

When Power is Key: a Reflexive, Decolonial and Feminist Perspective to Study Women's Migration in Belgium

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Résumé :

Dans le contexte des régimes migratoires violents et racistes, les chercheur·euses du Sud Global ont été à l'avant-garde des efforts visant à remettre en question les héritages coloniaux dans les études sur les migrations. Ils l'ont fait en critiquant la violence épistémique inhérente à ce domaine et en proposant des cadres alternatifs. Les approches réflexives ont facilité le développement de perspectives critiques, décoloniales et féministes, soulignant la nécessité de remettre en question les paradigmes dominants. À la lumière des dommages croissants causés par les politiques migratoires européennes, il est impératif que les chercheur·euses s'emparent des épistémologies féministes et décoloniales réflexives pour s'attaquer aux structures de pouvoir coloniales et patriarcales dans ce domaine de recherche. Cet article théorique fusionne deux travaux en cours, établissant une base épistémologique qui rejoint l'appel et s'engage dans des réflexions critiques, féministes et décoloniales sur la mobilité dans le contexte belge.

Mots-clés : Migration, Belgique, Épistémologie, Réflexivité, Pouvoir, Féminisme, Décolonialité

Abstract :

In the context of violent and racist migration regimes, scholars from the Global South have been at the vanguard of efforts to challenge colonial legacies in migration studies. They have done so by critiquing the epistemic violence inherent in the field and proposing alternative frameworks. Reflexive approaches have facilitated the development of critical, decolonial, and feminist perspectives, underscoring the necessity to challenge dominant paradigms. In light of the increasing harm caused by European migratory policies, it is imperative for researchers to employ reflexive feminist and decolonial epistemologies to address colonial and patriarchal power structures within this field of research. This theoretical paper merges two works in

progress, establishing an epistemological foundation which joins the call and engages in critical, feminist, and decolonial reflections on mobility within the Belgian context.

Keywords : Migration, Belgium, Epistemology, Reflexivity, Power, Feminism, Decoloniality

Introduction

In recent years and especially since the so-called ‘long summer of migration’ of 2015, in the context of Europe’s paradigm of ‘migration control’ and ‘border’s securitization’¹, most political discourses regarding the issue have entrenched the ‘migrant threat’ and embodied it through the image of a horde of racialized men and women arriving massively at the continent’s gate. Far right and liberal right parties, which have gained unprecedented power among European countries, specifically build their political program and narrative on this cultural, economic and security threat, often driven by fear, prejudice, and a desire to maintain ethnic dominance. Moreover, the anti-immigrant attitude is not only based on economic and unemployment issues, but it is mainly built up on racial identity, ethnic superiority and gender discrimination.

In such a context, some scholars have positioned themselves and participated in the building of critical perspectives on migration, but also on the way this age-old phenomenon was studied. This reflexive and critical perspective in research on people’s movements has first emerged in Latin America², examining, among others, the Chicana and Chicano studies from a multi- and interdisciplinary framework. Since their inception, these new perspectives have been working on the acknowledgement of colonial heritage present in the field, but also the entanglement of colonial and patriarchal principles in mobility management, policies and research. Being situated at the crossroads of various research fields such as migration or mobility, gender and feminist studies from a postcolonial perspective, our respective research projects aim at joining this critical perspective and reflexive turn in the specific political context of Belgium, by encouraging the mainstreaming of these epistemological and ethical perspectives to the study of mobility³.

Based on our respective experiences on mobility, volunteering and/or social work and today as researchers conducting empirical research with people/women on the move, we have been and still are confronted to various epistemological and ethical reflections and (internal) debates. Indeed, reflecting on people’s mobility in our respective political and historical context has forcibly brought us to the complex issue of power in all its diverse forms and through the multiplicity of questions it entails. In our respective research projects, we are therefore looking for an epistemological framework that entails these critical, decolonial and feminist perspectives by reflecting on our positionalities, but also by addressing the main issues of power through four concepts: violence, vulnerability, agency and resistance.

This paper combines two ongoing projects by the authors. From our two different perspectives, if we regret that mobility studies in Europe still too often lack reflexivity and critical self-analysis, we wish to follow the path of scholars who have started to address these epistemic turns in our Western/occidental contexts. Drawing from distinct fields of research and various key literature on postcolonial and decolonial feminist research on mobility, this theoretical article proposes a multidimensional look at the question of power while doing research among and with people on the move in Belgium.

In what follows, we first situate our reflection in relation to the growing field of feminist, postcolonial and decolonial approaches to migration studies. In this section, we highlight the political and social context of gendered and racist discrimination in Belgium and the common ground in which migration studies and policies have developed. Then, we see how the feminist legacies and intersectional perspectives have progressively shaped migration studies. Following an overview of our respective research fieldworks and positionalities, we engage with the concept of power and what scholars of the Critical and Reflexive turn have extensively reflected on. In this section we are raising several crucial points for consideration, such as violence, vulnerability, agency and resistance. Finally, we call for a critical and multidimensional reflection drawing from feminist and decolonial perspectives for a paradigm shift in research in the field of migration and mobility within the Belgian context.

Migration Studies in Belgium Through Feminist and Decolonial Epistemologies

Discrimination Based on Race, Gender and their Intersection in Contemporary Belgian Society

Although labor migration had already begun during the interwar period, it was the bilateral agreements between Belgium and certain European countries such as Italy, Greece and Spain that marked the post-World War II period for migration to Belgium. A few decades later, Belgium ratified new bilateral agreements with non-European countries to fill the gap in the internal labor market. At that time, women were primarily moving to Belgium through the family reunification process, and until the 1960s, they were barred from accessing the labor market⁴. Instead, they contributed to the economy through domestic work, gradually gaining access to '3D (Dirty, Dangerous and Demeaning) jobs'⁵.

In 1964, Belgium signed two bilateral labor agreements with Morocco and Turkey, with whom Belgium has no colonial past. Both agreements played a significant role in shaping the migration patterns to Belgium during the post-war period. These agreements were designed to address labor shortages in Belgium by allowing workers from these countries to migrate temporarily to fill positions in the Belgian economy, especially in sectors like mining, construction, and manufacturing. Even if the labor migration was focusing on masculine workforce, it is interesting to note that wives and women more generally were already treated differently depending on whether they came from European or non-European countries, othered and racialized by the hosting societies⁶.

After 1974, in response to growing economic concerns and social tensions related to the 1973 oil crisis, a border-closing law was passed, aiming at limiting the arrival of people, particularly from former colonies. In this context, family reunification remained the only option to reach Belgium. The 1970s and 1980s saw a resurgence in racist and xenophobic rhetoric. During this period, far-right political parties also gained significant support, and the issue of immigration became a prominent topic of discourse. This was particularly evident in the case of immigrant women, who faced challenges in accessing visibility and representation, particularly in the context of negative portrayals in the media⁷.

In the mid-1980s, political and media discourses targeted the Muslim working class, predominantly from Morocco and Turkey. These ethnic groups, due to their religion, were and continue to

be perceived as economically and culturally incompatible with Western ideals of modernity such as democracy, pluralism, secularism, and gender equality. Muslim women are frequently 'pathologized'⁸ and have been consistently depicted as victims of both their religion and patriarchal traditions. Simultaneously, they are also portrayed as the primary carriers of their groups' culture and identity⁹.

Since the 1990s, the liberalization of the European labor market has created new profiles of labor mobility and been accompanied by a 'Europeanisation' of migration to Belgium¹⁰, with some being relegated to informal, precarious and arduous work and others being able to benefit from more advantageous socio-economic statuses, contributing to the ethnic stratification of migrant populations¹¹.

In 2011, to further curb migration flows, Belgium enacted restrictive legislation, limiting access to family reunification procedures¹². This measure targeted the already 'vulnerabilized' and racialized minority with low socio-economic level¹³ as it introduces a certain income and stable resources as a family reunification visa requirement.

In this context, gender-based discrimination is also evident. Since the initial moving population was primarily composed of men, the restrictive procedure mainly affected women and wives who, after being left behind, sought to join their settled male counterparts. Belgian policymakers attempted to justify the introduction of new legal requirements for 'third country nationals' as an attempt to 'racialize and otherize ethnic minority citizens'¹⁴. The institutionalization of race-based discrimination aimed to restrict migration flows from specific regions and target particular genders.

Third country nationals face strict requirements, including sufficient resources and suitable housing to be able to join partners, parents and children in Belgium. This aims to fragment the 'migration issue', treating it as an individualized problem rather than recognizing the collective experiences of the so-called 'foreign' community. This approach overlooks and minimizes the systemic and structural dimensions of migration, leading to policies that inadequately address the broader context and holistic needs of people on the move.

Recently, following the electoral success of anti-immigrant parties in EU countries, the xenophobic *Vlaams Belang* (VB) and the New Flemish Alliance (N-VA) have made substantial gains in Belgium's federal parliament, securing a combined 30.5 percent of the vote with 16.7 percent for N-VA and 13.8 percent for VB during the last election of 2024. Meanwhile, the far-left political party PVDA garnered 17.3 percent of the vote in the Brussels Parliament. In the Flemish parliament, most votes went to the N-VA (23.9%) and VB (22.7%)¹⁵. In contrast, in large cities with significant migrant populations, such as Brussels and Liège, a large percentage of the vote went to left and far-left parties. This trend is particularly significant given the current geopolitical and social atmosphere leading up to the 2024 elections, especially with the ongoing occupation and genocide happening in Palestine on one hand and the introduction of new restrictions on migration and refugee laws, on the other hand. In comparison, Flemish cities with fewer immigrant populations saw an average of 24 percent of the vote going to these right-wing parties. Despite the VB's growth in big cities, immigrants have traditionally been concentrated in the Flemish region and major cities of Belgium like Antwerp, Leuven, Brussels and Liège. This concentration is largely due to the more accessible economic and social 'integration' opportunities in these areas.

The analysis of foreigner diaspora presence in Belgium together with the language and administrative separation of the country, lead to a conclusion that while Brussels shows a continuum dynamic, attracting people from ex-colonized state, Flanders tries to fill the gap of its labor market through migration policies, characterized essentially with discrimination and oppression against specific group of immigrants based on their gender, origin, race and religion¹⁶.

Another paradox lies in Belgium's stratified and unequal view of white European nationals and other racialized people. This dichotomy is very tangible when we look at the way in which these two 'categories' are treated politically, economically and in the media. Indeed, the establishment of the most important international and European institutions in Brussels, has led to a specific profile of migrants, mostly coming from the European Union or the UK and occupying high positions¹⁷ in the European institutions and international organizations called 'expatriates'. However, simultaneously, Europe has continuously intensified its non-European migration policies through the securitization of its borders and the criminalization of individuals attempting to enter the continent¹⁸ considered as 'illegal, profiteering and potentially dangerous migrants', creating a suspicious and fearful attitude towards them. The disparity in the portrayal and treatment of these two distinct populations reflects the enduring legacy of colonialism in the management of asylum¹⁹. More specifically, some scholars draw a direct line between how black people were treated by the colonists in Belgian Congo during colonization, and how immigrants and 'colored' minorities are since then discriminated against and oppressed in Belgium, putting lights on the continuity of the colonial legacy in the Belgian migration issue²⁰.

The migration trajectories of Congolese, Rwandan, and Burundian individuals significantly diverged from those associated with labor agreements. Predominantly composed of intellectuals and students, this group arrived in Belgium in small numbers following the independence of their respective countries, relying on individual initiatives rather than state-sponsored programs²¹. While initially male-dominated, the demographic soon expanded to include women, who entered through student visas or family reunification schemes²². The colonial legacy of societal division, which framed women as less educated, apolitical, and powerless or as hypersexualized 'exotic objects' of fascination, continued to shape their reception in Belgium. These enduring stereotypes influenced institutional perceptions, even as research underscores the pivotal role of these women in advocating for their rights and advancing gendered and feminist claims within their communities²³.

Nowadays, one of the most prominent cases of racism against migrant women in Belgium is perhaps still the one directed towards Muslim women who wear the *Hijab*. Due to their headscarves and religious affiliation, Muslim women are often perceived as economically and culturally backward. This narrative is perpetuated by right-wing parties together with the civilizational feminists since the 19th century around Europe. In Belgium, like in Europe, the criticism toward *Hijabi* women and Muslim men revolves around the notion that Muslims resist Western core values of democracy and gender equality.

This specific example highlights the intersection of migration background, religion and gender, among other factors, contributing to increased discrimination against racialized individuals. This discrimination can manifest in various areas, including social practices, employment, and housing. To this extent, women with a 'migration background' might face specific challenges related to employment, legal status, and social integration. As it will be further developed, gender intersects with other social categories such as race, class, and ethnicity, affecting women's experiences.

A Feminist Approach to Gender and Migration

Feminist epistemologies and methodologies have had substantial influence both on research topics and themes, and on research practices themselves²⁴. Studying migration through feminist lens has led scholars to work on the visibility and politicization of the gendered aspect of mobility, but also on the feminist practices of research in social sciences. In light of these considerations, we have started our respective research processes by focusing on the literature produced regarding gender and migration and especially how migration reconfigures gender inequality systems from a gendered feminist perspective. This initial immersion in feminist literature on migration is therefore the starting point toward a more critical perspective on migration studies. As you will be able to read further on, such perspective has helped us to step back and reflect on our practices as researchers by reflecting on power relations while working on people's mobility, position ourselves as researchers and discuss the reflexive aspect of our research.

Since the 1970s, an emerging avenue of literature has started to refer to the inclusion of women in migratory literature which can be related to the proliferation of feminist movements, specifically in the United States²⁵. Hondagneu-Sotelo²⁶ predicted three stages of women's migration, first she developed the stage of addressing the exclusion of women from migratory research. She considers addressing the omission of women from this field as a significant and pivotal step. This approach exclusively studies women's mobility, which has delayed the understanding of gender as a social construct.

In an earlier article, Hondagneu-Sotelo and Cranford²⁷ pointed out that this concern for exclusively writing about women in migration research and theory has stifled theorization about how constructions of femininity and masculinity organize migration and migratory outcomes.

The second stage of this literature, according to Hondagneu-Sotelo, consists of transitioning from research on 'Women and Migration' to 'Gender and Migration':

Prompted in part by the disruption of the universal category 'women'; by heightened awareness of the intersectionality of race, class, and gender relations and by the recognition of the fluidity of gender relations, this research focused on the gendering of migration patterns and on the way, migration reconfigures systems of gender inequality.²⁸

However, it has been shown that the decision for women to move is often related to a family decision. Family and community are important stakeholders in their decision-making. This has contributed to the proliferation of gendered migration. Furthermore, the demand for female labor was a factor in the feminization of these flows. Thus, studying gendered migration from this perspective is an extension of a gendered family or community. This era of 'feminization of migration' coincides with the rise of feminist movements and its propagation. Indeed, literature on migration concurrently examines the impact of the sexual division of labor in society on women's mobility, and then the impact of women's mobility on social relations. This dialectic between the productive and the reproductive sphere has reinforced women's participation in 'migratory flows' as independent actors.

The third stage concerns the current era of migration research. This era focuses on gender as a constitutive element of migration. Gender becomes a determining variable and not just one variable among others. This feminization approach to mobility requires the development of a specific theory

of women's place in the productive sphere. The proliferation of feminist movements in Latin/America and then in European countries has drawn researchers' attention to women's rights in various areas, including the right to vote, access to work, and other rights. Each wave of feminism has contributed to the feminist question in a specific way. During the first wave of feminism in the 1850s, minority rights were seen as an integral part of women's rights, including women of color and migrant women. The intersection between gender and social or legal status²⁹ has brought migrant women's rights to the forefront, not as rights granted to these women in motion but as women first, belonging to a specific social group thereafter.

The struggle for women's rights associated with feminist movements has gradually extended to the rights of racial and ethnic minorities, including foreign women or 'women of color'. The 1960s to the 1980s marked significant development in feminist movements in the United States³⁰ and later in Europe, including Belgium. Simultaneously, the development of feminist studies and research has encouraged research on women's mobility. The intersection between migration studies and studies stemming from feminist movements led to the emergence of feminist migration studies.

By placing women in research and theory on mobility, this has unfortunately led to an undue attachment to the theory of gender roles, a paradigm based on essentialist assumption³¹. The theory of gender roles, which argues that women and men learn and perform different gender role scripts, views gender as a relatively static attribute rather than a fluid practice. Studies on mobility conducted in this vein have generally emphasized how domestic roles anchor women and how connections between the public sphere facilitate the mobility of men rather than women. This feminist perspective on international mobility ignores the primordial role of gender in shaping the movements. Gender-based studies explore intra-domestic power dynamics that shape decision-making processes around mobility, as well as the reproductive constructions of gender following the experiences of women on the move. More recently, queer-sensitive scholars have critiqued feminist migration research for 'largely excluding issues related to sexuality, treating homosexuality as a special case, and thus remaining trapped in a heteronormative matrix'³². This critique suggests that a fourth theoretical wave, focused on sexuality, may be emerging, building upon the three previous waves identified by Hondagneu-Sotelo among reflexive and decolonial migration studies.

The Critical and Reflexive Turn in Migration Studies

Gender-critical and postcolonial perspectives seem to have had an unprecedented impact on current mobility studies³³. Indeed, the field has recently operated what has been called a critical and reflexive turn³⁴, starting to question, among others, gendered and racialized representations³⁵.

This reflexive turn 'criticizes the sociologically based migration research for taking its analytical categories unquestioningly from non-academic empiricism, without reflecting on the analytical substance of the conceptual vocabulary these categories involve'.³⁶

By questioning representations and categories, this new perspective allows for the analysis of mobility through not only its aspect of spatial movement but also as a category of social practice and power relations³⁷. This critical and reflexive turn therefore focuses on how these social realities of mobility are produced and how categories such as race, gender and class play central roles in the way policies are implemented, and research is done. Hence, the influence of intersectional thought³⁸ on mobility studies has encouraged scholars to depart from the hegemonic and problem-

oriented lens to focus on a more critical perspective regarding gender, race or ethnicity and class categories and specificities³⁹.

One of the facets of this reflexive turn, known as the 'critical migration and border regime approaches', insists on the social aspect of borders beyond the geographical one, which create political rationalities and subjectivities. Such perspective considers that 'European migration regulation, which is organized on several different socio-spatial levels, should be conceptualized as a nexus of institutions, power and knowledge'⁴⁰. In this context, knowledge produced about migration has a significant impact on how we operate classifications from which entail various asylum and reception policies.

The reflexive approach also questions the use of terms like 'migrant', 'forced migration' or 'migration journey' and has identified 'performative strategies of institutions, organizations and face-to-face interactions' that transform (non-)mobile individuals into 'migrants'⁴¹ reinforcing the 'us' and 'them' opposition⁴². Scholars are progressively questioning these notions and the categories related, and their tendency to reproduce state-centered vision⁴³, problematizing mobility⁴⁴ by making it an exception and normalizing sedentarism⁴⁵ or creating hierarchies among mobilities, legitimating them unequally⁴⁶. Some of those scholars are even calling for a 'demigrantization'⁴⁷ process of migration studies, enabling a genuine decentering global North knowledge, in order to 'recenter the South'⁴⁸. Finally, as Anna Amelina suggests, the reflexive turn as it is may be followed by another approach in line with the process of denaturalization of migration and the methodological 'de-nationalism'⁴⁹. The 'doing migration'⁵⁰ approach focuses then on the nexus between power and knowledge in 'the social production of migration and integration'⁵¹, creating classification systems and hierarchies among people on the move. This approach is therefore interconnected with intersectional thought in the way it identifies the categories such as class, race and gender as key points of this hierarchization.

Expanding Intersectionality: Toward a Multidimensional Analysis of Power and Mobility in Migration Studies

The concept of intersectionality⁵², and more specifically the one developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, which highlights the intersecting and overlapping nature of various forms of oppression, has been instrumental in broadening the analysis of social inequalities. In the study of mobility, intersectionality has been developed as a multi-level approach of research. As well as helping to grasp the complex reality of women on the move at a micro level, this (political, theoretical, epistemological, methodological) concept has helped to understand the multiplicity of issues regarding research at different levels. As a political project, it has invited researchers to keep broadening the scope of research fields which could implement an intersectional approach 'in order to give voice to so far silent and excluded categories of subjects struggling for social justice'⁵³.

From a theoretical perspective, the intersectional approach is considered as 'a theoretical approach with an activist orientation or social movement dimension'⁵⁴ which entails acknowledging the central issue of power. On the epistemological level, intersectionality has been described as 'a "knowledge project" whose raison d'être is to pay attention to power relations and social inequalities'⁵⁵. Somehow committing to shed light on new practices and viewpoints that are too often left aside or even marginalized, in order to participate in the emergence of new research

possibilities and to pursue the hope to bring change among academia. And finally, methodologically speaking, it ‘advances an analysis of the lived experiences of marginalized peoples that respects their expertise and agency as knowledge producers and attends to principles of social justice and changes central to feminist and intersectional politics’⁵⁶.

However, this concept has also been criticized for its emphasis on individual identity categories, which sometimes limit the ability to address more systemic and structural issues comprehensively. Moving beyond Crenshaw’s intersectionality requires a multidimensional approach that not only considers intersecting identities but also integrates a deeper analysis of the structural and institutional contexts that shape the experiences of the people on the move⁵⁷.

This multidimensional perspective calls for understanding how different axes of identity and power dynamics interact within broader socio-economic, political, and cultural frameworks. For instance, while an intersectional analysis might highlight the unique challenges faced by a stereotypically speaking, ‘migrant woman of color’, a multidimensional approach would also consider how immigration laws, labor market dynamics, and global economic policies collectively influence her situation. It seeks to address the root causes of marginalization and exploitation, by situating individual experiences within larger systemic patterns. For Bilge, the intersectional approach suffers criticism for its weakness in theory⁵⁸; she therefore emphasizes the division between the axis of constructing this approach, which Wallaby calls ‘segregationary reductionism’⁵⁹. The connectedness of the factors surrounding social inequalities while studying people on the move is a major lack of the intersectional approach.

Therefore, advocating for a multidimensional approach means moving beyond the focus on intersecting identities to encompass a comprehensive examination of social relations and power structures. This approach aims to develop more effective and inclusive ‘migration policies’ that address the complexity of mobility issues at both individual and systemic levels, ultimately fostering a more equitable and just response to the needs of communities on the move.

Where Do We Speak From: A Reflexive Perspective On (Our) Positionalities And Fieldwork

A reflexive approach to research necessitates an initial reflection on the researcher’s fieldwork and positionality, which in turn informs the subsequent research process. Indeed, an initial reflection on one’s identity and the rationale behind conducting research in such a field is a fundamental prerequisite. As we have chosen to pursue a path of reflexive and critical research, these considerations must be elucidated for us as well.

Marwa Neji is a PhD researcher specializing in mobility and gender studies. As a woman who moved to Belgium in pursuit of higher education, she analyzes feminist mobility studies from a postcolonial perspective. While primarily connected to Western research groups and a Belgian university, she collaborates with colleagues from both the Global North and the Global South to develop a decolonial approach to studying migration, gender and knowledge production. Marwa positions her research within this decolonial framework, particularly in the fields of gender and mobility. She has been working on the mobility of Tunisian women since the popular Tunisian uprising in 2011, situating her research within the social and political context that has evolved over the past decade and shaped new mobility trajectories and emerging gender-power dynamic.

Her study focuses on the movement of women from the Global South, interpreting their mobility trajectory and journeys, socio-spatial im/mobility, and their quests for freedom and independence as acts of resistance against capitalism and its imposed colonial border systems. Recognizing the importance of reflexive practices, Marwa seeks to uncover power dynamics and provide a deeper understanding of people on the move's experiences. From her positionality as a woman on the move, she carefully considers the ethical implications of studying her own community and emphasizes the importance of authentically representing the voice of the margin.

Naïké Garny is a PhD researcher in mobility through resistance and feminist perspectives. She is Afro-descendant and was born in Belgium. As a former social worker and coordinator of a grassroots based reception project in Brussels, created to host and support women on the move, she has gradually become aware of the racist and misogynist colonial legacy in the field of reception by being involved in a solidarity movement, first as a volunteer and then as a social worker. As a PhD researcher, she decided to position her research inside the critical and reflexive perspective in the field of mobility, especially regarding gendered specificities related to women's experiences. Naïké's research focuses on the study of alternative practices of reception developed by, with and for women. More specifically, she reflects on the extent to which it is possible to implement decolonial and feminist perspectives and approaches into the humanitarian sector in Belgium and the benefits and tensions such approaches create. Having worked closely and daily in a specific project in Brussels created in 2018 by and for women (the accommodation, information and accompaniment facility for women from the Citizen's Platform Bel Refugees called the Sisters' House) for 3 years, she has been studying the reality of the field by being inside of it. This specific position has led to various issues and reflections regarding her positionality and the power relation related. Indeed, it has challenged the possibility to create distance with the 'institutional thought'⁶⁰ and develop a critical position in a context where she has been directly involved, emotionally but also economically speaking. Furthermore, her role has brought her into direct confrontation with the critical issue of power and trust, by occupying a more privileged position and embodying humanitarian action through a political solidarity movement that is subject to multiple tensions⁶¹.

Initially belonging to different positionalities and from different backgrounds, our aim is to follow the path of scholars who have engaged with and are still pursuing impactful research through epistemic interventions⁶² and a 'disobedient gaze'⁶³, within a multi-dimensional perspective⁶⁴. We know that attempts to address these inequities are always imperfect, partial and ongoing, but we are convinced they are the prerequisite for research that sincerely claims first to respect, but more importantly, to go beyond the 'do no harm' commitment.

The Issue of Power in Migration Research: on the Importance of Reflexivity

The work of researchers in migration studies is embedded into a dual imperative of being relevant and rigorous to both academia and policy⁶⁵. As we know, the ambition for researchers is to have a significant impact on their fields of research and therefore their work being recognized as a major input in literature. By becoming a reference for policymakers and advocacy, it gets to another level of societal interest⁶⁶. However, when it comes to migration, we can't deny the application of an epistemic coloniality of mobility studies in policies and governance based on Euro-centric legacies⁶⁷. Moreover, mobility is deeply entangled with colonial power relations, not only in the historical emergence of sovereign nation states and transnational mobilities but also in the ongoing

power relations underpinned by racism and exploitation⁶⁸. This raises the question of whether these research practices reinforce 'harmful migration policies'⁶⁹.

Then, the power relationship between researchers and participants deeply influences the production of knowledge and how we might address the challenges created by exclusionary research practices⁷⁰. Acknowledging this power imbalance as the initial step to start a research project in the field of migration seems therefore a prerequisite. In this perspective, feminist epistemologies and methodologies have proven to be useful tools to apprehend migration research and the power dynamics that are embedded.

Feminists methodologists reject methods that contribute to the oppression of research participants, contest the notion of the objective, distant researcher and center the lived experiences of participants, situated in their particular social-political context⁷¹.

Indeed, feminist scholars have encouraged reflections on the relationship between the researcher and the field by recognizing one's position as a researcher with the concept of reflexivity and the importance to situate oneself in our own research field. The Standpoint theory⁷² states that knowledge stems from social positions and taking everyday life and personal experience as fundamental sources of theorizing. It gives us an interesting new perspective to engage with migration narratives. Here again, it seems that black feminist contributions and particularly intersectionality have helped going further on, allowing 'for recognition of the complex interplay of structures as they constrain and inform lived experience'⁷³ and also redefining the concept of power. bell hooks, for example, has discussed the complexity of speaking 'across' differences, but also the power involved in the creation of knowledge, feeding a form of contestation/distrust towards the idea of 'theorization'⁷⁴.

As PhD researchers in political sciences and social sciences working both on migration in Belgium, we analyze and interpret narratives and experiences – in this particular case, narratives of displacement and mobility, racism, classism, gender-based violence – filled with intimacy and personal matters, social interactions and movements. As our own subjective positions, including our worldviews, inform the ways we represent our research subjects and the conclusions we draw, our positionality becomes a form of power⁷⁵. Yet, the multidimensional approach encourages us to bring new narratives and positionalities to the fore by decentering our interests and gaze and opening the floor to perspectives that are unheard and unseen⁷⁶ (or silenced and hidden since there is not really such thing as 'voiceless'⁷⁷). Indeed, since power is inherent in all relationships, it becomes interesting to examine how the research process itself embodies not only the possibility of oppression but also resistance, struggle and change. In the footsteps of feminist scholars, we consider reflexivity as an ethical notion, 'an attempt to ensure that researchers are accountable to the people with whom they co-create knowledge both during the research process and in the final research report'⁷⁸. However, if we aim to consider it as rooted in intersectionality, it should acknowledge and enable attention to the situated, shifting nature of power⁷⁹.

We think research with people forcibly displaced or on the move, facing a specific form of violence itself creating multi-vulnerabilities, requires structural ethical reflections and commitments, in order to engage respectfully and rigorously with all participants. This commitment can take many forms and should be adapted to the reality of each field. Both of us are connected from a different

perspective to migration and reception policies in Belgium. Through her fieldwork, Naïké has been able to perceive the various forms of institutional and epistemic racist and sexist violence coming from state institutions, NGO's, volunteers and researchers. It is therefore with a deep commitment to not reproducing this type of violence that she has developed an 'Ethical framework for research' tailored to the specific needs of her field. It works as a form of charter which develops in detail the epistemic, ethical and methodological commitments of her research drawing from feminist, postcolonial and resistance studies. As a woman on the move herself, Marwa has navigated various migration policies and procedures. Her research primarily focuses on women from the Global South who moved to former colonizer countries, with an emphasis on exposing the impacts of imperialism and capitalism on both women and men. By focusing on Tunisian women, her main contribution lies in examining how colonial legacies interact with class, gender, and social factors in shaping women's mobility from a multidimensional perspective. While initially studying Tunisian women's mobility to traditional destinations in Europe, her fieldwork has expanded to emerging destinations, particularly the Gulf states and Canada, highlighting the ambivalent nature of capital mobility among these populations.

In the process of addressing the question of power as a central issue in migration research, we encountered several concepts and reflections that were in tension with one another. Indeed, in an iterative vision of power and in a constant reflection on our positionalities, we felt it necessary to address four key concepts in order to understand certain mechanisms present in our research fields. These also include a form of power that is in tension.

Four Concepts in Tension: On Violence, Vulnerability, Agency and Resistance

In the current political context, violence is unfortunately inherent to the process of migration and how it is managed for a certain part of the population on the move. Although these increased risks and the challenging nature of the journeys may act as a deterrent, they do not prevent people from migrating⁸⁰. Furthermore, they render individuals more vulnerable, as they face heightened levels of violence. By being at the crossroads of multiple forms of violence (sexual and gender-based violence, unwanted pregnancies, the use of the body as a bargaining chip for border crossings, female genital mutilation, forced marriages or unequal relationships, menstrual precariousness, administrative and legal violence, racism and discrimination in employment and/or education, the digital divide...) racialized and homeless women on the move are among the most marginalized and invisible members of our societies⁸¹. The experience of Sisters' House in Brussels has led to a similar conclusion: women are specifically vulnerable to repressive measures and have fled more gender-based violence, arranged marriages, genital mutilation, honor crimes and all forms of patriarchal domination⁸².

Therefore, working or conducting research with women in a context of precarity and therefore experiencing a certain form of vulnerability related to their situation calls for an intersectional understanding of their realities as well as specific ethical perspective which considers the multiple aspects of their identities and the discriminations and violence related⁸³. But more specifically, it incentivizes us to address the question of vulnerability in its political stance. Vulnerability is a major and highly discussed and criticized notion of migration policies and management⁸⁴ as it is in the field of social work⁸⁵ and in academia as a field of research in itself⁸⁶. In order to mitigate a portrayal of migrant women as victims who lack agency, researchers have addressed the sensitive

balance between vulnerability and violence in migration⁸⁷ through a feminist intersectional lens. Vulnerability has been reflected upon to be understood as a fluctuant situation that can be balanced with agency whether it is related to the research process or more broadly.

As we have seen above, feminist researchers have brought new perspectives by giving more visibility to women in migration trajectories but have also worked on a re-politicization of the 'gender and migration' approach⁸⁸. First, by analyzing the systemic and structural gender-based violence women are facing through migration, but also by showing their ability to defend and organize themselves, band together, and use their image to their advantage, they participated in a more nuanced and complex image of their status. The work and struggle of Latinx, indigenous, African, and Black feminists, who have advocated for the centrality of marginalized voices⁸⁹ and the legacy of postcolonial and subaltern theorists⁹⁰, has enabled feminist researchers to illuminate the specificities of racialized migrant women. More specifically, the works of black feminist scholars on intersectionality, have brought a new perspective of understanding the reality of 'multi-vulnerabilized' women.

Recent reflections on autonomy of migration and resistance have highlighted various strategies employed by people on the move, emphasizing a shift in perspective towards empowerment and agency⁹¹. Scholars advocate for approaches such as ethnographies of struggles⁹² and feminist analyses of resistance against violence⁹³, which underscores ethical commitments to affected individuals. By framing 'counter-conducts' as transformative practices that interrogate power relations, these studies encourage a critical examination of the depoliticization of migrant vulnerability. Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay⁹⁴ challenge the binary opposition between vulnerability and resistance, positing that vulnerability is a relational characteristic that emerges in specific contexts. They reject the dichotomous view that associates vulnerability with femininity and passivity, while linking agency to masculinity and activity, thus offering a critical feminist perspective on power dynamics. By taking a critical look at vulnerability, they encourage us to consider social and relational beings capable of autonomy and agency, while recognizing the importance of relationships of care and interdependence. They consider vulnerability through modes of action and self-determination for individuals that take into account the inequalities and power differentials of the political context, the relational autonomy⁹⁵ and capacity for resistance, agency and political action⁹⁶ that people demonstrate.

If the 'do no harm' commitment is only the starting point of the research ethics to follow⁹⁷, considering resistance as method⁹⁸ can perhaps help us to go beyond a relatively limited vision of power associated with migratory subjects. In light of this consideration, Stierl posits the necessity of integrating oneself into the struggle and research as a shared political commitment with migrant resistance. This posture diverges from the assumption of commonalities, which consequently disregards the differences and privileges of the researcher. However, it adopts the premise that one cannot be 'outside' the debate and that practical and theoretical opposition to the principle of repressive borders is imperative⁹⁹.

Aware of the biases and pitfalls associated with resistance studies approaches, such as a certain romanticization¹⁰⁰ of practices or a 'heroization'¹⁰¹ of subjects, it remains necessary to address the complexity of these power relations and how ambivalent the notion of resistance can be, especially in the context of ethnographic research¹⁰². Indeed, through her work, feminist and decolonial

scholar Saba Mahmood has demonstrated how agency does not necessarily equate to resistance for racialized women¹⁰³. Nevertheless, as Fiona Wright argues, we consider that:

When resistance is seen as a subjective as well as social encounter with power, then, our view of politics and its transformations become an ever richer field of investigation, whether one is skeptical of resistance studies or argues for more attention to the ambiguities and complexities within¹⁰⁴.

We therefore value the process of decolonizing the resistance approaches by first observing and considering epistemic violence, then nurturing the 'politics of listening'¹⁰⁵ by prioritizing counter-hegemonic and subaltern discourses and stories 'instead of focusing primarily on our own academic interests and perspectives'¹⁰⁶. Finally, building bridges between academia and the field, create authentic and 'transcommunal'¹⁰⁷ relationships across differences to be able to construct common worlds¹⁰⁸.

Conclusion: Following The Plea to A Feminist and Decolonial Perspective Within Mobility Studies

In conclusion, it is evident that despite the cessation of most of the direct military occupation, the residual effects of colonialism remain. These residual connections hinder economic growth and industrial advancement of former colonies, necessitating a decolonial approach to uncover and challenge the enduring power structures. Our work highlights the critical need for a decolonial approach into academic research, particularly in contexts such as Belgium, where postcolonial studies remain largely confined to academic circles rather than being embraced as a broader social issue.

By adopting a decolonial and feminist lens, our objective is to undertake a critical examination of the impact of dominant power structures on marginalized groups, including indigenous peoples and racialized people on the move. This approach not only critiques prevailing paradigms but also calls for a reorientation of research practices to align with the lived experiences and knowledge of those at the margins – individuals who have historically been silenced. Our work can be seen as contributing to the feminist response to conventional research practices, emphasizing the complex interplay of race, gender, and class, and advocating for research that is ethical, reflexive, and committed to social justice.

Furthermore, the advent of postcolonial dynamics within the academic realm is viewed as a constructive phenomenon. However, it is imperative that scholars acknowledge their own colonial legacies and engage in a more discerning manner with the power structures that influence their work. For us, reflexivity is an essential tool for navigating the ethical complexities of researching sensitive subjects such as mobility, racism and/or gender-based violence. It ensures that our work is inclusive, intercultural and responsive to the needs of the communities we study.

Finally, we advocate for a stronger commitment to decolonial and feminist methodologies in the field of mobility research. By cultivating a critical perspective and embracing reflexivity, we believe that we can contribute to a more just and equitable understanding and study of mobility, one that is grounded in the lived experiences of those who have historically been marginalized and oppressed.

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