-empowerment. We also expand our argument to include the critical embedding of neoliberal agendas around employability. We then discuss the CSOs main premise and principles of their services provision. The third part analyses the complex concepts of empowerment stemming from the migrantised women participating in our research.

14.3 Empowerment and the limits of agency: a critical framework

14.3.1 *The double bind: ambiguities of representation and responsibility*

The question of representation is fundamental to any discussion of agency and (em)power(ment). It is necessary to consider who is entitled to speak on behalf of whom, who is capable of speaking, who decides what needs to be spoken about, and which of the spoken content, language, and positions are audible.

The post-colonialist historian Dipesh Chakrabarty already emphasised the ambiguity of the (re)presentation of subaltern positions by their underrepresentation in historiography (Chakrabarty, 2000). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1994), building on Gramsci's theory of hegemony and the subaltern¹ (Gramsci, 1971), explores the position of the subaltern and concludes that the subaltern cannot speak, but is spoken for, which in turn creates a problem of representation that she calls the double bind. Part of the double bind experienced by educators and staff working for CSOs with the described target groups can also be related to Spivak's definition of the subaltern and the question who speaks for them. She describes the incapacity for action of those who have been historically structurally oppressed, such as women from colonised regions and groups. The double bind theory originates in communication theory and was initially a hypothesis to understand schizophrenic behaviour in psychotherapy. It is further used in order to understand the paradox situation of messages which carry two divergent meanings and describes the tension of having to withstand the need to decide for one meaning (Bateson, Jackson, Haley, & Weakland, 1956). This is what we would call accepting insolubility. However, Spivak does not describe the double-bind as a dilemma or logical problem; she rather portrays it as an experience of discomfort in which sooner or later a decision for one side or option must be taken. She calls this the "burden of responsibility" within the double bind (Spivak, 2012, p. 104). Hanna Meißner (2017) explains Spivak's double bind

as an attempt to understand epistemological spaces and to use them productively. In his examination of Spivak's double bind theory, Gabriel Huddleston posits that the concept describes intrinsic and ultimately unavoidable ambiguities arising from interventions "in the oppression of racism, classism, sexism, and colonialism" (Huddleston, 2015, p. 26). His understanding is that in order to use the double bind for a "productive" outcome that does not fall into the danger of quickly trying to escape the discomfort within the double bind, one should try to endure this uncomfortable position longer. He calls this longer perseverance an "awkward stance", characterised by "unease" and the temptation to end the discomfort "through traditional notions of knowledge and being" (Huddleston, 2015, p. 26). Huddleston's analysis of Spivak helps to understand the complexity of the double bind and supports its application to the example in this chapter: the ambiguous situation of CSO's staff in the fields of education and counselling for migrantised women.

14.3.2 Employability versus self-empowerment

The concept of employability has become central in contemporary policy discourses, particularly within migrant integration programs. Framed as a pathway to self-sufficiency and societal inclusion, employability is tied to developing specific skills—language proficiency, vocational training, and cultural adaptability—deemed necessary for labour market participation. However, this framing aligns closely with neoliberal ideologies, which prioritise individual responsibility and economic productivity over structural critiques of inequality (Rose, 1999). Migrants are thus seen as needing to "upskill" or "adapt," positioning them as entrepreneurial subjects who must continually invest in self-improvement to remain competitive (Urciuoli, 2008). This is strongly reflected in the European Union's integration policies, which emphasise language acquisition as a key to labour market access and social inclusion (European Commission, 2020). Benchmarks like the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2020) are widely used, and language training is often tied to broader employability agendas, including the development of job-relevant skills and workplace readiness. However, such frameworks risk excluding those with limited formal education or literacy, particularly women, who are often the core beneficiaries of CSO programmes. This discourse risks reducing empowerment to a transactional process, where individuals must conform to market-oriented benchmarks to be considered successful or valuable (Brown, Hesketh, & Williams, 2003).

The neoliberal emphasis on employability also perpetuates a discourse of the self, in which individuals are expected to view themselves as responsible for their own advancement (Ong, 2006). This perspective obscures systemic barriers such as discrimination, lack of childcare, educational disadvantage, or precarious legal status that disproportionately affect migrant women. Instead, structural inequalities are reframed as personal challenges (Foucault, 2008; Schinkel & van Houdt, 2010). For many, this can lead to a sense

of failure or inadequacy when unable to meet market-driven expectations, further marginalising them. Migrant women are particularly vulnerable to deskilling, often ending up in low-paid care or domestic roles despite higher qualifications (Kofman & Raghuram, 2015; Parreñas, 2011). Although CSOs may align with EU employability frameworks to ensure funding or institutional legitimacy, this alignment often constrains their ability to support women in more diverse and holistic ways on their paths towards empowerment—ways that prioritise personal development, social inclusion, and self-determination beyond labour market outcomes.

Self-empowerment, on the other hand, is a central concept in feminist civil society agendas, emphasising women's agency and autonomy in driving change. Feminist CSOs promote self-empowerment through education, advocacy, and fostering supportive networks. By cultivating self-awareness and critical consciousness, these organisations help women recognise and resist structures of domination (Philipps, 2016). In the context of development, they adopt intersectional approaches that acknowledge diverse experiences and challenge patriarchal structures. By supporting grassroots initiatives and women's leadership, CSOs aim to create environments where women can exercise agency. However, this concept risks being co-opted into a depoliticised, individualistic paradigm that echoes broader neoliberal framings of empowerment oriented towards economic productivity, thereby undermining its original feminist intent (Batliwala, 2007). As feminist scholars argue, true empowerment must address domination and inequality, prioritising collective action and systemic change (Allen, 2008; Rowlands, 1995; Sahay, 1998). In our research, we further unpack how CSOs navigate the tensions between empowerment as participation and empowerment as productivity. A critical rethinking of these practices is essential to expand processes of empowerment beyond narrowly defined labour market integration and to embrace more inclusive strategies that reflect the complex realities and aspirations of migrant women.

This chapter builds on this conceptual framework by examining how these tensions and ambiguities unfold in practice. Through an analysis of empirical data gathered from CSOs and migrantised women themselves, we explore how empowerment is navigated, negotiated, and experienced across different organisational and personal contexts.

14.4 Methodology

This chapter is based on qualitative research, conducted as part of the Re-IncluGen project, which took place in three CSOs supporting migrantised women in Vienna, Austria. The analysis draws on research with CSO staff members and with the women currently benefiting from the CSOs' diverse services. With the CSOs we conducted a series of focus group discussions (at least four in each CSO) and separate interviews with some staff members (ten in total). In addition, we conducted participant observation of daily activities

in the CSOs over the course of several months. We analysed programmatic documents, where available. In line with the ethical guidelines of the project, we intend to not name the CSOs or be explicit about their distinct features or services to protect the anonymity of all participants. Our research methods included interviews, focus group discussions, participant observations of daily activities, and document analysis.

A total of 30 women who benefit from the CSOs services were interviewed in the framework of the project research. The interviews were focused on their experience with the CSOs and their concepts and experience of being a migrantised woman in Vienna. Furthermore, the women's definition of empowerment was a key theme in the interviews. We used a photo-eliciting approach and met with the research participants multiple times (three times with some and twice with others). In addition, we have also conducted three focus group discussions with different women (18 women in total) on specific services of the CSOs. All women interviewed have received some form of support by the participating CSOs—whether in the form of language courses, social counselling, socialising activities, or other educational services. In order to safeguard the anonymity of the persons interviewed, they are quoted below using pseudonyms.

14.5 Mapping the context: target groups and CSO approaches

Empowerment cannot be understood without first considering the social and institutional landscapes in which it unfolds. In the case of the CSOs studied here, both the diversity of the women they support and the range of services they offer are central to how empowerment is enacted in everyday practice. All CSOs are based in Vienna and their everyday activities are deeply rooted in local, neighbourhood-based practices. Each CSO brings a distinct focus, ranging from counselling and education to anti-violence, support for victims of violence through psychotherapeutical support, and overall community-building activities. In addition, they all share a commitment to supporting migrantised women through multifaceted, participatory approaches. By examining the composition of their target groups and the complex realities these women face, including intersecting experiences of migration, trauma, and educational disadvantage, we aim to show how CSOs develop services that are tailored, responsive, and often holistic in nature. Understanding these intersecting conditions is crucial for interpreting the empowerment processes explored in the rest of this chapter. This background also helps clarify how empowerment is shaped not only by political and institutional frameworks but also by everyday negotiations between CSOs and the women they work with.

All CSOs in this research offer support to migrantised women of different backgrounds and needs, through a combination of educational, psychosocial, counselling, legal, and community-based services. Their work addresses the intersecting forms of disadvantage and discrimination faced by migrantised women, many of whom are navigating new lives in Austria after experiences of displacement, war, or violence. Most of the women supported by the CSOs

in our research come from countries affected by conflict, political instability, or restrictive gender norms, such as Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, Türkiye, and several Northern and Sub-Saharan African countries, bringing with them complex histories and experiences of systemic inequality. A large part of the women attending the CSOs services have received only a minimal amount of formal education and have no or limited access to the labour market, thus depending on their families, particularly their husbands, for financial support. Due to limited language proficiency, they also often rely on their husbands or children for everyday communication with institutions such as schools, health services, and landlords.

Women from Afghanistan, in particular, who attend language courses and social counselling in one of the CSOS, face the most visible and drastic educational disadvantage, having lived under two Taliban regimes (1996–2001 and since 2021), where girls' and women's education was largely forbidden or only possible under high risk and in secret. Generational differences here are evident: younger Afghan women who were of school age between the Taliban regimes (2001–2021) were more likely to have had the chance to receive some formal education. In contrast, some women from Türkiye and Syria arrived with higher educational levels and fluency in several languages but faced other challenges, including the non-recognition of their qualifications, difficulties securing employment matching their skills and qualifications, often unrecognised in Austria, as well as precarious legal status tied to their husbands.

Understanding these differentiated experiences is crucial for examining how empowerment is defined, supported, and contested across the three CSOs both in their formal practices and in their everyday interactions with the women they work with.

14.6 Challenges and tensions of empowerment: migrantised women's concepts and expectations

Based on the interviews we conducted with women who use the services of several CSOs, we identified different definitions of empowerment and the concrete ways to support them achieving it. Experiences and definitions of empowerment vary significantly for the migrantised women in our research based on their country of origin, educational background, and socio-economic status. The experiences shared by women across different CSOs reveal a consistent link between how they define and experience empowerment and key factors such as financial independence, freedom of choice, and gender equality. However, empowerment also reflects deeply personal and context-dependent aspects, shaped by societal norms in their home countries and their lived experiences in Austria. These narratives highlight the critical role CSOs play in creating spaces for empowerment through language training, social support, and broader community engagement. The narratives also uncover the underlying tensions and unresolved expectations that some of the women have in relation to support and final outcomes in relation to empowerment.

Empowerment for migrant women encompasses several interconnected dimensions which we categorise into three themes: the tools for participation in the society in which they live now (such as language acquisition), autonomy (e.g., financial independence, personal autonomy, gender equality) and access to supportive networks. Each concept reflects both shared experiences and context-specific nuances, shaped by the women's countries of origin, migration journeys, and socio-economic backgrounds.

14.6.1 Language acquisition

Language acquisition emerged as one of the most significant tools for empowerment across all groups of women, enabling them to navigate life in Austria independently. Improving their German was further experienced as empowering, as it enabled the women to use public transport or to make and attend appointments independently. For women from Türkiye, Afghanistan, and Syria, learning German was transformative, offering both practical and psychological benefits. A 38-year old woman from Türkiye shared, *I am now so well informed that I have more self-confidence. For example, I couldn't go to the doctor on my own before, and now I can do it, even without my children, when they're not around* (Soraya).

A recurring motivating argument for the women (participants in the CSOs' language courses) can be seen in the interactions within these learning groups between people from different generations: many of the learners state that they want to learn German so that they can be a role model for their children, while simultaneously drawing inspiration from their children. The dynamics reveal how different migrant generations of women can inspire each other to pursue empowerment, learning, and independence. Zuhra, a 47-old woman from Türkiye, who had a high school education diploma, described how her growing daughter became a source of motivation for her to take the first step towards learning German. After many years of staying at home, caring for her husband and children, she began to notice how her daughter confidently managed tasks that she could not, such as communicating in German or navigating the city. Seeing her daughter become increasingly independent and capable gave her the courage to enrol in a class and start learning herself.

She shared: *Once I knew how to ask for things in the shop, I already knew that I would continue and learn to talk to the doctors, and to the police, if needed* (Zuhra). This gradual process of learning basic German marked a turning point in her life. Language acquisition became the means through which she gained independence, confidence, and mobility. What started with small victories, like shopping on her own, soon expanded into communicating with authorities, schools, and healthcare providers. This progress enabled her to move around the city on her own without the fears she had at the beginning. For her, speaking even basic German became a source of freedom: *Speaking just a bit of German made me a freer woman* (Zuhra).

For this woman, empowerment was not defined in grand terms but through small, concrete changes that allowed her to feel free and autonomous in her daily life. This case also underscores how intergenerational exchanges act as catalysts for empowerment. The daughter's independence inspired her mother's learning, while, in turn, the mother's efforts to grow and become more self-reliant set an example for her children. Such reciprocal inspiration highlights the potential for empowerment to flow across generations, with younger women motivating older women to step outside their comfort zones and older women demonstrating the value of resilience, learning, and transformation. Exploring these intergenerational dynamics would provide deeper insights into how empowerment is not a linear or isolated process, but one deeply embedded in relationships, role models, and shared experiences within families.

Similarly, Sirin, a woman from Syria in her 30s, noted that language proficiency was essential for achieving financial independence: *So self-empowerment, in my opinion, would work if you first learn the language, you look for a job, you secure yourself financially* (Sirin). Many participants indicate that learning the local language is considered as a first and necessary step towards a state where a woman does not depend on her male relatives. For a group of middle-aged Afghan women, with whom we conducted a focus group discussion, the ability to learn German was linked to a profound sense of dignity and freedom. One of them explained, *I would love to work; I enjoy working. Only if I could speak the language, then I could also go to work*. However, all the participants in this discussion, and in the language course which they attended, were not alphabetised before coming to Austria due to the restriction of the Taliban regime. These challenges of illiteracy and trauma led the women to perceive their progress as very slow and insufficient. They shared that they are advancing very slowly, because they are only learning to read and write for the first time at 50 years of age or older, without speaking the language and without knowing how to write in their first language. Some of the women expressed feeling ashamed that they cannot advance faster and that even though the teachers were very supportive, they were afraid to disappoint them. While there is no pressure from the CSO to achieve a certain level of language proficiency, the women put pressure on themselves. They further discussed their concerns of never being able to find a job in Austria at their age due to their difficulties with language. This could be understood as a situation of double bind in which the learners find themselves caught between different notions and understandings of what successful learning means. While they felt that their progress was slow, they also appreciated that the teachers fostered a supportive environment and consistently accommodated their needs with patience and understanding. The value of the language courses was not simply in providing language skills but in providing a safe space for socialising and shared experience, which is also considered of key importance by many of the women who attend them. These overlapping functions are discussed in more detail in the following sections.

14.6.2 Autonomy: financial independence

Across all groups, financial independence was consistently viewed as a cornerstone of empowerment. Women linked their ability to earn an income to greater respect and safety within their families and autonomy in decision-making. Zainab, a woman who migrated from Syria, who came with her husband and children, reflected, *Without work, without this financial independence, a woman's position in society will remain weak... I had my job, my income... he couldn't beat me up, but as soon as I no longer had that, the violence came* (Zainab). Thus, having a job was empowering for the women, as it enabled them to realise their potential, become financially independent from their husbands, and make decisions on their own. Salma, a 44-year-old with high school education, who used to work in a bakery in Türkiye before migrating to Austria, emphasised, *If a woman works and earns her own money, she has a different status in the family and more say* (Salma). Another woman, Celine, also from Türkiye who separated from her husband, and was working in a small drycleaners, earning her own living, described the profound relief of no longer being financially dependent on her husband: *This situation of begging for money from the man is somehow not there [anymore]* (Celine). For many of the women who already held some educational degree or had working experience before coming to Austria, financial independence is linked to earning money and making their own decisions. Aysa, for example, another woman from Türkiye in her early 30s, defined “gender empowerment” as “*being her own boss*” (Aysa). These different examples illustrate how important autonomy and independence are for the migrantised women in our research and how this is connected to financial independence and holding a job. This sense of being able to stand up for oneself was connected to earning and managing one’s own money was a recurring theme in the interviews, whether by women who held their own jobs, or as an aspiration for the future or for their own daughters.

These ideas of independence and freedom were closely linked to their gender roles and their roles in society or the community. Having a job and earning money functioned as a means to gain more respect from and leverage within their families:

[I]f a woman works and earns whatever amount she does, but earns her own money, she has a different status in the family and is respected more or has more say. And this situation of begging for money from the man is somehow not there.... I don't work, and I have the feeling that somehow, I don't have as many rights.

(Aysa)

Belqis, an Afghan woman in her mid-30s who had low or no educational or professional qualifications echoed these sentiments, linking employment to a broader sense of freedom: *The work I did at home, like a worker you hire to work at home... I wasn't allowed to make my own decisions* (Belqis).

Financial independence was directly related to being able to find and hold a job. Some women, who already had sufficient language skills and possessed high school diplomas from their home country, formulated this as a mild critique towards the activities offered by the CSO. They wished for more professional training towards entering the labour market in Austria. These support activities are not provided by the CSOs in question; however, the women are referred to other organisations where they can pursue them further. Some of the women expressed a wish for a holistic approach where one can get all types of support and activities at the same place. Anife, another woman from Türkiye in her mid-40s, with high school education who got divorced and was living alone with her son and daughter, formulated it like this:

I already trust people here. They helped me with counselling in the beginning, I attended language classes, I took my child here and got to know many of the people working here. I feel safe. And I now want to get more information on how to find a job, to learn some new skills. But I feel insecure to go somewhere else. Why can't they offer something for me here?

(Anife)

This need to receive all support in one place highlights the fragile forms of trust that are important for some women to take further steps.

14.6.3 *Autonomy: personal autonomy*

Personal autonomy, defined as the ability to make one's own choices, was a recurring theme in the women's definitions of empowerment. Some of the Afghan women spoke powerfully about the lack of agency in their home countries: *I grew up in a society where someone else decided everything for us—marriage, education, everything* (Delara, 33). Migrating to Austria allowed them to experience basic freedoms for the first time, such as choosing their clothing and leaving the house unaccompanied. One woman described the transformation poignantly: *I have discovered that I am alive. Where I was born and lived, I didn't experience life at all* (anon, 46).

Some women also emphasised the importance of freedom in decision-making. Laila, a woman from Syria with higher education, in her early 40s, talked about empowerment as: *the freedom of making decisions that a woman wants to make, on her own without being pressured*. For another woman from Türkiye, who was in her 50s, self-determination was equally crucial: *Self-determination means that you decide for yourself what you do... because everyone has a life and you should decide for yourself, because you live once and only for yourself* (anon). Some of these reflections were connected to being able to attend the CSOs activities, to the fact that the CSOs offer a space where women feel secure, can bring their children, and meet other women. Initially, for some women, it was the simple fact of going to

the organisation's location by themselves. Gradually, for some of them, it developed into feeling more confident in other aspects of life. For others, talking and meeting different types of women—those who attend the courses, those who come for the consultations, and the employees themselves, gave them different ideas of how women could be, which they wanted to explore. Anife, that we also quoted above, put it like that:

Initially I was coming just for the course just to learn a few words for shopping and to read the signs around. But then I saw how many women are working here, some also from my home country, how they like their work, they are happy, and I thought to myself – maybe I can also feel like this someday. So, they inspired me, so to say.

14.6.4 Gender equality

Gender equality was another key aspect of empowerment, although its interpretation varied across groups. Many of the women in our research associated equality with shared responsibilities within the household. Hala, a 34-year old woman from Syria with a university degree who was currently looking for a job, observed, *There should be no difference between men and women... men often can't cook perhaps, but they can do the dishes, they can vacuum, they can also help around the house* (Hala). While Noor, another woman with higher education from Syria in her mid-40s, emphasised the importance of equal opportunities in employment: *They [women] have the same access to jobs and training as men* (Noor). The aspect of equal rights and access to work also emerged during other interviews with women from Türkiye, Syria, and Iraq, and was linked to questions of financial autonomy to which women should have equal access as men. In all these interviews, education and employment were seen as connected and playing together a key role in breaking the inequalities between men and women.

For some of the Afghan women in our focus group discussion (FGD), gender equality was similarly linked to education and employment, framed through the language of rights and the autonomy to take decisions about one's life. During a longer exchange between three of the women, one of them concluded: *Women should have the right to decide, women should have the right to education, women should have the right to a good job, like their men* (anon, FGD). However, later in the discussion, they talked about carrying these inequalities with them wherever they go, including as migrantised women living with their past in Austria. One of the women formulated it like this:

I don't have education, and now it's already too late for me. It's difficult to even learn the language here. That's my life. But I have hopes for my daughters. For them it is not too late. They can be equal with all other people here, men or women.

(anon, FGD)

14.6.5 *Supportive networks*

The role of CSOs in creating supportive networks and safe spaces was universally recognised as critical. Women consistently described CSOs as environments where they felt respected, included, and empowered to assert their rights. One of the women often visiting the CSO, even when there was no ongoing course or a need from a consultation, explained it like this: *Yes, it's a place where I feel comfortable and I know that if something goes wrong, I'll be backed up* (Aysa). Information workshops on legal rights and social systems, conducted by two of the CSOs, further bolstered women's confidence. An Iranian woman explained, *A lot of things I didn't know: women, they have rights here, they can speak up!* (anon).

The social aspects of CSOs were equally valued. One of the women described the experience of coming to the CSO on a regular basis for different workshop, for consultations, and for social events: *It is like therapy—you talk to friends*. Another woman from Türkiye highlighted the importance of building connections:

So I learned German, of course, and I am also a very social person and I always get to know new people during the courses and when I come on other occasions. I like that here. I have my own friends, not the family friends.

(Miriaam)

Some of the Afghan women appreciated the language courses as a space where one does not only go to improve their language skills but also to socialise and feel comfortable with the other participants and the people from the organisation. The social aspect that lingers through the other activities was formulated as key in their path towards feeling more empowered.

The narratives of migrantised women reveal that empowerment is multifaceted, encompassing language acquisition, financial independence, personal autonomy, gender equality, and access to support networks. Each concept reflects shared aspirations while highlighting the diverse challenges and opportunities shaped by individual circumstances. While for some women, using the support of the CSO is a step towards achieving very clear straight-line goals like achieving a certain level of language proficiency and being prepared for the labour market, for most of those we interviewed, the goal is not necessarily clear or singular, and it changes over time. While labour and education was highlighted as important by almost all, empowerment as an abstract term was not a clear goal for the women interviewed. But when prompted to think about it, what we observed is that for many of them, the very act of going to the CSO is a first step that already makes them feel more empowered. The multifaceted ways of defining and experiencing empowerment, through concepts, through practices, through further expectations, and through new ways of seeing themselves and their present and future, also demonstrate the

difficult task faced by the organisation in supporting such a process. CSOs in our study, which support migrantised women, play a vital role in addressing the diverse needs, offering practical tools and fostering inclusive spaces. Nevertheless, their task is also challenging exactly because of the multidirectional and multifaceted definitions of empowerment that women formulated for us, which depend to a great extent on their current circumstances and their past experiences prior to migration. What we described here is the background against which the CSOs from our study organise their services and their overall agenda. In the next section, we turn to the challenges faced by the organisations and the educators working with the women.

14.7 Staff approaches to empowerment processes

Two of the three CSOs we conducted research in were established by migrant women over 30 years ago to support other migrant women. The third one, founded more recently, has a mixed-background staff and focuses on supporting women affected by coercion and violence. While their origins and target groups vary slightly, all three CSOs share a strong commitment to empowering migrantised women through demand-oriented, holistic, and participant-centred services.

Initially focused on providing German language courses, counselling, or peer support for migrant women, all three organisations have evolved into multi-service providers. They now offer a broad spectrum of varying activities (not all by each CSO) including psychosocial counselling, legal advice, trauma-informed workshops, educational services, legal and institutional translation, community-building events, and expressive practices such as dance and yoga. This evolution reflects their recognition of the intersecting challenges women face—such as trauma, legal dependency, racism, and social isolation—and underscores their commitment to intersectional empowerment practices.

Although none of the CSOs rely heavily on formalised programmatic definitions of gender empowerment in their foundational documents, their organisational philosophies and everyday practices are rooted in a shared set of values. Our focus groups discussions with each CSO unfolded around the staff members' different definitions of what their key aim is as an organisation and how this is connected to the specific concept of gender empowerment. In two of the CSOs, we also had participants who were among the founders and could trace the evolution of the conceptual clarity that each CSO experienced over the years. The key concepts that were enumerated in the FGD included fostering *self-determination*, *independence*, *self-worth* (all three CSOs), *self-reflection* (CSO1 and CSO3), *emotional safety* (CSO 2), and the *ability to make informed decisions* (CSO1).

A key shared approach among the three CSOs was the goal to support, but not impose, empowerment on their target groups. In the words of one CSO1 board member, *They are already empowered. We only support them* (CSO1_FGD1). Similarly, CSO2 staff emphasised the goal of encouraging

women to *take their fate into their own hands* and *become free from dependencies*, highlighting the importance of women realising that they *can* live differently and choose for themselves what their life will be (CSO2_FGD1). CSO3 likewise focuses on *self-empowerment*, especially for women affected by violence, and sees its role as enabling women to acknowledge trauma, build confidence, and develop self-reliance.

All three CSOs promote empowerment not merely through services but through relationships of trust, cultural sensitivity, and proximity. Many staff members of CSO1 and CSO2 are themselves migrantised women and share this experience with their clients, enabling them to act as not simply mediators but also as advocates and allies, while maintaining the professional distance needed to offer non-judgmental support. One staff member noted the importance of *being able to relate to certain experiences*, while also remaining outside the clients' religious or ethnic community, which facilitates trust and openness (CSO1_FGD1).

Importantly, staff in all three organisations understand empowerment as both a process and a goal, a dynamic journey shaped by women's own aspirations. This is particularly evident in how CSOs centre their work around the individual needs and life situations of women, whether in legal processes, family matters, or personal development. From CSO3's emphasis on creating safe social spaces, such as women's cafés and dance classes, through CSO2's integration of therapy into their services, to CSO1's combination of language education with court accompaniment and housing support, empowerment is viewed as a multidimensional, contextualised, and evolving process.

The terms most often used by staff across the CSOs to describe empowerment include: *self-determination*, *self-worth*, *encouragement*, *freedom*, *independence*, *self-knowledge*, and *the ability to express and pursue one's own wishes*. These were echoed in daily conversations and in the reflective focus group discussions with staff members in all three CSOs.

At the same time, all three CSOs express tension between their holistic approach and the bureaucratic constraints of funding frameworks, which often prioritise short-term, measurable, and solely goal-oriented outputs (such as employment or language certificates) over long-term empowerment processes. The CSOs' holistic approaches, while differing from one to the other, share this approach in common, which is in contrast to the increasingly specialised nature of services demanded by funding institutions. All three CSOs intentionally address multiple, interconnected issues in different directions. For example, a woman seeking assistance with divorce might also need help securing housing subsidies or resolving legal status issues, and eventually enrol in basic education and a language course. Another one visiting a language course might need assistance with understanding access to social services, while also receiving psychotherapy in her native language. Similarly, social counselling might evolve into participation in community events and providing information on gender-based violence and available support mechanisms. This flexibility differently enacted by each CSO, but following a

similar principle, is considered a core strength of the organisation, according to the staff members, allowing them to tailor their support to the overlapping challenges their clients face. Yet, this approach also creates a tension between the expectations of public institutions and policies—both towards CSOs and the migrantised women—to achieve measurable outputs of inclusion and self-sufficiency, on the one hand, and the holistic and multifaceted concepts of empowerment that CSOs and women themselves have, on the other hand, as demonstrated earlier.

14.8 “Double-Bound”: inherent challenges for CSO staff

To illustrate the double bind as an inherent tension in the work of the CSOs, we will focus on only one of the services offered—the educational programmes and the challenges that CSO staff members face. As we have shown already, the tension between political discourse and CSO practices arises from differing definitions of empowerment. While political frameworks emphasise employability and measurable outcomes like labour market participation, the CSOs in our research prioritise broader goals such as self-determination, self-knowledge, as well as community strengthening and support. This divergence forces CSOs to balance meeting official expectations with maintaining their commitment to holistic empowerment approaches.

14.8.1 *Position of staff*

The first aspect has to do with the position of the educators/staff of CSOs who find themselves in the ambiguous situation of having the so-called “mandate to educate”, while—working for organisations that have a clear devotion to feminist ideals—also wanting to be in solidarity with the women who attend their courses and avoid the inherent hierarchies between teachers and learners. An additional difficulty arises from the transcultural approach, in which it is sometimes difficult for educators to accept that values might differ between trainers/staff and learners/participants. While staff members are truly devoted to support women in their own journey, as shown earlier in the chapter, this aspect came up in individual discussions with staff members and in one of the FGDs with CSOs staff members as a challenge.

In the event that a feminist trainer holds personal views contrary to the concept of women’s role and behaviour (e.g., the wearing of the hijab or certain family responsibilities), or has specific ideas regarding the manner in which participation should occur, and the participants’ actions diverge from these expectations, it is the responsibility of the trainer to refrain from expressing such opinions. Approaching difference with respect and without judgement is a key value for the work of the CSOs staff members but also a challenge on an individual level. Furthermore, for both the trainers of the educational programme and the learners—as described earlier—it is impossible to resolve the different expectations regarding possible educational outcomes

or learning successes. For example, one of the learners' main goals may be to learn German as quickly as possible. For another learner, the goal might be to come out of their everyday life full of obligations, socialise, and advance slowly and without pressure. Trainers and teachers, while having the flexibility to divide learners in different groups, cannot fully resolve such tensions and have the task of holding these different expectations together, while also managing their own aims, which might vary from promoting quick progress, to focussing on making learning fun, to providing a safe space. In addition to these multiple aims and perspectives, the political discourse puts additional pressure with a clear focus on defining empowerment and inclusion through concrete language skills that will result in access to the labour market as quickly as possible. This takes us back to the conceptual tensions between self-empowerment as a process and employability as a neoliberal discourse of the self-managing and reliant individual.

14.8.2 From self to other: individual versus collective notions of empowerment

A second aspect is that, specifically with (educational) programs that aim to foster empowerment, there is an inherent discrepancy between a post-colonial, feminist understanding of equality and independence for all women—regardless of their ethnicity, religion, marital status, sexual orientation, etc.—and the call to “educate” a specific group of women “towards” self-empowerment. Despite this dilemma of staff and trainers being situated between a position of power and the aim to be in solidarity, the situation of the migrantised women learners requires a closer look. To understand the ambiguity, the terms “self” and “empowerment” must be critically evaluated and always informed by an intersectional approach. Grasping the notion of the “self” can be a major challenge for some of the participants, especially if they are severely educationally disadvantaged and/or have experienced discrimination due to their gender, level of education, ethnicity, or religion. This stands in contrast to neoliberal and Western-centred concepts of empowerment as self-reliance and individual responsibility. In the classroom many learners find it difficult to talk about personal states, emotions, and dreams or wishes for the future. This, in turn, makes the concept of empowerment difficult to imagine and project, both conceptually and through concrete supporting activities.

Further complicating the picture is the dual nature of empowerment itself, both as a process of self-realisation and as something facilitated by external actors. The term includes an active and a passive image: who empowers whom, and on what terms? In the case of self-empowerment, the self/participant is expected to empower themselves—but where does this imperative originate? Is it internally felt or externally encouraged by institutions like CSOs? One staff member remarked earlier, “They are already empowered. We just support them.” This highlights an important nuance:

that empowerment is not necessarily something to be given, but something already present and needing recognition and reinforcement.

This paradox is echoed in Rubia Salgado, Dirim, Mineva, Rومانer, and Thomas-Olalde's (2014, p. 129) observation of the "simultaneity of the function of trainers as agents of empowerment and as those who enable empowerment." This double bind places CSO staff in a persistent tension between enabling agency and inadvertently reinforcing hierarchies. As such, the challenge is not merely how to define empowerment, but how to enact it without undermining its very premise. Moreover, the emotional complexity and multiplicity of selves that many migrantised women bring with them are not easily accommodated within dominant neoliberal frameworks, which tend to reduce empowerment to measurable outcomes and economic self-sufficiency. This tension, between what empowerment is imagined to be and how it is lived and felt, lies at the heart of the contradictions CSOs must continually navigate.

14.8.3 Critical self-reflection of staff

Going back to wider reflections based on all three CSOs, a key issue that emerged is the question of self-reflection on one's own position and privilege. A significant challenge for personnel within all three CSOs is to acknowledge, challenge, and reframe the intricate complexities inherent within the very systems that disadvantage their clients. While all three CSOs apply an intersectional approach in their services and internal structures, though this commitment is differently implemented, power asymmetries remain unavoidable. This need for reflexivity arises not only from the hierarchical nature of educational and counselling relationships but also from the broader institutional and social context in which CSOs operate. As several interviewees pointed out, participants are often fearful of disappointing the trainers if they cannot demonstrate "success"—whether in learning German, navigating bureaucracies, or gaining independence. The double bind theory is useful in capturing this dilemma: CSO staff are expected to empower women while functioning within institutional frameworks that impose structural limitations. These tensions cannot be resolved outright, but they can be made visible and endured through critical and collective reflection.

Even when staff share similar migration histories with participants, they often hold more secure social positions and access to resources—making power differences tangible. While participatory spaces and collective learning environments can soften these dynamics by building trust, solidarity, and peer support, they do not fully eliminate them. The presence of a shared experience and background can reduce hierarchical distance, which is what many of the staff members are hoping for, but the structural and institutional role of staff still places them in positions of authority. This is why reflexivity remains essential. This need is well captured in the discussions with all three CSOs, but the hierarchical relations remain insoluble. Yet, by remaining grounded in feminist principles of collective action, care, and critical

reflection, CSOs attempt to balance these pressures. Amid pressures to meet neoliberal policy goals like employability and integration, CSOs must continue to carve out spaces for alternative, relational forms of empowerment that are grounded in shared experience, care, and critical awareness.

14.9 Conclusion

Far from offering straightforward solutions, this analysis argues for the necessity of embracing discomfort and acknowledging the insolubility of certain tensions as central to understanding empowerment as a multifaceted, multi-vocal, and multi-directional process. For example, as we have shown, many women identify financial independence as a central element of empowerment. However, those without formal education or basic literacy skills often struggle to advance quickly in language courses or vocational training programs that could eventually result in securing a job and financial independence. Our first argument is that while such barriers highlight the discrepancy between women's aspirations and their ability to achieve them, they do not diminish the validity of their desires. Instead, they underscore how deeply these definitions of empowerment are shaped by intersecting factors like education, language proficiency, trauma, and gender roles.

Our second point relates to the role of the CSOs. The three CSOs described here strive to balance diverse needs while addressing their own institutional limitations. They aim to go beyond narrowly defined goals like employability or measured progress in language proficiency, offering instead safe spaces where women can learn, connect, and grow at their own pace and define their own goals of empowerment and self-empowerment. As we discussed in this chapter, the main services offered (language courses and social counselling) go beyond their formal content. They become sites for social interaction and emotional support, creating support networks and new communities. Women frequently describe these environments as places where they feel secure and valued.

However, this broad and inclusive approach is not without its contradictions. Some participants express dissatisfaction with the lack of direct pathways to employment, while CSOs struggle to meet these expectations under limited resources and neoliberal funding frameworks. These tensions between personal aspiration and structural constraint, and between institutional goals and lived realities are emblematic of the double bind faced by both women and the CSOs that serve them, and mirror what [Spivak \(1994\)](#) theorised as the double bind, where empowerment must be simultaneously enabled and critiqued. CSO staff are caught in this bind: expected to be both agents of empowerment and facilitators of self-empowerment, while navigating policies that prioritise market integration and individual responsibility ([Ong, 2006](#); [Schinkel & van Houdt, 2010](#)).

The findings of this chapter emphasise that empowerment is both situated and relational, shaped by the specific contexts in which migrant women

live and learn and cannot be understood as a linear or universally defined goal. Instead, it is enacted in daily practices and negotiated within unequal structures of power. While CSOs attempt to mitigate dependency and foster autonomy, they cannot eliminate the systemic forces that shape migrant women's lives. Self-reflection by staff is necessary but not sufficient; the structural inequalities remain. Ultimately, empowerment must be understood not only as a goal or policy mandate but as an ongoing, relational process that is contradictory and shaped by context. Rather than seeking to resolve these contradictions, this chapter calls for recognising them as central to understanding empowerment as a fluid, multi-directional, and ongoing journey—one that requires critical reflection, patience, and sustained commitment to addressing systemic inequalities.

Note

- 1 The term of the “subaltern” as a person of lower rank or status.

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15 Co-Creating Software for Inclusion and Gender Empowerment

Kris Aerts

15.1 Prologue

Amina is 38. She works at a civil society organisation (CSO) in Antwerp that fights for inclusion and gender empowerment. She knows her community well. She sees where systems fail, where people fall through the cracks, where strength is built in quiet ways. But when she's asked what her organisation actually does, it's hard to put into words.

There's so much, and yet, it remains invisible.

Visibility. Connection. Impact. These feel like big words. Their work happens in small moments, in trust, in stories. They don't have a communications team. They don't have time for tech experiments. And honestly, digital tools often feel like they're meant for someone else.

Then a new opportunity appears: a co-creation process within the Re-IncluGen project. A platform, shaped with CSOs, not for them. No digital background needed. Just real experience.

Amina hesitates. Will she be able to follow? Can she really contribute? Will it be worth the effort?

Still, she joins. And step by step, things shift. In workshops with other organisations, she finds her voice. With sketches, sticky notes, and simple questions, she sees her experience translated into something real. Amina realises: I don't need to be a developer to co-create something that works.

They call it Quwa: the Arabic word for strength.

The first version fits. It makes sense. But getting others on board takes courage. Some colleagues are sceptical. Too busy. Too digital.

Amina takes the lead. She shares, shows, invites. Slowly, the team joins in. Their work becomes visible. Their impact grows.

Not because they learned how tech works.

But because the tech learned how they work.

That is the power of co-creation.

15.2 Why co-creation in software development matters

As digital tools become increasingly embedded in how we work, connect, and advocate for change, the question of how they are developed matters more than ever. Too often, software is created at a distance from the people and organisations it is meant to serve, resulting in tools that may be functional but poorly aligned with the realities of their users.

Co-creation offers a different approach (Banfield, Lombardo, & Wax, 2017). It centres on the idea that people bring vital expertise not in spite of their lack of technical background, but because of their lived experience, organisational knowledge, and contextual understanding. In this approach, software development becomes a shared process: not something delivered to users, but something shaped with them.

This chapter explores what co-creation looks like in practice, through the development of Quwa: a digital platform co-designed within the ReIncluGen project, intended to support CSOs and stakeholders working on inclusion and gender empowerment. We examine how this collaborative process unfolded—from early workshops and service design to software development and real-world testing—and reflect on the methods, challenges, and learning moments that shaped the outcome. Our focus lies on the co-creation process, with ReIncluGen and Quwa serving as a rich and concrete illustration of how that process can unfold in practice.

15.3 Building a shared foundation

The ReIncluGen project brought together a broad alliance of partners, each with distinct perspectives on the challenge of gender empowerment and inclusion. Academic institutions contributed deep sociological and anthropological expertise, grounded in research on the structural barriers faced by migrantised women. CSOs added rich, practical insight from their daily work with marginalised communities—offering an essential view on how these issues play out in practice.

As software crafters, we joined this collaboration not just to build a platform but to help shape it from the start. Our role combined technical execution with active participation in the design process. We translated user needs into a robust and usable digital solution, while also helping the ReIncluGen partnership make realistic, informed decisions.

With project partners from five different countries, the collaboration benefitted from diverse perspectives but also faced complexity. We invested in establishing clear goals and a shared focus. Through a mix of in-person and online workshops, large-group discussions, and organisation-specific sessions, we created inclusive formats that encouraged meaningful contribution and helped build the trust needed for successful co-creation.

Creating space for dialogue: Facilitation in co-creation

In co-creation, having the right people at the table is only the beginning. What matters just as much is how we work together. Facilitation plays a key role in making collaboration meaningful. Good facilitation is more than a set of tools. It's a way of working that creates safety and structure for honest dialogue. It helps build trust across disciplines and cultures, navigate complexity, and arrive at decisions we can all stand behind.

Methods such as 1-2-4-All, which invites workshop participants to reflect individually, then discuss in pairs, foursomes, and finally as a full group, created space for reflection before group discussion, making it easier for quieter voices to emerge. We worked with consent-based decision-making rather than aiming for full consensus, allowing the group to move forward while remaining open to concerns. And when priorities had to be set, we used playful yet effective tools like poker chips or dot voting to make collective choices visible and fair.

Throughout the project, we varied our workshop formats: in-person or online, large group or small, general or organisation-specific. This helped accommodate different needs and comfort levels. Visual tools like screen mock-ups, sketches or post-it walls gave everyone something to respond to, even without a technical background. Energising moments, check-ins and creative metaphors helped us stay connected; not just to the task, but to each other.

15.4 Co-creating with CSOs

Co-creation proved particularly powerful in the ReIncluGen project, with the ambition to develop a digital platform with and for CSOs. These organisations are facing growing demands to professionalise, collaborate, and demonstrate their impact. Digital tools can play an important role in supporting these goals; yet many CSOs lack the resources, technical support, or contextualised solutions needed to engage meaningfully with digitalisation. While public and private sectors often benefit from large-scale digital investment, many CSOs work with generic tools that do not fit their needs or avoid digital transformation altogether. The consequences go beyond operational inefficiencies: they risk deepening structural exclusion from digital infrastructures that increasingly shape how organisations gain visibility, access funding, and build partnerships.

For many CSOs, stepping into a digital development process can feel like stepping outside their comfort zone. Yet this is precisely where co-creation shows its strength: it brings together the insights and expertise rooted in their day-to-day work with complementary technical expertise in a partnership of equals. This makes space for tailored digital solutions that reflect

organisational values and ensures that CSOs do not need to become digital experts to shape meaningful technology.

While this process led to a more relevant and tailored tool, it also had unexpected side effects. By thinking through features, content, and workflows, organisations began to reflect on their own practices: what they prioritised, how they worked, and what kind of support they truly needed. The sessions created rare moments of pause in otherwise busy routines, offering breathing room to revisit internal processes and reconnect with core goals. For some, it also shifted how they viewed technology: from something distant or imposed to something they could influence and help shape.

Not all organisations could participate equally, and not every idea made it into the final platform, but even limited involvement often led to renewed focus and confidence. In this way, co-creation not only helped deliver a useful digital tool but also contributed to small but meaningful moments of organisational strengthening.

Alongside this, the process revealed a more layered dynamic of inclusion. The platform itself was not aimed at individuals directly affected by systemic exclusion but at the CSOs that work alongside them. By involving these organisations in the design of a digital tool, the project enabled a form of inclusion that operates through infrastructure. Strengthening the digital capacity and visibility of CSOs can, in turn, enhance their ability to support and collaborate with the communities they serve. In this sense, co-creation shifted the focus of inclusion towards the CSOs themselves, recognising their role in enabling inclusive practice. That layered perspective may be subtle, but it is an essential step towards more equitable forms of digital transformation.

15.5 Shaping the vision

Before any software can be built, a shared understanding is needed of what we are trying to achieve. That means more than just listing features; it requires stepping back to ask: what problem are we solving, who are we designing for, and what would make this tool truly valuable? Service design offers a structured way to answer those questions. It helps development teams explore user needs, define goals, and connect them to practical decisions. It often includes early prototyping and visual design elements, making abstract ideas tangible and enabling rapid feedback. By doing this early in the process, service design builds a strong foundation for the work that follows.

This approach proved particularly valuable in the ReIncluGen project, where we worked with CSOs across multiple countries. At the start, we organised co-creative workshops and stakeholder interviews to understand their priorities. Rather than beginning with technical requirements, we focused on what CSOs wanted to achieve when working on inclusion and gender empowerment, and how a platform could support that. These conversations led to four shared objectives that became the backbone of the platform: showcasing, knowledge sharing, networking, and impact measurement.

Each theme was explored further. For showcasing, we discussed how organisations could present themselves in ways that felt authentic and adaptable to their identity and work. For knowledge sharing, we developed the concept of ‘wisdom bites’: short contributions that others could browse for learning or inspiration. The networking theme emphasised connection and peer exchange across contexts. The goal of impact measurement led to discussions on how to make results visible without overburdening organisations with reporting demands.

To translate these goals into design, we used simple visual tools. Low-fidelity wireframes, basic sketches of screens and structure, helped us test early ideas quickly and gather feedback without committing too soon. Once a direction became clearer, we built high-fidelity prototypes: interactive models that simulated the platform’s look and feel. These were used in user testing sessions, where the ReIncluGen CSOs explored the platform and gave input on clarity, usability, and relevance. Their feedback informed many adjustments and reinforced the sense that this was a platform built with them, not just for them.

Naming the platform was also part of this shared process. Early on, we invited ReIncluGen partners to reflect on what the name should express, not just functionally but in spirit. The result was ‘Quwa’, inspired by the Arabic word for ‘strength’, symbolising resilience and empowerment: values that run through the work of many CSOs active in inclusion and gender empowerment. The name also carries other associations: in Latin, qua can mean ‘in this place’ or ‘in the role of’, echoing questions of identity, context, and belonging. These layers reflect the lived experience of migration; how people and organisations locate themselves, draw strength, and build community in shifting circumstances.

The visual identity of the platform (see [Figure 15.1](#)) builds on the same ideas. We chose purple as the main colour, traditionally associated with strength and with gender equality movements. Additional colours help distinguish different

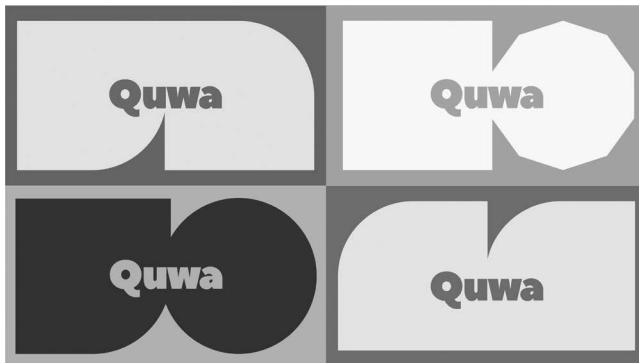


Figure 15.1 Quwa logo

parts of the platform in a clear and intuitive way, while soft tones and generous white space make the interface feel calm and accessible. The logo consists of flexible shapes that shift and adapt, rather than a single static icon; a visual metaphor for diversity, adaptability, and continuous growth. Together, these design choices support the platform's core goals: to be recognisable, welcoming, and adaptable.

15.6 Bridging design and development

A software project needs more than a compelling vision and working prototype; it also requires a clear, structured plan that is shared by all stakeholders and gives handles to manage the three key parameters of a software project: scope, time, and budget. A service blueprint provides that plan. It aligns everyone around a shared understanding of the project's goal, the direction forward, and the boundaries within which choices will be made.

To create that plan, we examine the project from three perspectives. The functional perspective explores what users want to achieve and how the software can support them. The technical perspective looks at how the system should be structured and which constraints or integrations are involved. Finally, the organisational perspective focuses on roles, responsibilities, and how decisions will be made throughout the project.

Our development team uses a toolbox of techniques to understand the project. A key technique is user story mapping, which helps us view the software from the user's perspective. We break down what people want to do into smaller steps, put them in logical order, and decide what's most important to build first. These steps lead to user stories; short, clear descriptions of what the software should do, written from the user's point of view. For example: 'As a member of an organization in Quwa, I want to upload a wisdom bite so others can benefit from our experience'. These stories are easy to discuss, estimate, and prioritise, and form the basis for planning and development. We also work with screen flows, which visualise how users navigate through the platform, and business processes, which help ensure that the platform fits with how organisations actually work. On the technical side, we use architecture diagrams to understand how the system fits together. Context diagrams show how the platform connects to users and external systems. Container diagrams outline the major internal parts and their roles, while component diagrams dive deeper into the internal structure of those parts. We also examine important quality attributes, such as privacy, accessibility, and performance, so that non-functional needs are built in from the start rather than bolted on later. Together, these tools help build a shared and realistic picture of what the software should do, and how it can be developed within project constraints. The result is not a detailed specification, but a high-level, flexible roadmap: structured enough to guide the development team but open enough to allow adaptation along the way.

In the ReIncluGen project, the service blueprint led to a detailed and realistic project plan, structured around the four themes that had emerged during the earlier service design phase: showcasing, knowledge sharing, networking, and impact measurement. Each theme was elaborated, leading to a user story map, which organised development into clear, incremental steps. For example, in the showcasing track, organisations could add a logo, describe their activities, and manage contact details. In the knowledge-sharing track, wisdom bites emerged as a core feature: short contributions that allow organisations to share tools, practices, challenges, templates, or research results. The blueprint also helped identify and plan technical building blocks, such as account management and login functionality. In addition, it surfaced important quality requirements: support for multilingual content, privacy settings that can be customised, and minimal need for manual moderation to ensure the platform remains low-maintenance and sustainable.

Finally, the blueprint identified several AI-supported features. One is topic detection, which groups related wisdom bites automatically, reducing the need for manual tagging. Another is the showcasing graph, which visualises an organisation's thematic focus based on their contributions, either across Quwa's predefined themes or their own areas of interest. A third is automated summaries, where the platform can generate a concise overview of an organisation's logged activities over time, to support internal reflection or external reporting.

AI in Quwa: Supporting, Not Replacing Human Insight

Several features in Quwa are powered by artificial intelligence (AI). One example is the automatic detection of topics across wisdom bites. Instead of manually tagging content or assigning themes, Quwa analyses the text and highlights the most common topics. This makes it easier to explore relevant content without needing a moderator. Another feature is the activity summary: when an organisation logs its activities throughout the year, Quwa can generate a concise, readable overview. This supports reflection, reporting, and funding applications, without adding to the administrative workload. Quwa also visualises how an organisation's contributions relate to core values such as inclusion, empowerment, education and sustainability. These insights are generated based on a combination of profile information, wisdom bites and activity records, helping to surface patterns that might otherwise remain unnoticed. In addition to these shared themes, organisations can also define their own areas of interest. This allows them to customise the lens through which their work is interpreted and presented, making the platform more relevant to their specific mission and context. These AI-generated insights make patterns visible that might otherwise remain hidden.

While these features are useful, we approach them with care. AI systems reflect the data they are trained on. As a result, they may overlook

nuance, reinforce dominant narratives, or misrepresent forms of work that are less visible or harder to capture. That's why we treat AI as a tool, not a truth machine. In Quwa, human judgement remains central. Responsible use of AI is not just about what technology can do, but about what we choose to let it do; and where we draw the line. In Quwa, we use AI to amplify insight, reduce the need for human moderation, and lower barriers to participation, while keeping the platform accessible, cost-efficient and sustainable, while ensuring people remain in control.

15.7 Building Quwa

Turning a service blueprint into working software takes more than just code. It requires a structured, collaborative process that allows for learning and change along the way. We work in small, multidisciplinary development teams, combining roles such as developer, analyst, architect, and project lead. Together, we built an initial version of the platform that focused on essential functionality: a minimum viable product (MVP). The goal of an MVP is to deliver immediate value and create space for feedback. But for platforms that aim to support diverse users, including CSOs and academics who may not feel fully confident with digital tools, usability and trust are just as important. That is why we also aimed for a minimum lovable product (MLP): something that is not only functional but also intuitive and inviting to use.

We followed agile principles throughout development, working in short cycles and adjusting based on what we learned. The project was structured around user stories, each describing a specific action from the user's point of view. These stories were grouped and prioritised using the user story map created during the blueprint phase. This approach helped us stay focused, flexible, and closely aligned with user needs.

To ensure technical quality, we relied on development practices that have proven their value in building robust and adaptable software (Jeffries, n.d.). Working in pairs allowed developers to think through decisions together, while automated tests and regular reviews helped catch issues early and keep the code clean and future proof. Frequent check-ins and retrospectives gave the team space to reflect and adjust, not only to improve the product but also how they worked together.

This approach helped us move from plan to platform within three months. The service blueprint remained a guiding reference, while the user story map structured our work and clear decision-making. We launched the first version of Quwa in April 2024 within the project consortium. ReIncluGen partners were invited to explore the platform using features that had been shaped through their input. To support accessibility, we provided a clear and illustrated user manual, making it easier for users with different levels of digital confidence to get started.

15.8 Improving through use

Building a first version of a digital platform is only the beginning. Once users start engaging with the tool, a new phase begins: learning from real use. Feedback from early adopters reveals how the platform fits into daily work, where it succeeds, and where it needs improvement. In agile development, this feedback loop is essential. It helps uncover blind spots, surface new needs, and guide the platform's ongoing evolution.

The ReIncluGen project partners were invited to explore the first version of Quwa and share their experience. They responded positively to the platform's core focus: showcasing organisations, sharing knowledge, building connections across contexts, and making impact visible. Users appreciated its clarity, multilingual access, and privacy controls. The visual identity and the name Quwa also resonated strongly. Users described the platform as intuitive and well aligned with their values and goals. The first AI-supported features, such as automatic topic detection in wisdom bites and activity summaries, were also well received. These functionalities demonstrated how artificial intelligence could support a low-maintenance model, reducing the need for manual moderation while keeping the experience rich, relevant, and personal.

Feedback also led to several new and improved features. One of the most requested features was the ability to add media to wisdom bites. This allows contributors to enrich short reflections with images or documents that offer extra depth, context, or inspiration. Another major addition was the Quwa label, a visual marker that highlights organisations and contributions aligned with inclusive and empowering practices. This label helps others find relevant examples more easily and may guide future decisions about partnership or funding. Filtering capabilities were also expanded. Wisdom bites and organisations became easier to search. In line with our commitment to privacy and General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), we also implemented a long-planned feature allowing organisations to be removed from the platform upon request, ensuring they retain control over their presence. This functionality had been on our backlog for some time but was prioritised as part of the platform's broader rollout, showing how both content-related and non-functional aspects continue to evolve together.

With the first version validated within the ReIncluGen consortium, we began preparing for broader use. The platform was opened to a wider group of CSOs working on inclusion and gender empowerment. As Quwa grows, this next phase will bring new forms of input, new questions, and new adaptations. These early experiences underline a core insight in co-creation: digital tools are never finished. They grow through use, through conversation, and through the small, everyday decisions of the people they are built to support. Our goal remains to keep listening, learning, and delivering improvements that make a real difference in how organisations work, connect, and create impact.

What is Quwa? A Closer Look at the Platform

Quwa is a digital platform developed as part of the ReIncluGen project to support CSOs working on inclusion and gender empowerment. It brings together four core functions: showcasing, knowledge sharing, networking, and impact measurement; all within one accessible and user-friendly environment. Organisations can present themselves through structured profiles, including information such as focus areas, target groups and contact details (see [Figure 15.2](#)). These profiles are designed to help others quickly understand what each organisation does and how to connect.

At the heart of Quwa is a growing library of ‘wisdom bites’; short contributions that allow organisations to share tools, insights, experiences, challenges or good practices (see [Figure 15.3](#)). These can include attachments such as images or documents, offering a richer and more visual way to communicate insights and experience. Users can explore this shared knowledge using filters or through AI-powered topic detection, which identifies trending themes across the contributions. This helps surface ideas and turn the platform into a space for learning as much as sharing.

Quwa is built with multilingual participation in mind. Contributors can add content in languages such as Dutch, German, Italian, Polish or Spanish, with content automatically translated into English. This

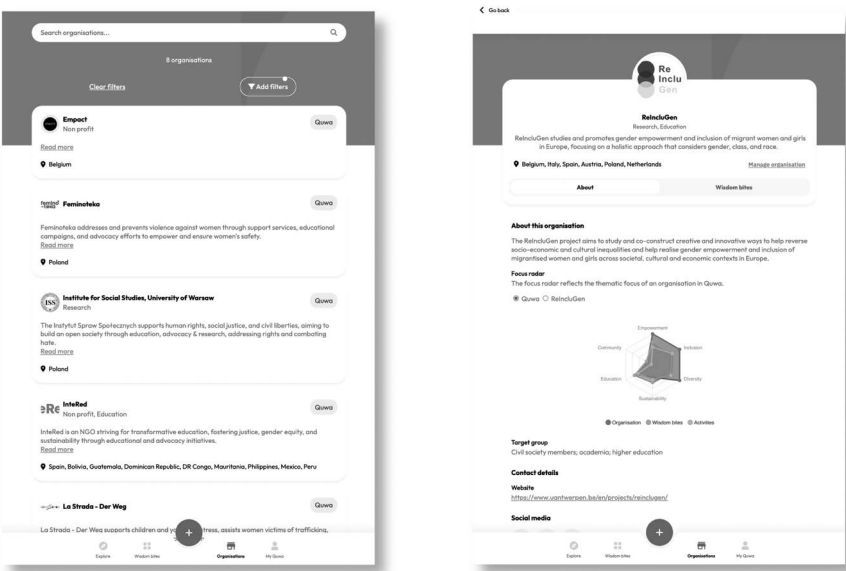


Figure 15.2 Quwa presents an inventory of organisations working on inclusion and gender empowerment

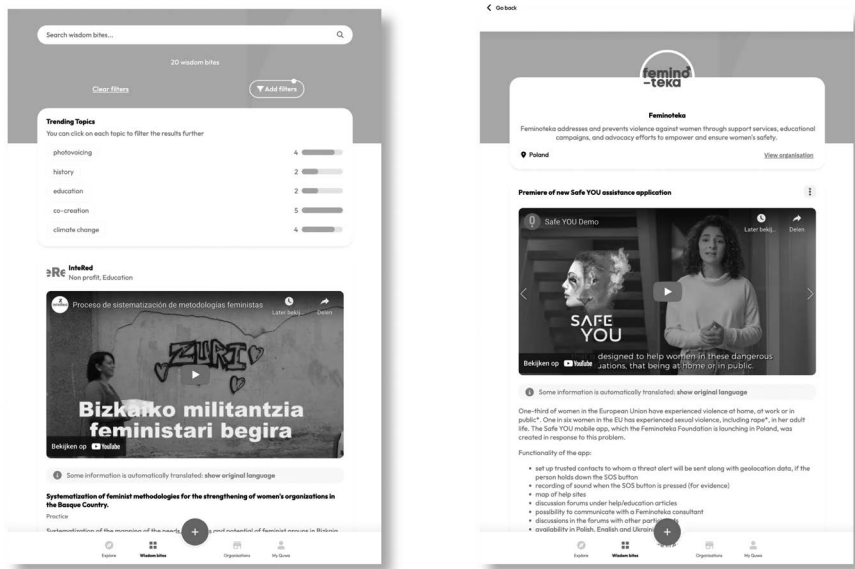


Figure 15.3 Quwa presents a library of wisdom bites to share and inspire

reduces barriers for those who prefer to work in their own language while still enabling international exchange.

Beyond its public features, Quwa offers a private space where organisations can log their own activities, with details like date, location, target groups and number of participants and these remain visible only to the contributing organisation (see Figure 15.4). The platform can then generate summaries based on these records, which are useful for reporting, funding applications or reflection. For each activity, organisations can also invite participants to complete a short feedback survey, enabling them to monitor appreciation at the level of individual activities as well as across their work over time. It also produces automated visual profiles showing how an organisation’s contributions align with Quwa’s core values such as empowerment, education, community or sustainability. Organisations can even define and visualise their own areas of interest, allowing for more tailored insight.

The platform is designed to be lightweight and sustainable. It runs as a progressive web app: accessible through any browser, or installable like a native app without needing an app store. Serverless infrastructure and automated processes help keep operational costs low, while a community-based invitation model ensures quality and alignment with shared values. Anyone can browse content, but only invited users linked to an organisation can contribute.

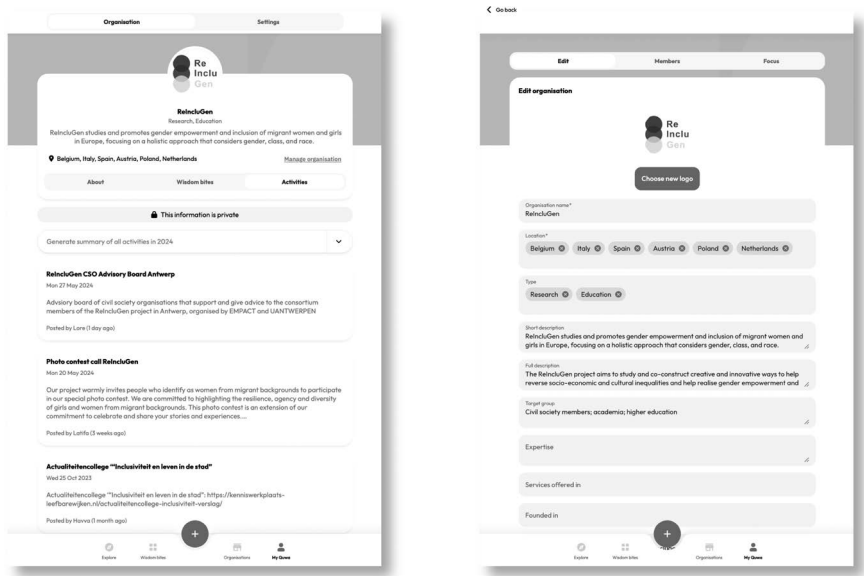


Figure 15.4 Quwa offers a private space to measure impact

Quwa is more than a digital inventory. It is a collaborative tool designed to support visibility, connection and insight for organisations working on gender empowerment and inclusion; built with care, shaped through co-creation, and ready to evolve alongside the needs of its users.

15.9 Reflecting on the co-creating process

Co-creation is not just a method for building software, but a mindset for shaping digital tools in dialogue with the people who will use them. It opens the door to more relevant, accessible, and empowering technology. But it also comes with challenges. Co-creation takes time, clarity, and trust. It requires more than collecting input; it demands a process where different types of knowledge can meaningfully shape the outcome.

One of the most valuable lessons has been the role of visual tools. Wireframes, diagrams, and clickable prototypes helped translate abstract ideas into shared understanding. These tools gave people without a technical background the confidence to participate in complex conversations and decision-making (Adzic, 2009, 2012). In an international, interdisciplinary context like ReIncluGen, this visual language proved essential: it bridged differences, reduced misunderstandings, and made the process more inclusive from the start.

Another key insight is that participation alone is not enough. Co-creation needs commitment. Stakeholders must be willing and able to engage over

time, not just at a single moment. That requires careful facilitation: choosing formats that match people's availability and comfort levels, offering multiple ways to contribute, and supporting continuity throughout the process. Creating a co-creative space is not a one-time act but an ongoing responsibility.

We also came to understand that the value of a platform lies not only in its features, but in how it is introduced and perceived. When digital tools are made freely available as part of a funded project, they risk being undervalued or misunderstood. That's why a clear narrative about the platform's purpose, origins, and ownership is so important. Framing Quwa as something built with and for its users, not simply delivered to them, helped create a sense of belonging and shared investment.

Finally, while uptake was still modest in the early months, the first real-world use of the platform yielded rich feedback and led directly to several improvements, such as adding media to wisdom bites and expanding filters. These improvements show that co-creation does not end with a launch. Instead, it calls for an ongoing relationship between users and builders, where the platform can evolve over time through continued dialogue, trust, and shared responsibility.

These experiences have reinforced our belief that inclusive technology cannot be built in isolation. Co-creation helps uncover what matters, for whom, and why. It challenges development teams to listen better, think deeper, and work together, not only to deliver a product but to support real, lasting change.

15.10 Challenges for CSOs

While co-creation offers a powerful approach to developing relevant digital tools, it is important to acknowledge the challenges many CSOs face when stepping into a digital development process. These challenges are not only technical or financial but often also structural and cultural.

Internally, many CSOs operate with limited resources. Staff and volunteers are often stretched thin, focusing on frontline work, with little time or energy to explore and integrate new platforms. Digital literacy varies widely within CSOs, and some staff may feel overwhelmed or uncertain about engaging with unfamiliar technologies. Even in a co-creation context like ReIncluGen, where organisations were involved from the start, sustaining engagement proved difficult at times. Once the platform was available, carving out time to explore it or embed it in daily practice was not always feasible. This reflects a deeper reality: no matter how relevant a tool is, meaningful use depends on time, trust, and ongoing support.

Externally, the barriers are no less real. CSOs not directly involved in the development of Quwa may not see its value, especially if they perceive it as tailored to a narrow audience or limited in scope. The invitation-based model helps ensure privacy and trust, but it can also limit discoverability. To overcome this, active outreach is essential—not only to explain what the platform

does but to show how it adds value to diverse missions and contexts. Manuals are helpful but not sufficient. Stories, examples, and peer experiences are more powerful in building trust and showing practical relevance.

These challenges are not unique to Quwa. Across the sector, organisations report concerns about data privacy, a lack of in-house technical capacity, and scepticism towards digitalisation. Many fear that technology might replace the relational, human aspects of their work. In some organisations, generational divides deepen these tensions. And unless a tool clearly supports their goals, through increased visibility, operational efficiency, or new connections, it risks becoming one more task on an already full agenda.

That is why digital inclusion must go beyond access. It must be accompanied by cultural change, by guidance that is practical and human, and by technologies that are shaped around real needs. Platforms like Quwa can only succeed if they grow not only from well-written software code, but from communities that are equipped and empowered to use them, shape them, and make them their own.

15.11 Making space for impact

The development of Quwa would not have been possible without funding from the European Commission's Horizon 2020 programme. This support offered more than just financial means: it created the space for project partners to come together across countries, sectors, and disciplines, and take the time needed for a meaningful co-creation process. For many CSOs, the opportunity to shape a digital tool from the ground up is rare. Resources are limited, and technology is not always seen as part of their core mission. This funding gave them room to step back from their daily responsibilities, reflect on their goals, and explore how digital tools could support and strengthen their work. The result was not just a more relevant platform but also a deeper sense of ownership and connection to the tool.

Academic ReIncluGen partners also benefitted. While their research provides essential insights into social issues, the opportunity to turn these into practical tools is often lacking. Institutional structures, restricted budgets, and limited access to technical expertise can stand in the way. This project offered space to bridge that gap: to translate research into real-world application and to collaborate in ways that extend beyond publication or theory.

Our involvement, being the ReIncluGen technology partner, was equally shaped by this support. For companies that aim to contribute to social change but must also remain economically viable, it is not always easy to engage in non-commercial projects. A public subsidy can shift this balance. It allows technology teams to contribute their skills and time to projects with a strong societal value, even if these projects do not generate profit in the traditional sense.

The benefits, however, go further. In the fast-changing IT sector, staying up to date with new technologies is crucial. Socially driven projects like Quwa

provide focused, manageable environments for experimentation with tools such as artificial intelligence or serverless infrastructure. This strengthens internal expertise while delivering tangible societal value. At the same time, projects with a clear social purpose can help attract new talent. Students are often seeking more than technical challenges; they want to contribute to something that matters. Internships or student projects within socially driven contexts offer exactly that: opportunities to learn, grow, and make a meaningful impact. These projects not only strengthen recruitment by attracting candidates who share the company's values but also open the door to longer-term collaboration. Many interns who experience this kind of meaningful engagement choose to stay on, becoming valued colleagues who already feel connected to the company and mission.¹ Meaningful work is also essential for retention. When developers and designers have the chance to contribute to social change, it adds purpose to their work. These projects create space for reflection and connection, fostering a sense of contributing to something meaningful. For development teams between commercial engagements, they also offer a valuable way to use time productively: to build skills, explore new domains, or simply support communities that would otherwise lack access to high-quality digital tools.

Finally, public funding can generate momentum that outlives the project itself. In this case, the collaboration did not end with Quwa. One of the ReIncluGen CSO partners continued working with the technology team on a follow-up initiative aimed at improving internal workflows and reducing administrative burden. That project, too, was guided by the same principles of co-creation, mutual respect, and belief in the value of meaningful digital tools. It showed how the relationships and insights developed during one funded initiative can lead to further collaboration, even beyond the scope of the original subsidy.

This illustrates what thoughtful public support can make possible: not just a digital tool like Quwa, but a broader process of learning, connection, and shared ambition. When used well, funding doesn't just cover costs: it creates the conditions for trust, experimentation, and long-term impact. And at the intersection of social change and technology, that may be the most important outcome of all.

15.12 Looking ahead

The development of Quwa offers a concrete example of what becomes possible when people from different sectors and backgrounds come together to shape digital tools in ways that are thoughtful, collaborative, and rooted in real needs. While the project delivered a working platform, its broader value lies in what it revealed about the process: how co-creation unfolds in practice and what conditions make it meaningful.

Throughout the journey, we learned how time, trust, and facilitation are not luxuries but fundamental. Co-creation does not happen by default. It

must be actively supported, especially when working across sectors with different expectations, vocabularies, and rhythms. Making space to listen, to clarify, and to adjust course is what strengthens the outcome and builds shared ownership.

We also saw that technology alone is never the solution. What matters is how it fits into people's work, how it reflects their values, and how it evolves in response to what is learned. That means remaining open. A platform like Quwa is never truly finished. It will continue to shift, adapt, and grow through use as long as the structures are in place to support that evolution.

Looking ahead, we hope this project can inspire others—not only to build better digital tools but to rethink how those tools are built. The methods we used are not limited to one context. Co-creation can be scaled, adapted, and embedded in many types of digital projects. It calls for a different way of working, one that values lived experience, invests in collaboration, and treats software development as a shared responsibility.

In that sense, Quwa is more than a platform. It is an example of what becomes possible when technology is shaped with care. Not to replace people's work but to support it. Not to scale one idea but to open space for many. And perhaps most importantly, not to deliver a final product but to begin an ongoing conversation: about what we build, why we build it, and who gets to take part. In doing so, it offers a glimpse of what more just and inclusive digital infrastructures might look like, when they are shaped with, not just for, the communities they aim to serve.

15.13 Epilogue

One morning, as part of her weekly routine, Amina opened Quwa. She logged a new activity and shared a short wisdom bite; something they had tried out in a recent workshop that worked surprisingly well. Later that week, she noticed another organisation had posted a similar challenge, with their own take on it. Not identical but clearly building on the same idea.

As she browsed further, one organisation caught her eye. They worked in a different area, but their values felt familiar; she could see it in their profile, in the way they described their work, in the kinds of bites they shared. Amina reached out. A few days later, they had a first conversation about a joint funding proposal.

It made her think back to the start, when everything still felt abstract. Now the platform was not just real; it was becoming part of how they worked, how they connected.

Not everything ran smoothly, and not everyone used it the same way. But it felt like something that belonged to them.

And maybe that was the real shift: not just using a digital tool, but being part of something they had helped build, and that kept growing with them.

15.14 Further reading and theoretical context

This chapter is based on practical experience rather than an academic research design. It reflects the journey of a software team collaborating closely with CSOs in the context of the ReIncluGen project. As such, it prioritises storytelling, lived process, and reflection over formal theory-building. Nevertheless, the co-creation process, the facilitation techniques used, and the technical practices adopted are strongly aligned with existing literature in fields such as Agile development, inclusive design, and digital co-creation.

For readers seeking to explore these concepts more deeply, we offer the following selection of relevant resources. These references include handbooks, practical guides, and conceptual frameworks that have inspired the methods described throughout this chapter. Together, they offer a rich context for understanding the foundations and implications of co-creating meaningful digital solutions.

Note

- 1 At Kunlabora, we cherish our internship projects and invest significantly in the guidance and mentoring of our interns. This approach has a tangible impact: as of September 2025, 9 out of 52 team members first joined Kunlabora after completing their internship project.

Suggested Readings

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16 Conclusion

Empowerment Revisited: Critical Reflections across Research, Policy and Practice

Lore Van Praag, Amal Miri, Havva Akçaoglu, Andrea Fleckinger, and Laia Narciso

16.1 How it started

This book represents an overview of how we approached the concept of ‘empowerment’—and specifically related to gender—and how it is conceptualised, applied and interpreted by different actors in society. Before we delve deeper into critical reflections on the use of this concept, we will start from an anecdote that sparked interest by the first author of this concluding chapter to further examine the concept of ‘empowerment’. A couple of years ago, she was part of a European research project, together with the city of Antwerp, in collaboration with various governmental bodies, such as the social welfare organisation, the municipality and its migrant integration service. While collaborating together on the concept of ‘migrant integration’, there seems to be an emerging trend to also refer to the importance of ‘empowerment’. During informal gatherings and when conducting interviews, it appeared that all of the different governmental bodies had different approaches to ‘empowerment’ of migrant newcomers in this city. This was, for instance, shown in the emergence of follow-up trajectories that aimed to ‘measure’ the integration of newcomer migrants. These trajectories were based on the activities and progress they made in terms of enrolling in Dutch language courses, employment schemes, citizenship courses, participating in voluntary activities, education/training or employment and being able to become independent (or less dependent) from municipality services. This rather linear approach to ‘migrant integration’ was especially oriented at migrants’ own progress and did not measure initiatives of the hosting society to welcome newcomers. Thus, it reflects more the neoliberal turn in policies and social work practice, which primarily focus on fixing the individual and promoting self-optimisation, risking to place the entire responsibility on the individual while allowing institutions to ‘wash their hands of any responsibility’ when difficulties and challenges arise, rather than questioning structural conditions or the broader social order. Moreover, this ‘integration trajectory’ was approached from an idea that newcomer migrants need to become ‘empowered’ in order to participate in the new immigrant society—which was mainly interpreted in economic terms. Additionally, the concerns in this discourse on

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gender empowerment mainly seem to centre around the bodies of immigrant women who seem to be targeted as ‘in need to be empowered’, ignoring all ways they have contributed to society, the communities and neighbourhoods they were part of and the families they supported. This raised some questions about the usefulness of the concept ‘empowerment’ in the context of migrant integration, as its interpretation leaves a lot of space for misinterpretation and miscommunication between governmental and organisational bodies, and has the potential to reproduce stigmatising stereotypes in society that not necessarily hold value.

Formally linking ‘integration’ and ‘empowerment’ of migrants and migrantised groups in society together already indicates how both concepts are interpreted and conceptualised. What is even more problematic in these policy realms is that the way empowerment is embedded in research does not consider the interpretation of the people involved. When preparing for the Horizon Europe research project ReIncluGen and doing some exploratory research, more diversity emerged in the interpretation of the concept ‘empowerment’ and its relevance in everyday discourses and policy debates across Italy, Spain, Poland, Austria and Belgium. While this concept had a long tradition in Spain, in Poland policy initiatives were especially focused on reducing inequalities and centred on specific topics, such as the recent Ukrainian war and its consequences for gender-specific migration to Poland and the relevance of ‘abortion’. The ways in which empowerment emerged across countries varied in policy debates and mainstream media debates, and also had a backlash for ongoing organisations who are often subsidised by governments. In addition, many civil society organisations (CSOs) respond to ongoing debates by compensating for the ‘missing’ parts and services of policies and by including more voices in ongoing policies and policy-making.

Dominant neoliberal discourses on migration in many European societies, shaped by intersecting beliefs on integration and empowerment, suggest that individuals who are new to a society and face various obstacles are expected to overcome these barriers on their own. They are often perceived as lacking empowerment primarily because they are immigrants and/or coming from a specific cultural/religious background. Such a strict focus on the individual may also be interpreted as a strategy of diversion, shifting attention away from the broader contexts, institutional structures and the overarching patriarchal symbolic order that underpins all European societies. In this framing, the locus of responsibility for processes of inclusion and/or empowerment is rendered unmistakably clear: it is displaced onto the singular subject, rather than interrogating the systemic conditions that sustain exclusion and inequality. These ideas seem to be structurally embedded in policies, reducing all responsibilities of this process by governmental institutions and members of the immigrant society. The situation represents a double paradox: on the one hand, singular subjects are rendered fully responsible for their own integration and empowerment, and on the other hand, their agency is curtailed, as these processes are defined according to a singular, prescribed model of

what ‘successful’ integration and empowerment are deemed to entail. In this sense, individual responsibility is simultaneously inflated and hollowed out, producing what O’Reilly (2016) has described in the context of neoliberal motherhood as ‘powerless responsibility’. A similar dynamic becomes visible here, where the burden of social transformation is shifted onto individuals while the systemic conditions that perpetuate exclusion and inequality remain largely unchallenged. Hence, the concept of ‘empowerment’ should not be viewed separately from ‘agency’, which, following Mahmood (2005), is better understood as a relational and situated practice shaped by both possibilities and constraints, resonating with Bourdieu’s (1990) view of the dynamic interplay between freedom and limitation.

The previously given example of the municipality of Antwerp should be seen as only one example that focuses on the integration of migrant newcomers. However, similar discourses remain in place when it comes to descendants of migrants, already living for more than two generations in Europe, who remain to be seen as ‘migrants’ and treated as such. Whether or not they have migrated themselves, these groups in many European countries are still considered as ‘migrants’ and their actions, behaviours and preferences are still evaluated in terms of this integration discourse, namely ‘in need to adapt’ and ‘in need for empowerment’. This is why, in almost all chapters, we have chosen the term ‘migrantised’ to emphasise the socially and politically constructed nature of migrant identity. In doing so, this book aimed to highlight how individuals are positioned through institutional discourses and practices in ways that often marginalise and disempower them, rather than simply describing the act of migration itself.

While these dominant integration discourses apply for men and women, demanding to adapt to the ‘new’ immigrant society, the exact interpretation of integration discourses is often very gender-specific. As also shown in our media discourse analyses (see Chapter 7), for many men, integration is often connected to criminality, (gender-based) violence and unemployment. Many migrantised women are often regarded as victims of their traditional cultures, patriarchal political regimes or religions, resulting in their need ‘to be empowered’. This further reflects upon how societies in the Global North approach ‘gender empowerment’ and ‘agency’, which is often mainly interpreted in a liberal feminist way. In these discourses, oppressed groups are expected to ‘take matters into their own hands’. With this dominant interpretation of agency, ‘empowerment’ only gets a limited translation with regard to the reality in which migrantised women live (Mahmood, 2005; Midden & Ponzanesi, 2019). As a result, these women and their life experiences are in danger of being wrongly seen as weak or simply submissive.

The key idea of the ReIncluGen project was to address these discourses and interpretations by looking at how European CSOs approached ‘empowerment’ within their everyday practices, and how members—focusing on migrantised women—interpreted these practices and policies and how they interpreted ‘empowerment’ themselves in their past, present and future,

across different settings. To do so, we started by using a ‘situated intersectional’ approach (Anthias, 2012; Yuval-Davis, 2015), in which time and place are differentiated, and the intersection of different personal characteristics, such as gender, migrant status/history, socio-economic status, age, ability and sexual orientation, was considered. This resulted firstly in reflecting on the traditions in research and everyday language use (across research settings but also across different languages and regions of origins). In this concluding chapter, we first reflect on why one needs to study empowerment and how it is perceived in current policies and civil society practices. Subsequently, we reflect on emerging ideas resulting from the different book chapters and the broader ReIncluGen project, to discuss how empowerment could be used in policy making and shape practices in CSOs. As you noted throughout the book, we incorporated contributions written by both authors working in CSOs, a technical developer and research institutions. This collaboration demonstrates the participatory and collaborative nature of this research and also aims to highlight the different perspectives, writing styles and reflections made by these different actors, shaped by their work experience and/or research findings.

16.2 How it is going: tracking how empowerment is situated in research, civil society and organisational practices

We present here the findings of the separate parts of the book, starting with the chapters focusing on the concept ‘empowerment’ in theory and methods, followed by chapters on how empowerment occurs in research and civil society and concluding with how empowerment is put into practices.

16.2.1 The concept ‘empowerment’ in theory and methods

As shown in part I, the concept of empowerment is intrinsically linked to power relations that are situated in the different markups of each society under study. We sketched the interlinkage between power, participation and positionality in our introduction section, which further highlighted the need to apply a situated intersectional approach to gender empowerment (Chapter 2). In the second chapter, Fleckinger explored how feminist social work practices in a women’s shelter sought to redistribute power and foster participation, highlighting both their emancipatory potential and structural limits. By introducing participatory tools such as resident-led documentation and responsibility for communal tasks, women gained more agency and opportunities for co-decision-making. Nonetheless, these practices do not reduce existing power hierarchies and relations. Within institutional settings, empowerment emerges as a relational and processual negotiation that depends on professionals’ willingness to share power. Thus, power relations remain to play a role in the case of migrantised women, as there seem to be boundaries to the level of empowerment people are allowed to become. As the chapter

illustrates, empowerment in feminist social work is not a fixed outcome but a continuous negotiation of power, where small participatory practices can challenge hierarchies, provoke resistance and ultimately foster lasting cultural change in institutional settings.

Many CSOs and policy domains also focus on specific social domains, and these are thus specialised organisations. The intersection between ‘empowerment’ and inclusion therefore also differs clearly across social domains. Hence, this requires the need for using a situated intersectional lens. More specifically, as shown in [Chapter 4](#), by Narciso and Reyes, policy discourses often frame the empowerment of migrantised women and girls in utilitarian terms, particularly in the economic domain, where it is conceived as a means to foster integration and development rather than as an end in itself. This framing reinforces distorted representations of women and girls as a homogeneous and passive collective.

However, the chapter goes further by examining how CSOs in five EU countries understand and enact empowerment, and by foregrounding the perspectives of the women and girls themselves. Their narratives reveal empowerment as an ongoing, multidimensional and relational process, rooted in autonomy, rights, resilience and collective support. In this way, the chapter contributes a counter-narrative that challenges hegemonic discourses.

These insights additionally call to rethink current research practices and methodologies. This is certainly the case as research practices may also reflect biases in society and in terms of conceptualisations of empowerment. For a large part of the data collection of the ReIncluGen project, photo-eliciting methods were used to gauge definitions and ask participants to reflect upon what ‘gender empowerment’ means for them. However, more arts-based research practices or co-creative research methods could be applied, especially when conducting research with migrants (see also [Van Praag, 2021](#)). In [Chapter 5](#), Rezanezhad and Miri proposed art-based research methods as a critical response to these neoliberal biases, considering researcher positionalities and interpretations of empowerment. As shown by these authors, artistic research and practice can be grounded in participants’ existing knowledge and skills, rather than extracting information and rearticulating it through researcher-authorised representations that reinforce hierarchical power relations. Additionally, arts-based methods can be used, such as showing documentary films, not merely as a means of representation but as a tool for reconsidering perspectives and generating diverse avenues for new insights and investigations.

16.2.2 *Empowerment in research and civil society*

In the second part of the book, we focused on the study of situated attitudes, discourses and implementation of gender empowerment in Europe. We saw that power hierarchies and relations further shape (implicit) views on diversity, empowerment and inclusion endorsed in research, policy documents,

media reporting and organisational practices. In [Chapter 6](#), Cvajner and Odasso provided a comparative study of gender attitudes in Europe. This chapter further examines whether the presence of migrants and their descendants—often still categorised as ‘migrants’ and portrayed in public discourse as holding traditional views on gender roles—affects these dynamics. The authors provided a first overview across Europe, before delving into the Italian case. Important to note is that these graphs and information about gender attitudes, based on European comparable datasets, often have high value for policy makers and provide a tool to further develop policies. The authors find that age at arrival of migrants, in combination with the Italian societal norms, further shapes gender attitudes. This demonstrates the interaction between region of origin and region of arrival in shaping gender attitudes and highlights that migrant integration processes should not be understood as linear trajectories resting solely on the responsibility of migrants; rather, the importance of the situated intersectional lens, with its focus on translocality, becomes evident. Additionally, when reflecting on gender norms and attitudes in society, it should be noted that there is no clear ‘goal’ of what migrantised women and societies should be heading to. In many cases, reducing gender inequalities is seen as a goal, searching for equal participation rates in all life spheres in society. By failing to acknowledge the lack of clear definition and objective, it is also easy to use and abuse this kind of analysis to further exclude specific groups or reinforce stereotypes in society that combine gender and migration.

Views and discourses on empowerment and inclusion, reflect and stress the barriers people are confronted with in societies, and opportunities given. When looking at these different gender attitudes across settings ([Chapter 6](#)), we need to acknowledge the context in which these attitudes are shaped and in which the exclusionary practices occur. It is also in these contexts that CSOs navigate and function. This brings us to many of the other chapters, which focus not only on the opportunities available to people but also on the mechanisms of exclusion in society and how these shape experiences of exclusion and empowerment.

We noted that there are more forces in society that continuously contribute to a specific portrayal of migrantised women and girls in society, this time in media discourses. Again, this portrayal depends on the specific social domain and topic discussed. In [Chapter 7](#), Ou-Salah, Fransen and Van Praag studied the ways in which migrantised women were portrayed in media discourses, in the Netherlands and Belgium. Again, these debates followed larger societal policy debates in each of the respective countries. The absence of references to migrantised women, their active voices in the media and the framing by experts varied per media outlet and per topic. What was striking is that, between more popular and more expert media sources, gender stereotypes were not always clearly reproduced in the actual articles, but were present in agenda-setting, essays by public figures and in the ways individual experiences and accounts found their way into the media.

Within CSOs, it is important to reflect on ongoing power dynamics and hierarchies in patriarchal societies, as well as on their institutional landscape and relationship with the government. Here the composition of CSOs and the contexts in which they operate are also highly relevant. As shown by [Chapter 8](#), by Klaver, Van Praag and Miri, power relations that are present in society further make up the composition of CSOs and shape diversity objectives and rationales in organisations. This is reflected in practices and organisational activities. Reflexivity in—often small scale—CSOs is often hard to realise without taking the time to see yourself and your organisation as outsider and/or to evaluate one's positions and activities in safe spaces. Hence, one's personal affinity and experiences with specific groups in society, as well as exclusion and precarities, can be relevant to further developing inclusionary practices in one's organisation.

Going beyond power dynamics within CSOs, we need to situate these dynamics in the broader institutionalisation of civil society and the broader bureaucratic requirements and neoliberal logics. To understand how exclusion works across societies, it was interesting to examine the civil society landscape as units of analysis to further understand how they respond to structural ways of exclusion in society and focus on specific target groups. Nonetheless, this also demanded attention to the broader contexts in which CSOs work and the level of institutionalisation. In [Chapter 9](#), Szczepańska and Siemieńska-Żochowska discussed how in Poland CSOs interact with migrant and migrantised individuals' identities within the specific context of an ongoing war and the process of non-governmental organisation (NGO) institutionalisation. Their findings indicate that the institutionalisation of civil society results in greater stability and professionalisation of civil society actors, but at the same time immediately impacts their functioning and ways of responding to urgent needs in society and the boundaries set by funding agents. This, in turn, can impact power relations and endorse specific views on migrantised and migrant women and girls in society that do not always recognise their empowerment, their added value in society or the specific needs and barriers they are confronted with.

16.3 Empowerment put into practice

In the third part of the book, the contributions further discuss and examine practices that foster empowerment and inclusion in Europe. The need for nuance and understanding of multifactorial vulnerabilities within organisations is discussed in depth by Balistieri and Fabbro in [Chapter 10](#). The combination of facing vulnerabilities and barriers at various levels and in different life spheres also complicates providing support that considers all these vulnerabilities. Instead of portraying people in terms of these vulnerabilities that often result in additional stress and feelings of shame, this chapter shows the need for even more specialised and targeted social services to tackle these vulnerabilities, which are accompanied by complex socio-economic conditions,

cultural and linguistic barriers, and experiences of discrimination. In doing so, there is a constant need to counter gendered stereotypes—and even more so in the case of migrantised women. Using the case of one organisation, of which the authors are part of, the authors demonstrate that women often-times do not only need support from organisations as theirs but also need to build a social supportive network that helps to reduce the dependence on CSOs, resulting in a more continuous line of support.

In [Chapter 11](#), Alfagame and colleagues use education as an interesting setting to understand how using an intersectional lens by school actors can further help to situate students and teachers in broader societal structures, shaping experiences of privilege and exclusion. One crucial practice they put to the fore is to co-create education to dismantle existing power hierarchies present in many settings and institutions. Through this practice, the organisation realised that they had to approach gender in a very diverse way, moving away from a binary understanding, and instead recognising that applying a gender dichotomy does not suffice in capturing all disadvantages, inequalities and ways of exclusion in education, and, by extension, in society. Especially dismantling structural racism and the use of existing categories (e.g., people of migrant descent) is hard, exactly as people are socialised within this system. This demands to understand and develop practices that deal with exclusion and how it is reinforced in everyday discourses and practices.

As shown in part I, the use of arts-based methods could support the empowerment of both participants and researchers—but also serve as a tool to exactly discuss, dismantle and interpret these broader societal structures that result in exclusion and remain insufficiently identified. In [Chapter 12](#), by Açaoglu, Miri and El Fikri, the authors examine how theatre is used as a tool to deconstruct existing assumptions and further reflect on one's own position in society and ways forward. For instance, Empact vzw initiated a theatre project to introduce migrantised women to storytelling as a means of expressing and processing migration-related experiences and trauma. By developing theatre skills in a supportive, confidential space, participants were empowered to confront their pasts, explore complex emotions and embrace new forms of self-expression. In [Chapter 13](#), art therapy is presented through a range of examples as both a method of social intervention and a tool for empowerment, well-being and integration. It is also shown as a means of raising awareness of migrant women's rights in order to generate social impact. At the same time, art therapy contributes to community-building while responding to individual needs for safety, belonging and personal growth. By fostering creativity and self-expression in supportive environments, these initiatives not only strengthen individual resilience but also promote collective agency, making art therapy a multidimensional practice situated at the intersection of care, empowerment and social transformation. Subsequently, Deneva and Häckel, in [Chapter 14](#), studied how empowerment is supported and interpreted in different CSOs in Austria, part of the same policy framework that too frequently reduces empowerment to employability and language

acquisition. Their analyses showed that CSOs go beyond these policy frameworks and strive to foster more holistic, participant-centred approaches grounded in feminist and intersectional values. Nonetheless, this does not occur within a social vacuum. The authors found that staff members still have to operate within a persistent double bind, in which they have to ‘empower’ participants but at the same time have to conform to neoliberal funding priorities. Interestingly, when taking on the perspective of migrantised women who are part of these CSOs, the understanding of empowerment consists of a continuous process of everyday acts of autonomy and independence. This chapter demonstrates the contradictions that prevail in social work and are certainly also applicable when focusing on the intersection between empowerment and migrant integration. Finally, in [Chapter 15](#), by Aerts, the development of EFIKO is discussed as a start-up to develop the QUWA digital tool in a later stage of the project. Again, a co-creative approach is proposed as a common practice of Kunlabora to develop digital tools. This ensures that a tool is developed according to the needs of the organisations that will use the developed digital tools.

16.4 How to proceed: recommendations for future policies and practices

This book demonstrates how empowerment and inclusion often intersect, and its intersection often contains very specific interpretations, depending on the life sphere, country context and positionality. Using the concept of ‘empowerment’ often evokes an applause when used in policy circles or in delivering policy goals and electoral campaigns, emphasising neoliberal ideals and objectives and assuming a distinction between those who are empowered and those who are not (see [Miri, Van Praag, & Klaver, 2025](#)). Also starting from the experiences of the migrantised and migrant women and girls who participated in this research, one noted that the concept ‘empowerment’ contains so many diverse interpretations that are often reflecting existing structural opportunities in society and the barriers people are confronted with. As we are confronted with more neoliberal understandings of the concept ‘empowerment’ that shapes policy, civil society practices and research, the accounts of this group of women to whom this concept is often applied even calls for more question marks to its usage in official research and policy documents. Using narratives and beliefs on what it means ‘to be’ or ‘to feel empowered’ in society reveals a lot of information about existing structures, ambitions, imaginaries and barriers, which makes it not the best concept to operationalise. Moreover, the distinct interpretations across genders, ethnicities, migrant and migrantised groups and racialised groups across societies, often intertwined with specific discourses on integration, may even further blur and weaken the conceptual usage of this term.

The findings of this book bring us to the following policy suggestions, research and civil society practices. First, policy makers, scholars and civil

society actors need to align conceptualisations and understandings of ‘empowerment’ before implementing policies and practices. The lack of having a common idea and conceptualisation of ‘empowerment’ and ‘integration’ in policy and CSOs working on these topics is problematic. This could give way to unclarity for the target group, include biases and assumptions that do not necessarily hold value and work counterproductive for the further development of additional practices to support empowerment in organisations. Or, stated differently, given the multiple interpretations this concept can carry, it is essential to clarify its purpose and highlight its situated, dynamic nature before it can effectively function as a tool or guiding principle for shaping practices and activities.

Second, policy makers and CSOs could apply a situated intersectional lens (Anthias, 2012; Yuval-Davis, 2015) into practice and policies, and give attention to existing power relations and hierarchies. While there are multiple ways to approach this, it is important to recognise the intersecting dimensions of individuals’ identities and social positions. Moreover, it is important to consider how these intersecting dimensions shape individuals’ experiences of inequality, opportunities and vulnerabilities, and how this relates to specific historical contexts or ‘transtemporality’ (e.g., colonial legacies, generational trauma, past policies), geographical spheres or ‘translocality’ (e.g., home, diaspora, migration routes, institutions) and different societal levels of analysis or ‘transcality’ (e.g., personal or intimate to relational and institutional level). A situated intersectional approach demands attentiveness not only to the contextual realities and needs of those involved but also to their agency, resistance and capacity for self-definition, in this case, of migrantised women. This is crucial to avoid reproducing paternalistic or victimising narratives that frame individuals solely through their vulnerabilities, rather than acknowledging them as active agents navigating, challenging and negotiating structural constraints. The ways these intersectional approaches can be implemented in practice can vary. For instance, some organisations prefer a relationship-based approach to better capture the entanglement of needs, barriers and support required to recover from more severe hardships and be part of society.

A third recommendation is related to incorporating arts-based practices and research methods in policy, research and CSO practices. Arts-based practices and approaches have in common that they stimulate agency, active reflection, participation and engagement about the topic. However, not all arts-based practices may be suited for all issues. For instance, theatre play may be relevant to work on stigmas, very sensitive topics or traumas, for persons with similar lived experiences or ‘intersectional wounds’. Using theatre play requires intense collaboration with a smaller group of people in safe(r) spaces and careful guidance. Art-based practices and approaches could also foster intercultural communication but may also not suit everyone. Not everyone likes to engage in theatre for a longer period of time or share intimate moments via photos. Photo-eliciting techniques may be relevant when

researchers have time for several moments to introduce the topic in a first interview, and later follow-up on the process of taking photos and discuss their meaning. The use of documentaries or short films or small improvisation theatre plays may be more appropriate for workshops or when participants do not wish to or cannot engage for a longer period of time. The preconditions in which arts-based approaches excel is also ‘situated’ and as such may differ across groups, topics, target groups and settings.

A fourth recommendation focuses on recognising the importance of a stress- and trauma-sensitive approach in both professional practice and research with vulnerable groups. Individuals who have experienced marginalisation, violence or other forms of adversity may respond to research and intervention processes in ways shaped by past trauma. Practitioners and researchers therefore carry a responsibility to act with awareness, sensitivity and care in order to avoid retraumatisation, foster trust and create safer spaces for participation. This requires not only methodological adaptations but also critical engagement with power dynamics, communication styles and ethical responsibilities that underpin encounters with vulnerable participants (Van Praag et al., 2025).

Importantly, such an approach should not be conceived as a one-directional duty towards research participants or clients. Stress and trauma sensitivity also functions as a protective measure for practitioners and researchers themselves. Engaging closely with experiences of violence, exclusion or suffering can generate secondary trauma, emotional overload and professional burnout if appropriate safeguards are absent. Embedding reflective practices, supervision and collective responsibility into professional and academic contexts can help mitigate these risks. In this sense, trauma-sensitive practice must be understood as a reciprocal process, ensuring the well-being of all parties involved while strengthening the ethical and sustainable foundations of research and social intervention.

Finally, using co-creative methods can help to design tools that support exchange and sharing of practices within civil society, or support in responding to existing needs of organisations or individuals. However, the conditions in which these co-creative sessions and methods should occur are very relevant, especially given the unequal power hierarchies and relations in society and organisations. The experiences of Kunlabora, as shown in [Chapter 13](#), may be useful tools to reflect on how to co-develop tools. However, every situation and collaboration needs to constantly monitor whether all participants are treated equally and feel treated as such, and how conditions to create safe(r) spaces need to be organised.

To conclude this book, we foremost like to thank all participants, co-creators, collaborators, photographers, policy makers, professionals and CSOs who engaged in this research project and helped to realise this book. We also wish to extend our sincere thanks to our academic advisory boards and CSO board members for their invaluable guidance, feedback and support throughout the project. We are very grateful to have learnt and experienced many

forms of empowerment and agency of people involved. We wish to stress the diversity in views on empowerment, and how this changes across people's lives, the contexts and geographic regions they found themselves in and with whom they were surrounded and supported.

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