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Women's experiences of border crossing: gender, mobility and border control

Abstract

In recent years, new migration patterns emerged in Europe and border control operations became more complex and broader, resulting in an increasing number of non-nationals detained for migration-related reasons. This paper aims to explore how gender, migration and border control intersect in the lives of women detained for not having authorisation to remain in Portugal. Several visits were made to a detention facility, where ten women detainees were interviewed. Our findings reveal how gender plays a crucial role in women's mobility pathways, and how the lack of a secure migrant status can be used as a control mechanism within the context of gendered relationships. Overall, due attention is paid to the way crossing borders impacts the lives of these women, reinforcing their vulnerabilities, and to the ways in which women deal with and resist the precariousness and violence they are exposed to, seeking a meaning and continuity for their lives.

Keywords: non-national women, gender, border-crossing, migration-related detention, lived experiences.

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Introduction

Looking back at history, scholarship on women and migration has been marked by a tendency to undervalue women's agency and their proactive roles in the migration process (Mahler and Pessar, 2006; Ross-Sheriff, 2011; Tastsoglou et al., 2005). Until the 1970s, indeed, most of the literature on this topic relied on the supposed women's tendency to migrate following a male decision or to meet family basic needs rather than to pursue their own desires or interests (Matos, 2016). By then, there was a widely shared assumption that women (and children) migrate to accompany or to reunite with their migrant husbands and fathers (Mahler and Pessar, 2006). In the early 1980's, however, different arguments began to emerge. For instance, Morokvasic (1983) demonstrated that women's migration can be a deliberate and calculated move to escape from a society where heteropatriarchy is an institutionalised and repressive force.

Following Morokvasic's work, in the last decades migration studies have begun to pay attention to gender, along with other social relations of power, and have conceptualised women's migration as a gendered process (Mahler and Pessar, 2006; Matos, 2016; Ross-Sheriff, 2011). In particular, part of this scholarship has argued that women's migration can be a means of escaping violence and/or dependence on men, as well as an opportunity for women to achieve new rights and to pursue self-development and self-determination (Mahler and Pessar, 2006; Matos, 2016).

In a previous study with non-national women in the Portuguese prison system (Matos, 2016), a plurality of migratory paths was found. While some women sought a better life in Portugal, others arrived by chance. Among those who hoped for better living conditions, several came from Portuguese-speaking countries (i.e., former Portuguese colonies) during their childhood or adolescence, as part of a wider family group. Others came later to Portugal, looking for labour opportunities. While some had decided autonomously on their migration, others came due to someone else's decision.

In the study by Esposito and colleagues in the Italian context, a wide variety of circumstances, needs, and desires emerged to inform women's migration too (Esposito, Ornelas, Scirocchi and Arcidiacono, 2019). Improving their financial situation, seeking autonomy from abusive family contexts, gaining an opportunity to live a free and full life, including an emotional life were some of the motives given by the women interviewed for their move to Europe/Italy. As Andrijasevic (2010) highlights "a feeling of being 'stuck' in life or the desire to find a partner or love are equally important as economic hardship in capturing the reason why people migrate" (p. 139). This rationale was confirmed in both the

studies mentioned above, and it informs the present paper as well. This means looking at migrant women as complex subjects seeking, and struggling for, geographic, affective, economic and social mobility (Esposito, Ornelas, Scirocchi and Arcidiacono, 2019).

However, it is worth noting that women's subjective experiences of transnational mobility are also deeply informed by what Mountz (2011) has defined as "material topographies of exclusion" (p. 385). Border posts, police patrols, prisons, and detention centres are all part of a complex apparatus aimed at containing and filtering migrants' mobility (Tazzioli, 2018; Tazzioli and Garelli, 2018), while also over determining their (gendered, as well as racialised and class-based) struggles to access sovereign territory. Notwithstanding this evidence, not much research has shed light on women's perspectives and experiences regarding borders and border crossing (for exceptions see Gerard and Pickering, 2014; Mehta, 2016), and most studies in this field have adopted a male lens. In particular, a scarce scholarly knowledge exists on the lived experiences of women who end up detained, and who can be regarded as a "silenced custodial population" (Bosworth and Kellezi, 2014, p. 81). Yet, the existing literature highlights that women in detention face particular challenges and struggles, and present gender-specific needs, vulnerabilities, and resiliencies (e.g., Bosworth et al., 2014; Bosworth and Kellezi, 2014; Esposito, Ornelas, Scirocchi and Arcidiacono, 2019).

Based on this evidence, in this paper we aim at understanding, from a psychosocial perspective, how gender, migration and border control intersect in the lives of non-national women detained for not having authorisation to remain in Portugal. In particular, we analyse the experiences of migration and crossing borders, the pathways to illegalisation and detention and the expectations for the future of ten women confined inside a detention facility of the Portuguese Border Control Agency. In doing so, we acknowledge Sládková and Bond's (2011) call for looking at diversity within migrant communities and for adopting an intersectional framework of analysis able to grasp the interacting role of gender and sex – along with other social markers (e.g., class, 'race,' ethnicity, nationality) – in shaping migrants' experiences as embedded in contexts from the local to the global. Furthermore, our analysis relies on a paradigm that goes beyond "simply understanding mobility as the movement of individuals or groups among fixed points in Cartesian space" (Conlon, 2011, p.354) to an approach that looks at migration as a structurally influenced experience that largely stems from systemic inequalities, deeply embedded in historical geopolitical relations between countries (Global North vs. Global South) (Brabeck et al., 2011). Taking on this viewpoint, in this article we trace the processes through which migrant women are exposed to a protracted condition of insecurity and precariousness as well as to a wide range of experiences of exploitation and

violence, including state-sponsored violence (i.e., detention and deportation). Overall, our main point is to unveil, through a bottom-up process of knowledge production that establishes migrant women as protagonists and experts, the nature and impacts of border regimes and their mechanisms of differential inclusion[3] (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013) across lines of gender and sex among other factors (Andrijasevic, 2009, 2010).

The research context

Consistently with a global scenario of progressive securitisation (Huysmans, 2000, 2006) and criminalisation of migration (Ackerman and Furman, 2014; Stumpf, 2006), in recent years an increased number of inspections and border checks have been carried out by the Portuguese Immigration and Border Services (hereinafter, SEF). As a result, in 2017, framed by the Portuguese Immigration Law[4], there were 888 new administrative expulsion processes (+6.3%, compared to 2016), and 354 removals were enforced, of which 187 within the framework of administrative expulsions (art. 145, Law 23/2007[5]), and 129 following expulsion orders issued as part of a criminal sentence (art. 151, Law 23/2007[6]). In addition, there were 38 cases of accompaniment to a border post of non-nationals who declared their willingness to leave the country (art. 147, Law 23/2007). Most of the people subject to removal were confined to dedicated facilities (Serviço de Estrangeiros e Fronteiras, 2018).

In Portugal, there are five short-term holding facilities for undocumented migrants and asylum seekers lodging an application at entry points in the main airports (Lisbon, Oporto, Faro, Funchal, and Ponta Delgada), complemented by one 'Temporary Accommodation Centre' located in the Portuguese national territory, with capacity for 30 adults and six children. This centre is managed by the SEF with the cooperation of partner institutions that provide support and guarantee the rights of detained migrants.

In 2017, 203 people were detained in the above-mentioned centre: 196 adults (80% men and 20% women, with an average age of 35 years), and seven minors. Of these, 54 people were asylum seekers (a significant increase with respect to previous years). According to the Portuguese Immigration Law[7], detention can be up to 60 days, or 90 days in special

[3] 'Differential inclusion describes how inclusion in a sphere, society or realm can involve various degrees of subordination, rule, discrimination, racism, disenfranchisement, exploitation and segmentation' (Casas-Cortes et al., 2015, 79).

[4] Law 23/2007, amended by Laws 29/2012, 56/2015, 63/2015, 59/2017, 102/2017, 26/2018, and 28/2019.

[5] Amended by Law 29/2012.

[6] Amended by Laws 29/2012 and 56/2015.

[7] The Portuguese Immigration Law follows the 2008 European directive on expulsion and detention.

circumstances and following a judicial order. However, in 2017, the average stay was of 32 days. Detainees were mainly from Brazil (14.8%), Democratic Republic of Congo (9.6%), India (6.1%), Cape Verde (5.6%), and Morocco (5.6%). Notably, most of the women detained were from Brazil, highlighting how the numbers of detention in Portugal, like in other countries (e.g., Bosworth, 2017), reflect its national colonial history. There were also several cases of migrants with physical and mental health problems, and all kinds of social problems with emphasis on unemployment (JRS - Serviço Jesuíta aos Refugiados, 2018).

This paper relies on interviews conducted during the fieldwork we have been developing since 2013 inside the 'Temporary Accommodation Centre'.

Methodological notes

Throughout the course of our fieldwork[8], we interviewed ten women[9] (18 to 49 years old) in order to gain an understanding of their lived experiences, through their own perspectives. Seven women came from Brazil, two from Nigeria and one from Sri Lanka, and most of them had been living in Portugal for several years (cf. Table 1). The interviews, which in some cases took place on more than one occasion, were conducted in both Portuguese and in English. Interpreters were not readily available on-site.

Table 1 – Participants (Country, age, time in Portugal and in the detention centre)

Women (*)	*Country*	*Age*	*How long in Portugal*	*Detention days when interviewed*
Anna	Nigeria	22	35 days	35
Barbara	Brazil	24	14 years	14
Carla	Brazil	33	5 years	2
Diana	Brazil	30	10 years (between Spain and Portugal)	1
Emma	Brazil	47	9 years	3
Fran	Brazil	49	6 months and 10 days	20
Gloria	Brazil	48	5 years	5
Helena	Brazil	21	6 months	14
Iris	Sri Lanka	27	11 days	8
Julia	Nigeria	18	26 days	17

(*) Pseudonyms

[8] The fieldwork was articulated in two distinctive periods (i.e., April 2013 – May 2014 and July 2015 - December 2017), consisting of segments of 2-5 consecutive days spent inside the detention centre.

[9] The relative small number of interviews is due to the fact that, when our fieldwork took place, the detention population was predominantly made up of men (see 'The research context section'). Furthermore, it is worth noting that we did not access the facility on an everyday basis and that some of the women we met did not agree to participate in the study.

All the interviews were conducted inside the 'Temporary Accommodation Centre', while women waited for their immigration cases to be processed. The interview script took the form of a life history, focusing on the women's lives in their countries of origin, migration motivations and expectations, migration journeys, settlement experiences, experiences with the Portuguese system of immigration and border control, life in detention, and views about the future. Interviews lasted from 20 to 68 minutes, and were digitally recorded and transcribed *verbatim*, with the exception of one case, in which the participant did not agree to audio recording, thus, her interview was handwritten. Before the interview, all the participants were informed on the nature and aims of the study, as well as on confidentiality, and signed a consent form (whenever possible provided in their mother tongue).

The women's accounts were analysed through a thematic narrative analysis inspired by the work of community psychologists Brinton Lykes and Rachel Hershberg (2015). We started by reading the transcripts several times and creating case summaries. Then, we reviewed these summaries to begin focusing on the crucial topics around which the women organised their narratives. In particular, we focused on the role of gender and sexuality on women's migration paths and their experiences of crossing borders. Themes within and across these narratives were identified and collectively discussed in order to refine the analytic framework. Continuities and discontinuities within and across participants' paths were also analysed.

Overall, our research is drawn on a feminist framework that takes into account the historical exclusion of women from the process of knowledge production, enacted also by leaving out or eclipsing their voices and experiences (Mehta, 2016; Piscitelli, 2008). In accordance with this framework, a critical reflexive attitude has been embraced at all stages of the research process (Esposito, 2017). Nevertheless, we are aware that our positionality, as white scholars from EU countries, has influenced the analysis and understanding of our data.

Below we present a brief history of each participant, using pseudonyms to introduce them.

Anna is a 22-year-old Nigerian woman. When she was interviewed, she had been in Portugal for 35 days, all of which spent in detention at the Centre.

She found it very difficult to talk about her past and her journey to detention in Portugal. Anna was caught by the immigration police at Lisbon's airport, while she was travelling from Italy to Canada without regular documentation.

Barbara is a 24-year-old woman from Brazil. She had been in Portugal for 14 years and at the Centre for 14 days, when she was interviewed.

She came to Portugal when she was 10 because her father was working here and had a stable economic and social condition. She reported several experiences of intimate partner violence throughout her life trajectory. She started working as a stripper in a bar, where she was caught by the police for being undocumented.

Carla is a 33-year-old Brazilian woman. She had been in Portugal for 5 years and at the Centre for 2 days, when she was interviewed.

She had a hard childhood in a very poor family and surrounding social context, and at the age of 13 she started to work as a housekeeper. At 17, she had her first child. A victim of intimate violence, she escaped to Spain where she had an aunt. After two months in Spain she decided to move to Portugal. When she left Brazil, her plans were to earn some money and go back. But she enjoyed being in Portugal and planned to stay longer. She worked in a hostess bar, where she was caught by the police for being undocumented.

Diana is a 30-year-old Brazilian woman. She had been living intermittently between Portugal and Spain for 10 years. She had just arrived at the Centre when she was interviewed.

She was adopted early in her life and had what she considers to have been a "normal" childhood. She got married at a young age and experienced a violent relationship with, according to her, a very controlling husband. She went first to Spain on a tourist visa and moved to Portugal about 10 years ago. She was caught in her house, after her boyfriend's report to the police that she was in an irregular situation.

Emma is a 47-year-old Brazilian woman. She had been in Portugal for 9 years and at the Centre for 3 days, when she was interviewed.

She had a stable life during childhood and as an adult. However, after facing economic difficulties and ending her marriage, she decided to move to Portugal, where she had a friend. She received an expulsion order some years ago, but she ignored it. She worked in the sex industry, and was caught by the police while she was working in a hostess bar.

Fran is a 49-year-old woman from Brazil. She had been in Portugal for 6 months and at the Centre for 20 days, when she was interviewed.

With little education, in Brazil she worked in construction and in agriculture, exposed to harsh conditions and low salaries. During her first time in Portugal she started a relationship with a Portuguese man, but she got an expulsion order and had to go back to Brazil. In 2014, she came back to Europe, first to France, where her Portuguese boyfriend was working in construction, and then she moved again to Portugal. She was caught in a police raid.

Gloria is a 48-year-old Brazilian woman. She had been in Portugal for 5 years and at the Centre for 5 days, when she was interviewed.

Abandoned by her father and mother, she grew up with her grandmother, described as a very catholic woman, very attached to her, and then with her aunt. Since childhood she knew that she was a transgender. Finally, at the age of 17, when her grandmother died, she came out of the closet. She experienced sex work in Brazil to pay for hormones and silicone. She arrived in Portugal on a tourist visa. At the time of our interview she was HIV positive, and she was on a retroviral treatment. She was caught undocumented in a police raid while travelling between two Portuguese cities.

Helena is a 21-year-old Brazilian woman. She had been in Portugal for 6 months and at the Centre for 14 days, when she was interviewed.

She described her parents as very traditional, reason why she had a conflictual relationship with them, and, ultimately, she decided to leave the family home at the age of 16. She came with a friend to Portugal on a tourist visa. Here she began an intimate relationship with an older partner who abused her and she found herself in a situation of economic and housing dependency. She was detained at her boyfriend's house after having received an expulsion letter in a bar where she was working. At the time of our interview she was 4 months pregnant.

Iris is a 27-year-old woman from Sri-Lanka. She had been in Portugal for 11 days and at the Centre for 8 days, when she was interviewed.

In her country of origin she was a member of the Tamil liberation movement. Together with her family, she actively participated in the Sri Lankan Civil War (which lasted from 1983 until 2009). After that, she was imprisoned by the Sri Lankan military in a concentration camp for Tamils. She was incarcerated in 2009 and released in November 2015, upon the payment of a sum of money. Afterwards, she went to her aunt's place in Vietnam. From there she went back to Sri Lanka, but she was forced to escape. She used a fake passport and, for this reason, she was apprehended by Portuguese border police at Oporto's airport, while she was trying to get to the UK where a cousin was living.

Julia is an 18-year-old woman from Nigeria. She had been in Portugal for 26 days and at the Centre for 17 days, when she was interviewed.

She had a very tortuous trajectory until her detention in Portugal. Her story involved several stages with multiple obstacles and extreme violence. This story was similar to the one described by other women seeking to escape from Nigeria to Europe and ending up being trafficked. She was finally caught in Oporto where she was forced into sex work.

In the next sections we will present the results of the qualitative analysis on four main themes: *Migration plans and expectations*, *Crossing borders*, *Life in Portugal*, and *Looking to the future*.

Migration plans and expectations

First of all, the analysis highlighted different migratory paths, as was evidenced in previous studies on gendered migrations (e.g., Mahler and Pessar, 2006) and on non-national women in the criminal justice system (e.g., Matos, 2016). Nevertheless, despite such diversity all ten women moved geographically because they sought economic, social and affective mobility (Esposito, Ornelas, Scirocchi and Arcidiacono, 2019). In particular, their mobilities were driven by two essential motives: achieving better social and economic conditions, and escaping from violent relationships and high gender control.

Seven women came from Brazil (nationals from this former Portuguese colony represent the largest number of residents in the country[10]). Among them, Barbara was the only one to have come during her childhood. Like several non-national women caught by the criminal justice system, whose pathways were analysed in the work of Matos (2016), she came as part of a wider family group. However, contrary to many migrant women who declare they left their home countries because of poverty and the lack of living conditions (Bonizzoni, 2015; Matos, 2016), Barbara described a more privileged life in Brazil and told us that she came because her father had a stable job in Portugal:

> *"We had a normal life, not with many… well, it was normal, without difficulties or so. The idea of coming to Portugal was because my father was living here already… he had businesses here, he was an influent person, so he went to get us."*

This migration path is aligned with what has been designated as the first wave of Brazilian migration to Portugal from the late 1980's to the mid-1990s. This wave, in which most migrants were of a high social and economic status and had a university education, preceded a second migratory trend, more expressive in numbers and in the diversity of migrants' profiles (Cunha, 2014; Gomes, 2018). This second migratory trend fits the cases of other Brazilian women we interviewed. Indeed, they came to Portugal later on in their lives and the majority reported very poor living conditions in their home country, from childhood to adult life, experiencing economic deprivation, low access to education, early need to assume household tasks and precarious work from an early age. The words of Fran are very telling in this regard:

> *"I didn't study much [...] I have worked in everything you can think of... coffee, potato, tomato harvest, this whole thing ... I used to get up at 4 o'clock in the morning… You have to work, with rain or under the sun, because it's based on production, not per month."*

The pathways of our participants shed light on the concept of gendered poverty: indeed, the difficulty in accessing education, the early need to assume household tasks, and the low opportunities and the precariousness that they faced in the labour market were influenced by gender roles and expectations (especially in the case of Gloria). In addition, the majority of them mentioned experiencing violence and discrimination in interpersonal domains. The desire to escape from these relationships was, therefore, one of their main drives

[10] According to the last report of the Portuguese Immigration and Border Services (Serviço de Estrangeiros e Fronteiras, 2018), Brazilian citizens represent 20.3% of the foreign nationals with permission to live in Portugal.

to move. Hence, we can argue that these women's mobility is directly linked with the precariousness associated with their female status, and thus, clearly gendered (Lutz, 2010).

In the cases of Helena and Gloria, there were no significant economic problems, but gender was crucial in determining their mobility trajectories too. Helena came to Portugal, as an adolescent, trying to escape from her family problems and her parents' control:

> *"So I went out and stayed at a friend's house, because at my parents' house I couldn't […] because my mother was very systematic, very traditional; she is young but she thinks like an old person. My parents are very difficult..."*

Gloria also moved driven by the desire to escape from traditional forms of gender control. However, in her particular case she was looking for a context where she could assume to be a transgender person without the risk of being targeted. Her story sheds light on the phenomenon of transgender migration, which has been documented in academic literature (e.g., Cerezo et al., 2014; Pessoa, 2016). As in the cases analysed in these works, Gloria reported to having experienced discrimination at different stages in her life, as well as other forms of violence. About her mobility path, she first moved, in Brazil, from a small rural town to the big metropolis of São Paulo, because, as she tells in her own words, she *"wanted something different, wanted new horizons"*.

Later on, Gloria decided to come to Europe, where she expected to have a better life due to a more liberal mentality, less violence and access to better public services (e.g., healthcare) and life conditions. As Pessoa (2016) explains in his work on transgender Brazilian women in the sex industry in Europe, these women come to Europe looking mostly for freedom, access to economic capital for feminisation techniques, respect for their identity and the possibility of experiencing femininity, permanently and safely.

The two women who came from Nigeria and the one who came from Sri Lanka had different paths before their detention in Portugal. As illustrated by the cases of Iris and Julia, it was not only their past in their country of origin that was full of violence, but the migratory trajectory itself also had contours of great violence (see Crossing Borders section). On these women, who were forced to undertake a very risky route, often relied the burden of ensuring the survival of their families. For instance, Julia's words are enlightening as to the situation of poverty and deprivation that she and her family experienced in their country of origin:

> *"We are very poor, my father is a farmer, my mother is a trader […] it's not easy. […] We don't have a house; the house we stayed at… with a lot of people, has 12 rooms. […] Not just my family, different families."*

As for her journey, the scenario she described is one of violence, kidnapping and successive life-threatening situations, and she is likely to have been caught in a trafficking network, as is the case of other Nigerian women (Plambech, 2007). In the case of Anna's journey, violence and suffering were also present. However, during the interview she didn't clarify many details of her departure and trajectory to her detention in Oporto. As she told us, she wanted to move because she *"just wanted to have a good life, like everybody"*. Finally, the case of Iris made us think about the specificity of the mobilities driven by war scenarios. Indeed, Iris was a Tamil and together with her family she participated in the Sri Lankan Civil War (which ran from 1983 until 2009) supporting the struggle of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) for the creation of an independent state for Tamil people. After the defeat of LTTE, Iris, like many Tamils, was imprisoned by the Sri Lankan military in a concentration camp, with little or no contact with the outside world (see Weissman, 2011). Iris told us she moved through many camps, suffering continuous rape by militaries (Wood, 2009). She was incarcerated from 2009 to November 2015, when she was finally released upon the payment of a sum of money. However, once outside, her life continued to be at risk (indeed, her father was shot). For this reason, she decided to come to Europe, albeit through 'irregular' channels.

Remarkably, our participants' mobility paths, characterised by subjugation, violence, and heightened vulnerability associated with their gender, also revealed instances of agency and resistance. For example, when they firmly asserted their will to not return to their countries of origin, when they described how hard they worked to pay for their passage to Europe, or even when they revealed their plans to marry their Portuguese male partners in order to get a residence permit and be no longer subject to persecution by immigration authorities (see the Looking to the Future section).

Crossing borders

Our participants provided some interesting insights regarding the gendered challenges experienced by women in crossing transnational borders. Notably, these challenges, despite being universally faced by the women we met, were quite different in their nature due to the intersection of gender and sexuality with other structural determinants, namely 'race', social class, nationality, and geopolitics.

For instance, coming from a sort of privileged background, and having her father regularly working in the country as a businessman (see section above), for Barbara it was not a difficult endeavour to get a visa to come to and reside in Portugal:

"Exactly… my father has companies here [in Portugal]. He had before; he was an influent person and so on, so he came to get us [in Brazil]."

On the contrary, the other Brazilian participants (namely, Carla, Diana, Emma, Fran, Gloria, and Helena), who came from less privileged backgrounds, only managed to come to Portugal on a tourist visa, with a limited validity period of three months. To do so, and accomplish their desire for mobility, they had to rely on relatives or friends already living in Portugal, while also demonstrating to have enough finances to be able to support themselves during their stay abroad. This highlights the role of social class and related access to finance, among other factors, in determining people's opportunities to move across the globe, and thus upholding what Mezzadra and Neilson (2013) have defined as a "system of differential mobility". Despite this evidence, however, the Brazilian women we interviewed ultimately managed to fly to and enter Portugal 'legally', mainly due to the agreements between Portugal and Brazil, a former Portuguese colony (see Cunha, 2014). Conversely, for Anna, Iris and Julia things were much more complicated, primarily because of their nationality. Coming from Nigeria and Sri Lanka, obtaining a visa was almost an impossible endeavour for them, thus revealing the role of geopolitical power relations in defining an uneven distribution of access to transnational mobility between citizens of different countries

Meaningful at this respect is the story of Julia, who narrated her high-risk journey through the Sahara Desert in order to reach Europe, Italy to be exact (see also Esposito et al., 2016; Gerard and Pickering, 2014; Plambech, 2007). These journeys, commonly undertaken by Nigerian women who come to Europe through trafficking networks, to work in the sex industry, are marked by gendered violence and abuse from the moment the women leave their country of origin until they arrive at their final destination. In other words, violence emerges as "a rule of action" with which these women are forced to cope with at different levels (Esposito et al., 2016). Many women, as was Julia's case, reported to have witnessed or suffered rape at the hands of armed groups (either government army or so-called 'rebels'). Some of them die in the desert due to the harsh travelling conditions they face in their long journey and, particularly, for lack of food and water. Whoever dies is usually abandoned in the desert, without a proper burial. Furthermore, women, like Julia, can be sold *en route*, passed from one group to another, as proper commodities. As she vividly narrated:

"They [the traffickers] left, they sold us to Arab men […] they [the Arab men] do prostitution for money, they would collect the money from us. (Interviewer: And in the desert nobody died? Nobody felt bad?) In the desert many people were fainting,

many girls were fainting [...], there was no food, […] only one girl died [...] they threw her away [...] (Interviewer: And did you meet rebel groups, army in the desert?) Yes, we met them. They beat us, they beat us [...] (Interviewer: And did they rape you?) Not me, but the other girls yes."

Julia's testimony highlights the direct and structural violence affecting people in transit that, being evidently racialised and gendered, is a direct consequence of the increasing securitisation of borders cultivated by the EU (Gerard and Pickering, 2014; see also Andrijasevic, 2010). Furthermore, our participant's account lays bare the polytraumatisation suffered by migrants forced to undertake 'irregular' journeys towards the Global North[11], and particularly by migrant women who are subjected to numerous gendered human rights violations and abuses, including (but not limited to) rape. Yet, this violence, and particularly sexual violence as Canning (2016) highlights, is generally not recognised as a form of torture, as narrowly defined by the UN Convention against Torture, and therefore not considered as a "legitimate" grounds for seeking asylum (this is particularly evident when such violence is perpetrated by non-state actors).[12] Contesting this lack of acknowledgment, Canning argues that "sexual torture is socially and politically silenced by both states and organisations working to narrow definitions of torture" (2016, p. 439), which also do not recognise torture's gendered nature. Furthermore, the structural violence and difficulties that these migrant women experience in the countries of destination (in our case Portugal) due to their uncertain legal status – including poor housing and welfare, lack of healthcare, labour exploitation, increased police control and surveillance, detention and forced deportation – further compound the impact of their previous traumas and vulnerabilities.

Life in Portugal: Pathways to illegalisation and detention

Concerning their experience in Portugal, women who had been in the country for some time (all of them except for Anna, Iris, and Julia, who were caught while in transfer at the Portuguese border), stated to have been living in a highly vulnerable situation. The conditions they tried to escape from through migration somehow persisted in the new country they moved

[11] It is worth noting that what is described by Julia happens, for instance, also to Mexican women trying to cross the border into the United States.

[12] Canning uses the term "sexually torturous violence" to refer to sexual violence which is torturous in nature in relation to its degradative objectives and effects but does not fall under the UN Convention's definition in relation to either state accountability or obtaining information" (2016, p. 438).

to. This evidence resonates with the work of Matos (2016) about non-national women in the Portuguese prison system, and generally with the findings of previous studies on gender and migration (e.g., Mahler and Pessar, 2006; Ross-Sheriff, 2011; Tastsoglou et al., 2005).

Our participants' narratives illustrate well the experiences of discrimination, violent relationships and labour exploitation, as well as the existential precariousness migrant women face in Europe, and the Global North more generally. They also show the role of gender in the creation and maintenance of circumstances that, as we shall see below, relegate non-nationals to a condition of illegalisation.

Barbara, for instance, described the complexity of her intimate relationships and how the violence and breakdowns that characterised such relationships with heterosexual male partners were linked to her experience of living on the street, of entering the 'nightlife scene' and working in the sex industry in Portugal and, ultimately, to her route towards detention:

> *"When I moved in with him [her partner], I lived in his house and so, with all his things. Then we had a fight and he kicked me out of his house. That meant I had no place to go… and the only opportunity I had was from the owner of a hostess bar. He had apartments and so, and I went with him. What was meant to be just for a few days, because I was going to leave quickly from there… it was the need and then the fact that I started to know the context…"*

> *"I ended up falling into the world of the nightlife scene [...] in a dancing and stripper bar... and that's why I ended up here."*

Carla described a similar instability and she revealed to us that working in the 'nightlife scene' was very much related to her difficulty in finding a stable job. In her own words:

> *"I worked now and then, cleaning at a friend's house, then […] you know, to earn a little more […] I worked in this life, the 'night life', in the bars..."*

These and other narratives show that labour and economic precariousness tended to be at the centre of these women's lives in Portugal, in a scenario similar to the one Paola Bonizzoni (2015) describes in her work about Latin American women's migration to Italy.

Diana and Gloria, in turn, narrated experiences of discrimination. The first as a black migrant woman in the Portuguese context of the early 2000's, and the second as a transgender woman that was mistreated by the police. In Gloria's case, it wasn't just instances of discrimination but all the above-mentioned circumstances that affected her stay in Portugal. As we mentioned before, she moved driven by her will to gain freedom and access to a range

of resources important for her as a transgender person, particularly economic capital and respect for her subjectivity (Cerezo et al., 2014; Pessoa, 2016). However, she encountered in Portugal some of the same difficulties she faced in her home country, and while she was working in the sex industry as a means of subsistence and resistance, she continued to endure social and economic difficulties/challenges. As Taliani (2012) notes speaking about Nigerian women doing sex work in Italy, "prostitution in the time of migration feeds a sexual economy inside a repressive system" (p. 599). Indeed, as the scholar notes, domestic and sex work, in its different forms (e.g., in the street, in clubs, at home), are those racialised jobs usually left to migrant women as they cannot be outsourced abroad as other types of work (such as textile production and call centre services). As a result, these women, whose sexual performances are "clandestine but at the same time easily accessible" (Taliani, 2012, p. 600), receive very low remunerations, and are exposed to a condition of precariousness and exploitation even when they work for themselves.

Overall, limits to legalisation are constantly present in migrant women's daily routines, making 'legality' unreachable for many of them. In particular, our data revealed that many women came to Portugal with a valid visa but were caught in pathways that led to illegalisation and, ultimately, to detention. When trying to understand these pathways, two dimensions stood out in our participants' narratives: the bureaucratic obstacles for the legalisation process, and the role of abusive rather than supportive relationships. One aspect universally highlighted was indeed the difficulty in navigating the puzzling intricacies of the Portuguese immigration system, and women mentioned several obstacles in the legalisation process even when their everyday lives were inserted within 'legal' contexts and included interactions with citizens whose 'legality' was not questioned by the authorities (see De Genova, 2002). As Barbara explained: *"I had everything… social security, a tax number... I just had no residence permit [authorisation]"*. These women mentioned the efforts they made to actively achieve a documented status. In particular, they described several actions that they triggered over the years for this purpose, but those actions ultimately proved to be unsuccessful, revealing the structural violence inherent to the immigration apparatus. In Diana's words, *"we tried several times, but it just didn't work out"*.

Determinant in this 'perverse game', and impacting on women's failures in achieving legal status, were also the relationships established with significant people, especially those who proved to be manipulative and abusive rather than supportive. Indeed, several of our participants identified people who, instead of helping them, made their lives more difficult. Barbara and Diana reported having been controlled by their partners, who seemed to take

advantage of their illegalised status as a control mechanism. In particular, Diana explains that her partner used her illegalised status to control her, ultimately ending up calling the police on her after a fight: this episode led Diana to detention. From her corner, Gloria spoke about the lawyer who took her money but did not help her. When these women identified the relationships that enhanced their vulnerability and eventually contributed to their paths to detention, gender clearly emerged as a catalyst that, along with other dimensions such as class, 'race', and nationality, amplified their powerlessness in such relationships, while also enhancing the violence and exploitation they were exposed to. A condition that, in any case, women did not suffer passively, but rather strived to resist by any means available to them.

Looking to the future

Despite the uncertainty and instability produced by the machinations of the immigration system, strongly affecting the lives of people in the maze of detention, particularly their capacity to plan and imagine a future (Bosworth, 2014; De Genova, 2016; Griffiths, 2013; 2014; Esposito, Ornelas, Briozzo, & Arcidiacono, 2019; Turnbull, 2016), the women we met strived to resist and preserve a sense of meaning and continuity in their lives.

The case of Anna is exemplificative in this regard, as she focused on the present as a way to resist the "temporal violence" acted against her (see Lewis, 2013). In point of fact, in her interview, Anna claimed her right to be free to imagine, desire, and experience happiness immediately, in the present, like everyone else. In doing so, she challenged the power regime that was suspending her life and dictating her present:

> *"The future is in God's hands. I don't think about it. I just want to know about the present. [...] My life… I just need happiness, you know? In the present. Now."*

Like Anna, who believed that it would be God to indicate the path for her to follow, other women relied on their faith to cope with the detention experience and its unpredictable outcomes. As highlighted by McGregor (2012), religiosity can provide narrative and performative ways to cope with confinement, enabling detainees to give meaning to their experiences and to survive the everyday violence of the detention machine. Furthermore, in the case of our participants, reliance on God served to maintain a sense of humanity and hope for their lives. For instance, Gloria revealed to us she spent a lot of time praying, and was confident that God's decision about her future – to remain in Portugal or to return to Brazil – would be the best one for her:

"I pray a lot for what is best for me, and for everyone else [...] faith is like this, isn't it? If God decides [...] that I have the possibility to stay, well, I'll go on with my life, if not, I'll return to my, my native land."

Ultimately Gloria recognised Brazil as her "native land", a place where she still had loved ones waiting for her. Therefore, she was not worried about what would happen to her over there or how she would be received - "*I didn't steal, I'm not a criminal*" – but rather her concerns were related to what she was leaving behind in Portugal. In particular, Gloria mentioned her sadness for having to leave the things she had patiently accumulated over the years spent in this country, things earned with "sweat and tears". Notwithstanding the peaceful acceptance she displayed about her destiny, at the end of the interview Gloria revealed that, if she had been able to choose, she would have opted to remain in Portugal. Her desire was to have regular employment and lead a peaceful life. In Brazil, the risks and violence were high and this affected her, particularly as a transgender woman (at heightened risk of being targeted).

Like Gloria, other participants faced the possibility of being deported with apparent acceptance. As in Carla's case, who agreed (although it was not a voluntary choice) to return to Brazil; she hoped, indeed, that her Portuguese boyfriend could reach her there and marry her. Imagining her future life in Brazil, Carla told us that she desired to have a regular working contract – indeed, as an unauthorised non-national this possibility was not available to her in Portugal – and "live her life". Both Carla and Fran planned to come back to Europe only once formally married: as wives of a Portuguese citizen[13], they would be able to move freely and without any risk of arrest or detention. As Fran said:

"My hope is that P. (partner) will go there [in Brazil] in December and will marry me [...] All this and I'll go to Grenoble, a city I found to be beautiful. I found it beautiful."

Emma too, at the time of her interview, told us she was looking forward to going back to her home country. *"I just want to arrive in my country… and hug my family"* she asserted. She had a life in Brazil, she had her son and relatives there (that she described as "wonderful"), and she had her house. This awareness, of having a network of support, gave her the confidence to believe that she could "start again", without any fear of doing so at the age of

[13] On the predominance of heterosexual marriage as a means of legalisation in Western immigration systems and its effects in terms of gender power relationships and risk for violence, see Luibhéid (2008) and Narayan (1995).

47. Although she was anxious to leave the detention centre, Emma noted that such an experience, of being confined, even if hard, could be filled with substitute meanings. In particular, she acknowledged how contact with other detained persons, with more difficult life trajectories, was teaching her how to value her own life. Somehow, she understood detention as an experience from which she could learn and take lessons from for the rest of her life:

> *"It's good for us to know something else... that is, to let us value life even more, isn't it? Because sometimes we complain... Ah, it's missing this, I could have this, I'm here [...] I get to know life stories in here... and I feel well with mine [life story], I thank God a lot, because we have a lot of life stories inside here [...] mine is wonderful [comparatively]"*

Differently from Gloria, Carla, Fran, and Emma, the other women we interviewed overtly opposed the idea of deportation, expressing their willingness to stay in Portugal or elsewhere in Europe. Helena wished to live in the country, possibly near Lisbon, and stay with her baby and her new boyfriend, a guy from Cape Verde whom she met while in detention (he was detained for migration-related reasons too). She had a romantic vision of what her future could be. On her side, Diana did not have anybody left in Brazil among her loved ones. In the last ten years her life had been spent in Portugal and, although she was intimately involved in a violent relationship, she desired to go back to her home in a small town in the North of Portugal, the only one she felt she had. Even more extreme was Barbara's case. Having spent most of her life in Portugal, Barbara identified herself as a Portuguese citizen and did not see any meaning in returning to Brazil, a country where she felt she didn't have any ties. Barbara did not even recognise Brazil as her own country; in her words: "*If you ask me about the national anthem, I'm going to sing the Portuguese anthem. I don't even know the Brazilian one*". Consequently, she claimed her right to be recognised as belonging to the Portuguese community, and to have the conditions to get a "good" job in the country (not being forced to work in the sex market):

> *"No, because I don't want to, I can't, I'm not gonna leave, because I'm not Brazilian, I'm Portuguese."*

Finally, Iris and Julia had both applied for protection due to their experiences as victims of violence and sexual exploitation (Iris in Sri-Lanka and Julia in Portugal). Therefore, they could not imagine any possibility of going back to the contexts they had come from, where they lived a very precarious and difficult life. On the contrary, both these women

desired to be released from detention and be able to pursue their dream of a safe and dignified life, free from violence, in Europe.

Concluding remarks

This article adopted a psychosocial perspective to explore gendered relations, mobility pathways, and the experiences of crossing borders of women affected by the Portuguese system of migration control. It relied on the analysis of the narratives of ten women with different life and migratory trajectories and distinct experiences of settling in Portugal. While some came from Brazil and lived in Portugal for several years, others travelled from African countries through trafficking networks and arrived in Portugal to reach other Northern destinations (e.g., United Kingdom and Canada). Finally, one woman experienced political persecution, having escaped from a war scenario. Acknowledging diversity within migrant experiences, as Sládková and Bond (2011) suggested, and adopting an intersectional framework of analysis and a structural view of mobility, we looked at these women's migration as a complex and non-linear process of subjectivation taking place in a field of conflicting forces and desires, inscribed overall in a "matrix of domination" (Collins, 2000)[14].

The testimonies analysed here allow us to draw some conclusions on the intersections between gender, mobility and border control in the lives of women detained in Portugal for migration-related reasons. First of all, our findings revealed that, despite the diversity of their backgrounds, all our participants moved geographically in pursuit of better socio-political and economic conditions. Furthermore, the majority of them reported to have experienced violence and discrimination in interpersonal domains, and therefore the desire to escape from such abusive relationships, as well as from other forms of gendered oppression (including family control and poverty), was an important drive to move from their contexts of origin.

Despite women's desire to improve their lives, once they arrived in Portugal they faced several obstacles and were exposed to new processes of vulnerabilisation. Many of them entered the country with a valid visa. That was the case of the Brazilian women who, although encountered some obstacles, ultimately managed to travel to and enter Portugal in a 'regular' situation, mainly due to the historical relation and the postcolonial agreements between the

[14] In Collins' own words, "the matrix of domination refers to how these intersecting oppressions [of race and gender, or of sexuality and nation] are actually organised. Regardless of the particular intersections involved, structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal domains of power reappear across quite different forms of oppression" (2000, p.18).

two countries. For the three women who came from Nigeria and Sri Lanka, the situation was different as acquiring a visa was impossible. Their cases illustrate the unequal distribution of access to transnational mobility between citizens of the Global South and the Global North, as often highlighted in the literature, but also between people from different countries of the Global South itself (e.g., based on their nationality). This evidence is, therefore indicative of the geopolitical power relations at stake in the management of the mobility regime (Esposito Esposito, Ornelas, Scirocchi and Arcidiacono, 2019; Hyndman, 2000): power relations and imbalances that are not only upheld, but also actively reproduced, through borders and visa arrangements.

In any case, what our results evidenced was that, even when the women entered Portugal legally, once in the country they were forced into pathways towards illegalisation and, ultimately, detention. Our participants' narratives highlighted a kind of a circular effect between the absence of 'regular' migrant status and the presence of numerous obstacles, in particular social and economic ones, with a constant reinforcement of both conditions. Not having authorisation to remain in Portugal exposed the women to enhanced vulnerability, making it difficult for them to find decent employment and have good housing conditions, thereby increasing the risk of women falling into exploitative and violent relationships, especially intimate ones. These abusive gendered relations and, on the whole, the precarious social and economic conditions experienced by these women, made in turn harder for them to access the resources (e.g. time, information, stability) needed to meet the requirements, request and obtain permission to stay in the country. Simply put, gender emerged as a catalyst that, intersecting with other structural power relations (e.g., based on class, 'race' and nationality), exacerbated women's marginalisation as produced by their precarious (il)legal status, while also amplifying their powerlessness in interpersonal domains.

It should be noted, however, that despite this evidence, and overall the precariousness endured throughout their life trajectories, the women we met revealed instances of agency and resistance. As shown in recent works (e.g., Andrijasevic, 2010; Esposito, Ornelas, Scirocchi and Arcidiacono, 2019; Matos, 2016), agency is more present in women's migration than was evidenced in the early literature on this topic. Indeed, even when confronted with the uncertainty, instability, and overall violence of the migration control system, our protagonists strived to resist and give meaning to their lives. That was the case when they claimed the right to have desires and expectations for their future, opposing the expulsion dictated by the state, but it was also the case when they accepted the expulsion, complying with authorities' orders, as a strategy to 'move on' and continue with their lives beyond confinement.

So, we conclude by claiming that migrant women are mobile and precarious subjects (Butler, 2004), troubled by the scenarios of violence, uncertainty, and instability that they are forced to navigate, but who, nevertheless, struggle in search of a life worth to be lived. Thus, we suggest that future studies should deepen the understanding of the complex relationship between oppressive forces and women's capacity to survive and resist them, in order to acknowledge trans-border migration as a strategy to re-affirm individual and family life projects and to challenge histories of domination. This body of scholarship, in our view, should have the ultimate aim of enabling the re-thinking of borders and the re-crafting of national and international migratory policies towards recognising the right of free movement and stay as a precondition for human freedom to truly live (De Genova, 2010).

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