



Women Who Migrate

UNSEEN STRUGGLES,
RESISTANCE AND
HOPE IN TIMES
OF CRISES



Women

Who

Migrate

UNSEEN STRUGGLES,
RESISTANCE AND
HOPE IN TIMES
OF CRISES

Project website: www.genmigra.org

Authors:

Dorota Szpakowicz

Niklas Luft

Jullyane Ribeiro

Hannah Haycox

Laureen Walker

Design and art :

Adriano Vespa



This booklet is based on findings from the GEN-MIGRA Project, which was funded under the Trans-Atlantic Platform for Social Sciences and Humanities (T-AP) under the Recovery, Renewal and Resilience in a Post-Pandemic World Call. Bringing together researchers and practitioners from four countries (Brazil, Germany, Poland and the United Kingdom), GEN-MIGRA researched the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on migrant women and their families.

**The project
was funded by:**



Fapesp (in Brazil):

Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado de São Paulo (Grant no: 2021/07574-9)



NCN (in Poland):

Narodowe Centrum Nauki
(No-2021/03/Y/HS6/00159; ID52702)



DFG (in Germany):

Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft
(GZ: BA 6184/3-1)



ESRC (in the UK):

Economic and Social Research
Council (ESRC) (ES/X001210/1)

Speak up, women!

Speak up!

Do not be afraid.

You are heard.

Oksana Zabuzhko,
Ukrainian poet, novelist and essayist

Contents

Introduction: Women who migrate	08
1. Why did we migrate?	20
2. Life in a new country	12
3. Institutional barriers: Everyday inequality and uncertainty	30
4. Experiences of violence and its effects	40
5. Resistance and resilience across borders	50
6. Hopes for an uncertain future	60
Afterword	62

Women Who Migrate

Introduction:

This is a collection of stories from women who have migrated to Brazil, Poland, Germany and the UK, sharing their own experiences of migration. Women who migrate are often seen as victims, carers, mothers or dependents of spouses or male relatives. We hear less about the reasons why women move, their struggles and agency or their everyday experiences.

Women migrate for complex reasons: to escape war, persecution, violence, repressive regimes, poverty, and patriarchal norms. They leave to seek employment, education, better opportunities and to secure better lives for themselves and their families. When global crises hit, existing gender inequalities are increased, and migrant women are disproportionately impacted.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, violence affected one in three women and girls worldwide. With global lockdowns, there was a spike in violence against women and girls. The current cost of living crisis affects migrant women significantly. They are more likely to be engaged in low-paid work and often have additional care responsibilities. The rise

in far-right, anti-immigrant ideology worldwide has also coincided with a wave of sexism and anti-female sentiment. Yet, the work that migrant women do to navigate these crises is often invisible, hidden and not recognised.

This booklet shines a light on migrant women's stories of survival and resistance, which overlap with ongoing inequalities. The lived experiences that we draw on were part of a ground-breaking research project called GEN-MIGRA, which took place in four countries: Brazil, Poland, Germany and the UK. We spoke to over 120 women who had moved to these countries to seek asylum, find work or seek new opportunities for their family and children.

This booklet explores how women who migrate deal with challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian war in Ukraine, as well as other hostile environments. Whilst there is no single story, we can see the shared experiences of violence, inequality and discrimination, but also of resistance and hope. We depict these in artistic forms to show the women behind the label of 'migrant'. Join us as we explore the multiple paths migrant women tread, uncovering their hidden stories and inspiring a collective commitment to stand in solidarity with migrants worldwide.

Why did we migrate?

The women we interviewed in Brazil, Germany, the United Kingdom and Poland had complex reasons for migrating. These related to personal reasons, relationships and wider issues like lack of work or poverty. Situations of war, domestic violence, the search for a better life, reuniting with friends and family, seeking better working conditions and education for their children were other reasons. As shown below, not all women arrived at their intended destination country, and some had to settle elsewhere.

Family was a recurring motivation. Women shared their desire to facilitate their children's access to new educational

opportunities and to improve their English language skills. Many spoke about seeking a 'better life' for their family due to barriers they faced in finding work in the countries they had left.

Migrant women in all four of the countries were impacted by multiple global crises like the Russian war in Ukraine, the cost-of-living crisis, the rise in far-right sentiment and violence against women worldwide. We emphasise the importance of taking into consideration the overlapping barriers that women encounter. The labels of 'migrant', 'refugee' or 'asylum seeker' are too simplistic to convey the diverse reasons that force women to leave their countries of origin.



INES (PORTUGAL) AND EMILIA (PORTUGAL)

For the love of family

When we met her, Ines had lived in the UK for 20 years and had recently retired from her career as a health worker. She had been raised as a child in a country in Southern Africa and then had subsequently moved to Portugal and started a family. She shared how, since being a young child, she wanted to move to the UK:

I told my father I want to go to England. I want to go to England since I was 13 years old!

Ines came alone but was joined in 2011 by her daughter, Emilia.

At the time, Emilia was separated from her then-partner, and she was pregnant with her second child. Emilia's move was motivated by a desire to be closer to her mother and sister:

When I got pregnant with my second son, 16 years ago, I came here, and I had the baby here to be close to my mother. She's my everything.

When Emilia first arrived in the UK, she and her three children lived with Ines for several years in a three-bedroom house. Emilia spoke fondly about the support she received from family during this time, which helped her get through some tough times and helped her to navigate the challenge of being a new parent. These strong family ties were essential in helping Emilia to stay strong mentally and to maintain positive mental health:

If I don't have my family here, I couldn't live here. Without my family, I get depressed a lot of times.

Emilia did not have many friends in the UK and did not feel comfortable sharing information with anyone other than her family, showing the centrality of family in her life:

I share my life with my family only.

Emilia highlighted the mutual nature of this family support. The support that Emilia received from Ines, when she first arrived in the UK, was reciprocated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Ines lived alone during the pandemic, and Emilia was able to provide her with emotional and practical support throughout that time:

I went to my mother's house. I call her. I listen. I cook for her.

MARTHA (ALBANIA)

Seeking a better life

Martha and her family were originally from Albania. Facing difficult circumstances in Albania, they had initially fled to Greece, hoping to find better opportunities. Her husband had been living in Greece for 15 years, and she joined him 5 years before their eventual move to Germany.

Life in Greece proved to be challenging for the family. After the birth of their son, they struggled financially, compounded by Greece's ongoing economic crisis. Martha described their hardships:

I had a lot of trouble... because in Greece, the work was... hard and very poorly paid.

Martha's husband, who was increasingly uncomfortable with their situation in Greece, made the decision to migrate to Germany. He believed moving to Germany would offer them better opportunities and a more stable life.

The family held a permanent residence permit from Greece, which allowed them to move to and work in Germany, even without

Greek citizenship. This legal status facilitated their migration after her husband had secured employment and housing in Germany.

In 2018, after her husband had established himself with a secure job and accommodation, Martha and their three-year-old son joined him in Germany. Their move was driven by the hope for better economic stability and living conditions, as Martha explained:

The economic crisis in Greece was a decisive reason for us to leave.

AYOMIDE (NIGERIA:

Kinship ties and the hope to “improve one’s life”

By the time Ayomide, a 25-year-old laboratory technician, landed at Guarulhos airport in São Paulo, it was likely that her bags were waiting for her at Benito Juárez airport in Mexico City or had been sent back to Nigeria. Ayomide’s planned destination when she left Lagos was the United States, a desire she shared with Oluwafemi, her boyfriend. Oluwa would have to wait in Lagos, however, because he had other responsibilities.

Ayomide knew it would be very difficult to get a visa to the United

States. She bought a ticket to Mexico and, as she had no savings, incurred a debt of 20,000 dollars, which she promised to pay back as soon as she got a job. She set off alone towards Mexico City, unsure about the next stage of the trip. She wished she could save some money for herself and help her brothers in Nigeria.

I would have to go to the embassy myself to get the visa, so I can’t just go there. I was looking for a visa to run away quickly, so... I have a sister in Mexico. And I bought a ticket to Mexico, so I don’t have to seek a visa.

The flight stopped in South Africa and Brazil. She was stopped at the Mexican airport and taken to a room in the immigration area.

They took my passport, and an officer gave me a document, in Spanish, asking me to sign. He just repeated “no hablo inglés”. I was scared, he scared me a lot, he said he would arrest me. I signed the papers. They took my phone, my watch, my earrings. They put me in a room with three other men and women. I think they were Arabs, but I don’t know. I don’t know how long I was there because I had no watch and there were no windows. I only asked: What’s the reason? What have I done? I didn’t do anything!

She was put on a flight and discovered she would stop again in Brazil and South Africa. Only then did she understand that she had signed a document declaring that she was aware of her return to Nigeria. Arriving in Guarulhos, Ayomide was taken from the plane directly to the Federal Police room. Ayomide was determined not to return to Nigeria. She had incurred a large debt and left Lagos with the

promise of “improving her life” and helping her brothers. It would be “a shame” to return empty-handed without paying what she owed.

She then considered seeking asylum in Brazil, a country she knew nothing about other than what she saw in a few soap operas. It would be down to Ayomide to convince Brazilian authorities that she had suffered persecution in Nigeria. After some resistance from the airport police and great insistence on her part pointing out that she could not, under any circumstances, return to Nigeria, she was allowed to enter the Brazilian territory.

The asylum request appeared for Ayomide as a possibility of staying or, more precisely, of not returning to Nigeria. Since it was not possible to go to Mexico and cross the border to the United States, she changed her plans and decided to work in Brazil to pay off her debt and save money again so that, perhaps, in the future, she could continue her journey to the USA.

INNA (UKRAINIAN) AND HELENA (UKRAINIAN)

Fleeing wars and violence

Inna, a 36-year-old Ukrainian woman, fled to Poland just after the outbreak of the Russian war in Ukraine. She never wanted to leave her homeland; she had a good life in Ukraine, with a good job and expecting their first child. The war changed everything – she had to leave Ukraine to save her child, which also meant she had to leave her husband behind. The horrors of the war left her scarred and traumatised, displaced and waiting for the war to be over:

I was pregnant and hoped to stay in Kyiv for the rest of my life because

I had everything. I had my whole life there, and I didn't want to undertake any journeys. I didn't want to go to Western Europe to work. I just wanted to stay home in Ukraine, but when the Russians came, they came so violently that they murdered and raped even 3-year-old girls; you can imagine this from what we saw in Bucha [Ukrainian city]. They were like animals, like beasts, absolutely crazy.

I haven't seen my husband for two and a half years. I didn't return because it is too dangerous, for me, for the child. It is a very difficult situation.

Here, in Poland, you don't realise that every day they kill like 500 Ukrainians. I have no tears left. (Inna, Ukraine)

Helena, a 49-year-old Ukrainian mother of seven, also remembered how the Russian invasion forced her to leave her home for the sake of her younger children. Forcefully displaced, she nevertheless had left her two eldest sons fighting the war and an older daughter not wanting to leave her homeland. Helena had been living a split life, neither here nor there, torn apart between two countries and in constant fear for the safety of her children:

My soul has been divided into two parts – one half is here with my (four younger) children, and the other is there, left in Ukraine because it's all mine. I ran away from the war with my children, but the war didn't just run away from me. There are my two sons on the front line... this is my life divided... I always ask them: When you come back, write to me. You can just text me a single dot, and then I will know you are alive. (Helena, Ukraine)

Both Inna and Helena were unsure about their futures; they did not know when the war would end, when, if ever, they would see their loved ones again, or what their home country and lives there would look like after the war. They have been waiting...

Life in a new country

After their arrival in a new place, women need to first find out about available services and support in a context where they have limited networks to draw on. Many of the women we interviewed had different citizenship statuses and so could only use some services, with limited support.

In this section, we show the challenges migrant women face in their new host countries: finding their way around new spaces and getting to grips with complicated health, education, work,

housing and welfare systems. They were dealing with financial difficulties, housing, long working hours and exploitative working conditions, health concerns and their qualifications not being recognised. These challenges overlapped with the need to learn a new language, which was more challenging during the COVID-19 pandemic, when language classes stopped, and women had few opportunities to practice. Experiences of isolation, loneliness, hope, resilience and vulnerability emerged from these stories.



SARA (NIGERIA)

Overcoming multiple obstacles

Sara arrived in the UK in 2023 after having been delayed in her migration journey due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Whilst she was born in a country in West Africa, Sara had migrated to different European countries and had eventually welcomed her two children in Germany. She aimed to migrate to the UK to seek educational opportunities in English for her children, and a job for herself. Sara explained how immigration restrictions, language barriers, obstacles to acquiring school

placements for her children, housing precarity and COVID-19 policies created a labyrinth of obstacles that she had to navigate alone.

Without legal immigration status, Sara was not able to work, and she could not access any social benefits, leaving her in limbo:

It's getting difficult because we've been here for almost 7 months, and we are using the savings we had with us. Because we are waiting for the decision, and we are unable to work or do anything.

Sara spoke about the difficulty of understanding the systems in the UK, particularly the health care system. Sara struggled to access appropriate healthcare for her son who had additional support needs. After visiting her GP, she received support from a health visitor, but she still had not received an official diagnosis for her son.

Sara further shared how language barriers heightened her stress in relation to finding school placements for her children and housing for her family:

The language barrier...I am still unable to speak, with the kids and everything I couldn't focus on learning the language. Because of Covid, actually, when you're not allowed to go out and mingle and all this stuff. So, I think that's number one, the language barrier... and then we were trying to enrol my

daughter into school and everything, but it didn't work... When we came, we had already paid for the house rent. So if you are not accepted, if you don't get a school, it's going to be so hard, you know.

In response to housing uncertainty and difficulties in finding a school placement, Sara drew on community networks to access information and support. Her current housing was accessed by drawing on support from a friend before her arrival:

It was kind of hard getting accommodation, then a friend of my partner got us this place, even while we were still in Germany, they were like, 'Oh, I found somewhere. And the landlord is like a good person'. So, we're like, 'Oh, okay, we'll take you. Just move. Come down there and see if it's okay'...That's how we just moved straightaway.

SINEAD (SYRIA)

Being more than ‘the refugee’

Sinead arrived in Germany in November 2015 with her children after fleeing a refugee camp and surviving a dangerous sea crossing. Upon crossing the border, she faced immediate hardships: *“The first night in Germany, I had no money, no clothes, nothing”*. A German woman offered her family food, and though grateful, Sinead remembers thinking: *“I didn’t care if it was halal, I just wanted to eat.”*

Once in Berlin, Sinead and her children spent days on the streets before being placed in a temporary shelter—in a sports hall. Though it felt like a slight relief at first, she soon realised, *“This is not a real life for me and my children”*. Determined to build a stable future, she began fighting for proper housing, schooling for her children, and access to a language course.

Navigating the system was not easy. Social workers often dismissed her, and she found herself constantly pushing for her needs to be met: *“No one listened. They pushed us away.”* However, Sinead’s persistence paid off, and after months of struggle, she secured housing in a hotel, a school for her children, and a place in a German language course.

Despite these achievements, Sinead felt she was still seen primarily as *“a refugee”*. Even after contributing to the workforce and volunteering, she noticed how people often questioned her competence:

I’ve gained experience like anyone born here, but I’m still treated like a refugee.

With the help of a supportive German woman, who became like a mother figure, Sinead continued to build her life. But the sense of belonging and recognition she sought still felt out of reach: *“I’m not just a refugee—I work, I contribute, I deserve respect”*, she emphasised, reflecting on her ongoing journey of integration into German society.

NAJLA (SYRIA)

Being on your own

Najla, a Syrian woman in her fifties, arrived in Brazil in 2017 with her husband and three children. Before leaving, she had been a nurse in Damascus. There, she raised her four children during the war, which had been going on for years. When a bomb hit the family's house, killing Najla's only daughter and leaving her baby with hearing

damage, she decided to leave Syria. The family chose Brazil because Najla's brother was well-established there. However, the family's situation became complicated only three weeks after arriving in the city when Najla's brother suddenly died.

I couldn't buy things or pay the rent for the house we live in here now. He

paid. It was blood cancer. It was very difficult for us. We arrived in a different country, a new country, and everyone depended on my brother because he spoke Portuguese, he worked, he knew everything.

The money the family received when Najla's brother died was only enough to cover hospital and funeral expenses. Najla and her children remained in the same house. The small apartment was on the fourth floor of a building and had no elevator. Climbing the long flights of stairs was a challenge for Najla's husband, who was selling bags Najla was making to support the family. Najla was sleeping in the living room while her husband, who had health issues, used the only bed in the house. Her four children slept on mattresses scattered around the apartment. For Najla, one of the biggest problems the family faced was that "Brazilians", in her perception, took advantage of migrants' lack of knowledge of the language to rob them.

My children used to work in an Arab restaurant, but there were a

lot of thieves who took their money. My husband didn't learn a word of Portuguese, so no one wants to give him a job. I learned to make bags, so I told my husband to sell them at the market. When someone gives him money, he doesn't know when he's short of money. It's not like my country here. There, if you give him the wrong money, you tell the person: "No, you made a mistake, this money is yours".

Najla and her children had asked for support countless times from refugee aid organisations and their mosque, but they had never received any help. She was very concerned about her children's future. Her son had a disability. As for her younger daughter, who was born in Brazil, Najla worried about her becoming detached from their Arab culture and their family's religion.

My daughter was born here; she doesn't know anything about the Arab culture; she's like a Brazilian, the same as a Brazilian girl. That's why I take her to the Mosque so that she can learn these things.

ANASTASIYA (UKRAINE)

Challenging realities of living as a migrant woman

Anastasiya's migration journey began against the backdrop of a deteriorating economic situation in Ukraine. Her father, once a skilled electrician, lost his job due to health issues, leaving the family reliant on her mother's factory wages. At the age of 24, she decided to come to Poland with a friend, as she wanted to help her parents financially:

And so it happened that right after school, due to a difficult home situation, I had to leave to work. And I had a friend who told me that he was in Poland and could help me, so I trusted him, I submitted the documents. It was 2017, and the money was tight, and at that time, I was still studying and working.

Despite her university education in accounting, Anastasiya found her qualifications were unrecognised in Poland. This forced her into low-wage, exploitative jobs, which is often typical for migrants. She first worked at a bottle factory through an agency, where she experienced financial exploitation and poorer working conditions. Working long hours for little pay and doing more work than others, she then also experienced severe harassment from other workers in her second job. This experience, while deeply abusive, made her more determined to learn Polish. Her commitment to learning the language became a tool

for self-advocacy, allowing her to deal with the various challenges she had been facing as a migrant woman more effectively:

We started working there. We had a contract for three months, and we worked. Basically, we did everything. It wasn't like we were doing one thing. At first, we did work like everyone else, and then more and more work was added, and the pay was kind of the same.

There was this one guy, he was our foreman's brother, and he liked me, and he made me this indecent proposal, so even if I didn't speak Polish very well, I could understand him. I said sorry, get lost. And from that moment on, my bullying started, well, tough luck. I survived it; for half a year, there was mobbing every day. I decided then that I would learn Polish so that nothing would bother me anymore. I just remember it was really difficult. Even now, I'm crying, yes. But I survived.

Anastasiya's contract was manipulated upon notifying her employer she was pregnant, leaving her to live on little money and to manage motherhood amidst a global pandemic. Financial worries became even bigger when her husband's hours at work were cut, and Anastasiya was made redundant. To survive this difficult time,

Anastasiya began to work casual jobs in cleaning and gardening when her son was only three months old:

In November, I signed this contract, and it was supposed to last until December of the next year. And then COVID started, and the first day, they said that half of the company had to take annual leave at their own expense, and they tell me that, ma'am, please go on sick leave, or take annual leave, whichever. I thought, well, sick leave, so I went on sick leave. They then said I worked part-time, and they also collected some expenses for something; in the end, it turned out that when I gave birth, I had another six months of this contract, and they said that they would not extend it. They told me directly that you are not convenient for us. I had to work in the black market. I cleaned because no one wanted me for anything else when you have to run to the child all the time. I worked as much as I could.

Anastasiya's experiences show the complex realities migrant women face upon arriving in a new country, as well as their strength and resilience when they face inequality, discrimination and socio-economic challenges while maintaining their hopes for good, dignified lives.

Institutional barriers: Everyday inequality and uncertainty

For many women who migrate, the journey doesn't end when they arrive in a new country; in fact, it often feels like their struggle is just beginning. Instead of finding a place to start afresh, they are immediately faced with a maze of rules and paperwork that can feel overwhelming and impossible to navigate. These systems, often rigid and confusing, seem more focused on creating barriers than offering support, leaving women to struggle with uncertainty and stress as they try to build a new life. This section explores the struggles that non-citizens face when trying to navigate these institutional barriers, highlighting the challenges, discrimination, and inequality they encounter along the way.

Imagine being in a new place where you don't speak the language fluently; you have little understanding of how things work, and you are met with complicated rules at every turn. Now, think about the pressure

of securing legal status, finding a job, accessing medical care or ensuring your children can attend school. For many migrant women, this is their daily reality—a reality shaped by institutions that often feel indifferent and unwelcoming. On top of the legal hurdles, many migrant women endure financial insecurity, precarious jobs, and limited access to essential services. Yet, through determination, they continue to navigate systems that seem designed to keep them out rather than help them succeed.

In this section, we'll look at these experiences and how they play out in everyday life, shining a light on the human cost of these institutional hurdles. By sharing these stories, we aim to help readers understand what it is like to be caught in the maze of inequality and uncertainty in a new country.



SHANTI (PALESTINE)

Navigating complex and hostile immigration system

Shanti's journey through Germany's immigration bureaucracy was marked by long periods of uncertainty and frustration. She had arrived in Germany in 2009 with her family but struggled to obtain legal residency for many years. Despite multiple applications, she could not secure a residence permit until 2022. *"I applied many times, and then I waited for a long time,"* Shanti recalled, emphasising the protracted and opaque nature of the process. Her family remained in limbo, unable to travel freely or work legally in the country for many years. Only in

2022 did Shanti finally receive her residence permit, alongside her two children: *"I finally got my residence permit, me and my two children"* she said with relief.

During this prolonged period, Shanti faced constant challenges in her dealings with the authorities, especially the Foreigners' Office, which she felt offered little explanation for the delays. *"I don't know, but for no reason, I didn't make any problems in Germany. No mistakes"*, she explained, reflecting her confusion and frustration over the lack

of clarity regarding the status of her case. Despite following all the required procedures, her case seemed to languish without progress. This bureaucratic uncertainty led to significant stress, mainly when Shanti needed assistance and clarity on her situation.

The lack of legal status also impacted Shanti's ability to work. *"I was not allowed to work until 2022"*, she said, illustrating the years spent without the opportunity to contribute to the economy or achieve financial independence. The inability to work legally placed Shanti and her family in a precarious position, making it even more difficult to navigate the challenges of daily life.

Shanti's frustration was compounded by the constant barriers she faced when attempting to get in touch with the relevant authorities. She described how, even when trying to reach out for help, she was often met with silence or unhelpful responses. *"We call them: So now, also for my brother, they don't answer"*, her friend commented, adding to the picture of a system that seemed to be indifferent to their needs. This lack of communication from the authorities made Shanti feel disconnected from the support systems she was supposed to be able to rely on.

In one of her more distressing moments, Shanti recalled how she waited for hours outside the social office, hoping to speak with someone who could help her. *"I waited several times in the winter at the social office on the street, the whole day, but I couldn't get in, couldn't get in, and all, all documents were lost, everything,"* she said, describing the sense of helplessness that came with waiting in vain for assistance. Even when Shanti was able to make contact, it often felt as though her case was being ignored or mishandled.

As the immigration process dragged on, Shanti recognised that navigating the system was nearly impossible without the help of a lawyer. *"Nobody does anything without a lawyer"*, her friend told her, summarising the widespread reliance on legal assistance just to make any progress with immigration. For Shanti, this meant additional stress and financial burden, as she had to pay for legal representation during an already difficult time. *"We now work with a lawyer, and we already pay for the lawyer, and it costs a lot of money"*, Shanti added, highlighting the added expenses that came with trying to secure legal status and obtain the basic rights she was entitled to.

EMILY (GUYANA)

“We are in a deep hole!”: Getting residence documents during political instability

Emily, a woman in her fifties, left Guyana for Brazil in 2012, accompanied by Fabrício, her 10-year-old son. During the first three years when she lived in São Paulo, she did not seek out documents because she neither knew how to get them nor did she worry much about them. She only began to worry when her son got a full

scholarship to attend a private high school. To register, he needed documents. At that time, Nathan, Emily’s oldest son, had also arrived in the city. Nathan was resentful because he had been working as a croupier in casinos for years but could no longer take any job because he did not have travel documents.

Emily didn't know how to apply for asylum, so she looked for lawyers who would charge her to issue her documents. She searched via several institutions and found no information about the procedure.

Everyone I spoke to wanted to scam me. One lawyer told me it would cost 20 thousand reais (\$3.6 thousand) to get my documents from Brazil. Another told me 5 thousand just to schedule a meeting with him. Then I met a law student, and she took me to the public defender's office. There I met a guy who gave me a book and said: Oh, it's free! You don't have to pay 20 thousand to apply for asylum.

Her difficulties continued at the Federal Police, responsible for border control where Emily again encountered confusing procedures, delays and conflicting information.

I went to the Federal Police, and the guy at the counter said: oh, what country are you from? I said: Guyana. And he said: there is no war in your country, you can't [apply]. And I said: I know I have the right to request political asylum. And then he said: oh yes, so do you want the papers in French or English?

Three years after her asylum application, there was still no resolution. With the delay, Emily said she felt "stuck" because she

could not do anything to support herself and her children. What worried her most was the uncertainty and long waiting time:

Almost three years and nothing has happened. And we are stuck, and I can't leave. If I leave now and it's almost over, I'll lose the whole process. But if my process isn't over in another six years, what will I do? I can't have a child to get Brazilian documents. My situation is worse because of my age; I think it's horrible.

With the death of Richard, the father of her youngest son, who lived in Barbados, Emily anticipated that she would have to go to court to claim her son's inheritance. She would need to hire a lawyer and travel, but none of this could be done without documents. She also wanted to open her own business and was very frustrated with the political changes that, in her opinion, led to slow bureaucratic processes in Brazil:

There were things that didn't happen, and I had to go back in September, October and now again. So, I think everything is at a standstill. We don't know what's going to happen to the country, and it's hard for people to maintain a professional attitude because they can't make decisions without a government. We are in a deep hole!

DELILAH (SOUTH AFRICA)

Navigating the pandemic, poverty, and a harsh immigration context

Delilah was a single mother with small children and her experience captured the difficulties facing women when trying to access support during the COVID-19 pandemic. The 'No Recourse to Public Funds' visa condition attached to her immigration status meant that she was not allowed to access any welfare support. Delilah had lived in the UK since 2000 and migrated from a country in the Southern region of

Africa. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Delilah worked as a wedding caterer and chef. Unable to claim benefits, she now faced food insecurity, precarity, and increased debt. As she explained:

The visa says 'no recourse to public funds'. Public funds you're not entitled to...It became so frustrating and there were so many organisations that were popping up saying we are offering help. Even if you don't... the banks have not

given you any help, we are here to help. But it was the same answer. They will make you fill out all the forms... by the time you get to the end [of the process], oh, sorry, you don't qualify for public funds.

Delilah further shared how lack of access to social benefits led to housing worries during the COVID-19 pandemic and worries over her children being taken into state care. However, it was through support from friends, neighbours and charity organisations that she was able to navigate the intersecting restrictions of 'No Recourse to Public Funds,' housing precarity and COVID-19 measures:

My rent started piling up. The bills were piling up, and it got to a point where I started getting eviction letters, and social services got involved... So at that point now the housing officer, bless [their] heart, really fought hard to make sure that social services started helping us and just making sure that the children

were receiving some sort of support...So, those are some of the challenges that, you know, the pandemic brought, because of the fear of losing the children, just because my business was not running.

Delilah spoke of the hostility that many migrants felt, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic and following the Brexit referendum. She highlighted a common sentiment among British people:

All these migrants are coming to get our jobs. All these migrants are coming to occupy our space or get the NHS service. I need to pay for the NHS service, but nobody will recognise the differences we made in the community!

This discriminatory behaviour ignored the contribution made by migrant women, many of whom worked in key services like health and social care during the pandemic.

MARIA (RUSSIA)

Being ‘the enemy’: Formal rejection from the country of migration

Maria, a woman in her early thirties, migrated to Poland with her husband, an IT specialist, from Russia, seeking a better life free from the Russian oppressive regime for themselves and their future children:

Firstly, we wanted a better life for us. Secondly, we wanted a child, and we also wanted our children to have a better life than in Russia. And thirdly, it's the politics; I think politics is actually the first reason. And in Russia, there is a lot of corruption, and a lot of media outlets were closed down, which say that Putin is not good.

Maria thought Poland would be her forever home. This all changed when the Russian war in Ukraine started. Maria and her husband, half Ukrainian and half Russian, strongly opposed the war. She got involved in supporting Ukraine, speaking out against the war, organising donations, and even transporting a generator from Poland to the Ukrainian army in Kyiv:

We help the Ukrainians as much as we can, so it's not safe for us to ever go to Russia. For example, one year ago, I helped the Ukrainian army. The generator

needed to be brought to Kyiv, and I found the money and people who could bring it.

Despite her opposition to the Russian regime and the war, Maria discovered that the Polish authorities did not renew her temporary residence permit. She was informed that she and her husband's applications were rejected because they were considered a threat to Poland's state security. She believed this decision was discriminatory:

When we received these refusals and we asked various legal advisers, they all said that it was the end. We received a refusal because we were seen as a threat to the Polish state. There were cases before the war, such as those with citizens of Afghanistan and Syria, for example, and it was not as bad? as with the Russians, but there were several refusals. And all these people could not live in Poland and in the EU after that decision.

Maria appealed the decision ordering her to return to Russia, as she felt it was unsafe for her and her husband due to their open support for Ukraine and condemnation of the Russian war. She then quit her

job to focus on the long, difficult legal battle to secure their status, connected with other Russian citizens in a similar situation and sought help from lawyers, non-governmental organisations and the media.

It was very hard for me and my husband; I was crying every day, I was writing letters to different departments, and I was meeting with different journalists. I also organised an online group for other Russians in similar circumstances... We produced various materials for newspapers and television, such as videos in which we described our lives here, that we do not support Putin, and that we are just normal people.

After over a year of legal battles, Maria won their appeal and had their residence permits renewed. Nevertheless, Maria and her husband said they felt their life in Poland remained uncertain. They feared what would happen to them if their right to stay was denied in future. At the time of our interview, Maria was still dreaming of starting a family, but she was afraid to do so.

Experiences of violence

Several dimensions of violence affect women during their lives. For migrant and refugee women, this includes not only domestic and family violence but also other forms of violence, as we will evidence here. These experiences of violence can happen before women migrate, acting as a motivation to leave their home countries, or they can happen in the arriving countries.

According to the narratives of the women we interviewed, there were many violent experiences on their migratory journeys, such as the violence they suffered at borders, within their families and workplaces. Other forms of violence included institutional and state-led violence, such as public anti-immigrant speeches and racist and xenophobic attitudes.

It is essential to think about gender, race and nationality as aspects that matter and reflect on the different ways in which violence manifests itself. This section aims to present violence experienced by

migrant and refugee women considering different dimensions of their international mobility, such as family and domesticity, neighbourhood networks and violence at the state level.

In these narratives, we explore how women from different backgrounds experience acts of violence. We present some of the effects of this violence on their lives and the lives of their children. Their stories teach us that events such as pandemics, wars and riots are not the only ones that mark their lives. We also uncover acts of violence that become “ordinary” or part of everyday life, such as discriminatory state policies, anti-migrant discourses and work exploitation. Women also face several “checkpoints”, such as borders when they enter or leave a new country or the everyday checks that happen on the streets, in workplaces and in state buildings.



GRACE (MALAWI) AND FATIMA (NIGERIA)

Racial discrimination and state violence

Grace had lived in the UK for over 20 years. She had moved from a country in Southeastern Africa and lived with her young child. Grace shared the intersecting experiences of racial discrimination and immigration policy she experienced in the UK. She emphasised how women who seek asylum experience a culture of fear in relation to the immigration authority, the Home Office:

You don't want to put yourself in trouble. You don't want to put your child in trouble. So that is what I call fear. And in my vocabulary, fear doesn't exist. Fear traps you. Fear stops you from achieving your goals. It stops you from doing anything. We just stay like this [suggests paralysed position]. This is what I call fear. And what I feel now about the Home Office is fear..."
(Grace, Malawi)

Grace also discussed how there were expectations of women who seek asylum to present themselves as ‘victim’. She elaborated on how her decision to reject this label led to backlash and hostility, both from immigration institutions and in her everyday life:

But also the abuse because you’re an enemy...Why are you wearing makeup? You’ve done your hair. You’re wearing a leather dress. You’re saying you are...putting yourself [forward] as an asylum seeker. But you’re sitting on a fancy sofa. You’re doing that. You’ve got a nice Christmas tree. You’ve got a dress. (Grace, Malawi)

Grace further linked her experience living under the label of the ‘migrant/asylum-seeking woman’ with racial discrimination:

We are controlled by the system. So if we make a phone call now, looking for a job, but they hear our accent. Oh, God, we’ll not get it. I’ve heard of

actresses changing their names the first time they came to this country when they had nothing. (Grace, Malawi)

Other women also emphasised the institutional barriers they faced, including delays to citizenship applications because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Fatima arrived in the UK in 2019 after having travelled from Nigeria to seek new opportunities. The COVID-19 pandemic overlapped with her experiences of the UK immigration system:

I was not having documents. I was still an asylum seeker, you know, aside of the pandemic. And I’ve gone to [the immigration] interview and all those things. But because of the COVID and everything, everything was so slow. You understand? Everything was so slow, and all these things, so it was a tough time for me. And at the same time, there was a friend of mine who was close, and I lost her during the pandemic and all those things. It was not easy. (Fatima, Nigeria)

CARMEN (BOLIVIA)

Intersectional violence and agency in a new country

Carmen was born in La Paz, Bolivia, in a cold mining region where it snowed several times a year. Her father was a miner, as were all her neighbours. When Carmen was 12 years old, all the mines in the area were closed and sold to private companies. When her father lost his job, the family moved to the city, and Carmen was able to focus more on her studies and her work.

She began studying and worked at a firm from the age of 19 up until she turned 30. She dropped out of college when she became pregnant and dropped out of work when the domestic violence she

was experiencing got out of control. Carmen wanted a divorce, but her husband would not accept it. One day, he picked up their son from school without Carmen's permission and locked them in an apartment. Carmen took her son, reported her husband to the police station and left for Brazil with the child:

My ex-husband was violent. At first, I put up with it, you know, like every woman who experiences violence: "No, I won't tell my family, I won't tell my brothers, I won't tell anyone, you know, he'll change." A woman doesn't get married thinking she will get divorced; she gets married to build a place

and a family. But you can't be experiencing violence forever either, you know, so I got divorced. After a year, I think he thought about it and didn't want to be alone anymore, like, he wanted to get back. Then there were threats, persecution, I had to leave the company, leave my house, my pets, my dog, my cat. I took my son and I'm here.

A colleague of Carmen had a brother who needed employees for his sewing workshop in São Paulo. Upon arriving in Brazil, Carmen immediately started working, even though she didn't know how to sew and had never done this work before. The workshop owner had paid for her flight. Carmen did not receive any money for seven months. She slept in the workshop with her son, and everything she used was deducted from her salary:

He [the employer] paid me monthly. He paid me \$50 and then he discounted the bus fare to Brazil, the food... I won't forget, I didn't know the detergent they used to wash dishes, and he told me it was shampoo. I didn't know it was for washing dishes, you know? At that time, this detergent was about 15 cents and he charged me \$1. So, these are things that we went

through, and I know that even now, there must be some workshops that still do this. When we came to Brazil, the idea is to work, save and come back, but the time goes by, and that's not what people achieve.

After working in other workshops, Carmen decided to buy a sewing machine to work on her own. She made that decision when one of her employers demanded that her son, then 11 years old, work in the kitchen in exchange for food:

In my country, I worked for eight hours, had overtime and an additional salary. There, you work for five years and get a benefit. So I really didn't like it here in Brazil, but in some ways, it was peaceful; my son's father wasn't threatening me, right? I slept peacefully, but this came at a price: working a lot and earning very little.

After taking Portuguese and sewing classes through a migrant organisation, Carmen started working for them. In her new role, she was now visiting sewing workshops to inspect the working conditions of other Bolivian migrants and was helping women who found themselves in the same situation she went through.

ANIELKA (LEBANON)

Experiencing violence in transit

Anielka and her family endured a traumatic migration experience, marked by severe violence from authorities and police dogs in Hungary, after they escaped from Lebanon. Their journey was filled with suffering, as they faced not only physical brutality but

also a lack of empathy and understanding from officials. Anielka's son was brutally beaten at the Hungarian border by border control, leaving him "*extremely injured and all swollen*" with bruises. The physical and emotional scars from that violence lasted long after the incident.

One of the most horrifying moments occurred when five police dogs attacked them. Anielka recalled how the dogs charged at her son. The dogs *“bit us on the backs and on the legs,”* causing serious injuries. These bites resulted in a blood infection, which added to the trauma her son had already suffered. In their desperate attempt to escape, the family fled through the woods, covered in blood. Anielka used her headscarf to try to contain her son’s wounds, trying to stop the bleeding as best as she could.

The physical violence they experienced was compounded by further humiliation when border officials destroyed their belongings. Anielka recalled how the border guards *“stomped on our phones and broke them,”* an act that left them feeling even more

powerless. The trauma of this violence and the emotional toll on the family were undeniable, leaving psychological scars that would stay with them for years.

Even after they arrived in Germany, Anielka’s fear and trauma lingered. The fear of dogs, a constant reminder of the brutal attack they had endured, remained with her and her son. She said, *“I still have nightmares, and I can’t let dogs near me. I was the kind of person who went out at night, who had no fear.”* The trauma of what they had faced during their journey had a lasting effect and the memories of that violence continued to haunt her. This fear, born out of a traumatic experience, underscored the profound emotional impact the family had suffered throughout their migration journey.

DESHI (CHECHNYA)

Continuum of violence: fleeing forced marriage and living with the fear of deportation

Deshi was a Chechen woman in her twenties. When she was 19, her father arranged for her to marry a man she did not know and did not want to marry. To avoid the marriage, Deshi fled her home and married a Chechen refugee man, whom she had met online. They married in a small Russian town and travelled to Poland as newlyweds.

Because my father wanted to marry me off to another man, another person, I came to this Russian city; I didn't tell anyone that I was going.

Her life as a refugee woman in Poland had been full of uncertainty, economic hardship and stress. Her husband suffered from epilepsy and could not work, and one of her children had suspected Autism and was awaiting diagnosis. Deshi and her husband, who had lost his international protection rights when he crossed the border with Russia to marry her, had been waiting for 5 years to find out if they could get refugee status. They both feared deportation and what would happen to them if they were sent back to Chechnya.

My husband has been living here [in Poland] for 17 years. He had the right to stay, and we finally got our marriage certificate. When we came back, they cancelled his protection. They said we had a Russian marriage certificate, and that's why.

I feel helpless when I think we get this letter from the Foreigners' Office saying they won't give me a residence card. I don't know what will happen next or whether something will happen. I don't know when the deportation will be or whether it will happen at all. I stress so much that I... I stress a lot. I am very nervous; I am so mentally stressed that I cannot... whenever a letter arrives, I say - now there is a deportation!

I won't go there; I don't want to. My father could marry me off to another man, to another person; I don't want to leave my children here; I didn't work in Russia either. They will kill my husband if he goes back.

Amid these challenges, Deshi found work as a part-time cleaner in a shop. The shop owner, understanding her situation,

agreed to hire her 'na czarno' (illegally), which allowed Deshi to support her family with limited finances. She enjoyed this opportunity as she could build new friendly relationships with her work colleagues and learn Polish through daily conversations. For Deshi, this job was more than just a means to earn money; it was a step towards greater stability and belonging in her new country.

I clean the office there, and I also clean the shop. It's very good, and the people are very good. I want to work there. I know another woman who works there, also a Chechen, she helped me. Earlier, I was looking everywhere; I called, and they always said that without a contract you can't, without a contract, you can't [work]. When I talk to people, I listen to them, and that's how I learned Polish.

Despite the overwhelming uncertainty and fear of deportation, Deshi has shown incredible inner strength and continues to fight for her family's legal status.

Resistance and resilience across borders

Women migrate for various reasons, to free themselves from violence, including the violence of wars, authoritarian regimes and patriarchal and inequality structures. This decision to migrate or to flee is also an act of resistance. In this sense, migrant women resist their fate of violence, poverty, inequality and suffering and seek better, safer, dignified lives – for themselves and their loved ones. They are not solely experiencing victimhood but are survivors, too, who try to actively shape their lives and livelihoods as best as they can when faced with forces outside of their control. Suffering and strength, therefore, go hand in hand. They are clearly entangled and almost inseparable in the life stories of the women who migrate, showing their incredible strength and resilience.

Such strength and resilience derive also from women's support networks, which exist across borders and in various forms. Migrant women support other migrant women, and migrant women's grassroots organisations are often created and staffed by migrant women. We can clearly see migrant women's mobilisation during times of crisis, such

as during the COVID-19 pandemic, global wars, and sociopolitical upheavals. Migrant women resist by relying upon and sharing their strengths, skills and resources across their networks, both in their countries of origin and their new countries. Many forms of such support include feminised (paid and unpaid) labour and practices of care, which are often invisible. Women care for others, elder parents, children, and other women in their social networks – to resist and survive together.

Migrant women's political activism is also remarkable, as many of them become advocates, activists and leaders for equality, women's rights and empowerment. Despite their traumatic experiences, women show solidarity with those who are wronged and suffering and fight for social justice, dignity, and a good life for all. This is done via their work, volunteering, organising and participating in political action, NGOs, and local, national and international organisations. Their time is selflessly given, and their experiences are shared with hope for a better tomorrow. Their voices and actions are driven by the ethics of care and empathy for others and continue to be the backbone of political activism.



SINEAD (SYRIA)

Resisting institutional discrimination and inequality and advocating for and supporting others

Sinead, a 45-year-old woman from Syria, began her new life in Germany in 2015, carrying with her both hope and the heavy burden of feeling unseen. Her experience as a refugee led to subtle but persistent discrimination, where her expertise was often undervalued compared to that of native Germans. In her early days in Germany, Sinead often

experienced dismissive treatment. In her workplace, she felt that her contributions were often disregarded or questioned, reflecting a broader tendency to view her through the narrow lens of her refugee status.

Sinead decided to channel her frustration into resilience and activism as an integration counsellor by using her lived experience to

support other women who migrate. Her role allowed her to become an advocate for those navigating the complexities of resettlement and integration. Central to Sinead's activism was her focus on gender equality, justice and solidarity. She recognised the challenges faced by migrant women, including exploitation and abuse, and worked to build a supportive network for them. Her efforts fostered a sense of sisterhood and empowerment among women, highlighting their collective strength and capacity for change.

Sinead's journey was marked by significant hurdles, including verbal attacks from men and protracted bureaucratic battles related to her citizenship. Despite these obstacles, she remained determined and used her experiences to fuel her activism. Her commitment to improving conditions for people arriving in Germany led her to become the chair of a migration organisation. In this role, she addressed systemic issues and advocated for policies that promote greater equality and support for migrant communities.

Sinead's journey from feeling overlooked to becoming an integration counsellor and activist illustrates her resilience and agency. Her experiences of marginalisation fuelled her drive to fight for visibility and equality, and her ongoing work continued to reflect her deep commitment to creating a more inclusive and just society.

The idea came up that I wanted to apply for the Migration Advisory Board, and now I am also the chair. Gradually, over time, I had many conversations with women who have also experienced verbal attacks and threats from Arab men, not all of them, but many of them. Because of that, I want to bring many more women to the table, so we can fight together for our freedom and our lives. And the idea came that we also need to address our existence—not only against the men who do not accept us as free women, but also against the society that does not accept us as refugee women. We need to prove that we are part of this society and fight for peace or freedom for all women here. But we also need recognition for our existence as ordinary people, not just as refugees.

MILENA (BELARUS)

Political activism and invisible practices of care

Milena, a Belarusian woman in her late fifties, was actively involved with her family in the 2020 anti-government protests in Belarus. Due to their political activism aimed at dismantling the Belarusian authoritarian regime, she had to flee the country to protect her two grandchildren from repressions adopted by the government:

My entire family supported the political movement of the leader, Sergei Tsikhanousky. I had to leave my home and my family right after my daughter was detained. I left very quickly with my two young grandchildren.

My husband stayed in Belarus to support our daughter and her husband. We were a normal, friendly family; we spent all our free time together, we raised our children together, we helped our daughter, our daughter helped us, and then it all ended... We haven't seen each other for 4 years. It's like we are at the frontline: two of us became prisoners, one is alone on the front line, and the three of us are in exile.

During her refuge in Poland, Milena heard of two Belarusian children who needed help, and she became their foster parent. Four

years had passed since she arrived in Poland with her grandchildren and three years since she started fostering. Despite all the challenges and hardships deriving from having her family torn apart, Milena has not given up as she continued to resist the violence inflicted by her country on her and her family through practices of care:

Social services told me about these children; that there are two Belarusian children in a very difficult situation, almost on the street. I couldn't remain indifferent, and I don't regret it at all. It was hard, and now

it's not easy, but I don't regret it because I see how the children are changing, and my grandchildren are better; they are starting to appreciate their family, their grandmother. The older one, as I see it, is becoming stronger; he doesn't have that look of "What will happen to me?" on his face. He seems to feel at home here...

Time flies, and children grow; they make me happy, both mine and the foster boys. And I see how the little one is growing and developing. You could talk endlessly about what was "before" and what is "after" [fostering].

KANONI (TANZANIA)

Solidarity, kinship and hope

Kanoni has lived in the UK since 2005 with her young daughter. She was born in a country in North-East Africa and subsequently lived in a European country for most of her life. Her decision to migrate to the UK was to reunite with her mother and access educational opportunities for her future children. Similarly to many of the women that we spoke to, she had been subject to both personal and state violence. In discussing her experiences of overcoming obstacles, Kanoni shared how she relied on grassroots networks to help deal with her challenges. She elaborated on how she developed new friendships

with other women with a migration background via these grassroots organisations, and she considered these women as family and a source of strength:

It was just knowing that you're not alone. When adversity hits, you feel like it's just me in this big world. I can feel quite overwhelmed. You just feel like I am on my own. I have to figure this out on my own. I think having the support of [an organisation] behind me in the background, just I just knew that I wasn't on my own... When I come here, I feel like I'm healthy, I'm wealthy, I'm just at peace, I'm at ease.

She further elaborated on the small everyday acts of care as a form of resistance, activism and solidarity in a system that was trying to push her out:

Just knowing that you can pop in for a drink...they'll just give you the undivided attention and just listen to you and see you. Like you feel seen, you feel heard, you feel embraced. I definitely believe that resilience can be fuelled by your community and just that reassurance of remembering that you're not alone, remembering that we can get through this. It gives you an extra layer of thickness on your skin... just love, unity, and community.

Community organisations, like the one that Kanoni attended, provided a safe space for women to come together and to problem-solve:

A brew and a chat is all it needs, and then, before you know it, that's the major transformation, rather than all of these programs or whatnot.

These peer support groups helped migrant women maintain positive mental health and stay strong mentally, even when going through challenging times:

I definitely appreciate grassroots organisations like [name of organisation]. There's women in there that come, and they're like, I'm on 15 medications a day, but coming here beats it all.

Strong female support networks provided both practical and emotional help. After Kanoni gave birth, it was other migrant women who brought food to her house and offered to take the baby for a few hours so she could sleep.

SANDRA (BOLIVIA)

Redefining work relationships in everyday life

Sandra lived in La Paz, Bolivia, with her family. After she moved to Argentina at the age of 16, she entered the sewing market. There, Sandra married a man who, after the birth of their son, moved to Brazil. He invited her to join him in São Paulo, and she reluctantly accepted. When she arrived in the country, Sandra and her son were forbidden to leave the house. Her husband had a girlfriend in the same neighbourhood, and Sandra began suffering physical and psychological violence:

I put up with all of this, all for my son because there was no way I could get out of there. I would tell other Bolivian women: "My husband beats me, what can I do?". They said, leave him. But I didn't know how to leave him. I didn't know anyone, I had a son, where would I go?

Sandra managed to get out of the relationship with the help of a neighbour who gave her a job in a sewing workshop. Time passed, she took sewing courses, bought sewing machines, and became a micro-entrepreneur.

When the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, Sandra had health issues but began sewing masks and receiving state aid. At the same time, she met a woman at Casa do Povo, a cultural centre that houses social projects. There, she started a Cooperative that, in her words, saved her during the pandemic:

I didn't know what I was capable of. Until then, I was just Sandra, a resident of Bom Retiro, but when I went to Casa do Povo... It seems that at that moment, I felt like a leader. Before, I was nothing. Then we started calling women to sew, and the Cooperative was born.

The work started with five women, and eventually, more than 30 arrived. Sandra became the president of the organisation, centralising much of the work. The cooperative closed after the pandemic, but since then, two other organisations were born:

That was the place I wanted to be, to help women, to take care of them. I felt like everyone's mother because my life was the organisation. I wanted to live from Monday to Monday at Casa do Povo, working, taking care of,

listening, because to every woman who called in and said: "I have a problem", I said: "Come on, let's work".

Sandra also became the leader of a group of migrant women who meet in her neighbourhood, helping women in her community as she was previously helped:

I feel that by doing this, I feel alive, happy, caring, and helping other people because when I am here alone, working, I feel very tired and very stressed. I feel like I could die alone in this workshop.

Sandra said that working with the other women helped her see her past differently, less as a source of suffering and more as a motivation to help other women who were going through similar situations:

Nowadays, I am more confident in myself because I learned that there are many laws for women, and I feel that if something happens [violence], I must report it. I want to prepare myself so that I can help more women. I don't want them to go through what I went through, I want to tell them that since I healed, they can heal, that now it doesn't hurt as much as before.

Hopes for an uncertain future

My future plan...I wanted to go back to school, right? Because of this barrier of no recourse to public funds and the visa. So, I'm just waiting when I get my indefinite stay. I want to go back to school...This job I'm doing, I'm in love with the job. So, I just want to go further with it. So that's just my future plan, and hope my children get the best. - Amara, Nigeria

I don't want to delay myself cause this is the moment I've been waiting for all my life. And now the time is here, let me ...let me just start working. - Agatha, Malawi

I want to go to Ukraine, maybe not Mariupol, but at least for a while to Ukraine. To my homeland. My family is there, there is family. - Klara, Ukraine

My father is now in the United States. He got a visa. My stepmother is in Haiti, a small city with less violence. But me? I don't like travelling because I know what I suffered to get here. I was alone back then, and now I have a child. Can you imagine going to the US with a child? I have heard there are children who die on the road. No way, I'm staying right here! - Brigitte, Haiti

During the pandemic, I started an organisation. It is not official yet, but I want to regularise it as an NGO. I have so many projects. I went to the city hall, but they asked me to make it official, or else they couldn't help me. - Élise, Cameroon

Now I'm doing ok in Brazil; I'm probably going to die here. Both my girls were born here, and they are studying. Now I'm thinking about sewing and making a full piece of shorts or blouses because I have learned how to do it. In the end, I was blessed with everything that happened. I'm crying now, but these are happy tears. - Sandra, Bolivia

Before I came here, I wanted to study. But you know, with Covid, you hold back a bit. When you have children, you need to do something because they have to eat. You need to take care of them. - Umamaka, Nigeria

I don't talk about plans. It doesn't matter if it's with loved ones or strangers; I don't talk about it, and that's it. I don't feel safe at all, even being here. I'm not convinced it's safe. That's why we'll just dream, and my dream is this: does anyone have a time machine? And that it would work. - Olena, Ukraine

The first year was very difficult because every day, my children kept saying: “Mom, we want to go home. Mom, when are we going?”. But we can’t go. They want to, and they have this dream, and there’s always this conversation: “Mom, when we go to Ukraine, we can do something like this, and then something like this...” Well, they’re just planning. Yes, but I said we can plan. We hope to return, but I can’t promise it will be soon. - Helena, Ukraine

I wish these ageing comrades would disappear [in Belarus]. What I want most is to go home. The children watch videos and photographs and they want to go to Belarus. We try to talk to them about how it would look like when we finally get there. - Nadezhda, Belarus

I dreamed of a peaceful, good old age and a small pension; I had 80 rubles. - Bozhena, Ukraine

I hope that there will be no other pandemics, that science will somehow do something so that there will be nothing like that, and that the war [in Ukraine] will finally end, so that people can travel and meet their families. Because it’s not just about me not meeting my parents or someone else. There are so many people who, for whatever reason, do not meet their families; it’s not only because of the pandemic, but also because of the war. - Larysa, Ukraine

I would like to continue helping people and start my own business. These are issues close to my heart, because I went through it myself once, and now I can share it by talking to people and helping them as a consultant, as a professional - what can they do to stay in Poland legally and to work legally and how can they find their way here, especially when they are immigrants. - Volha, Belarus

We want to get Polish citizenship. Our temporary residence card has expired, and we are waiting for a new one, so there is a bit of fear. Because we are citizens of Russia, there is such uncertainty: maybe they will not extend it. We understand that with our [Russian] citizenship, we are not very liked in the world. That is why it is difficult for us to make any plans for the future; moving is also very difficult. - Elena, Russia

I want to work so that I can get a visa for my daughter in Syria, to sponsor her to join me. - Fatima, Syria

A big dream. Ah, that my family comes here. Yes, that would be my dream. - Chiamaka, Colombia

Yes, my wish, I want all to live well, all the world to live well. Without wars, without [wars]. Yes, to live together. All over the world. Also, all religions, I want us to live here together. That is my wish. - Shanti, Morocco

We're just expected to pick up everything that spills. The glass has broken.... We're expected to pick it up, regardless of whether we're wearing shoes or not... As women, we're so used to walking through the storm with grace and pose...which automatically builds our resilience, which is why in times like COVID or in other crisis moments, we're able to just spring into action... For our children, our community, and the people that we are used to care for.

Kanoni, Tanzania

Each story presented in this booklet offers a vivid and intimate window into the lives of women who migrate, their often-unseen struggles and shared experiences of inequality, violence and discrimination. However, they also show migrant women's strength, resilience, and undying hope that define their journeys as they continue to fight for better futures – not only for themselves but also their children, families, communities and other migrant women.

We do not know what the future holds for the women whose life stories we shared. What we do know for certain is that it is time to act. The lives of migrant women must be made better, safer, and more just. We thus call for greater empathy, solidarity, and action to create a world where women, no matter their background or circumstances, are seen, heard and empowered.

The challenges migrant women face across the world are significant, but so is the hope for change.

Afterword



www.genmigra.org

This booklet is based on findings from the GEN-MIGRA Project, which was funded under the Trans-Atlantic Platform for Social Sciences and Humanities (T-AP) under the Recovery, Renewal and Resilience in a Post-Pandemic World Call. Bringing together researchers and practitioners from four countries (Brazil, Germany, Poland and the United Kingdom), GEN-MIGRA researched the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on migrant women and their families.

