Exploring motivations, empowerment and agency of migrant women

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ABSTRACT: This study employs narrative inquiry to explore the evolving motivations of women migrants as they embark on their migration journeys, discover and assert their agency, and challenge entrenched stereotypes associated with migrant women. Drawing on 54 biographical interviews with women from diverse backgrounds and COST member countries, the research examines how a complex interplay of personal aspirations, structural constraints, and sociocultural factors shapes individual migration trajectories. Thematic analysis reveals a range of motivations—including economic opportunity, education, family reunification, and escape from political or gender-based oppression—alongside instances of agency and resilience in the face of systemic challenges. The study underscores the transformative potential of migration for women and offers an intersectional perspective highlighting how overlapping identities influence access to rights, resources, and belonging. This research contributes to a more nuanced and humanized understanding of female migration experiences by centring on women's voices. It offers insights with potential implications for gender-sensitive migration policies and integration strategies.

KEYWORDS: women migrants, narrative inquiry, motivations, agency, stereotypes

1. INTRODUCTION

In the ever-changing landscape of global migration, a critical and expansive aspect has emerged: the extensive phenomenon of female migration (Anastasiadou et al., 2023; Ullah et al., 2023). Historically overshadowed by a predominantly male-centric perspective, the global movement of people is now recognized as being significantly shaped by women's migration experiences. This evolution in understanding reflects not just a demographic shift but also deeper socio-economic and political transformations. Women migrate for a myriad of reasons, including economic necessity, the pursuit of educational opportunities, family reunification, and the need to escape societal or political unrest (Killian, 2012; Main, 2015). Their journeys, marked by distinct challenges and experiences, highlight a crucial dimension of modern migration dynamics. Thus, understanding the driving forces and motivations behind women's migration is increasingly crucial. According to the World Migrant Stock 2020 report by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA, 2020), women comprise a significant proportion, nearly half (48.1%), of all international migrants, amounting to approximately 135 million individuals. Historically, women have always been part of migration flows. Still, there is a growing trend of women migrating independently for reasons such as employment, education, and as heads of households, a phenomenon highlighted by Boyd (2021). Several studies have proposed a gendered approach, suggesting women's migration was driven by a desire for a new way of life and the expectation of better social circumstances (Kim, 2010; Pande, 2022).

This study analyses a series of interviews collected as part of a WG4 initiative focused on creating a video capsule map documenting the life narratives of migrant women within European Cooperation in Science and Technology (COST) Action countries. By examining women's motivations during the migration process and their experiences of agency and empowerment, this project sheds light on the complexities of women's migration. It underscores the impact of women migrants on host societies and their personal empowerment, revealing how they contribute to transforming social and economic landscapes. This study proposes an intersectional perspective emphasising how overlapping identities—such as ethnicity, socioeconomic status, education level, and religion—shape migrant women's experiences (Yuval-Davis, 2011; Anthias, 2006). These intersections influence motivations, access to opportunities, and the forms of agency women exercise throughout the migration journey.

2. STATE OF THE ART

The motivations and drivers behind women's migration are multifaceted and interconnected (Collins & Carling, 2020). A range of studies have explored the motivations of women migrants, revealing a complex interplay of factors (Anastasiadou et al., 2023). Economic opportunities are a primary factor, with many women migrating for employ-

ment, better wages, and financial independence to escape poverty and improve living standards for themselves and their families (Libanova, 2019; Gabaccia, 2016). The number of women independently migrating for work has risen significantly, positioning them as the primary migrants and main income earners in their families. This marks a shift from their traditional role as "family dependants" who travel with or join their husbands abroad (Pande, 2022) and who lose financially from migration, even if the family as a whole benefits (Boman, 2011). A current report from the European Parliamentary Research Service (2023) stated that a migrant woman's status—i.e., whether she is legally or irregularly resident—is likely to shape her migration experience. Those who migrate for work are expected to 'fill the gaps' in the labour market. Often, this means working in low-paid and unregulated sectors of the economy, where they are likely to be over-qualified. Employment and legal status are interrelated: both impact the migrant woman's access to public services. Yet many migrant women, especially those with young children, face barriers to accessing the labour market. Säävälä (2010) highlighted the role of self-representation, with Kosovo Albanian women emphasizing their role as mothers and Russian women portraying themselves as passive migrants.

Under the influence of shifting political, social, and economic conditions, traditional notions of femininity and masculinity are increasingly challenged. Education and professional development play a significant role as women seek access to higher education and training opportunities unavailable in their home countries (Aydemir et al., 2021; Zid, Casmana & Hijrawadi, 2020). The quality of education, scholarship opportunities, and relevant study programs are key motivating factors for international education (Donkor et al., 2020). Higher gender inequality in the home country can also influence more highly educated women to migrate (Huh, 2016). These findings suggest that education can be a driving force for women to seek better opportunities abroad. Women's high educational achievements, active participation in the local labour market, and involvement in international labour migration are driving the emergence of diverse new expressions of femininity (Winter, 2022).

Family dynamics and family networks, such as reunification with family members who have already migrated or marriage migration, are also significant drivers (Antman, 2018; Ryan, 2009). Marriage is not only a driver for migration but also an indicator of post-migration integration. Family networks are significant in this process, as they facilitate migration and help women develop relationships in their new environment (Ryan, 2009). Social networks and community ties in destination countries also influence women's migration decisions, as does the lure of personal aspirations and adventure, with women seeking personal growth, new experiences, and cultural exploration. The rise of social media has further transformed migrant networks, making it easier for women to maintain ties with family and friends, access insider knowledge, and address weak ties relevant to migration (Dekker, 2014).

Gender-specific factors are particularly critical, with many women migrating to escape

gender-based violence, discrimination, or restrictive societal norms in pursuit of greater gender equality and autonomy. Research has shown that gender violence and political instability are closely related to women's migration experiences. Women migrating to the Mediterranean region are particularly vulnerable to mental health issues due to the prevalence of sexual and gender-based violence (La Cascia et al., 2020), and women in countries in Central America have been forced to flee their homes to escape drug trafficking-related violence (Obinna, 2021). This violence is further exacerbated by structural and symbolic violence, particularly in conflict and post-conflict settings (Hourani et al., 2021).

The notions of empowerment and belonging are closely related to the migration experience. Empowerment in the context of migrant women refers to the process through which these women gain the ability to make choices, control resources, and influence decisions that shape their lives despite facing various socio-economic, cultural, and political challenges (Gaye & Jha, 2011). Anthias (2006) defined belonging not only as a form of identification and membership but also considers the emotional ways by which immigrants bond with their new society.

Another significant notion is agency, denoting individuals' capacity to independently make decisions, take actions, and influence their own destinies (Donald et al., 2020; Karasev, 2022; Donato, 2024), thereby challenging prevailing social norms and systemic contexts. In the realm of migrant women, agency manifests as the capability to respond to entrenched norms and systems while suggesting alternative pathways (Donato, 2023).

3. METHODS

To understand women's migration experiences in the European Union, the present paper takes a qualitative approach by collecting and analysing the women's migration trajectories. Using a biographical narrative interview approach (Schütze, 1983), the researcher can analyse the complex dimensions of migrants' aspirations and realities. This method also helps ensure theoretical sensitivity during the data collection stage, avoiding the imposition of theoretical ideas by formulating interview questions. Moreover, biographical narrative interviews allow for a participant-centred approach that foregrounds women's voices and lived experiences. This method captures the fluidity and complexity of motivations and personal transformations over time, offering insights that structured questionnaires or short interviews might overlook.

The data were collected as a part of the WEMov COST network action "Narratives of Migration" (available at: https://www.womenonthemove.eu/documentaries/). For this project, 54 women from all the COST member countries were interviewed using a semi-structured interview asking about their migration experiences, motivations, and how migration has changed their lives. The data collected from the interviews was analysed using a thematic approach to identify, analyse, and interpret patterns of meaning

('themes') within qualitative data (Clarke & Braun, 2017, p. 297). We explored the experiences of migrant women across a variety of profiles in the countries analyzed, including academics, care workers, women who migrated for family-related or political reasons, as well as those involved in work- or war-related migration. The women interviewed ranged in age from 20 to 60, and all self-identified as women.

The interviews were conducted between 2022 and 2024, in English or another language mutually understood by both interviewer and interviewee, ensuring sufficient language proficiency on both sides. All interviewers were researchers and members of the WEMov network. Interviews were recorded with informed consent and subsequently translated into English by the respective interviewers. These contributions form part of WEMov's qualitative dataset on women's migration experiences in Europe. Only essential details are provided to ensure confidentiality regarding the participants' socio-demographic profiles. As follows a table of the interviewees:

No.	Migrant, fictional name	Country where the interviewee lives	Language of the interview	Main migration reasons (as declared by the interviewee)
1	C.	Spain	Spanish	Professional migrant
2	K.	UK	English	Professional migrant
3	A.	Iceland	English	professional migrant
4	S.	Portugal	Portuguese	Professional migrant
5	T.	France	Portuguese	low-skilled
6	M.	Spain	Slovak	professional migrant elite
7	T.	Germany	English	professional migrant
8	O.	Israel	English	academic
9	M.	Italy	English	refugee High-school level
10	M.	Croatia	English	student
11	K.	Germany	English	professional migrant
12	K.	Poland	Polish	student
13	M.	Poland	Polish	student
14	D.	France	Slovak	High-school-level professional migrant
15	C.	Italy	English	academic student
16	V.	Israel	Spanish	low-skilled
17	M.	Italy	English	professional migrant refugee
18	M.	France	French	low-skilled illiterate
19	N.	Bulgaria	Bulgarian	asylum seeker
20	A.	UK	English	professional migrant
21	H.	UK	English	professional migrant student
22	E.	Greece	English	professional migrant student
23	A.	Switzerland	German	Professional migrant
24	S.	Netherlands	English	Professional migrant
25	L.	Norway	English	Professional migrant

26	I.	Sweden	English	Professional migrant
27	M.	Ireland	English	low-skilled student
28	L.	Denmark	English	Professional migrant
29	M.	UK	English	refugee academic
30	S.	Greece	English	Professional migrant
31	L.	Greece	English	Professional migrant
32	L.	Slovakia	Czech	professional migrant
33	S.	Sweden	Myanmar	academic
34	I.	Malta	English	low-skilled student
35	M.	Turkey	English	student
36	H.	Denmark	English	academic, professional migrant
37	M.	Latvia	English	professional migrant
38	C.	Estonia	English	Professional migrant
39	M.	North Macedonia	English	professional migrant academic
40	A.	Czech Republic	English	Professional migrant
41	E.	Belgium	English	Professional migrant
42	G.	Romania	Romanian	Professional migrant academic
43	M.	Slovenia	English	academic
44	H.	Ukraine	English	Professional migrant
45	G.	Montenegro	English	Professional migrant
46	E.	Moldova	English	Professional migrant
47	K.	Lithuania	English	Professional migrant
48	A.	Cyprus	English	Professional migrant
49	P.	Austria	Slovak	Professional migrant student
50	L.	Finland	English	academic
51	O.	Armenia	Ukrainian	Professional migrant
52	O.	Luxemburg	English	Professional migrant
53	H.	Albania	English	Professional migrant academic
54	I.	Sweden	English	Professional migrant

Table 1. Profile of the interviewees

All narratives have been anonymized for ethical reasons, and any identifying information has been modified to protect participants' privacy. The three researchers examined and interpreted the findings to review the trustworthiness of the analysis and data to ensure that all perspectives were accurately represented. The paper, hence, poses the following questions:

RQ1 – How do the motivations of women migrants evolve and manifest in their life stories as uncovered through narrative inquiry, and what factors contribute to these motivational shifts?

RQ2 – In what ways do women migrants exercise agency and empowerment within their migration narratives, as revealed through thematic analysis, and how does this agency influence their integration process into their host society?

RQ3 – What are the main challenges women migrants face in their process of social integration?

4. RESULTS

The analysis yielded three principal themes detailing the life narratives of the migrant women interviewed in this project: migration motivations, empowerment, agency and belonging.

4.1.1. MIGRATION MOTIVATIONS

The first central theme emerging from the interviews concerns the diverse motivations that prompted women to migrate. These motivations were often multifaceted and interwoven, shaped by personal aspirations, structural constraints, and sociocultural pressures. While economic opportunity was a common driver, many participants also migrated to pursue education, career advancement, or safety from political or gender-based persecution. Others were influenced by relational dynamics, such as following a partner or reuniting with family abroad. This section presents these motivational factors through the women's narratives, revealing how their decisions to migrate were not merely reactive but strategic and aspirational.

4.1.2. ECONOMIC MOTIVATIONS

Economic motivations are a central reason for migrating, as individuals and families seek to improve their living standards and financial security. The search for better employment opportunities is a significant driver behind the movement of millions of people worldwide. Many individuals emigrate from regions with high unemployment rates, low wages, or limited career prospects to countries offering higher incomes, more job opportunities, and the promise of a better quality of life. This economic migration impacts the individuals and families involved and has significant implications for both the countries of origin and destination, affecting labour markets, economies, and social structures. V. tells a story that reflects the reality of millions of women in low-income countries such as Colombia:

> I arrived here in Israel because there was a time in Colombia when, unfortunately, the job situation became very bad. So, I was unemployed for a very long time. Here, a cousin of mine had come who was about to complete one year here, so I talked to her. I asked her what Israel was like and all that, and I told her that I would like to come here. Then she gave me the means and all that to be here, and I came. First of all, because I was unemployed, and I came here through an agency that speaks Spanish to take care of elderly sick people.

E. migrated to the Netherlands and then returned to Moldova. She moved for 7 years to the Netherlands in two stages. In 2008, a 30+-year-old mum of two small children left Moldova for a Master's Study, then she moved back to Moldova and again in 2014, she moved to the Netherlands for 3 years already with three small children. Now, she is back in Moldova and works for State University as Director of International Affairs and European Integration, and she also teaches.

4.1.3. PROFESSIONAL AND ACADEMIC ADVANCEMENT

The qualitative text analysis revealed that many women migrated to advance their academic and professional careers. Many women migrate from their country of origin to advance their academic studies and continue to live abroad to advance their professional careers. T., who currently lives in Germany, emigrated from Italy to study abroad and has relocated to Germany to work in the NGO sector.

> The first time I went out of my home country like moved for real was in 2017. I have been back for short periods of time in 2020, in 2019, but since then I have never really lived there anymore. There is no life before that I can compare my current life to. Therefore, the life in my home country that I know is life as a student and short periods of time working there, which I don't really miss. also know that in Italy, I wouldn't be able to do the job I do or at least do it in the same way. So there are no big NGOs that work in the sector that I'm in, meaning for security, livelihoods.

> Teresa has permanently relocated to Germany to further her career within the civil society sector. Her situation exemplifies the circumstances faced by numerous women who, due to a lack of employment opportunities in their home countries, are compelled to emigrate permanently.

M. described how she migrated to Turkey for study purposes and declared that:

> If it wasn't for studying, I don't know if we would have decided to move because we wanted to be in more internationally recognised schools, to study in English, which was not possible in our country…

I. migrated to Slovenia mainly because she wanted to study abroad. She eventually came to Slovenia because of her research and her partner. Today, she works at the Institute of Contemporary History. Her migration is primarily linked to her professional career and the political situation. Her Serbian nationality has shaped her migration path, which has limited her access to academic education and employment in the EC countries. She also

stressed that the political instability in her country has been a significant factor in her decision to live outside Serbia and seek permanent residence in a more stable society.

H., who lives in Ukraine, found her empowerment in terms of cultural identity. She was born in Princeton, New Jersey. She moved around the United States several times but ended up going to Brown University and getting her bachelor's there. During her time at Brown, she did a university exchange with Saint Petersburg State University and studied there. She wanted to take a year off of learning to return because everything was interesting. It was her transition period. Everything fascinated her, but she got a job in Ukraine instead of Saint Petersburg and is incredibly happy about that. That was the best piece of luck that ever happened.

> My children understand different people in ways I did not until I moved abroad. I think migration is a positive force. I really do because I mentioned earlier you become other and it even can go into the next generation or generations. And I feel that, you know, all cultures have really strong positive influences in them. And I think when people are able to move to other societies and are accepted because I was accepted, immediately stay.

Women living in countries within the EC have a wide range of opportunities to advance their academic careers, as G., living in Romania, relates:

> I came here (to Romania) after graduating high school, I was not very sure about what I wanted to do next. The options I had home were different from the opportunities Romania offered many scholarships to students coming from the [country of origin] and I realized I had a chance. Also, I thought that otherwise, my parents would have been obliged to assist me financially. I chose the city of Galați because it was really close to my home town. Less than 100 km separated the two, just the border. It was there where I studied the four years of The Faculty of Geodetic Engineering on Land Measurements and Cadaster and it was truly a different world; what Romania offered was something different from what I could have seen at home and how I generally understood things. All legal aspects, everything about the resident's permit for temporary stay was granted, everything was ok, there were no problem with that.

> From this point of view, the [Romanian] authorities offered a guarantee, there were no situations of illegal stay. Later on, having a temporary stay resident's permit, there were barriers to getting a job because it was a limited thing, and one could not work like any other citizen of Romania.

K., who migrated to Poland from a non-EU country, shares the obstacles she encountered in studying in Poland:

> I come from [country of origin], to be precise, where I was born. Initially, I

came to Poland to study. That was 10 years ago. However, I didn't finish up studying for my first degree in Poland after all, but in [city of origin] instead. To be honest, I meant to come here to study immediately after finishing school, but frankly my family couldn't afford to pay for my studies in Europe, so, my first diploma was from a university in my own country. Later, after I graduated there, I still continued working for a couple of years, although I wanted… I particularly wanted to study elsewhere than in the [country of origin] and so I made a resolution to leave for Poland. It was easier said than done. Just 10 years ago, it was not possible for everybody to obtain a Student Visa. It was even harder for me because I was married and my husband and I resolved to come here together. It is quite different when a young man simply leaves [country of origin] in order to study and is probably likely to return to his family afterwards.

4.1.4. POLITICAL, RELIGIOUS AND GENDER-BASED PRESSURES

Throughout human history, factors such as political instability, religious conflict, and persecution have been significant drivers of emigration. At the dawn of the 1990s, facing the disintegration of the USSR, O. chose to leave her homeland and move to Israel. This decision was primarily influenced by the widespread antisemitism she endured during that era, which made her feel alienated and threatened due to her Jewish identity. Her migration reflects the broader narratives of individuals seeking safety, acceptance, and a chance to rebuild their lives away from the prejudices and dangers of their countries of origin.

> We never felt in the Soviet Union like people who live and feel that it's their place they belong to. I think there were, of course many cases of anti-Semitism and both for our family and our friends and people we knew, it was very not pleasant and very sad and also sometimes dangerous so it was a kind of fear especially in the end of 1980s it was a great feeling that the place is not safe.

Feeling secure is a vital component of belonging. In the USSR, Olga experienced alienation due to her religious beliefs, which negatively distinguished her from others, prompting her to emigrate.

4.1.5. FAMILY AND RELATIONAL DYNAMICS

Women may migrate to follow a partner for various reasons, often intertwined with social, emotional, and economic factors; first, in some cultures, it is customary or expected for a woman to follow her husband or fiancé if he relocates. These societal norms can significantly influence a woman's decision to migrate, making it a personal choice and a cultural obligation. Second, following a partner who has secured employment in a new location can promise a more stable economic future for both the individual and her fam-

ily. This is particularly compelling in cases where opportunities are limited in the woman's home country. Last, fundamental to many migration decisions is the emotional bond and commitment to a partner. The desire to build a life together can motivate women to relocate, facing new environments and challenges alongside their partners. L. emigrated to Finland in the 1980s after she met her partner, a Finn citizen, in college.

> Basically I fell in love with, and thought like. He asked if I wanted to come to Finland, and I was like, sure, why not? So that's how I actually ended up in Finland and I can honestly say that I probably didn't know almost anything about Finland when I came here. So but luckily, like it's not that different from Michigan or Detroit weather? Wise and things like that, but darker, colder.

M. migrated to Turkey following her partner and relates the difficulties she encountered in her new home.

> I kind of find myself following someone else. And that was what happened in reality also, I never planned. I thought I would, I would go myself, but this happened, and what happened was that first I had to follow my husband without getting actually a master's or a master's acceptance actually or any job offer, so I had to like to try hard here for two-three years to get acceptance…

One of the most common reasons women migrate is to be with their spouse or partner, especially in cases where the partner has moved abroad for work, study, or asylum. This kind of migration is motivated by the desire to maintain family unity and support their partner's opportunities for a better life, as O., living in Luxemburg, relates:

> Our family came to Luxembourg because my husband received a job offer here. There are professional opportunities in our home country, Republic of Moldova, for him and he was applying to jobs abroad. We did not think that we will come all together right away but due to the situation in Ukraine in February 2022 the air was closed and there were no flights from or to Moldova, one of the probabilities that was discussed at that time was that Moldova will also get involved in the military actions and then it will be very difficult for us to leave the country and for my husband to come and see us all. So the decision was made that we all must leave together at once.

Currently, she is on maternity leave, but she plans to find a job according to her professional background in the next few months.

4.2.1. EMPOWERMENT, AGENCY AND BELONGING

The second theme explores how women migrants navigate their new environments by exercising agency, cultivating empowerment, and negotiating a sense of belonging. Though often accompanied by uncertainty, migration provided many participants with

opportunities for self-discovery, professional development, and civic engagement. The women's stories reveal how agency can manifest in subtle yet powerful ways—from making independent life decisions and acquiring new skills to becoming politically active and reshaping their identities. Belonging, in turn, emerged as a dynamic and emotional process, not simply about legal status but about feeling accepted and rooted in a new society. These findings highlight the transformative potential of migration in fostering personal empowerment and community integration

4.2.2. EMPOWERMENT THROUGH ADAPTATION

One of the most prominent subjects revealed in the interviewees' narratives was the subject of empowerment, that was reflected in different forms in the interviews. For instance, for M., who emigrated to Spain as a diplomat's wife, empowerment meant learning a new role in life through study and perseverance.

> I actually applied my vitalist principle, if we can call it that, and I actually started very consistently, because I am also a very consistent autodidact, self-taught, to prepare for protocol matters, to find out how to behave in individual matters and also how the dinner should look, how to prepare it, even cook it, the mistake of many is that they think that someone will make and serve you dinner, usually until you are at the ambassador level, everything is in your hands, from the innermost decoration to cooking a three-course dinner plus some aperitifs, so this is all on organization and on you. Since I am an organizational type, I took it with vigour and really enjoyed our stay in Prague.

Migrating to a new country means facing challenges and obstacles away from the support of family and friends. K. feels empowered when she realizes what she has accomplished in her life as a migrant.

> I think that living here in Poland, as an immigrant, has changed me so much because when I came here, I was so uncertain, so lacking in self-confidence, afraid of many things, I was dependent. But here, when nobody is by your side and you have to decide on everything and do everything on your own because nobody will instinctively help, I suggest that makes a person mature faster and learn to live independently. I think this is a good university here and it is good experience for me, and thanks to that, I can hand down many things that I have learnt here to my children. We plan to stay here in the future, probably, because, as I have already said, this is my children's home already, their homeland. We will continue to develop ourselves here in Poland.

4.2.3. EXERCISING AGENCY AND SOCIAL ACTIVISM

For H., living in the UK, empowerment came from helping others.

I think for me, that is where relief work and assisting people in desperate states and speaking on their behalf or acting on their behalf or, you know, helping them in difficult states… it's very deeply rooted, because I've experienced discrimination as a as a woman, as a female child, as a woman, as a Muslim in the UK, as a [nationality] in the UK… And I think my reaction has been since I was young, to fight injustice wherever I see them. And I can do that on a very profound level I think as a doctor.

T., living in France, became a social activist fighting women's exploitation to have an impact in her new home.

 I showed interest in doing something in those two hours of break that I had every day, anything that I could do and they immediately put me in the situation. So I started to take part in all the activities that were against exploitation and that's how I started to become an activist, an activist against fascism, against colonialism and also for the women's struggle.

4.2.4. CONSTRUCTING A SENSE OF BELONGING

One of the central elements in the integration process of a migrant is to develop a sense of belonging to their new society. For the migrant women who participated in this project, the process was personal in which they experienced a new perception of themselves and their new society. Teresa, who migrated to Germany, describes her sense of belonging as a process that takes time. A process in which she has found a balance between who she was and who she has become.

The main thing that I learned] is to just give time to things to develop, and adapt. But adapting doesn't mean not changing what is not good for us. It means to be curious and just discover in every culture even the most alien one, something that is similar and something that is very different but could help us.

O., who moved to Israel, describes her sense of belonging as rooted in her acceptance of new aspects of her life and her ability to see herself within her new surroundings.

From the very beginning, you have a lot of things that you in your daily life are something routine, and suddenly there is something else like the taste, smells, food climate like you know even clothes, I mean how you can see yourself in the mirror and how you can see the people walking down the streets and you feel with it's something different.

For M. living in Turkey, a sense of belonging emerges alongside an improved economic and social status.

(…) passion for studying—that's not enough for taking this hard decision [emigration]—the passion to move forward, I mean to socially, economically and to

change that—the socio-economic status that you have—that was the one thing
what we were thinking at the time.

I. describes how her temporary status in Slovenia leads to a lack of belonging, as she does
not possess the same rights and opportunities as others.

> [...] actually, now I have become more and more aware of the fact, that I am a
> migrant. That I don't have citizenship rights, that I don't have political rights
> where I live and work, I don't even have a permanent residence. This is some-
> thing that, when you asked me to give this interview, I was thinking, well, yes
> actually, this might be an opportunity to think about it a bit more and to realize
> what it means to be an academic migrant from the third country.

G.'s journey to foster a sense of belonging began with friendships and ultimately gave her
the resilience to continue her fight for equal rights as a woman.

> In 2004, when I came, I did not know any group, any social network back then,
> no additional service. All the help one could get came from the students who
> already had experience being older, and through personal connections, friends
> and personal connections. We helped one another and somehow, this brought
> us closer, it really helped, and from my point of view, we developed beautiful
> friendships. First of all, because a woman is vulnerable, I had to fight against
> these preconceptions, and I think that I will continue to fight. And maybe that
> a woman does not have the same rights as a man. But all these preconceptions
> only helped me, and I developed resilience.

S., who emigrated from an African country to the Netherlands, was inspired by her
mother's fight to give her daughters a better life, motivated by the lack of opportunities
for graduates from [home country's] higher education, and encouraged by her Dutch
partner in Kenya, to apply to do a Masters in Globalization and Development in the
Netherlands. Although adapting to a new life in the Netherlands has come with challeng-
es, the move has allowed her to live in line with her feminist values. At the same time, her
transnational connections to family around the world provide her with the resources to
build this new life.

> (...) for me, it was such a powerful thing to do because I thought, I was not going
> to be what they expected me to be. I'm going to be different.

4.3.1. CHALLENGES INTEGRATING INTO A NEW SOCIETY

Despite stories of growth and resilience, participants also recounted significant difficul-
ties in integrating into host societies presented in this third. These challenges ranged
from linguistic barriers that limited social and professional interactions to cultural and
religious dissonance that created feelings of alienation. In addition, many women faced

structural barriers such as insecure legal status, discrimination, and limited access to employment. These difficulties not only complicate their everyday lives but also undermine their sense of security and belonging. By examining these challenges, this section provides a more balanced understanding of the migration experience and underscores the need for more inclusive integration policies.

4.3.2. LANGUAGE BARRIERS

The first was the acquisition of a new language. The inability to speak the language of their host society represents a significant barrier for these women. For instance, Heyllin, who moved to Denmark from a Spanish-speaking country, shared how challenging it was to learn English for professional communication initially.

> The first challenge was this about English, I mean, like I was able to read and maybe write. But in this talking, and also the academic English is totally different than the kind of the touristic, or everyday life, English? So that was one of the biggest challenges. I mean really to have this discussion about your research, and also the philosophy.

Language is a big part of a culture. For M., who emigrated to Latvia, not speaking a second language in the country, such as Russian, left her feeling as an outsider.

> Having to explain to people that I don't speak Russian, and people did not believe me and thought that I was being difficult and learning to deal with, just to deal with people in the culture here. Because I was very much an outsider, and foreigners living here wasn't a very common thing, even though I felt I was Latvian. People didn't see me like one.

Not speaking the language can have profound implications in the life of a migrant. As V. describes, her lack of proficiency in Hebrew has limited her efforts to communicate with her surroundings.

> The language limits me. I understand things about the Hebrew language, but I feel that it limits me because I want to interact, I want a conversation, I want day to day life. I can speak like words but I would like to speak like sentences or sit and talk with a Hebrew speaking person. Sometimes I feel bad because I want to understand everything and I can't. I want to understand everything.

In certain situations, the inability to speak the local language may lead to social isolation and challenging work environments, potentially resulting in exploitation. This was evident in the case of Teresa, who moved to France for domestic work.

For M., who lives in Spain as the wife of a diplomat and moves from country to country in short periods, learning a new language each time has prevented her from feeling as she belongs.

> But then the feeling of alienation and the language issue is something that does not go away completely, because we live in each country too short to feel completely at home and fully accepted and fully integrated in that country.

The lack of language proficiency facilitates the othering and discrimination processes by positioning the participants as outsiders. Not speaking the language is one of the markers that make immigrants distinct from their host society (Udah & Singh, 2019) since language is a "marker of belonging" (Hout et al., 2014, p. 93). Participants described how the language barrier intensified their differences from their host society, limited their ability to have a social life, and impacted their sense of self. Being different or 'the other' by not speaking the language also negatively affected their employment prospects and, hence, their possibilities of social mobility.

4.3.3. CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS DISSONANCE

For several women, cultural and religious differences between their home and their host society can also become a challenge in the migrants' lives as H. living in Denmark relates

> I am a believer, I mean, I am Christian, and I practice. I mean, it was. It is still a big part of myself as a person, in [country of origin] we are quite open about our faith, and in Denmark, religion is a kind of a very private thing. I think maybe in [country of origin], still, after almost 15 years, is still a very a part of the identity of being from [country of origin], I mean, like faith is a big issue. So, in the beginning, was I really was kind of cutting part of myself, because I could not say like you will normally say [country of origin]. Okay, I will be there, and then you will say, by the way of God, for example, oh, see you tomorrow, god bless you!

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This research has adopted a qualitative approach, utilizing biographical narrative interviews to examine the intricate dimensions of women's migration trajectories. By allowing participants to recount their migration stories, we have been able to navigate the hidden motivations for migration as well as their stories of empowerment, agency and belonging.

Addressing Research Question 1 (RQ1), this study has shown how women migrants' motivations evolve and manifest in their life stories. Findings from the thematic analysis reveal diverse motivations, including economic advancement, pursuing education and professional development, family reunification, partner-driven migration, and escaping gender and societal constraints. These narratives highlight that migration results from a complex interplay of personal aspirations, societal pressures, and structural constraints shaping women's decisions.

In response to Research Question 2 (RQ2), the study has highlighted how women migrants exercise agency and empowerment within their migration narratives. Through text analysis, the research has uncovered instances of empowerment manifested in various forms, such as pursuing education, advocating for social causes, adapting to new environments, and fostering resilience. These narratives underscore the agency of women migrants in navigating challenges, shaping their destinies, and contributing to their host societies.

Finally, Research Question 3 (RQ3) has focused on the main challenges faced by women migrants in their process of social integration. The analysis has revealed significant challenges in language barriers, cultural and religious differences, social isolation, discrimination, and difficulties accessing the labour market. These findings, hence, underscore the importance of addressing structural barriers and providing support mechanisms to facilitate the integration of women migrants into host societies.

This study contributes to the theoretical understanding of migration by foregrounding women's lived experiences through the lens of biographical narrative inquiry. It responds to the need for migration research that not only focuses on gender but also captures the fluidity and complexity of women's trajectories across time and space. The narratives presented here challenge static or generalized depictions of migrant women as passive victims or hyper-resilient actors. Instead, they demonstrate how agency is contextually negotiated—shaped by intersectional structures of power, legal frameworks, and personal aspirations.

Drawing on intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1991; Yuval-Davis, 2011), the study illustrates how multiple identities—such as gender, nationality, legal status, religion, and class—interact to produce unique constraints and opportunities for each participant. These intersecting axes not only inform migration motivations and strategies but also influence the degree to which women are able to access rights, services, and social acceptance in host societies. Intersectionality moves the analysis beyond "additive" categories and highlights structural inequalities embedded in origin and destination contexts.

In addition, the concepts of agency and belonging (Anthias, 2006; Donald et al., 2020) are employed not as static end-states but as evolving processes. Agency is exercised not only in major decisions (such as migration) but also in everyday acts of resilience, adaptation, and resistance. Belonging, meanwhile, is framed as an emotional and political project: it is about more than legal status; it involves recognition, participation, and the formation of affective ties with people and places. Women's narratives reveal that belonging can coexist with feelings of displacement and that the boundaries of inclusion are constantly being negotiated.

Methodologically, narrative inquiry allows for a more situated and layered understanding of these dynamics. Unlike traditional survey-based studies, narrative interviews grant space for participants to make meaning of their experiences, foregrounding voice,

temporality, and emotion. This approach aligns with feminist epistemologies, prioritising lived experience and rejecting universalizing claims. The study adds to a growing body of qualitative research that seeks to rehumanize migration scholarship and inform more responsive and inclusive policies (Atkinson, 2007).

Furthermore, based on these findings, a series of practice and policy recommendations could be addressed. For instance, integration policies must be gender-sensitive and intersectional in their approach, recognizing the different backgrounds and requirements of migrant women in comparison with the experiences of other genders. This requires facilitating access to language courses, recognition of foreign qualifications, and culturally appropriate mental health services. Second, labour market policies need to address the structural limitations that hamper the employment of migrant women, first and foremost, the devaluation of care work and domestic labour. Establishing channels for regularization, social protection, and job placement targeting can help with economic independence and social inclusion. Finally, civic spaces and leadership by migrant women must be promoted by public institutions and civil society organizations to involve them in decision-making that affects their lives. This would empower the people and promote social cohesion and democratic resilience in host communities.

The research contributes to a deeper understanding of women migrants' motivational journeys, agency, empowerment, and challenges, shedding light on the complex dynamics shaping their migration experiences and integration processes. By embedding individual narratives within comprehensive theoretical frameworks and substantiating them with empirical evidence, this study has yielded valuable insights into the multifaceted experiences of women migrants in Europe. These findings provide a rich foundation for further exploration by subsequent studies.

6. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

While this research provides valuable insights into women migrants' experiences, it has some limitations. The sample size of 54 participants, while diverse, may not be fully representative of all women migrants in COST member countries. Additionally, the use of semi-structured interviews may have influenced the direction of conversations, potentially limiting the emergence of unexpected themes. Future research could benefit from a larger sample size and more diverse data collection methods to further validate and expand upon these findings. Moreover, future research in this area could benefit from longitudinal studies that track women's experiences over time, comparative analyses across different types of migration, and in-depth qualitative studies that give voice to women's personal narratives and reflections on their migration journeys.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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