



# Mujeres inmigrantes en Francia: contradicciones y paradojas

*Migrant women in France: contradictions and paradoxes*

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**Abstract:** This article was based on qualitative interviews within the EU project Voices of Immigrant Women. It aims to reconstruct the migratory journey of the different women. In the first part of this article, we present the contradictions of France's national, regional and local integration measures for migrant women. In the second part, through the life stories of five women, we show how the so-called integration of immigrant women is promoted. Their profiles cover different generations, countries, documented/undocumented status, highly skilled/few qualified, and political participation. This part analyzes the individual strategies adopted by migrant women by recentering on the labour market issue. It underlined the high education as a tool of integration, social services and professional skills as indispensable assets for the labour market, political engagement in trade union and human rights activism as a way out of forced labour. We question the epistemological

**Resumen:** Este artículo se basa en entrevistas cualitativas realizadas en el marco del proyecto de la UE "Voices of Immigrant Women". Su objetivo es reconstruir el viaje migratorio de las distintas mujeres. En la primera parte de este artículo, presentamos las contradicciones de las medidas de integración nacionales, regionales y locales de Francia para las mujeres inmigrantes. En la segunda parte, a través de las historias de vida de cinco mujeres, mostramos cómo se promueve la llamada integración de las mujeres inmigrantes. Sus perfiles abarcan diferentes generaciones, países, estatus de documentada/indocumentada, altamente cualificada/poco cualificada, y participación política. En esta parte se analizan las estrategias individuales adoptadas por las mujeres inmigrantes volviendo a centrarse en la cuestión del mercado laboral. Se destaca la alta educación como herramienta de integración, los servicios sociales y las competencias profesionales como elementos indispensables para el mercado laboral, el compromiso político

political framework that constructs the “successful” integration criteria on individual criteria. Finally, we examine that migrant women in France are subject to a series of paradoxical injunctions, and the norms to which they must conform reveal multiple contradictions related to their origins, religions, gender, skin colors, etc. Especially in the actual political context where the migrant women are the ideal figure to illustrate tensions surrounding the question of migration and the role of women.

en el activismo sindical y de derechos humanos como salida al trabajo forzoso. Cuestionamos el marco político epistemológico que construye los criterios de “éxito” de la integración sobre criterios individuales. Por último, examinamos que las mujeres inmigrantes en Francia están sujetas a una serie de mandatos paradójicos, y las normas a las que deben ajustarse revelan múltiples contradicciones relacionadas con sus orígenes, religiones, género, colores de piel, etc. Especialmente en el contexto político actual, en el que las mujeres migrantes son la figura ideal para ilustrar las tensiones en torno a la cuestión de la migración y el papel de la mujer.

**Keywords:** interculturality; Intercultural Education; Migrations; Ethnography; Ethnographic accounts; Students.

**Palabras clave:** Interculturalidad; Educación Intercultural; Migraciones; Etnografía; Relatos etnográficos; Estudiantes

## Introducción

In France, state racism is a historical phenomenon that has amplified since the 1970s, with the growing influence of neoliberal policies and the disappearance of the “left” from the political scene. The current electoral campaign is constructed on a xenophobic discourse that aims to reject all immigrants from France, in a context where the myth of the “great replacement” conveyed by the far-right has been gaining more visibility in the public debate. The “Muslim immigrant” figure represents the main target of state racism, which has built its nationalist imaginary through the control and repression of the “Muslim woman.” Since 2004, successive laws banning the wearing of the headscarf in schools and public spaces (Law 2004; Law of 2010-1192) have been carried out in the name of “protecting” French Republican values in front of a “Muslim threat.” These laws have hindered Muslim women’s social and economic inclusion in French society, impeding their access to public services and marginalizing them (Hauser, 2021) -- thus revealing the ongoing patriarchal and postcolonial structures embedded in French society (Quiminal 2022; Slaouti et Le Cour Grandmaison 2020; Scott 2010).

The recent “Anti-Separatism Bill” (2021) reinforces political repression, racial discrimination, and islamophobia. In addition to expanding a series of bans against the public demonstration of Islam belonging<sup>1</sup> increases nationalist state control and repression. It plans to suspend family allowance in case of child absenteeism (mainly aimed at immigrant families and “mothers” considered irresponsible in front of their children’s education). It also plans the dissolution of any organization that “prohibits a

<sup>1</sup> The Anti-Separatism Bill bans the wearing of burkinis in public swimming pools; the wearing of the jilbab and other religious signs in sports competition; prayer in university.

person or group of persons” from participating in a meeting “based on their color, origin or belonging or non-belonging to an ethnicity, nation, race or religion.” This especially targets immigrant, racialized, and “women of color” groups.

University has become a key area of liberty attacks. Many professors and groups of students exploring ideas of “intersectionality,” “decolonialism,” and “islamophobia” to critically address state power became subjects of public launching and received personal intimidation from hate-groups<sup>2</sup>.

Women political figures have played a key role in promoting such xenophobic measures in the name of “women’s rights” and secular democracy. Marlène Schiappa, Minister of State for Gender Equality and the Fight against Discrimination in France, was the primary carrier of the Anti-Separatism Law -- while actively promoting “gender equality” on a global political level. On the other hand, women have been excluded from the General Assembly for wearing the veil and forbade to take part in the public debate<sup>3</sup>.

## Theoretical framework

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The percentage of women migrants in France is analyzed according to the reasons for immigration. The feminization of migration dates back to 1931 when women represented 40% of the migrant population in France (Beauchemin, Borrel, et Régnard 2013). They will become the majority in the 21st century, representing 51% in 2008. In France, in 2018, women migrants who have crossed the borders of Europe represented 51.8%; they are therefore in the majority. Migration is no longer a men's business as the proportion of women migrants is constantly increasing. This increase can be explained by the individualization and the role of "guarantor" of their family's economic survival in the country of origin that many migrant women take on. In addition, many women also want to escape from the patriarchal structure, pursue higher education, and seek opportunities that break away from gender norms that define women's values according to motherhood and family. We are thus faced with a first fundamental contradiction: on the one hand, exile allows many women to escape from dangerous and unequal situations, often linked to gender, and take part in the process of emancipation by refusing the fate to which they are assigned. But on the other hand, the closing of EU borders and the institutionalization of state racism in French society traps women in many deathly, unwelcoming, and domineering situations that need to be understood through a global perspective (Schmoll 2020; Falquet 2008).

This feminization of migration has inevitably impacted the composition of immigration in France. The number of foreign women presents on French territory has

exceeded that of men since 2008<sup>4</sup>, representing 51.5% of the total in 2020, all types of immigration combined. Regarding people in need of protection<sup>5</sup>, 31,672 of the 96,424 asylum applications registered at the French Office for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless Persons (Ofpra) in 2020, i.e., one-third, were submitted by women. Fifty-five percent of these women are from Africa, but 24% are from Europe, particularly Albania and Russia. The percentage of Africans is also high because the migrants come from countries colonized by France. In total, as of December 31, 2020, 41.3% of those protected in France were women, compared to 40% as of December 31, 2019<sup>6</sup>.

Faced with different kinds of sexual/class and or racial violence in their countries of origin, during their migratory journeys and integration process, immigrant women are all too rarely taken into account for what they have accomplished during their life trajectories and struggles they faced. This article focuses on their individual stories, which, in multiple ways, show how they move between inequalitarian French immigration policies and counter-public strategies.

## Metodology

This research was conducted within the European Erasmus+ VIW project<sup>7</sup>. We chose to take as a sample five women whose trajectory was particularly exemplary of the migratory processes at stake in France. The selection of these five women was made within the twelve qualitative in-depth interviews that we conducted in the VIW project. In addition to these twelve interviews with migrant women in France, the six partner teams of the project from six countries has conducted 61 interviews. The choice of these five women's life stories is justified by a comparative dimension encompassing several European countries and therefore different types of female migration trajectory. The interviews and the collection of materials were carried out according to an anthropological methodology that involved listening to and analyzing the women's speeches and addressing them to an anthropologist, on whom they projected their welcoming dispositions. The women were given the opportunity to speak freely, without any interference from imposed questions, and the anthropologist was involved at the epistemological level in the interpretation of the narratives.

<sup>2</sup> See for example Eric Fassin, « Qui est complice de qui? Les libertés académiques en péril », Blog de Mediapart, Novembre the 1st 2020, <https://blogs.mediapart.fr/eric-fassin/blog/011120/qui-est-complice-de-qui-les-libertes-academiques-en-peril>

<sup>3</sup> See the recent controversy over the student union leader Maryam Pougetoux :

<https://www.rfi.fr/en/france/20200918-french-mps-walkout-muslim-hijab-student-leader-feminist-secularity-religion>

<sup>4</sup> Beauchemin Cris et alii.

<sup>5</sup> United Nations, International Migrant Stock, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> OFPRA, annual reports of 2019 and 2020.

We supported this methodological approach with a documentary analysis highlighting the various contours of the feminization of migration in France. In addition, we conducted interviews with professionals from the associative sector working on support issues towards and within employment. These three approaches combined aim to expose the representation of migrant women in France and highlight the difficulties they encounter in their integration process.

In the first part of this article, we present the contradictions of France's national, regional and local integration measures for migrant women. In the second part, through a few examples, we show how the so-called integration of immigrant women is promoted through the educational, professional, and political spheres. We finally question the epistemological political framework that constructs the "successful" integration criteria on individual criteria.

### ***French immigration policies: gender integration and exclusion***

In 1991, the High Council for Integration defined a process and policies for the integration of foreigners in France. The integration policies carried out aim at republican integration, which "is assessed about the migrant's commitment to respect the principles on which the French Republic is founded, the effective respect of these principles and his or her sufficient knowledge of the French language." In 2014, the government clarified this definition by drafting its "Republican equality and integration policy" roadmap. It distinguishes between newcomers, whose reception and integration are the responsibility of the Ministry of the Interior, and foreigners who have settled in France for a long time, or who have even become French, who are covered by standard law policies.

Over the last ten years, migrant women have become a priority for integration policies in France as "they constitute an economically and socially often more fragile public than the average population." This construction of "immigrant women" as a category of public action is reflected in legislative measures, the implementation of national and local programs, and the development of specific activities in the field of associations and social intervention. Thus, the issue of "immigrant women," considered a public priority, falls within the scope of both integration and women's rights policies.

Following international treaties<sup>8</sup>, the French government is setting up an organizational approach to take into account the different sectors of integration policy for migrant women in France. To support the inclusion and civic participation of migrant women in France, funding is made available. Regarding labour market integration and access to employment, national guidelines and priorities specifically

<sup>7</sup> The interviews are conducted for the project Erasmus + *Voices of Immigrant Women*. This project (n°2020-1-ES01-KA203-082364) is funded by the European Commission in the framework of the Erasmus+ Programme, KA2 - Strategic Partnerships for Higher Education.

<sup>8</sup> *The Core International Human Rights Treaties*, United Nations, New York and Geneva, 2006, 227p. <https://www.ohchr.org/documents/publications/coretreatiesen.pdf>

consider migrant women, as evidenced by the "action plan" for the recognition of skills of newcomers and access to employment for foreign women<sup>9</sup>. This consideration results from developing the national integration strategy and the orientations pronounced by the Inter-Ministerial Committee on Integration (C2I) and the Inter-Ministerial Committee on Immigration and Integration (C3I) in 2018 and 2019. This action plan places migrant women as a priority subject at the inter-ministerial level. Through calls for projects<sup>10</sup>, the French government subsidizes associative leaders who set up support programs specifically for women.

At the national level, in 2020, four projects specifically targeted newcomer women and the professionals who support them. They addressed the themes of support towards employment and access to rights (in particular female genital mutilation, early marriage, violence against women). In 2021, six projects in favor of women had been subsidized for their support towards employment, professional training, access to rights, and learning French in addition to the training provided under the Republican Integration Contract (CIR, *Contrat d'Intégration Républicaine*). Some projects include a childcare solution.

At the territorial level, in 2020, 35% of migrant women benefited from integration actions (employment, learning French, including for professional purposes, access to rights, appropriation of the principles of the Republic, and the customs of French society). For example, the State has supported many projects at the regional level for the professional integration of newcomer women. These projects, like the ones run by the associations UniR Universités & Réfugiés in Ile-de-France, CIDFF in Haute-Savoie, or Retravailler in Moselle, include a diagnosis of acquired skills, validation of acquired experience or comparability of the foreign diploma via ENIC NARIC. Another example is a job discovery program for newcomer women, including ten days of training and ten days of internship in partner companies.

An Integration Week for migrant women was organized throughout France in October 2021 to promote the initiatives of all actors, ministries, local authorities, associations, and companies committed to integration. This week was an opportunity to present the comprehensive support system "Empower My Mama," dedicated to women's empowerment to enable them to become independent and entrepreneurial women.

The multiplication of such initiatives is emblematic of the so-called "civic turn" of French immigration policies, which encourages personal autonomy, self-entrepreneurship, individual creativity, and talents as part of the general neoliberal tendency (Haapajärvi 2020). It lines with the agenda of the European Union, which aimed to break with an assimilationist and culturalist model of integration - and to promote citizen integration based on a "logic of togetherness" instead of a national

<sup>9</sup>. Le plan d'action de l'UE sur l'intégration des ressortissants de pays tiers [https://www.solidar.org/system/downloads/attachments/000/000/666/original/80\\_Briefing\\_Together\\_for\\_Social\\_Europe\\_The\\_EU\\_action\\_plan\\_on\\_integration\\_of\\_third\\_country\\_nationals.pdf?1487062481](https://www.solidar.org/system/downloads/attachments/000/000/666/original/80_Briefing_Together_for_Social_Europe_The_EU_action_plan_on_integration_of_third_country_nationals.pdf?1487062481)

<sup>10</sup> « Stratégie nationale pour l'accueil et l'intégration des réfugiés », Comité Interministériel à l'Intégration, 5 juin 2018. <https://www.interieur.gouv.fr/content/download/110377/880362/file/strategie-nationaledeintegration.pdf>

“logic of sameness” (Goodman 2014). However, research reveals how nationalist ideology underlines such civic integration policies, which “reflect the self-representation of majorities,” thus excluding and/or discriminating groups who don’t share the dominant cultural and moral values (Larin 2020; Mouritsen, Kriegbaum Jensen, et Larin 2019). During different civic integration programs (language courses, employment services, etc.), women immigrants are thus required to comply with Republican French values of secularism and gender equality - through strict control of their food, sexual, dress, and parenthood practices (Mazouz 2012; Hajjat 2012, quoted by Haapajärvi).

Such an example reveals how immigration policies tend to contain women in alterity (Gourdeau 2018). Moreover, research shows how local institutions tend to value women’s involvement in civic associations and political participation according to gender and racialized roles: while their public legitimacy and participation is encouraged upon identity issues, they are excluded from broader debates on political migration issues (Mattia et Beaujeu 2015). On a more general note, economic problems disappear from “civic integration” discourse which promotes “successful” migrant women while others are left in the shade; and blamed for their failure on an individualistic basis.

### ***Recentring the debate on labour issues***

It is thus necessary to focus the debate on labour issues, as for more than thirty years, immigration policies and regulations in France have become increasingly restrictive, which makes life for all foreigners more precarious, complex, costly in terms of time for regularizing or keeping one migrant’s legal status (Kofman, Kaye & Selmin 2012). Concerning the labour market, the state promotes a selective migration policy through, for example, the Law of 24 July 2006. This legislation privileges the movement of skilled or highly skilled migrants while restricting the free movement of people considered low-skilled and confined in specific sectors or precarious and seasonal labour activities. To offer a vision of the significant heterogeneity of women migrants, we draw on three institutional sectors: high education, social services, trade unions and political organizations.

#### *High education as a tool of integration*

For many high-skilled immigrant women, economic success in the host country remains linked to obtaining a job equal to or higher than the degree obtained. As our interviews show and based on the work of Renaud and Carpentier (1993), in the host society, immigrants generally experience a devaluation of their professional status. Indeed, a high level of education is associated with great difficulty in obtaining the first job. According to Florent Domergue (2012) study, many immigrant women experience professional downgrading in the French labour market. According to the author, 7% of French women are downgraded compared to 9% of immigrant women. Regardless

of nationality, women are systematically relegated to positions below their qualifications. The unemployment rate among migrant women remains very high; in 2017, it was 21%. This is generally explained by discrimination in hiring. In search of jobs that correspond to her level of training, many migrant women who have obtained a university degree in France are instead led to respond to advertisements corresponding to a lower course than the degree received. The longer it takes to find a job after getting a degree, the more the age-associated with obtaining the degree becomes a discriminating factor in assessing the application. The interview with a counselor in charge of integration through employment allowed us to understand that her incentive to encourage immigrant women with diplomas to respond to offers below their qualifications results from a mission of social control leading to employment instead of personalized accompaniment towards the job.

The diploma, perceived as an "intellectual" benefit for these qualified migrant women, becomes a disadvantage as soon as it is associated with the presuppositions of the country of origin. This junction of origin and the status of migrant women become parameters that together contribute to devaluing the importance of the university career and the various diplomas obtained in France. This situation has the consequence of creating a lack of motivation and developing psychological problems, as Gomez (2016) points out.

#### 1° Lemei<sup>11</sup>

Lemei arrived in France for her master's degree in joint supervision between her university in China and France. She obtained a French-language bachelor's degree, making her life in France much more accessible. This joint supervision agreement of her universities had spared her the administrative complications (visa, residence permit, etc.). However, it didn't prevent her from experiencing difficulties renewing her residence permit like other foreigners. After she arrived in France, she relied on her network of acquaintances in China when she was a freelance interpreter during her studies. This network helped her in France and informed her about the entities that could help her find a job and accommodation. At the same time, she had seen a job as an au-pair, thanks to the network of Catholic and Protestant churches serving as an information platform and intermediary agency between middle-class families and people looking for care-related jobs (housekeeper, cleaning, babysitting, etc.), although she was not religious. After her Ph.D. degree, she got a job as a permanent employee in one NGO offering aid for the homeless. With this permanent employee's status, she applied for French nationality and got it after waiting two years. It's important to underline the full support she gets from her family, who play a supportive role, not guilt-inducing in her choices. Benefiting from social ascension through education, her parents transgressed the one-child policy to bring her into the world. They did not deprive her of higher education favoring the boy child as many rural parents did but encouraged her to more achievements.

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<sup>11</sup> For more information about this success story: [https://viw.pixel-online.org/case\\_view.php?id=MjQ=](https://viw.pixel-online.org/case_view.php?id=MjQ=)



Lemei's trajectory shows the importance of high education as the resource to facilitate her integration in France. Besides her diplomas in France and China, her network of acquaintances, her language skills, her autonomy to find information, and her family's support are essential elements in her integration in France. Even though she has a privileged background, she still encounters administrative constraints in France, let go of those who do not speak the language and have fewer diplomas or qualifications. The qualifications and opportunities Lemei may have in China make her return to China quite possible. Her choice to stay in France is more a quest for freedom and a desire to escape the demeaning norms of educated women like her. Employment is another essential factor in her integration in France and is a crucial criterion for measuring her integration in the eyes of the French administration. Having a permanent work contract means statutory and financial stability and contributing to the host society.

## 2° Marie<sup>12</sup>

Originally from a developing country (Cameroon), Marie comes from a Cameroun family of five girls and one boy. Although the priority of studies is given to boys in her country, her parents, especially her father, always wanted her to pursue their studies. In their eyes, the more a woman has a degree, the more independent she is and the more she is not obliged to get married to support herself. That's how Marie decided to migrate to France for studies after her degree, with the full support of her father and her older brother, who lives in Lyon.

Her arrival in France developed her ability to persevere and empower herself. Without any family in Reims, where she lives, she first supported herself through student jobs. After her father's death, she temporarily wanted to stop her studies and find a job to help her mother and sisters financially. She quickly gave up this idea following the behavior of her uncles, who despised her and her sisters, believing that women have no right to speak and judging that their father, instead of financing the studies of his daughters, would have done better to spend his money on other things. Revolted by his words, Marie began to oppose all the decisions taken by her uncles concerning her father's inheritance while making them understand that as a woman, a member of the family, and the daughter of the deceased, she also had a say in the decisions to be made.

Her stay in France has completely changed her vision of the place of women. From this frontal opposition, she was aware that she no longer wished to be reduced to the subordinate position assigned by men. That's when she decided to get a Ph.D. degree, succeed in her studies, and find a job in France. The objective is to prove that a woman who migrates to Europe can succeed by herself without marrying a Frenchman to obtain a residence permit or a job. Therefore, this desire to break with the presuppositions of migratory success through marriage and the subordinate status

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<sup>12</sup> For more information about this success story: [https://viw.pixel-online.org/case\\_view.php?id=MjU=](https://viw.pixel-online.org/case_view.php?id=MjU=)

of women in Cameroon led Marie to invest in her integration in France through my university studies.

The individual story of Marie underlines the importance of acquiring knowledge and shows how women from developing countries are looking for social recognition. In the same way as men, they wish to obtain an ascending status within the family unit and society. They migrate to attend university, obtain a degree, and then a job to get this status since their access to high education and training opportunities in their country remain difficult and few.

These two stories show the importance of language skills as an inescapable condition for acquiring autonomy by escaping intermediaries and getting information directly. The access to education favors the social ascension of women from modest social strata and their quest for freedom and emancipation. It facilitates the obtain of a residence permit as foreign students. They can rely on their university network as support and openness, representing assets that migrant women can mobilize to get a contract in the less qualified sectors as highly skilled activities. Foreigners face more difficulties in the French labour market due to higher social charges than French employees. However, the diploma doesn't guarantee the residence permit renewal after studies or a suitable job. They still need to overcome the multiple barriers to their integration (Nedelcu 2005, Kofman 2014).

### *Social services and professional skills: indispensable for the labour market*

More and more immigrant women are working, but their activity rate remains lower than that of immigrant men and non-immigrant women. They are also more likely to hold part-time, precarious jobs, generally involuntary (Donnard 2004). They are mainly present indirect services to individuals (maternal assistants, housekeepers for the elderly, cleaning ladies, janitors) and in the Care sector (Farris & Magliani-Belkacem 2013, Dussuet 2016). They are also numerous in services offering unskilled jobs such as catering, hotels, supermarkets, cleaning, and business services. This specialization means a precarious professional situation and greater exposure to unemployment that immigrant women suffer from double discrimination in the world of work because of their actual or supposed origin and gender. It is also essential to consider the so-called informal employment where immigrant women work without being declared, and therefore known and recognized by the State services.

The professional integration of migrant women involves various public administrative bodies and associations working in the social and solidarity economy. Governments promote action in different sectors of integration and inclusion policies for women: skills equivalence, language training, labour market, entrepreneurship, education, training, gender equality, and the fight to end violence against women.

Access to public services is conditional on legal residence and work authorization. This excludes women who are in an illegal situation. Their access to institutions for professional integration is minimal. These women find themselves in

additional social, professional, and economic difficulties. The initiatives and services of the alternative economy can offer them rare and unconditional access, considered a valuable springboard and support in their migration and inclusion process.

### 1° Cassandra<sup>13</sup>

Cassandra left Angora with her elder sister when they were only 7 and 8 years old in 2005. They followed the instructions of their neighbors, who took care of them after their parents left their hometown with their two little brothers and sister. They arrived first in Holland, where they spent five years in a host family. They arrived in France without speaking French and got helped by the associations taking care of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children.

She stayed there until she was 18 years old. She had to leave this center because she was no more a child but an adult. She got housing from this association and paid for her daily expenses until 21. The young people like Cassandra, from 18 to 25 years old, have rare help from the state:

- they are no more children, so nothing from the children's protection social services;
- they are less than 25 years old, so they cannot have the RSA (minimum revenue only for those who have 25 years old and more).

When she had her birthday of 21 years, she was told that she had to leave the studio because the service is only for young people from 18 to 21 years old. Thanks to a social worker, she got professional integration and training opportunities, finally leading her to a permanent contract in one social work association. This job stability helped her get social housing after spending several years in a "social residence" – an intermediary housing before getting social housing.

She wants to continue her studies because she understands that's very important if she wants to have a promising career, and she knows that she must fight alone for her future. She didn't get her high school diploma in a difficult time. Her employer helped her get an equivalent certificate after one year of training, and she knows that if she wants to get a bright future, she needs more education and a diploma.

After a particular measure announced by the Prefecture of Police gives more opportunities to obtain French nationality for those who stayed in their work during the challenging Covid period in 2020, Cassandra decided to seize the opportunity and send her demand for her nationality with the help of her social worker. Step by step, Cassandra fights for her integration in society and in the family where she was a long time non-included.

The story of Cassandra shows the ambivalence of the social welfare system for child care in France, in her case for the Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children

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<sup>13</sup> For more information about this success story: [https://viw.pixel-online.org/case\\_view.php?id=NzI=](https://viw.pixel-online.org/case_view.php?id=NzI=)

who have both problems in family inclusion and socio-juridical integration. She benefited from lots of help, without which, she would not have a job and a house as she has now. But still, we would like to highlight the break moments when she got her 18 years old and 21 years old. There was seldom anticipated help for her to transition from minor to adult or young adult to adult in the administrative categories and public policies.

Cassandra didn't decide her migrant initiative at all: it was always the decisions of her parents, who didn't recognize their family ties legally nor explained the reasons for their exile. She was almost an orphan without really being one and staying alone. Cassandra's only help was the social work and social services that got around her. These services were chained to limit their actions or even be violent when Cassandra is not the target public receiving their benefits. The situations create more breaks in Cassandra's life path despite theirs helping to limit other breaks and damage.

## 2° Yun<sup>14</sup>

Yun got her residence permit after working illegally for more than ten years. In 2005, she paid for a business trip to France and stayed after the expiry date of her visa. She planned to stay for three years to earn enough money to improve their family's financial situation: pay for the medical fees for her husband and the studies for her son. Most of the time, she worked in the Chinese community network: as a nanny in Chinese families, like a nail bar worker, as a kitchen helper in the restaurants, as a housekeeper for the hostels, etc.

She didn't speak English and knew nothing about the French language when she arrived in France. She tried to learn French in the associations to improve her vocabulary and daily communication. For her, language skills are essential because she even needed to hire an interpreter for any administrative procedures. Professional skill training is another factor for her success: she trained herself hardly to become one of the rare women sashimi chiefs.

Without university qualification, her determination to learn French and learn sashimi work touched her boss a lot, who decided to help her get the residence permit after spending two years working for him. Despite all the paperwork that her boss did for her situation, she encountered many difficulties. With legal assistance, she finally got a residence permit for her job. Despite the permit for which Yun fights for almost ten years, she gets a bitter feeling about her stay in France, especially regarding work choices or life choices. She had to do the low-paid job and suffered exploitation from both her employers and some from the same country as her. All these are considered banal since she was in an illegal situation.

During all these years' struggle, for Yun, marrying a French to get the resident permit is never in her thoughts. She admits that it's easier to get the card but much

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<sup>14</sup> For more information about this success story: [https://viw.pixel-online.org/case\\_view.php?id=NzY=](https://viw.pixel-online.org/case_view.php?id=NzY=)

more challenging to get rid of the marriage. Some of her acquaintances complained that they are not allowed to work as they used to or want to after the marriage that gives them the legal permit. It's a price too expensive: when you are illegal, you can work; once you get the permit by marriage, you lose your job.

She pointed the contradiction of the public policies: her work in the restaurant is declared, and both her boss and she paid the taxes, even she had no residence permit for several years. She is an illegal worker, but the taxpayer is tolerated, but not in other roles. She remembered she paid more than one month's salary for her income tax, even though she was not allowed to work since she didn't have any residence permit.

Language learning in community associations and self-training in professional skills are key factors contributing to Yun's integration into the labour market, ensuring her situation's regularization. The illegal migrant situation only restraint her choices and enhance the difficulties she has in the labour market in France as a woman: she can barely get other jobs as an illegal woman migrant not speaking a word of French but only in the services such as nails bar, babysitting, housekeeping or kitchen clerks.

We want to point out that Yun belongs to one generation born in the 60s and educated in the context where gender legality was in the ideology and the real-life under Chairman Mao, especially in the labour markets. She worked and lived without cooking for her family or her husband: the work that she did in France to earn her living, and with which she managed to become the financial support of her family as it was before.

The entry into the labour market of migrant women is later and more complex than that of foreign men or women due to specific and additional obstacles related to their gender and their migratory path: obtaining a residence permit (and renewals) and a work permit, language skills, access to information, lack of qualifications, lack of a professional and social network, mobility difficulties, childcare difficulties, stereotypes related to their origin, discrimination in hiring, more significant wage gaps among women, exposure to different forms of violence, job mismatches, etc. While the highly qualified migrant women have professional downgrading experience, the professional integration of less-skilled migrant women, such as Cassandra and Yun, shows us the additional difficulties they had encountered for their integration compared to Marie and Lemei.

First, it confirms that language learning leads to more autonomy in both cases. Lack of high education diploma reduces job opportunities and makes difficulties in the labour market, while professional skills facilitate job hunting for documented or undocumented migrants. Work opportunities and stabilities enhance financial autonomy and housing solutions in their trajectories. Immigrant women have been overrepresented in care-related activities, jobs in tension towards which the various services are tempted to direct migrant women because these orientations lead more quickly to hiring. It is also in these activities with individuals that informal work is concentrated. That's where Yun implemented her survival strategies as an illegal

migrant. Like others in the same situation, they are exposed to additional risks of exploitation and the absence of social and professional protections. Moreover, if they are abused and exploited at work, they may fear legal consequences for their undeclared work, which would prevent them from seeking help.

### *Trade union and human rights activism: a way out of forced labour?*

Our last example draws on the story of Zita Cabais-Obra, who has received high media coverage for winning a case against her former employer -- a bourgeois family living in the wealthy arrondissement of Paris 16<sup>th</sup> arrondissement --- she sought for labour trafficking and exploitation in domestic work (during 1994 and 1998)<sup>15</sup>. Since then, Zita Cabais has become a global leading human rights figure who fights against modern slavery: spokesperson in many ILO and OSCE conferences, she was recently appointed to the International Survivors of Trafficking Advisory Council (ISTAC). Her story tells the emancipation from a condition of sex/race/and class oppression -- a woman and mother coming from a very poor background in the Philippines looking for a better life abroad to support the needs of her family”. Her story also reveals the great support she found within French associations: after fleeing from her employer, and finding herself in the street, nowhere to go and without knowing the French language, she met someone in the Parisian public transports who encouraged her to seek help with the Committee Against Modern Slavery (Comité Contre l’Esclavagisme Moderne, CCEM). Through this organization, she was then introduced to French the trade union CFDT. There, she encountered much more than legal assistance: she found a “school” where she started studying law and labour issues, educating herself in order to transform her personal traumatic experience into a wide political and human rights struggle. After one year of attending training sessions within the trade union everyday, the CFDT proposed her to join its activities; first as a volunteer providing assistance to victims, then on a salary basis. That brought her to work - during 17 years -- as the General Secretary of the trade union’s branch which focuses on the care work, in the public and private sector (SAMSSAP, Syndicat des Assistant.es Maternel.les et Salarié.es des Services à la Personne).

While multiplying her responsibilities on a nationwide - and global - level, she has always kept working on a very grassroots level with victims of trafficking and domestic exploitation. That way, she has played a key role in raising awareness on the global phenomenon of forced labour that has long remained an underestimated issue of human trafficking (Levy 2016; Ricard-Guay et Maroukis 2017). She emphasizes that her struggles go far beyond a strictly gender or community level. Her work has led her to deal with a great majority of women, as they are the first victims of forced labour in domestic work. Yet she has grown particularly critical of gender norms of motherly care and self-sacrifice. During the workshops, Zita Cabais recounts

<sup>15</sup> See for example: <https://fr-fr.facebook.com/artetv/posts/10158692399918945>;  
<https://www.streetpress.com/sujet/1551890315-zita-cabais-obra-d-esclave-domestique-briseuse-de-chaines>;

how she often tells women: "It is the affection that kills your rights. Once you have affection, your rights are dead". Moreover, Zita Cabais has never confined her struggle to her national community of belonging : it deals with universal human rights issues, and taps into the structural core of the capitalist/patriarchal/neo-colonial system when it comes to labour, migration and reproductive issues (Federici 2019; Moujoud et Falquet 2018). Also, her struggle goes beyond her personal story: after winning her personal case against her former employer more than fifteen years ago, she has accompanied many trials against exploitative employers in domestic work, many of which are diplomats. The problem, she explains, is that they are protected by State impunity. Until today, the French government refuses to ratify the ILO Convention n°189 that protects domestic workers under the rule of law.

Her story thus sheds lights on the contradiction between global institutions that give "voice" and "recognition" to former victims of forced labour, and state politics which systematically refuse taking responsibility for such issue. In these regards, the making of her "success story" needs to be questioned in regards of the "Moral Empire" (Hours et Sélim 2020). While she has gained international legitimacy and high respect for being a former victim who fought her way out, what does this recognition of "victimhood" mean -- when the same structural patterns that reproduce this same condition of victimhood are kept intact? To what extent her migration traumatic experience is making her into a "good victim" (Fassin et Rechtman 2007)? Her "gender" category into a "global heroine" (Sélim 2016)? In different ways, these figures nurture imaginary saving patterns that build on individual levels of responsibilities in a context where the "market market appears more and more immoral to everyone and calls for an overall moralization, the translation of which is the emergence of a true moral market" (Hours et Sélim 2020).

Anthropology teaches to bridge a global, political and ideological level of analysis, that reveals systematic patterns of domination with an understanding of what it means to be human -- how people struggle to give sense and meaning to their lives (Jansen et Löfving 2009; Hours et Sélim 2010; Carrier et Kalb 2015). Speaking to Zita Cabais and hearing the power of her voice and her complete determination, there is a clear sense that her entire life has taken the meaning of a "mission" to end human exploitation. She creates a strong continuity between her experience as a victim and as an activist, reminding us that "I never considered myself as a victim"; but also how she "used my wounds to guide me". Having built herself through the globalized system - with its worse exploitative practices, and its best "human rights" politics -- Zita Cabais learned how to make use of it for her endless struggle for social justice. After having worked for the CFDT for more than 17 years, she's now in the process of creating, in France, her own association to support victims of labour trafficking. She's very active on social media, where she uses her highly mediatized figure to make victims reach out to her despite their spatialized confinement. In time when the French government actively contributes to social disaggregation and destroys the welfare system, such a personal initiative links with many other ones, through which women, migrants and

other subaltern groups seek to create counter-public spaces of democracy (Fraser 1990).

## Conclusions

Our conclusions consist two parts. First of all, at the empirical level, we underline that migrant women in France are subject to a series of paradoxical injunctions, and the norms to which they must conform reveal multiple contradictions. In the first place, if the fact of being a woman understands gender as both fragility and reproduction - the two qualifiers being linked - this condition assigns migrant women to care tasks (cleaning, home help, babysitting or nursing, etc.), which absorbs women to the point of making them potentially deficient concerning their own children and ancestors. Therefore, the ideal model advocated cannot be actualized. It bursts under the blow of a reality stretched by access to housing, employment, family allowances, and the obligations induced by children's schooling and the care of relatives. From this point of view, the ban on Muslim women keeping a headdress (improperly called a veil to stigmatize Islam more) on their hair while accompanying school was a revelation of the stranglehold that is closing in on migrant women.

The perfect migrant woman, with no distinctive features in her clothing, body, and lifestyle (cooking, home decoration, etc.), would ideally only care for her own and others in an unlimited time that would, of course, privilege her devotion to the members of the host society. This model implies having a spouse who is himself perfect in terms of full employment and sharing domestic tasks and not fathered too many children, i.e., being within the national average of less than two. However, the jobs to which migrants - both men and women - are directed are precisely those with schedules that make it impossible to have the time available to fulfill the family archetype of complete integration into French society.

Migrant women are thus the prey of multiple accusations oscillating between doing too much for their own and not enough for others, or the opposite, neglecting their duties towards their own and enjoying the offers of the outside society too much. Scrupulous workers but failing mothers or single women who are too free and happy on the one hand, with the hypothesis of the prostitution side (Biligha Tolane 2017), and on the other, negligent employees and mothers too confined to their domestic space, abusing social assistance, the options offered to migrant women make it unthinkable their acceptance by the institutions who project their own powerlessness onto these wo On the eve of the 2022 presidential elections, the French political area reveals the multiple negativities brought to bear on migrant women by making the foreigner the operator of an imaginary unification process of French society (Selim 2010). In conclusion, it should be noted that global gender norms not only do not benefit migrant women but, on the contrary, contribute to making their situation even more challenging (Guo et Sélim 2017; Querrien et Sélim 2015). Indeed, on the one



hand, the revalorization of femininity through motherhood and the praise of care. On the other hand, the supposed reconciliation for women between professional career and fulfillment in family life are presented as values. These values are mainly out of reach for migrant women, forced to try to prove more and more that they are doing their best to fulfill the formal or informal tasks/jobs offered to them.

Slipping into the shoes of the victim to be saved by the French Good Samaritan is therefore not as easy as it seems to be for migrant women. What would a good migrant victim be if she were torn between several imperatives corresponding to the different social fields in which she has to fit and contradict each other? Alone or accompanied by her children and/or a husband? Turned towards those she has left behind or carrying this heavy burden that embarrasses her in her new aspirations? Smiling, humble but at the same time dynamic and enterprising without overshadowing her French female colleagues?

Moreover, it should be stressed that migrant women, wherever they may be, legal or illegal, with or without diplomas, always encounter multiple obstacles to their wish to immerse themselves in the host society. This fact is once again demonstrated by the discriminatory treatment given to the 15,000 or so male and female students from the South settled in Ukraine, as they fled the country after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The sorting out of good and bad exiles, white and European or coming from Asia and Africa, has shown a will to prioritize women, which was not the case for female students from the South on the borders of Ukraine<sup>16</sup>. A deep-rooted xenophobia has been manifested, which resonates with the transformation of the Mediterranean and the English Channel into cemeteries for thousands of men and women fleeing dictatorships, wars, and environmental crises.

At the theoretical level, we must highlight that social science research on migration emerged in France in the 1970s, first with studies of rural-to-urban migration, then with studies of migration from the former French colonies and overseas territories to the metropolis. The vast majority of this research focused on male migration, leaving out women, even though they were present in French rural migration (Selim 1980; 1997). Critics have shown how this has historically resulted in making invisible women migrants specific experiences (Diaz 2020)<sup>17</sup>. As a result, studies tend to put the emphasis on the social relations of sex as a fundamental framework of analysis to tackle women migrant issues (Soudant-Depelchin 2016). However, we want to emphasize how male migration continues to function as an interpretive model for all migration, including female migration. Social science research on migration thus appears to be marked by the reproduction of categories of sexual differentialism, assigning men and women to gendered roles and ontologizing sexual duality. This ideological framework of interpretation constitutes a notable obstacle to the internal

<sup>16</sup> See <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20220228-pushed-back-because-we-re-black-africans-stranded-at-ukraine-poland-border>; <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/02/28/europe/students-allege-racism-ukraine-cmd-intl/index.html>.

<sup>17</sup> See also le « carnet hypothèse de Migrinter », <https://migrinter.hypotheses.org/>

understanding of the logics and aspirations of migrant women. Not only does it result in putting “women” and “migrant” issues into competition (GISTI 2007). It also prevents us from grasping the emancipatory dimension of women's migration trajectories.

Our research endeavors to get rid of a priori gendered categories in order to approach migrant trajectories, it brings a fundamentally new perspective on women's migratory itineraries. The de-ideologization that we implement in our hermeneutic approach allows us to grasp the complexity of women's intentions when they decide to leave their country and their group of origin. It highlights the positive positions that migration triggers. It emphasizes how the separation that presides over this new departure for women opens up horizons that they would not have dreamed of, if they had remained "in their place" as women, mothers, wives, in their environment of origin. Migration is not only a physical and material displacement, it is also a psychic, symbolic and imaginary displacement that question hierarchical orders and relationships of domination.

Let us also underline the decisive contributions of the anthropological perspective that animates this research. We consider that the anthropologist is involved in the strongest sense of the term in the investigation she is conducting on migrant women and that her profile constitutes a mirror in which the actresses project themselves. The conditions of material production are therefore essential and must be analyzed in order to grasp what the women are trying to say and elaborate in front of the anthropologist. This mode of anthropological listening seeks to draw out the deep dialectical meaning that women give to their migrations, embracing failure and success, liberation and alienation. It sets in motion a double reflexivity, that of the anthropologist and that of the actress, and links them in a hermeneutic overcoming.

The critical perspective that underlies the research carried out - in terms of the production of materials, knowledge and analysis - has a strong and important practical and operational significance: it leads to not locking women into normative frameworks of interpretation, which are unfortunately common in studies on both male and female migration. The humanitarian ideology, compassionate and condescending, very conventional on gender roles, indeed permeates the views on migrants in general, caricaturing their original living conditions as well as their itineraries, their misfortunes as well as their alleged happiness.

The emphasis we place in this research on politics as a structuring element of migratory trajectories does not only concern the objective political conditions but also the representations of politics that are inscribed in the subjectivity of the actresses. The imaginary figure of the State in the country of origin, in the countries crossed, and in the country of arrival is decisive for understanding the opportunities that migration offers to women. Indeed, everywhere the State, with its laws marked by more or less male domination, sets the limits that women must not cross in their desires and their lives. The women who migrate measure the relativity of these limits and free themselves from the impositions that weigh on them. This is why the women's narratives, their discourses, must be articulated to the political in the full sense of the

term, which is what we do in the perspective of political and critical anthropology that is ours in this research.

Finally, it should be noted that although the trajectories of only five women are the basis of this article, the selection of these exemplary itineraries was made within the framework of the Erasmus VIW project, which gave us a comparative perspective on six countries, as we stated in the introduction.

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