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RESEARCH ARTICLE

REVISED Transnational patterns, social networks and self-help organizations for migrant women

[version 3; peer review: 2 approved, 2 approved with reservations]

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Abstract

Previous research shows the importance of building up self-help structures in a transnational perspective for the inclusion of migrant women who are fleeing their home countries because of war, violence, or different forms of vulnerability. The mobilization of self-help organizations through the intersection of transnationalism and gender is, in fact, a useful direction for a practice-oriented pedagogy directed both towards (1) the most vulnerable groups of women, or (2) those already empowered either as community leaders or network facilitators, other migrants and the whole native population. For this paper, we compare two video-interviews of refugee women collected in Bulgaria and Italy, which are important receiving countries either at the South-Eastern or Southern external border of the European Union. The research questions of this comparative assessment include: 1) How do refugee women organize themselves for mutual help? 2) How do they build their social networks through transnational practices to bridge with the local people? 3) How is the community or individual empowerment of refugee women achieved across ethnic lines or through gender? The final aim of this investigation is to analyse various patterns of social networks' creation among refugee women originating from different socio-cultural contexts. The research findings might be useful to instil inclusion practices which are apt to refugee women empowerment.

Keywords

migrant transnationalism, gender networks, self-help organizations, inclusion practices

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REVISED **Amendments from Version 2**

The third revised version of this article includes specific changes to address the request from the fourth reviewer after the article has passed peer-review. In detail, we have slightly reformulated the third research question posing either the reliance on ethnic lines or gender as opportunity structure for the individual empowerment of the interviewed refugee women. This reformulation has been effective both in the abstract or introduction of the article. Soon after the research questions we have also added a short paragraph of explanations to further clarify the scope of our research as follows: "the research explores examples of self-organization and community mobilization through transnational and ethnic networks and through gender mobilization in the host countries of refugee women seeking asylum."

In the state of the art, the adopted concepts have been presented as "social networks, gender, ethnic mobilisation and migrant transnationalism" to aim at consistency with the contents of the paragraph "gender and ethnic networking" which has been reformulated in "gender and ethnic mobilisation."

In the subsequent paragraph "Transnational migration, gender, and self-help structures" we have explained the inspirational nature of our work from former research on "the social class composition of the community in which the networks are operating" to capture the intersections between gender and class in ethnic enclaves. In this vein, we have provided an example as per Boyd & Nowak's (2012) which elucidates the research's aim at "focusing on the gendered division of labour within receiving countries, which is a result of the segmented labour demand."

The importance of learning the local language to engage the refugees' social and cultural capital for adaptation has been emphasised in the section describing the fieldwork in Italy and Bulgaria but also in the final comparative assessment. At last, we have also implemented minor stylistic revisions.

Any further responses from the reviewers can be found at the end of the article

Introduction

This paper aims at comparing selected data collected in the framework of the COST Action "Women on the Move" (WEMov). The comparative assessment included two video interviews of refugee women collected in Bulgaria and Italy, which are important receiving countries either at the South-Eastern or Southern external border of the European Union.

Transnational migration, gender, and the creation of "self-help" structures originating from the social network theory are considered conceptual tools for the inclusion of a sample of refugee women. The investigation aims at analysing various patterns of social network creation among refugee women originating from different socio-cultural contexts. The research findings, although limited in their geographical and sample extent, might be useful to instil inclusion practices that are apt for refugee women empowerment.

Several study topics are pertinent to this investigation and merit discussion in this migratory comparison. Among these is the understanding that women who are refugees are dispersed throughout various social and geographic situations and do not form a monolithic group. In these situations, given the varying migration experiences of the participating women, local integration strategies may vary greatly. Inclusion and learning acquisition strategies still require social safety, especially for migrant women who are subject to various forms of exploitation.

The research questions of this comparative assessment include: 1) How do refugee women organize themselves for mutual help? 2) How do they build their social networks through transnational practices to bridge with the local people? (3) How is the community or individual empowerment of refugee women achieved across ethnic lines or through gender?

The research explores examples of self-organization and community mobilization through transnational and ethnic networks and through gender mobilization in the host countries of refugee women seeking asylum.

Methods

The article moves from a review of relevant theoretical concepts to the described migration process, ethnographic considerations and the proposed setting up of self-help structures for refugee women. Subsequently, Italian and Bulgarian data are presented with a caveat pertaining to the limited characteristics of the selected sample for the video-interviews. The interviewed women for the visual project of the COST Action WEMov were selected by snowball sampling by experienced researchers because of their life stories as migrants residing in one of the Action's member states. Considered participants were over 18 years of age and competent to agree to participate formally in the project. Demographic criteria that are relevant to participant selection include: age, family status, dependents, and educational level. Participants were asked to bring to a comfortable video interview setting an object that represents something important to them about their migration journey. Objects or prompts such as a photograph, heirloom, jewellery, or musical instrument could be used.

Considering that "vulnerability" may connote classification, self-classification, and the maintenance of a devaluing or inferior image for the real victim of, say, sexual assault or war trauma as in our research sample, all ethical considerations and precautions were taken before, during, and after the interview. Sensitive arrangements included the form of interpersonal communication, conversation in the preferred language of the participant and welcoming, comfortable setting. The way the research questions were presented was discursive, dialogic, and considerate to avoid creating new trauma or further "vulnerability" issues. In addition, the respondents showed a sincere dedication to the project's objectives and a willingness to share their personal narratives and experiences to help other women who are migrants or refugees facing comparable circumstances.

The interviews were carried out by the authors of this article according to the requirements and protocol of the COST Action WEMov, and were approved for online publication by the Action's Chair in accordance with all the ethical norms for conducting scientific research of the European Commission and the provisions of the Declaration of Helsinki.

The authors have obtained written consent from the women interviewed for participation and for their faces and stories to be published and broadcasted for scientific purposes. Participants were given the opportunity to have their personal data anonymised with pseudonyms, as well as having specific personal information omitted if they desired. The interviewees were also advised that they could leave the study or rescind their contribution at any point in the research process. The relevant narrative and visual data collected were saved on a password protected computer. Edited sections of the video interviews are open access and can be watched on the WEMov website.[1]

Data collection methods for the one-on-one interview included the following general themes and related prompts: the motivation for migration; the migrant journey; the life of the interviewee before and after migration; and her hopes for the future. The questions of the interview grid were flexibly adapted to the distinct categories of selected participants who were given the opportunity to check for them in advance and afterwards they were provided with the raw and edited video materials and transcripts for comments[2] (WEMov Visual Project, 2022).

The WEMov research network protocol allowed the collection of only a few video interviews per country. This limitation has been addressed for this comparative article by considering complementary data on refugee women collected in Bulgaria during different time lapses, as well as previous research on migrant women in Italy originating from the Sub-Saharan region (Lapov & Campani, 2017; Ruspini, 2019). Finally, interpretive and conclusive findings are discussed.

State of the art

The literature review focuses on a few concepts and their interrelation, which are either significant in migration studies or relevant for the general aim of this article, as well as for answering the suggested research questions around the nature of the proposed self-help structures for the empowerment of women. These concepts include social networks, gender, ethnic mobilisation and migrant transnationalism.

Social networks

According to Granovetter (1973), social networks are networks of relationships or ties between people that can differ in strength, kind, and length. Bourdieu (1986) asserts that social networks, posing as social and cultural capital, are potential resources that must be activated. These resources include assistance in getting employment and moral or financial support. Joining a group grants access to a network; nevertheless, a person's ability to access resources is contingent upon their standing within the relevant network.

Granovetter (1973) concentrates on the advantages and disadvantages of social connections. Strong ties to family members and close friends are unquestionable, but they frequently do not give the person access to significantly more resources. Weak links are those with people who are further distant from you, such as acquaintances; these relationships need more "work" to be activated, but they might give you access to quite different resources (Granovetter, 1983). For this reason, weak links may be more advantageous than strong ties in terms of getting access to resources that are crucial to society.

Networks are crucial tools for migration since they offer pathways into a targeted nation or aid in integrating into a particular culture. Labour, personal (family), and so-called "illegal" migrant networks are the three main social networks that typically influence migration patterns. Each of these has costs and benefits for the participating migrants (Boyd & Nowak, 2012). Furthermore, while networks are crucial for employment and social opportunities - especially for the most vulnerable - not all migrants rely on labour networks to obtain work, nor do they all rely on personal networks during the settling process. However, the goal of this paper is to investigate the real prerequisites for networking or bringing about changes in ethnic networks through the activation of bridging social capital.

Migrant networks are a long-standing feature of Italian experience. Since the start of immigration to Italy, associations have developed into helpful resources that offer networks of mutual support and solidarity, particularly in the 1970s. Organizations made up of migrant women often replicate the unique migration history of individual national groups (such as associations of women who were born in Cape Verde and the Horn of Africa in the 1980s), as well as the level of internal gender relations and group cohesiveness (mixed-gender and/or exclusively female associations). To support them in obtaining their rights and acquiring specialized skills to provide welfare services to the migrant population, a large number of migrant women are grouped on the basis of gender in multi-ethnic associations, many of which include Italian members (Ruspini, 2019).

However, despite the fact that non-religious organisations and those affiliated with the Catholic and other churches have played a leading role in providing various forms of support and assistance to immigrants in Italy, other observations indicate that the vast majority of immigrants have not benefited from any support at all, frequently relying on their own resources and small networks and groups formed through local circumstances or migratory chains, as well as individual relationships formed with the natives. The "less fortunate" immigrants, on the other hand, who have fewer resources, have ended up slipping into the ranks of social exclusion (Ruspini *et al.*, 2000).

Bulgaria's migration experience during the decades of the socialist rule was too limited, like several other former socialist countries. In the decades before 1989, the labour migration

[1] https://www.womenonthemove.eu/documentaries/#interviews

[2] Four major categories of migrants were identified for the fieldwork as follows: 1. Forced migrants: refugees and asylum seekers, transit migrants, people whose migration is related to gender persecution (including transgender migrants), people who have been subjected to human trafficking, environmental migrants; 2. Voluntary migrants: remigration through Europe (networking migration), returnees, expatriates, people taking part in chain migration, modern nomads, lifestyle migrants, internal to border migrants; 3. Second, third, fourth generation migrants (left-behind populations as a consequence of migration) and helpers; 4. Highly skilled category: elite, professionals from multinational companies and retired people, academics.

of the Bulgarian population was constrained within the former Eastern Bloc, within the republics of the USSR, and from the 1970s also in some of the countries of Asia and Africa, such as Libya, Syria and Angola for example. After 1990, the country became part of the world migration system, and the flows of emigration and immigration abruptly changed their destinations. And while Bulgarians immigrate in masse to the West (regularly or irregularly), Bulgaria's geographical position positively affects immigration flows from countries outside Europe, as it is one of the three countries that share a land bridge to Asia and the Middle East at the base of the Black Sea. Moreover, the admission of Bulgaria to the EU in 2007 and the following opening of the European labour market for Bulgarian citizens resulted in an increase in immigration flows from the former Yugoslav and Soviet republics, mainly of people of Bulgarian origin from the historical diaspora in these countries. The growing immigration also includes migrants from the Near and Middle East, Iran, Afghanistan and China (Dzhengozova, 2009: 201), and in the last decade (after 2014) also from Ukraine and Armenia.

Since the 1990s, there have been active migration studies in the media on the image and perception of migrants and refugees, both in local communities and in Bulgarian society. The policies of the Bulgarian state regarding the adaptation of migrants and opportunities for socialization and inclusion in Bulgarian society are also discussed. From 2020, the Bulgarian Council for Refugees and Migrants at the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) regularly publishes the Academic Bulletin "Refugees: Today and Tomorrow". On its pages, many Bulgarian researchers and experts discuss critical issues regarding the policies of the Bulgarian state and the EU in general for the reception and socialization of refugees, the difficulties they face in their adaptation, and stories of the refugees themselves. A special issue of the Academic Bulletin with the title "Forced migration and women" is dedicated to refugee women and their stories about forms of self-organization and ways of building social networks for mutual aid (Refugees: Today & Tomorrow, 2021). Recently, concrete studies of the cultural adaptation strategies of immigrants in the EU's poorest countries have also appeared (Hristov *et al.*, 2023). Migrant associations, as well as those particularly composed of and/or involving refugee women, remain a topic for further research.

In summary, ethnic networking has been seen as positive for bringing people together, but it also carries the risk of confining an individual to "her/his" ethnic/national space, which can be dangerous for some people, especially women who have fled perilous situations in their home countries or have had unique migration experiences.

Gender and ethnic mobilisation

This study also considers the role of ethnic networks and gender roles in social capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Intercultural ties encourage the "bridging" of social capital, whereas intimate community relationships support the idea of "bonding" social capital. Building bridges across social capital enables people to collaborate and network across diverse backgrounds as well as inside heterogeneous groupings (Putnam, 2000). Bridging social capital was also positively correlated with education, especially focusing on adults' transversal competencies. On the one hand, education can be a powerful tool in the development of diversified social capital since it increases tolerance and social trust. On the other hand, informal and diversified components of social capital influence successful education (Helliwell & Putnam, 2007; Putnam, 2000). This kind of social capital generates weak ties, as per Granovetter's (1983) definition, but ties that are more outgroup-oriented are more likely to foster social inclusion.

At the associative level, ethnic mobilisation in the host society is a strategy that has the potential to garner a great deal of attention. The materialisation of two fundamental objectives: the preservation of ethnic identity and the political representation of the migrating communities, including membership interests like the advancement of equality of opportunities, civic engagement, citizenship rights, and the fight against discrimination are its main goals, according to Sardinha (2009).

Migrant transnationalism

The transnational immigrant dimension is also relevant in this research endeavour since associations mobilise not only along ethnic lines in the host country but also across receiving-sending country contexts. In this sense, Faist's (2000) idea of the "community without propinquity", which links migrant social and symbolic ties to positions in networks and organizations in different geographical locations covering two or more nation-states, is deemed important. Similar social arrangements are made possible by time-space compression; hence, these links between contexts also offer a favourable environment for continuing rights and identity negotiation (Mapril & Araújo, 2002).

The described mobilisation in a transnational social space as per Faist's (1998, 2000) definition also represents a useful ground for the intersection of gender and rights, as well as a direction for selective mobilisation of the paper's sample across different lines. In fact, migrant organizations bring transnational resources not only to the country of origin but also to the country of settlement (Clarke, 2013). Their role and impact on the lives of individual migrants, rather than in one country or another, fits Faist's transnational perspective and provides grounds for our research endeavour.

Transnational migration, gender, and self-help structures

The potential for additional migration studies or for the empowerment of women by refugees may lie in the confluence of transnationalism and gender in mobilising self-help support strategies for migrant and refugee women. In this context, evaluating the value of migrants' social and cultural labour as well as how women use specific social networks can be accomplished using a gender-sensitive approach to the study of migrant networks (Salaff & Greve, 2004).

To capture the intersections between gender and class in ethnic enclaves, empirical research should consider the social class composition of the community in which the networks are operating. This research should be inspired by former theoretical output in this spatial context and focus on the gendered division of labour within receiving countries, which is a result of the segmented labour demand (Boyd & Nowak, 2012). In this regard, a considerable body of research has been done on the degree to which migration has disrupted social ties. Prior studies have demonstrated the duty and challenge faced by migrating women in creating new networks of care within their host societies due to time restrictions resulting from the necessity to care for their children (Purkayastha, 2005; Salaff & Greve, 2004). If migrant women leave their family behind in their native nations, transnational nurturing obligations complicate matters further (Bernhard *et al*., 2009; Parrenas, 2005).

The mobilisation of self-help structures through the intersection of transnationalism and gender is therefore a direction for practice-oriented pedagogy directed towards the most vulnerable groups of women or those already empowered either as community leaders or network facilitators among the same migrant women, other migrants, and the native population as a whole[3]. The network building needs to be adapted to the unique circumstances of the countries under investigation, i.e., Italy and Bulgaria, the different samples, their potentialities, and specific needs per country and local contexts. Therefore, we now examine the collected data in Italy and Bulgaria.

The fieldwork in Italy and Bulgaria

Italy

In the Italian case, the research sample includes life stories collected through video interviews carried out in the summer of 2022 of two young migrant women (28 and 33 years old) residing in Italy, one who migrated from Argentina (for love) and another from the Democratic Republic of Congo (for asylum), first to South Africa and then Italy (Ruspini, 2022).

The identified themes for the purpose of the interview included life before and after migration, obstacles and challenges resulting from migration, inclusion processes, role of mediators, use of social networks, transnational practices, objects of migration brought across borders, and plans of the interviewees.

For this comparative assessment of refugee women between Italy and Bulgaria, we limit our analysis to the patterns of migration and networking of the Congolese M.[4], since she migrated for asylum.

M. left the Democratic Republic of Congo because of sexual violence, threats against her father, and violent assault against the whole family from the local army. Consequently, her family was separated, and she moved first with her sister to South Africa, where she received refugee status. Afterwards, because of local job insecurity and xenophobia, M. made a secondary movement since she fled to Italy, where, at the time of the interview, she was still under humanitarian protection and unemployed while studying the local language and taking care of her small child.

During the interview, M. declared that her family had been disrupted and uprooted because of forced migration. Consequently, her nostalgia for home and local food is manifested as follows:

> *I miss my friends and mostly the food [from home], I mean you can't get that kind of food, fresh food like that in any other place in the world than home... […]. The cassava leaves,* si *[yes]! That's like my favourite! I like cassava leaves and it's different, it's just different, when you are just back home is different. It is totally different.*

As far as social networks are concerned, in M.'s case, relevant research issues include connection with family and friends left behind, assistance from local churches in the first country of settlement (South Africa) to get a visa for Italy, and any help in settling in the local contexts. At a later stage of the incorporation process, networking with local people (through babysitting, as in the case of the Argentinian participant) is deemed useful to extend connections.

Transnational practices, either through mobility or virtual ICT, are deemed important, particularly in connection with M.'s disrupted family. The interviewee has, in fact, a big sister in Canada but also a fiancée in Sweden, as per the following quote:

> *Well, the joyful part of my life [now] is that I met my fiancée, I have a baby and meet some new people. […] He is from Nigeria. At the moment, he is in Sweden. That's where we met actually, so he is there, currently working there, so yes, that's how we met and got a baby together and got engaged this year.*

Life as a migrant woman in Italy brought M. relief from a history of sexual violence and family disruption in Congo, but also from the experience of xenophobia in South Africa. However, the difficulties of living in a new country as a refugee woman have been emphasized.

[3] According to the website of the Interaction Institute for Social Change (2009), three categories of social change networks have been established for implementation and migrant empowerment with the aim of providing social support and change networking. They include:

- The connectivity (emerged) network which connects people to allow easy flow of and access to information.

- The alignment network which aligns people to develop and spread an identity and a collective value proposition.

- The production (action) network which fosters joint actions for specific outcomes by aligned people.

[4] Although the data has openly shared access in the WEMov website, we present the respondents only with the initials of their first names.

> *[…] As a female refugee, it is not easy at all, you are here alone like in my case, I am here alone, I am alone in a new country and you do not know if you are going to come across bad people or not and thankfully enough for me, I came across good people and I was helped and that's it, that's the good part for me was meeting good people. So, the bad part, was learning the language, indeed […].*

At the time of the video-interview, the life of M. in Italy was also much permeated by networking for help, ties of solidarity and "sisterhood" to other African refugee women in the shelter where she used to live and where we did pick her up for the recording of the video-interview. Babysitting from other refugee women allowed her sufficient time for the second recording since the first attempt was disturbed by the unavoidable but joyful presence of her little two-year-old baby who was crawling, playing around, and making noise while we were chatting for the interview. Sharing of children's toys, clothes, and food with other African refugees of different origins was part of M.'s daily experience in the shelter, as well as her reliance on the staff of the non-governmental organization Ballafon in Varese that ran the aid services as well as other charities in their local network. Learning the local language helped her to engage and adapt her social and cultural capital as acquired in the first country of asylum, i.e. South Africa to the specificities of the new asylum context, i.e. Italy.

Bulgaria

We now turn to the second case for our comparison by examining Bulgaria as a destination country for refugee flows. Historically, Bulgaria had already received waves of refugees, both ethnic Bulgarians after the Balkan Wars and after the First World War, as well as ethnic Armenians after the genocide in the Ottoman Empire (1915–1919) or ethnic Greeks after the Civil War (1946–1949). Some authors have counted four waves of political immigrants and refugees from Ukraine to Bulgaria before the current Russian military aggression (Hristov, 2021: 45–54). However, the Russian-Ukrainian armed conflict in February 2022 led to an explosion of refugee waves to the neighbouring countries of Ukraine, including countries close to language and culture, such as Bulgaria. The conflict between the two countries arose in 2014, when pro-European Ukrainians' Euromaidan protests led to the replacement of the Ukrainian government of pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovych. It turned into an armed conflict after the disputed referendum in Crimea, which was annexed by the Russian Federation, and demonstrations by pro-Russian groups in the Donbass in April 2014. What had been going on for several years as a local armed conflict between the armed forces of Ukraine and Russian separatists escalated on 24 February 2022 in Russia's armed aggression in the eastern regions of Ukraine.

Many of the representatives of the historical Bulgarian diaspora in the regions occupied by Russia chose the path to Bulgaria in search of freedom and asylum. Hundreds of thousands of refugees left their native places, running away from the war. In general, three major groups of displaced persons have been formed due to armed conflict: those considering leaving (2,217,717 people), refugees (3,077,398 people), and internally displaced people, which is the most representative group of 6,477,723 people, predominantly women and children (UIDR1 (2022); see also Koroutchev, 2023).

In the Bulgarian case, the data published by the National Council of Ministers account for nearly 195,000 Ukrainian citizens who had crossed the borders of Bulgaria and over 91,000 who had chosen to stay within the country, of whom approximately 35,000 children. At the end of June 2022, nearly 120,000 people were registered for temporary protection (BfU, 2022), while at the end of January 2023, this number increased to 151,700 (UNHCR, 2023).

Most refugees seeking protection are of Bulgarian ethnic origin, since the largest Bulgarian historical diaspora has been formed in South-Eastern and Southern Ukraine, accounting for a population of more than 200,000 according to official data. Ukrainian refugees who arrived in Bulgaria came mainly from the same regions, that is Odessa district, and to a lesser extent Mykolaiv, Kyiv, Kherson, and Kharkiv (BfU, 2022).

In general, Ukrainian refugees can legally stay and work in the country if they receive temporary protection, which has been granted automatically if they have been living in Ukraine before the 24th of February 2022, and after obtaining a foreigner's identity card (BGfUA, 2022). All the interviewed Ukrainian refugees started to work in the tourist, service, and entertainment sectors and succeeded in adapting very quickly and learning the Bulgarian language at a relatively proficient level (Hristov, 2021: 45–54).

As can be seen from the interview with a woman from the Berdyansk region published on the WEMov map (Hristov, 2022), many of them also possess Bulgarian passports. Although the official power in Kiev does not recognize dual citizenship, local institutions show an understanding and tolerance for the population of Bulgarian origin. Most Bulgarians living in Ukraine have retained their Bulgarian language in archaic dialect form for 200 years. This helps them adapt easily after arriving at Bulgaria.

Thanks to a special decree of the Council of Ministers of Bulgaria enacted in 1993 (No. 103), young Bulgarians belonging to this historical diaspora can study at Bulgarian universities with state grants. As a result, thousands of young people from Ukraine have taken this opportunity over the years. After some time in Bulgaria, many of them were used to returning to their native places as teachers in Bulgarian language and culture. The Russian occupation interrupted this process in the occupied zones, as far as only the use of the Russian language is allowed there. However, good knowledge of the Bulgarian and Ukrainian languages makes many of these women successful facilitators for mutual support in several cities in the Bulgarian-Ukrainian regions, as is the case with our interviewees.

N. (52 years old) was born in Bogdanovka, which is in the region of Berdyansk, in South-Eastern Ukraine. Prior to the current war, she was a teacher at a local school. The occupation of her village by the Russian army took place a few days

after the start of military aggression and caused her family to separate. Consequently, N.'s son ended up in Bulgaria, whereas her sister was in Zaporozhie in Ukraine, and her niece in Bogdanovka asked her documents to obtain a Bulgarian passport. N. was able to leave Ukraine thanks to the first open corridor for refugees from Melitopol and Mariupol, with the aim of seeking refuge in Bulgaria, where her son was settled. Escapes are long and unsafe. N. speaks of:

> *We were rather afraid when going through the one (Russian) and the other (Ukrainian) checkpoints, but we had no problems. And finally, when we heard them speaking in Ukrainian, we realized that we were already in the free Ukrainian zone and calmed down. We travelled in a red cross truck, 23–24 people, including children. It was dangerous because you were going through mined areas. We covered a distance of 100 km in 5–6 hours, but thanks to God, everything went well.*

Within three days in Bulgaria, she received refugee protection and status that granted her safety. Six months later, she was able to organize the arrival in Bulgaria with her elderly parents and her sick husband. She found and met again the people who helped them to evacuate via Crimea (i.e., the Russian zone), Georgia, and Turkey to Sofia, for a total of five days. After that, she immediately began to work as a volunteer at the refugee support center and has been collaborating with her sister for some time at the Foundation "For Our Children" in Sofia. At the beginning of military aggression, a special programme was already established in this foundation for the support of Ukrainian children and their mothers, where N. is currently working as a facilitator. When asked if she liked working at this foundation, she answered:

> *I really like it. We work on various projects with children and women from Ukraine. Working with Ukrainian children is close to me, I also worked with children in Bogdanovka. The children are different - not only Bulgarians, there are Ukrainians, there are Russian speakers also, etc. But I love working with them.*

N. plans are clear, as she wants to stay in Bulgaria near her son and family. When asked if she misses her home in Ukraine, she answers:

> *Maybe a little yes, but I'm here next to my son. I always wanted to be close to him, and that's probably why I took the departure from Ukraine more calmly. Maybe if the circumstances hadn't turned out like this, I wouldn't have been in a hurry to leave Bogdanovka, but now I'm fine in Sofia.*

A final comparative note

The exposed Bulgarian contribution proves the importance of ethnic networks across borders, particularly in conflict-ridden situations where family bonds are endangered and thus need to be re-created. This research finding seems in line with that of the video interview of Congolese refugees in Italy, although the geographical and historical circumstances are different.

Transnational practices are also vital in both life stories in helping refugees to maintain bonds with their family and relatives. Interestingly, the Bulgarian case shows the importance of providing help in the volunteer sector as a refugee woman facilitator for co-nationals. This evidence matches well with the article's scope of investigating the setting up of self-help structures, where facilitators can assist newly arrived women in the context of migration and search for international protection.

While ethnic mobilisation was deemed useful for the satisfaction of basic needs in and around the shelter, travelling and networking with distant others coupled with the engagement of her growing social and cultural capital allowed M. to start a slow process of reconstruction of her life, meeting new people, including her fiancée, and fostering intercultural ties that are prominent for her future wherever in Italy or Sweden where her boyfriend lives. Similarly, N.'s life has been under a process of reconstruction in the current country of temporary protection, i.e. Bulgaria, where thanks to the closeness of her relatives, she owns the resources to bridge with and help others, while maintaining symbolic and virtual transnational ties with her close home country, that is, Ukraine.

As time passes, long-term empowerment for both refugee women seems to be the expected outcome of the described processes of life rebuilding, thanks also to the self-help structures generated under the tragic circumstances of war or violence that they have experienced. Finally, networking with other refugee women and their children as natural coping strategies to their present situation, as well as their intercultural encounters with native people, might bring positive outcomes in terms of inclusive practices both for them and the whole local population.

Data availability

Underlying data

The data for the quoted interviews are part of the results of the COST Action CA19112 "Women on the Move" (WEMov) work and can be observed here:

https://www.womenonthemove.eu/documentaries/

This online repository contains the following underlying data for citation:

- Ruspini, Paolo (28 July 2022). *Interview of Monique Tschienda (from Democratic Republic of Congo to South Africa and then Italy).* Varese, Italy (length: 1:01mn).
- Ruspini, Paolo (24 June 2022). *Interview of Cecilia Ferullo (from Argentina to Italy).* Varese, Italy (length: 2.10mn).
- Petko Hristov (23 December 2022). *Interview of Nataliya Romaliyska (from Ukraine to Bulgaria).* Sofia, Bulgaria (length: 2.12mn).

COST Action CA19112 implements data processing for the purpose of managing the image rights of the participants. The legal basis for this processing is the contract (Article 6.1 b.) of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

The recipients of the data are the persons in charge of data processing within COST Action CA19112. The data collected is kept in a current archive at the grant holder, i.e. the University of Picardie Jules Verne (UPJV) for the entire duration of the COST ACTION CA19112 and then five years in an intermediate archive.

Full (raw) data (i.e. not edited portions of the video interviews) are stored in the repository of the University of Picardie Jules Verne (UPJV) and can be accessed upon request. To exercise these rights, COST Action CA19112 can be contacted by e-mail: contact@womenonthemove.eu or by post: Université de Picardie Jules Verne – 1, chemin du Thil 80000 Amiens (France). The Data Protection Officer can be also contacted at: contact.cnil@u-picardie.fr

Extended data

Extended data including the interview grids "WEMov Visual Project (2022), *Questions and guidelines*, 19.09.2022", the forms "Women on the Move's Visual Project – Consent form" and "Authorization for recording and broadcasting (Image/voice). Legal Age" of the study's participants can also be accessed at the above repository of the University of Picardie Jules Verne (UPJV).

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Open Peer Review

Current Peer Review Status: ✔ ? ? ?

Version 2

Reviewer Report 21 February 2025

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?

Irina Diana Madroane
West University of Timisoara, Timișoara, Romania

The article contributes to the research area of transnational migration and gender, by examining comparatively how two women migrants in Italy and Bulgaria, a Congolese asylum seeker and a Ukrainian refugee, respectively, employ social capital and build social networks in the transnational space as a way of achieving (self-)empowerment. The women migrants' use and development of self-help structures and social inclusion strategies are discussed through the lenses of ethnic mobilization and transnational networking practices, which shape and are shaped by the migrants' actions. Methodologically, the authors opt for an in-depth study of video interviews with the two women migrants (life stories), carried out as part of the COST Action WEMov. The gender-sensitive, qualitative research approach zooms in on the historical and geographical specificities of transnational migration spaces, viewed as relevant for practice-oriented pedagogy and policymaking in support of women migrants. The research design is sound, and the study is coherent, with minor exceptions. Overall, it succeeds at meeting its objectives, bringing to the fore the benefits and limits of ethnic mobilization in juxtaposition with intercultural and transnational relations building, both articulated in relation to gender.

I suggest a clearer phrasing of the third research question and a clarification of why ethnic mobilization is counterposed to gender in this question (I believe the authors mean "transnationalism and gender", but the wording of the question could still generate some confusion). In the presentation of findings, ethnic mobilization in the host country is mostly counterposed to transnational networking between sending and receiving countries, so there is a question mark regarding the formulation of the research question. Further, while transnational networking practices are indeed correlated to gender in the article, gender also plays a role in ethnic networking, as mentioned in the text, so there is some lack of clarity there, as well. For clarity purposes, too, and if that is the case, it should be specified that "ethnic mobilization" is confined in the study to the host country (otherwise ethnic networks cut across borders and may be considered to have a transnational dimension, as the Bulgarian case actually reveals). Some of these aspects require further theoretical forays and, especially, a strengthening of the connections among them in relation to the empirical work. The difference between the two strategies seems to lie rather in the type of social capital they require, and the authors could make this more explicit in

the theoretical presentation. It is also unclear how the discussion of "the intersections between gender and class in ethnic enclaves" in the theoretical review applies to the empirical study. If it is simply an example of transnational relations, that should be specified. Further, while it apparent that "bridging" social capital plays an important role in the building of weak ties outside one's ethnic group, the role of "bonding" social capital remains somewhat backgrounded in the analysis of findings.

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it engage with the current literature?
Partly

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?
Yes

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?
Not applicable

Are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?
Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Not applicable

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Main areas: applied linguistics, discourse and rhetorical studies, public discourse analysis Secondary areas: media and communication studies, gender studies, transnational migration studies

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Reviewer Report 21 January 2025

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John Eade
University of Roehampton, London, England, UK

Looking at the response to the feedback submitted by the reviewers including me it is clear that they have tried as hard as they can to improve the paper. So I do not think that we should hold up the paper from being indexed

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it engage with the current literature?
Yes

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?
Yes

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?
Yes

Are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?
Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Yes

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: global migration, cultural diversity, urban ethnicity, identity politics, community representation, pilgrimage

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.

Version 1

Reviewer Report 14 August 2024

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?

Nasreen Chowdhory
Department of Political Science, Delhi University, Delhi, India

The article reads very well with a clear set of questions:
1) How do refugee women organize themselves for mutual help? 2) How do they build their social

networks through transnational practices to bridge local people? (3) Is community or individual empowerment of refugee women better for implementation through ethnic lines or a gender perspective?

While the questions attempt to engage with the state of the art in a comparative framework, the article appears to have certain drawbacks:

1. The state the art literature is relevant and engaging especially network theories and gender as a category. However it would have been interesting if the authors had attempted to bring the empirical cases with that of the theoretical framework.
2. The analysis seems rather disjointed
3. A small section on methodology need to be added.
4. Perhaps the authors can be encouraged to build on the case studies and the narratives and add a small section to re-engage with the theoretical framework, which then would lead to a coherent conclusion.

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it engage with the current literature?
Partly

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?
Partly

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?
Yes

Are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?
Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Not applicable

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Partly

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Migration, citizenship and ethnonationalism

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Author Response 13 Mar 2025

Paolo Ruspini

We wish to thank you for your very useful comments. While revising the second version of the article, they have been taken on board, particularly your re-alignnment request between

the theoretical and empirical part of this work as well as that for a methodological section which has been added.Currently, we are unfortunately not in the position to support the arguments with further data/case studies. We have however slightly revised the third research question and fulfilled other minor revisions after the article passed peer-review and we had received a fourth review. Thank you, again!

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Report 29 May 2024

https://doi.org/10.21956/openreseurope.18554.r40108

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?

Erka Caro
University of Tirana, Tirana, Albania

Overall, the paper presents an intriguing topic with the potential for engaging insights, yet falls short of delivering a comprehensive analysis. The introduction provides a broad overview but lacks specificity, with some content that could be better suited for footnotes. While the paper's premise holds promise, its execution disappoints upon closer examination.

One glaring issue is the ambiguity surrounding the selection method, described as coincidental, which raises concerns about the study's rigor. Methodological limitations are evident but not acknowledged, contributing to the lack of clarity in the methodology section. Key details, such as the number of interviews conducted and whether data stratification was employed, are conspicuously absent, undermining the study's credibility.

The revelation in the results section that only two video interviews were conducted is troubling, as this sample size is insufficient for drawing meaningful conclusions or facilitating comparisons. Additionally, the diverse backgrounds of the participants, hailing from Ukraine and the Republic of Congo, coupled with disparate motives for seeking asylum, further complicate any attempts at meaningful comparison.

Furthermore, there are no clear links between the literature and the results, particularly regarding the application of theoretical concepts like social networks, ethnic, and gender networks. The research questions posed at the outset remain largely unanswered, leaving the reader with a sense of incompleteness. The absence of a conclusive section compounds this issue, denying the opportunity for a synthesized interpretation of findings.

Moreover, the decision to include fieldwork descriptions within the results section seems misplaced and could have been better integrated into the methodological session for a more coherent presentation.

In summary, while the paper's subject matter holds promise, its execution is not up to expected standards. Addressing these shortcomings through improved methodological transparency, clearer theoretical application, and a more cohesive structure would significantly enhance the paper's scholarly value.

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it engage with the current literature?
Partly

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?
No

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?
No

Are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?
Partly

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Not applicable

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
No

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Migration, gender, labor issues

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Author Response 03 Jun 2024

Paolo Ruspini

We will answer to this review by blocks of paragraphs starting from comments on (1) the paper's introduction:

- We do believe that the introduction is clear in terms of objectives and contents of the article. As far footnotes, the article went through an attentive review by ORE senior editors and indications came to include specific elements in the text.

On (2) "the ambiguity sorrounding the selection mehod":

- The research’s sample limitations have been properly acknowledged along the text and they overall pertain to the COST Action’s limitation when doing “research”. Snowball method has been used and “coincidence” pertains to a specific ORE request during review. Kindly check for our final answer to the other reviewer as well. Number of interviews conducted and related methods have been clearly exposed but,

if necessary, we will point out once more that we were able to carry out two interviews per country.

On (3) "the video interviews":

- On the sample size: the matter has been already exposed. Let us add that the WEMov project requested two video interviews per member country. The drafted comparison has been based upon two refugees' women who searched for help when fleeing and found support at different level by networking, thanks.

On (4) the "link between the literature and the results":

- There is a comparative section where preliminary findings are discussed. This is not a final, conclusive work just the start of possible analysis of the ongoing incorporation process.

As far (5) "fieldwork descriptions within the results section":

- This is indeed arguable since the comparative assessment allows the discussion of specific points not necessarily exposed earlier. We will keep this comment under consideration, anyway.

At last (6) on "methodological transparency":

- We spent several rounds of revisions to make the methods as transparent and ethical sound as possible. Thanks, anyway, for your comments.

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Report 20 May 2024

https://doi.org/10.21956/openreseurope.18554.r40103

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John Eade
University of Roehampton, London, England, UK

This is a promising paper that tackles the highly relevant issue of developing self-help structures through transnational networks among women who have been forced to migrate. The paper tackles this issue by drawing on interviews with two women in different countries linked to three research questions.

In my opinion, the paper's impact can be improved by the following:

1. Consider the limitations of the social capital model as exposed in the wider literature. Putnam's approach has been particularly questioned and his perspective differs considerably from Bourdieu's so bringing them together with Granovetter raises important theoretical issues that should be addressed for the sake of clarity. The exploration by Bourdieu of the role played by cultural capital could be useful here, especially as migration requires people to learn the dominant 'rules of the game' in a new country.

2. The balance between the two case studies needs improving. There is more detail about the Bulgarian context and this weakens the comparison between Italy and Bulgaria and the conclusions drawn from this comparison. More information about the role played by self-help organizations in Italy would be very helpful since the person interviewed appears to have relied more on her personal transnational networks, especially her partner in Sweden with whom she shares a child.
3. It would be helpful to know more about the relationship between these two women and other migrants (male as well as female) and 'the whole native population' since this plays a crucial role in learning the local 'rules of the game'. There are more indications about how this relationship works in the Bulgarian case study so again more balance is needed here.

In sum, then, a very interesting and promising paper that can be strengthened along the lines outlined above.

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it engage with the current literature?
Partly

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?
Yes

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?
Yes

Are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?
Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Not applicable

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Partly

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: global migration, cultural diversity, urban ethnicity, identity politics, community representation, pilgrimage

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to state that I do not consider it to be of an acceptable scientific standard, for reasons outlined above.

Author Response 03 Jun 2024

Paolo Ruspini

We will answer to this review by the relevant blocks of paragraphs pertaining to improving the paper's impact moving from (1) the "limitations of the social capital model":

- The triangulation of adopted theoretical concepts supported by relevant literature is deemed useful in developing self-help structures, particularly in conflict ridden situation as those briefly exposed as well as in bringing positive impact in self-leaning perspective. Cultural capital has been addressed under the guise of class and gender in ethnic networks and their positionality. Intercultural exposure as bridging factor can then bring much needed support considered the experienced traumatic situations.

On (2) "improving the balance between the two case studies":

- Partnership brought far away emotional support, but concrete help came from the mentioned “sisterhood” in the local shelter. Unfortunately, we could not explore further the shelter and related refugees’ women dynamics for lack of time and resources.

As far (3) "the relationship between these two women and other migrants" is concerned:

- This comment pertains to a different level of the inclusion process which the research could not address as specified in the final section of the current paper. It would be indeed good to track the interviewees now to see how they cope with life and draft on their incorporation process.

On the reviewer's final statement:

- Data limitation because of the specific characteristics of the COST Actions which do not allow and fund research has been clearly addressed along the article. Considering that and the overall positive assessment of this review, we do believe that the “not approved” status does not reflect properly the quality of the work we were able to carry out under limited conditions. Therefore, we do invite the reviewer to revise his final assessment accordingly, thanks!

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Open Peer Review

Current Peer Review Status: ✔ ✔ ? ?

Version 3

Reviewer Report 27 March 2025

https://doi.org/10.21956/openreseurope.21576.r52319

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✔ **Erka Caro**
University of Tirana, Tirana, Albania

Substantial improvements have been made in response to prior feedback. While some issues (especially theoretical application and analytical depth) are only partially resolved, the revised version shows clear effort to address core concerns, and the paper now holds stronger academic value.

Recommendation: Accept with minor revisions
(Focused on strengthening conclusion and deepening theoretical analysis in discussion)

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.

Version 2

Reviewer Report 21 February 2025

https://doi.org/10.21956/openreseurope.19924.r49942

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? **Irina Diana Madroane**
[1] West University of Timisoara, Timișoara, Romania
[2]

West University of Timisoara, Timișoara, Romania

The article contributes to the research area of transnational migration and gender, by examining comparatively how two women migrants in Italy and Bulgaria, a Congolese asylum seeker and a Ukrainian refugee, respectively, employ social capital and build social networks in the transnational space as a way of achieving (self-)empowerment. The women migrants' use and development of self-help structures and social inclusion strategies are discussed through the lenses of ethnic mobilization and transnational networking practices, which shape and are shaped by the migrants' actions. Methodologically, the authors opt for an in-depth study of video interviews with the two women migrants (life stories), carried out as part of the COST Action WEMov. The gender-sensitive, qualitative research approach zooms in on the historical and geographical specificities of transnational migration spaces, viewed as relevant for practice-oriented pedagogy and policymaking in support of women migrants. The research design is sound, and the study is coherent, with minor exceptions. Overall, it succeeds at meeting its objectives, bringing to the fore the benefits and limits of ethnic mobilization in juxtaposition with intercultural and transnational relations building, both articulated in relation to gender.

I suggest a clearer phrasing of the third research question and a clarification of why ethnic mobilization is counterposed to gender in this question (I believe the authors mean "transnationalism and gender", but the wording of the question could still generate some confusion). In the presentation of findings, ethnic mobilization in the host country is mostly counterposed to transnational networking between sending and receiving countries, so there is a question mark regarding the formulation of the research question. Further, while transnational networking practices are indeed correlated to gender in the article, gender also plays a role in ethnic networking, as mentioned in the text, so there is some lack of clarity there, as well. For clarity purposes, too, and if that is the case, it should be specified that "ethnic mobilization" is confined in the study to the host country (otherwise ethnic networks cut across borders and may be considered to have a transnational dimension, as the Bulgarian case actually reveals). Some of these aspects require further theoretical forays and, especially, a strengthening of the connections among them in relation to the empirical work. The difference between the two strategies seems to lie rather in the type of social capital they require, and the authors could make this more explicit in the theoretical presentation. It is also unclear how the discussion of "the intersections between gender and class in ethnic enclaves" in the theoretical review applies to the empirical study. If it is simply an example of transnational relations, that should be specified. Further, while it apparent that "bridging" social capital plays an important role in the building of weak ties outside one's ethnic group, the role of "bonding" social capital remains somewhat backgrounded in the analysis of findings.

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it engage with the current literature?
Partly

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?
Yes

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?
Not applicable

Are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?

Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Not applicable

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Main areas: applied linguistics, discourse and rhetorical studies, public discourse analysis Secondary areas: media and communication studies, gender studies, transnational migration studies

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Author Response 13 Mar 2025

Paolo Ruspini

We would like to thank you for your valuable insights. We have considered them all and re-arranged the third research question to make it clearer. We have also added one short underlying paragraph on the research objectives. The theoretical concepts addressed in the article have been also checked both in the text (see ethnic mobilisation) and the conclusive statements to make it sure that they are fully aligned to the presented empirical data. There are also other minor additions throughtout the text that we are confident make the article fully consistent. Finally, slight editing has been also accomplished.

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Report 21 January 2025

https://doi.org/10.21956/openreseurope.19924.r49648

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John Eade
[1] University of Roehampton, London, England, UK
[2] University of Roehampton, London, England, UK

Looking at the response to the feedback submitted by the reviewers including me it is clear that they have tried as hard as they can to improve the paper. So I do not think that we should hold up

the paper from being indexed

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: global migration, cultural diversity, urban ethnicity, identity politics, community representation, pilgrimage

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.

Version 1

Reviewer Report 14 August 2024

https://doi.org/10.21956/openreseurope.18554.r40111

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?

Nasreen Chowdhory
[1] Department of Political Science, Delhi University, Delhi, India
[2] Department of Political Science, Delhi University, Delhi, India
[3] Department of Political Science, Delhi University, Delhi, India

The article reads very well with a clear set of questions:
1) How do refugee women organize themselves for mutual help? 2) How do they build their social networks through transnational practices to bridge local people? (3) Is community or individual empowerment of refugee women better for implementation through ethnic lines or a gender perspective?

While the questions attempt to engage with the state of the art in a comparative framework, the article appears to have certain drawbacks:

1. The state the art literature is relevant and engaging especially network theories and gender as a category. However it would have been interesting if the authors had attempted to bring the empirical cases with that of the theoretical framework.
2. The analysis seems rather disjointed
3. A small section on methodology need to be added.
4. Perhaps the authors can be encouraged to build on the case studies and the narratives and add a small section to re-engage with the theoretical framework, which then would lead to a coherent conclusion.

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it engage with the current literature?
Partly

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?
Partly

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?
Yes

Are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?
Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Not applicable

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Partly

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Migration, citizenship and ethnonationalism

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Author Response 13 Mar 2025

Paolo Ruspini

We wish to thank you for your very useful comments. While revising the second version of the article, they have been taken on board, particularly your re-alignnment request between the theoretical and empirical part of this work as well as that for a methodological section which has been added.Currently, we are unfortunately not in the position to support the arguments with further data/case studies. We have however slightly revised the third research question and fulfilled other minor revisions after the article passed peer-review and we had received a fourth review. Thank you, again!

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Report 29 May 2024

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Overall, the paper presents an intriguing topic with the potential for engaging insights, yet falls short of delivering a comprehensive analysis. The introduction provides a broad overview but lacks specificity, with some content that could be better suited for footnotes. While the paper's premise holds promise, its execution disappoints upon closer examination.

One glaring issue is the ambiguity surrounding the selection method, described as coincidental, which raises concerns about the study's rigor. Methodological limitations are evident but not acknowledged, contributing to the lack of clarity in the methodology section. Key details, such as the number of interviews conducted and whether data stratification was employed, are conspicuously absent, undermining the study's credibility.

The revelation in the results section that only two video interviews were conducted is troubling, as this sample size is insufficient for drawing meaningful conclusions or facilitating comparisons. Additionally, the diverse backgrounds of the participants, hailing from Ukraine and the Republic of Congo, coupled with disparate motives for seeking asylum, further complicate any attempts at meaningful comparison.

Furthermore, there are no clear links between the literature and the results, particularly regarding the application of theoretical concepts like social networks, ethnic, and gender networks. The research questions posed at the outset remain largely unanswered, leaving the reader with a sense of incompleteness. The absence of a conclusive section compounds this issue, denying the opportunity for a synthesized interpretation of findings.

Moreover, the decision to include fieldwork descriptions within the results section seems misplaced and could have been better integrated into the methodological session for a more coherent presentation.

In summary, while the paper's subject matter holds promise, its execution is not up to expected standards. Addressing these shortcomings through improved methodological transparency, clearer theoretical application, and a more cohesive structure would significantly enhance the paper's scholarly value.

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it engage with the current literature?
Partly

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?
No

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?
No

Are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?

Partly

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Not applicable

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
No

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Migration, gender, labor issues

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Author Response 03 Jun 2024

Paolo Ruspini

We will answer to this review by blocks of paragraphs starting from comments on (1) the paper's introduction:

- We do believe that the introduction is clear in terms of objectives and contents of the article. As far footnotes, the article went through an attentive review by ORE senior editors and indications came to include specific elements in the text.

On (2) "the ambiguity sorrounding the selection mehod":

- The research's sample limitations have been properly acknowledged along the text and they overall pertain to the COST Action's limitation when doing "research". Snowball method has been used and "coincidence" pertains to a specific ORE request during review. Kindly check for our final answer to the other reviewer as well. Number of interviews conducted and related methods have been clearly exposed but, if necessary, we will point out once more that we were able to carry out two interviews per country.

On (3) "the video interviews":

- On the sample size: the matter has been already exposed. Let us add that the WEMov project requested two video interviews per member country. The drafted comparison has been based upon two refugees' women who searched for help when fleeing and found support at different level by networking, thanks.

On (4) the "link between the literature and the results":

- There is a comparative section where preliminary findings are discussed. This is not a final, conclusive work just the start of possible analysis of the ongoing incorporation process.

As far (5) "fieldwork descriptions within the results section":

- This is indeed arguable since the comparative assessment allows the discussion of specific points not necessarily exposed earlier. We will keep this comment under consideration, anyway.

At last (6) on "methodological transparency":

- We spent several rounds of revisions to make the methods as transparent and ethical

sound as possible. Thanks, anyway, for your comments.

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Author Response 13 Mar 2025

Paolo Ruspini

We also wish to thank you for the above detailed comments and for allowing the article to pass peer-review. We have now uploaded for publication a third version of the article with minor theoretical revisions to address the arguments raised by the fourth reviewer. Thank you again!

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Report 20 May 2024

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John Eade
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This is a promising paper that tackles the highly relevant issue of developing self-help structures through transnational networks among women who have been forced to migrate. The paper tackles this issue by drawing on interviews with two women in different countries linked to three research questions.

In my opinion, the paper's impact can be improved by the following:

1. Consider the limitations of the social capital model as exposed in the wider literature. Putnam's approach has been particularly questioned and his perspective differs considerably from Bourdieu's so bringing them together with Granovetter raises important theoretical issues that should be addressed for the sake of clarity. The exploration by Bourdieu of the role played by cultural capital could be useful here, especially as migration requires people to learn the dominant 'rules of the game' in a new country.
2. The balance between the two case studies needs improving. There is more detail about the Bulgarian context and this weakens the comparison between Italy and Bulgaria and the conclusions drawn from this comparison. More information about the role played by self-help organizations in Italy would be very helpful since the person interviewed appears to

have relied more on her personal transnational networks, especially her partner in Sweden with whom she shares a child.

3. It would be helpful to know more about the relationship between these two women and other migrants (male as well as female) and 'the whole native population' since this plays a crucial role in learning the local 'rules of the game'. There are more indications about how this relationship works in the Bulgarian case study so again more balance is needed here.

In sum, then, a very interesting and promising paper that can be strengthened along the lines outlined above.

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it engage with the current literature?
Partly

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?
Yes

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?
Yes

Are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?
Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Not applicable

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Partly

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: global migration, cultural diversity, urban ethnicity, identity politics, community representation, pilgrimage

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to state that I do not consider it to be of an acceptable scientific standard, for reasons outlined above.

Author Response 03 Jun 2024

Paolo Ruspini

We will answer to this review by the relevant blocks of paragraphs pertaining to improving the paper's impact moving from (1) the "limitations of the social capital model":

- The triangulation of adopted theoretical concepts supported by relevant literature is deemed useful in developing self-help structures, particularly in conflict ridden situation as those briefly exposed as well as in bringing positive impact in self-leaning perspective. Cultural capital has been addressed under the guise of class and gender

in ethnic networks and their positionality. Intercultural exposure as bridging factor can then bring much needed support considered the experienced traumatic situations.

On (2) "improving the balance between the two case studies":

- Partnership brought far away emotional support, but concrete help came from the mentioned “sisterhood” in the local shelter. Unfortunately, we could not explore further the shelter and related refugees’ women dynamics for lack of time and resources.

As far (3) "the relationship between these two women and other migrants" is concerned:

- This comment pertains to a different level of the inclusion process which the research could not address as specified in the final section of the current paper. It would be indeed good to track the interviewees now to see how they cope with life and draft on their incorporation process.

On the reviewer's final statement:

- Data limitation because of the specific characteristics of the COST Actions which do not allow and fund research has been clearly addressed along the article. Considering that and the overall positive assessment of this review, we do believe that the “not approved” status does not reflect properly the quality of the work we were able to carry out under limited conditions. Therefore, we do invite the reviewer to revise his final assessment accordingly, thanks!

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.