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'When my children were born, I started to love Belgium': Moroccan migrant mothers' narratives of affective citizenship in the Belgian citizenisation context

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ABSTRACT

Integration policies and citizenisation programmes tend to have narrow conceptions of 'good' citizenship and are often articulated alongside specific assumptions regarding different migrant groups. This study draws on the qualitative research of a unique citizenisation pilot programme in Flanders, Belgium. The programme offered the combination of language courses, citizenisation and education support, and specifically targeted low literate migrant mothers from a non-EU background. Our analysis reveals the discrepancies between dominant discourses about integration and citizenisation and the participants' own views and experiences. We found that the government-subsidised local programme primarily focused on the mothers' citizenship in terms of linguistic and cultural integration, while the women themselves mostly endorsed an affective citizenship as mothers, wives and community members, by centralising mothering and care work. Furthermore, the programme oscillated between paternalism and support, visible in discourses of 'need' and 'empowerment'. And finally, the mothers' agency to navigate between the programme's objectives and their own were dependent on their intersectional positionings; the more literate and the longer their residence in the host society, the more critical they were regarding the programme's agenda. Based on these findings, some empirically obtained directives for future citizenisation programmes are suggested.

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1. Introduction

When family migrants leave their home country to settle in the immigration context, they face multiple challenges, ranging from building social networks to integrating into a new society with different legal structures, values and habits (Ahmed et al. 2003). Especially challenging for many female migrants is maternity, since this amplifies their financial and social vulnerability, and constitutes an important identity marker in the post-migration experience and settlement (Gedalof 2009). Although many policy and research reports have demonstrated that male and female migrants have different positionalities

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and therefore different needs and desires (cf. reports in EWSI 2018; Pessar and Mahler 2003), in practice, few integration programmes specifically target female migrant mothers (EWSI 2018). This study draws on the qualitative research of a citizenisation pilot programme in Flanders, Belgium. Citizenisation, mostly used in an European context, is a term that refers to an 'integration' policy that requires noncitizens to acquire 'citizen-like' skills and values in view of seeking citizenship or other forms of settlement (Fortier 2016).

In Flanders, the Northern region of the Federal State of Belgium, this unique citizenisation programme was developed in 2015, specifically geared towards the integration of 'low literate migrant mothers of children between 0 and 3 or pregnant women of a non-EU background' (AGII 2019; EC). The programme provided an interesting case study, situated at the intersection of (gendered and classed) migration, motherhood and citizenship. The study of the programme and its participants may contribute to the gap in current research on 'conceptual and empirical linkages of practices and identities of mothering, migration and citizenship' (Erel 2011, 699). Additionally, our assessment of the programme may serve future policy directives.

The programme encompassed two distinctive pilot programmes and was organised by the municipal services of the City of Antwerp and funded by the European Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund. The courses took place in Antwerp twice a week, at two different locations. The first programme ran from October 2015 until the end of December of 2016, and the second from March 2017 until the end of August of 2020. The courses combined language learning, education support and 'citizenisation' or the 'the promotion of participation-enabling skills among a variety of *non-citizen* populations, from persons seeking citizenship to immigrants seeking entry and permanent residence' (Goodman 2014, 3). There were twenty participants enrolled in the programme, divided in two groups who were almost all Moroccan (with one group also including sub-Saharan African) Muslim mothers between 25 and 40 years with a Belgian residence of approximately three years. Some of the women, however, had first emigrated to other Western countries several years before coming to Belgium, while others arrived straight from urban or rural Morocco. Approximately 70% of the women had little schooling (until the age of twelve) and were thus classified low literate, while the remaining 30% were illiterate without any education. The local programme explicitly targeted 'third-country, low-literate migrant mothers with preschool children and legal or in-process citizenship statuses' (Vervaeke and Geens 2016). These variables demanded an intersectional analysis (Collins and Bilge 2016; Yuval-Davis 2006) which enabled us to account for the diversity amongst the mothers.

Between September 2017 and July 2018, ethnographic research was carried out with the groups during their participation in the courses. This included qualitative in-depth interviews, focus-groups and participant observation in and outside of the classroom. Most qualitative research was done between January 2018 and July 2018, whereby the first author conducted a total of eight semi-structured in-depth interviews, weekly observations in each of the locations and three focus groups with the participants. The first author also conducted in-depth interviews with one of the programme's teachers and with a route counsellor in the umbrella citizenisation institution. After the programme's first pilot programme came to a close, another in-depth interview was held with two of its key facilitators, prompting these actors to reflect on their findings, observations and the intents and design of the pilot programme.

The coding and analysis of the data was completed using Grounded Theory, a methodology founded by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and further developed by Charmaz (2014). Grounded Theory is a way of developing a plausible theory based on individuals' lived experiences, following a constructivist and interpretative theoretical approach. Theory development was completed via induction, which is an approach whereby one starts from a general premise that is backed up by data. Based on the data and the programme's directives, the research team selected themes that recurred frequently but were not necessarily explicit in the classroom, such as 'empowerment'. We then used these themes for theory-building.

As the local pilot programme was executed by civil institutions on request of the Flemish government, the discursive ideologies of the different actors involved were entangled in (at times) complicated and conflicting ways. Previous research on European migration discourses and their translation by the Flemish government has shown that so-called third-country migrant women are often believed to integrate less well than their male counterparts and therefore lack sufficient socioeconomic autonomy (Ghanem 2019). Consequently, it has been argued that as the main reproductive socialisers, these women will negatively impact the prospects of their children (*idem*). Therefore, a directive for a civil programme was launched that aimed to 'empower' these women (*cf. infra*) and consequently their children (AGII 2019, EC). Yet throughout our empirical research it became clear that some of the standpoints and concerns expressed by the government in regards to empowerment and what that should look like for the participants were not merely endorsed. These standpoints and concerns were also challenged by some key facilitators within the programme as well as by the latter's participants.

In this paper, we interrogate the implications of this tailored local pilot programme and its ideologico-discursive ambiguities and frictions and the experiences of the participating migrant women. Do the aims of the government's pilot programme reflect the needs and desires of the women, or are these mainly assumptions that are out of touch with the women's realities? And to what extent might migrant women themselves endorse or challenge some of the integration and citizenisation discourses by inscribing an affective citizenship by centralising mothering and care work? In the first part of the paper we will demonstrate some of the local citizenisation programme's challenges to and reifications of political discourses about migrant mothers. The second part of the paper lays out the pseudonymized narratives and experiences of Moroccan migrant mothers in relation to the citizenisation process in Flanders, and in relation to the context of the local programme in particular. The empirical study allows for a more nuanced understanding of the frictions regarding 'failed' or 'successful' integration in migrant women's lives (Erel 2007), and can also inspire to formulate some suggestions for future citizenisation policy directives and trajectories.

2. The Moroccan migrant mother as 'the migrant with poor prospects'?

In the Dutch-speaking Northern region of Belgium (Flanders) integration and citizenisation policies are decided upon by the Flemish Federal government (AGII 2019) and are not informed by the Belgian state's migration policies. In general, migration policies can be informed by academic research and civil expertise but in turn might have an (ideological) impact on civil society and research funding. This applies to the Flemish local

programme for migrant mothers, which is funded by an ‘Externally Autonomous Agency’. This type of Agency often has the legal structure of a non-profit organisation and is therefore part of civil society, yet simultaneously translates the Flemish citizenisation and integration decrees into policy-relevant action. This action is thus informed by party ideologies.

In the following section we examine the influence of these ideologies on the local programme. Our analysis is based on qualitative research, including an analysis of policy documents as well as qualitative interviews with the programme’s organisers and teachers and participant observations in the citizenisation programme. Specifically, we will demonstrate some of the local citizenisation programme’s challenges to and reifications of political discourses about migrant mothers. Within this analysis of qualitative research, three prevalent components are included: Moroccan women’s integration capacities, reproductive roles, and ‘empowerment’ within and outside of their religio-cultural communities.

2.1. Discursive constructions of (Muslim) migrant mothers in Flemish politics

While spatiality is crucial in migration research, more attention is required for the temporal aspects of migration. Erel and Ryan (2019) use the notion of ‘historical time’ to situate migration experiences in specific macro socio-political contexts. Hence, we will demonstrate the influence of historical events in shaping discourses on migration and on (female) migrants’ capacities to integrate.

The local programme was developed in a period of increased right-wing politics in Flanders and in Belgium as a whole. Flemish-nationalist and right-wing conservative parties occupied important posts related to asylum and migration ‘management’, which became even more severe after the 2015 ‘asylum and refugee crisis’. Prior to the ‘asylum and refugee crisis’, Flemish political discourses on the culturalist citizenisation criteria such as linguistic integration or the transmission of cultural practices and beliefs (Gryp, Loobuyck, and Verschelden 2009; Mandin 2014) were already in place. However, as several political analysts have demonstrated (i.e. De Cleen et al. 2017; Van Leuven et al. 2018), such discourses and criteria intensified further in 2015. More particularly, these discourses by the Flemish state have emphasised ‘our values and norms’ (Homans 2016; Miri 2020) conveying both ideas of ‘good citizenship’ and concerns over failed integration (Arnaut et al. 2009; De Cleen et al. 2017; Van Leuven et al. 2018).

Hence, according to the Flemish government, successful citizenship entails ‘proper’ integration. The logic of ‘citizenisation’ in Western Europe (Fortier 2017; Mouritsen 2013; Paparusso 2019) and specifically in Flanders or Belgium (Gryp, Loobuyck, and Verschelden 2009; Mandin 2014) demands that newcomers acquire information about certain cultural practices, languages, ethnicities and religions, laws, and the citizen’s legal rights. Yet, migrants’ ‘proper’ integration and ‘good’ citizenship become increasingly defined in more ideologically volatile terms. This progression – which in the local programme is centralised around the need to ‘empower’ migrant mothers (AGII 2019) – is informed by the rise of specific gendered and culturalised discourses on so-called third-country migrants, which emphasise the need to ‘save’ women with a Muslim background (Ghanem 2019; Ghorashi 2010; Miri 2020; Ouali 2012).

Furthermore, mothers have historically been constructed as ‘bearers’ of the Nation and its future citizens (Erel 2011; Rai 2013; Yuval-Davis 1996). Hence, we will focus on the specific expectations regarding Muslim migrant mothers and how these intersect with dominant discourses in Belgian politics.

In the specific case of so-called third-country migrant mothers migrating from Islamic nations, motherhood has been constructed as an important site of cultural and religious transmission (Erel, Reynolds, and Kaptani 2018). Migrant mothers are believed to simply transmit their own heritage, capital and resources (Gedalof 2009) to their children, and in doing so, instil specific civil ideals and standards. As several feminist scholars have claimed, mothers are regarded as either ‘proper’ citizens when they bring forth ‘capable’, participating patriotic citizens, or an incarnation of failed integration when they transmit their own cultural values and norms and thereby reproduce ‘difference’ (Reynolds, Erel, and Kaptani 2018).

Migrant mothers furthermore play a crucial and contradictory role in the ‘political economy of reproduction’ (Barbagallo 2016; Kofman and Raghuram 2015). On the one hand, migrant women and mothers are urged to work in order to be financially autonomous as well as economically productive citizens; on the other hand, neoliberal economics engender structural barriers by deregulating and creating precarity in the labour market, which consequentially forces migrant and non-migrant mothers alike to continue to shoulder reproductive and unpaid labour at home, all of which hampers the mothers’ demanded financial autonomy and productivity.

Moreover, discourses on Muslim migrant women and mothers often insist on personal development or self-realisation. Self-realisation and the related ‘entrepreneurialism’ (Del Percio 2018; Mata-Codesal, Peperkamp, and Tiesler 2015; Ong 2006) ideally lead to increased wellbeing and hence secure labour participation (*idem*). Cynically, however, these ideals are foregrounded in contexts where not only neoliberalism is thriving, but also right-wing politics (Van Leuven et al. 2018), both of which are increasingly dismantling welfare for all and precarising living conditions. The language of ‘empowerment’ as used by the programme can and does partially become a means to responsabilise individuals for their ‘success’ or ‘failure’ in society (Del Percio 2018; Mata-Codesal, Peperkamp, and Tiesler 2015). It may also be an indicator of the pre-existing framing of female migrants as ‘migrants with poor prospects’ (Bonjour and Duyvendak 2017).

The empowerment discourse also relates to, yet sits ambiguously with, structural ‘feminist’ emancipation (Gedalof 2009; Ghanem 2019). On the one hand, women undeniably benefit from education, participation in public activities, economic autonomy and citizenship in a country where women’s legal rights are prioritised and safeguarded. A substantial part of Belgium’s so-called third-country migrants originate from countries with overtly patriarchal policies, norms and practices. An extensive and deeply-embedded gendered public and private sphere (Erel 2011; Ferguson 2013; McDowell 2008) often exacerbated by the migration process, may have constricted these women from public sphere participation in education, the labour market, politics, or certain leisure activities. On the other hand, we have to be careful not to essentialise the cultures in which specific gender(ed) discriminations occur, as well as the women who may have suffered from the latter. This brings us to a last reservation with respect to the foregrounded empowerment ideals, which is that they are rather imperialistic and paternalist (Coene and Longman 2005; Farris 2017; Ouali 2012; Squires 2013). For not only do these ideals reify the

notion that (Muslim) migrant women should be rescued from oppressive and patriarchal traditions that keep them from integrating 'successfully', they are also seldomly informed by the lived experiences and narratives of the subjects concerned (Abu-Lughod 2002). Here again, maternal identity is important, since political discourse assumes (Muslim) migrant mothers' reproduction of gendered family and community structures that perpetuate these unequal gender patterns in their community (Gedalof 2009; Ghanem 2019).

2.2. The programme's reification of and challenge to culturalist discourses

How are these political discourses translated in citizenisation programmes? Based on reviews of programme documents and on our observations in a specific local programme, we will now discuss some of its contents and outlines that could illustrate when and how the programme reifies and challenges these gendered and culturalised political discourses.

As is stated on the programme's website, the first pilot programme focuses on low literate Moroccan migrant mothers who are perceived to be in need of a steppingstone to regular Dutch language and citizenisation courses (AGII 2019). The language of empowerment is apparent in the programme outline: 'The empowerment of mothers certainly has an indirect impact on children's opportunities for development. In short, this integrated approach, aligning with the mothers' and children's world, allows both the mothers and the children to find their own position in society' (Vervaeet and Geens 2016). The specific activities that were organised to achieve these ideals were citizenisation courses, language courses, group workshops about childrearing support and mother-and-child-interaction moments, plays concerned with skill development in children during day care, and a range of activities amongst mothers and their children, such as going to the zoo, and visiting the library or a day care facility. Participant observations during the courses and activities and interviews with the programme's teachers revealed that the intended empowerment is related to personal development as well as to family relations – with an explicit focus on motherhood and gender equality within the family.

The programme stresses the importance of 'personal development' in citizenship and successful integration. On the one hand, the programme can be understood as a safe space for the women to be amongst and associate with other women, learn the language, engage in activities and express their desires and dreams. On the other hand, the story of personal development was articulated in ways that may ignore the women's diverse social positions. In fact, several variables accounted for different agentic capabilities amongst the women. These included the women's differing degrees of literacy (ranging from illiterate to low literate, based on schooling degrees in their home countries), lengths of stay in Western countries before arriving in Belgium (some women arrived straight from Morocco, while others had been in Spain or the Netherlands for several years), number of children, and legal statuses (some were fully 'legalised', others were in the process of legalisation). Many of the participants reported to have benefited from the programme's courses, as the narratives illustrate (*cf. infra*). However, some had to cross many barriers to partake in the first place. For example, some of the mothers living with their in-laws were prevented from joining the classes as they were expected to prioritise household tasks, yet others were supported by their in-laws to attend. Other barriers included financial and mobility issues, as some women lived further

away than others and had to take public transport. In the case of the less 'privileged' women in the group who had to overcome barriers to attend, the programme's emphasis on self-development may have ignored such barriers, while conceiving participants through the language of 'self-realisation', regardless of their conditions. In this sense, we found that 'personal empowerment' discourses of the programme resonated at times with prevalent neoliberal citizenisation discourses which overlook structural barriers.

In regards to empowerment, migrant women's personal empowerment was often conceptualised and actualised through the family. However, despite participants' intersecting identities as Muslim (Moroccan) women, wives, and mothers, the programme's goals clearly include enhancing migrant women's financial, emotional and cognitive autonomy. Again, there are frictions between action on behalf of the women and action on behalf of political integration views, between working 'with' the women and working 'on' them.

The integrative set-up of the programme was a good starting point to illustrate these frictions. The programme contextualised the women both as mothers and wives. As mothers, the women could bring their children to the programme and make use of cost-free day care. As wives, the programme acknowledged the prevalent Islamic requirement of gender-separated classes. If these criteria were not met, many of the women would not have been permitted by their husbands to participate. Religious prescriptions and patriarchal interference in the women's life choices were real, and the programme's pragmatic approach towards this was unique in a political landscape that otherwise endorses and enforces Muslim migrants' integration in a way that answers to secular and liberal understandings of gender equality (Maliapaard, Fleischmann, and Phalet 2013). Simultaneously, the programme's mission to 'educate' or 'free' the vulnerable women was illustrated by the fact that most of the mothers did not enrol themselves in the programme but were *recruited* by e.g. their integration counsellor. This mission statement and the recruitment is subtly reminiscent of liberal-colonial feminist discourses on migrant women's emancipation (Ahmed 1992; Farris 2017).

This liberal feminist discourse also informs the programme's particular reference frame for maternal empowerment. Conscious of the fact that everyday childcare was largely shouldered by mothers (Barbagallo 2016; McDowell 2008), the programme taught the mothers to include more self-care and to encourage fathers' caregiving contributions. Yet as the programme explicitly targeted mothers, the women were subsequently addressed (and naturalised) as primary socialisers. In the classes, for instance, communication, playfulness, rest ('me-time') and recreation were emphasised mainly as a *means* to fulfil the participants' roles as good mothers and to avoid (mental) health issues. Examples of what was taught in terms of good parenting were playing linguistic games, singing songs and doing crafts with the children, all of which fit in with the idea that linguistic competence was an important criterion for successful integration or good citizenship. These examples of good parenting also indicated something else: the professionalisation and intensification of maternal work, behaviour and knowledge, which enable future human capital (Smyth and Craig 2017).

Not only does this intensive form of parenting require of the mothers to spend quality time with their children by engaging in the abovementioned activities, it also required them to actively involve the fathers in the caregiving process. However, gender equality

in parenting is not so straightforward or easily solvable. Prevalent patriarchal interpretations of Islamic law and contemporary values in Moroccan society prevented the women from ‘actively involving’ their husbands or to ‘simply’ emancipate and become fulltime workers. Moreover, the dependency of many of the women on their husbands was sustained by the Belgian migration policies that state that marriage migrants cannot work during the first year and should live with their spouses for three to five years before acquiring full citizenship (Miri 2020). In these circumstances, the well-functioning of their marriage was important to many of the women. It is thus important to understand how ‘the relationship between masculinities, femininities, migration, mobility and transnationalism’ (Erel and Ryan 2019, 248) influence the gender roles of Moroccan migrants in Belgium.

A final comment regarding the programme, was that the fundamental goal of educational support, i.e. to ‘educate’ these mothers on how to raise and care for their babies, was in line with liberal feminist ideals as well as with colonial discourses on migrant mothers. The sessions namely sought to convey ideals of ‘proper’ motherhood, which favoured Western mothering practices over non-Western practices and functioned as an important identity-marker in the women’s citizenship.

Therefore, the programme demonstrated the fine line between ‘thin’ interpretations of empowerment and homogenising projections of needs. We argue that this is because the programme was shaped by governmental directives and monetisation and thus necessarily subscribed to some of the latter’s logics. Nevertheless, our participant observations showed discrepancies when comparing the programme’s views and practices and the dominant Flemish (Belgian) citizenisation and integration discourses. There were even significant discrepancies among the teachers, whose backgrounds (Belgian or Moroccan of Moroccan origins) also accounted for differing conceptions of emancipation and proximity with the social realities of the women.

3. Religion, motherhood and care: cornerstones of affective citizenship

In this section, we foreground the agency and subjectivity of the migrant women themselves by exploring their own experiences of (dis)empowerment during the citizenisation trajectory, as well as their unique perceptions of citizenship. It is important to note here that the term ‘empowerment’ was never explicitly used during interviews, nor by the participants themselves. Nevertheless, we choose to adopt this term in this article in reference to the programme’s explicit aim to simultaneously ‘empower and integrate’ the migrant mothers (Vervaeet and Geens 2016). It also enabled us to analyse migrant mothers’ own interpretations of the programme’s agenda. Our use of ‘empowerment’ as well as the women’s *non-use* of the term are of course indicative of our different social locations.

In order to engage with migrant mothers’ realities and potentials, the first author listened to the women’s narratives during extensive conversations in the women’s mother tongue: (1) eight in-depth interviews took place during the classes, (2) three focus-group discussions on the topic of migrant motherhood were organised as an integral part of the courses, (3) weekly participant observations and (4) many informal conversations both during and outside the courses or activities took place. The first author, who conducted the empirical research, is a doctoral researcher and young mother of Moroccan

descent. Adopting a critical stance on insider/outsider categorisation in ethnographic research (Lisiak 2015), she maintains that her position is contingent, constructed and fluid, which ‘impacts the research situation’ (Eppley 2006, 11). During the research process, insider and outsider positions existed simultaneously: the first author shared the language, ethnic and religious background, gender, age and motherhood experiences which proved to be significant for the confidence and ease with which the participants shared their lives with her. However, the first author is not a migrant herself and being highly educated, she does not share the same socioeconomic status. Assumptions regarding the participants’ and researchers’ positions need careful consideration as they reveal thought processes and, as such, are part of academic analysis (Lisiak 2015).

3.1. *In between empowerment and belittlement*

Based on the fieldwork, we learned that the programme’s agenda of simultaneous ‘empowerment and integration’ often oscillated between support and paternalism. In one way, the women indicated that the course provided a safe space for mothers to be amongst only women and talk freely, to bring their kids, and to learn. The large majority of these women thus welcomed this opportunity to share their stories and create a community.

I was locked up for years actually. I thought: “Why didn’t I decide to go to school earlier? Why only now?” In the beginning I had no residence documents, so I was scared. I thought they would [refuse me], while there are women who don’t have [residence documents either], but still come to learn. I didn’t know that; I didn’t know anything. And when I came here, I was really enjoying myself. (...) We support each other and talk to each other. I think it’s good and fun to come and listen. (...) Alhamdulillah! (Zohra, illiterate, six years in BE)

Like Marwa, many others also reported to have learned about childcare:

As far as the programme is concerned, it has enlightened my life. I was in a stuck place where all the doors were closed. The programme has opened [some doors], Alhamdulillah. (...) I was not handling my daughter well. I wanted to be a strict mother – I wished she would see a strength in me that I didn’t have. (...) So when I came here and met [the children education supporter], she gave advice and taught things that amazed me. (Marwa, low literate, five years in BE)

However, the women were not exclusively positive towards the programme’s agenda. Some, for instance, were critical of the (liberal) ideals of motherhood that were ‘taught’ in the child support classes. Others had the impression that the programme’s underlying assumption was that they, as low-literate women, lacked maternal ‘resources’ (*cf. infra*). Several women also criticised the programme’s citizenisation ideology and the entangled legal regulations and restrictive conditions of citizenship in the context of family related migration (Miri 2020). The participants reported that their legal citizenship status was an important stress factor and had a major impact on their (mental) health as well as on their relationships. Many complained during the group discussions about a lack of connection to what was being said in class:

What we learn in [especially the Dutch] class, it just does not stay with us as our heads are full of these ‘paper’ issues. (Laila, low literate, two years in BE)

Another participant discusses the mental impact of the legalisation process:

My husband asks if we will have another child (...). My daughter even asks if she can have a sister. (...) I would love to even have six children, but I am tired. The problems with my residence permit have had a major impact on my life. You make a request and it gets refused, over and over again. The lawyers cost money. I don't get it. Am I going to eat their trees here? I don't understand why ... People want to work, build a future and learn [the language]. (...) [The government's policies] are ruining your future. (Norah, illiterate, five years in BE)

Yet another participant, Laila, shared during the group discussions that she felt pressured by her husband to have a second child, but was afraid to get pregnant again and give birth without health insurance. Her first delivery was very expensive due to a required but uninsured hospitalisation, which caused financial hardship.

These narratives highlight some important issues: (1) the specific and problematic linkage of motherhood, migration and citizenship, given that migrant budding mothers' financial dependency and insecurity are largely sustained by current policies, and (2) the necessity to deploy different forms of capital to survive in an alien environment.

3.2. Dynamics of gender, religion and cultural capital

The mothers used to varying degrees their religious and cultural capital to navigate the programmes' discourses.

By rendering their own religious and cultural capital meaningful to their mothering practices, for instance, some mothers challenged the programme's ideology of 'good' parenting: 'This is how our mothers and grandmothers have been doing it in our family for a long time', or 'Allah will guide and bless my childrearing, if He approves of it, for we cannot control everything'.

As another participant states:

These things about motherhood ... God 'teaches' you those things without anyone having to tell you. If you are breastfeeding at night while you are sleeping, your brain is not sleeping because you are feeding your child. That is something you have no control over. There is a difference. (...) [Non-religious people] don't have the beliefs that we have. We are Muslims and know that it comes from Allah. (Loubna literate, two years in BE, but lived and worked for six years in an Arab oil state before)

The blessings of God were thus experienced as direct forces and sources of empowerment, especially in the context of family and motherhood. Although the women considered family and motherhood to be the most valuable elements in their daily lives, it became clear throughout the observations and during the in-depth interviews that many of them experienced tensions. On the one hand, they identified as mothers and, from an Islamic perspective, therefore as 'proper' wives (Cheruvallil-Contractor 2016). On the other hand, however, many expressed the desire to become financially independent, learn the language, be autonomous, get an education, and have a career and a good social position. Many also complained about their husbands, whom they portrayed as possessive ('jealous'), restrictive and controlling. They reportedly suffered from the unequal gendered dynamics between their husbands (who were 'free') and themselves.

Women who were more outspoken, socially active and self-aware like Aicha, Norah and Hidaya, who have all resided in other European countries for several years before moving to Belgium, knew how to navigate and use this religious and cultural capital. They reclaimed their role as ‘good’ mothers (and wives) and ‘reclaimed their faith’ and certain traditional cultural practices in their experiences of mothering (Cheruvallil-Contractor 2016; Erel 2010). So even if the patriarchal structures within institutionalised religion continued to have a constraining impact on women’s lives, the lived experiences of religion were more nuanced in their reification or denouncement of these structures (Kawash 2011; Ryan and Vacchelli 2013; Rye and Cheruvallil-Contractor 2016).

For instance, when interviewing Aicha, she often spoke about the taboo that existed in the community regarding day care facilities and how she succeeded in convincing her husband. In fact, Aicha drew on the sections in the Quran in which self-care is encouraged in order to explain why their son should go to day care and in doing so had more time for herself:

I really want to rest on Friday (the blessed Islamic day of Jumuha). (...) On Friday, my second youngest son goes to day care and I go out alone and have a drink. I take the youngest with me and I go (...) where they serve delicious Moroccan coffee. Every time, I find a new place. I go and drink something and if I am hungry, I also eat something (...). I don’t care if it costs 10–15 euros. I buy something for myself, I even buy flowers for myself. I am not waiting for anyone to bring me flowers. I love it! (Aicha, literate, three years in BE)

3.3. The effects of maternal care and community-building

As mothers, wives and community members, care plays a central role in the women’s lives. In Islam, ‘mothers are both recognised and valorised as the first educators of children’ (Rye and Cheruvallil-Contractor 2016, 1). On the one hand, this implies that women are more ‘burdened’ with reproductive labour than men. Almost all the participants acknowledged this gendered labour division and wished that their husbands were more involved in childcare. Simultaneously, however, motherhood was often seen as that which makes life worthwhile and fulfilling, even if their empowerment originating from bearing and raising a child was not always acknowledged by Western (secular) ideals of empowerment. Research demonstrates that especially in a migration context with few social networks, motherhood represents a site of achievement, status, community-building, household authority, moral obligation and blessing in Islam (Afshar 2000; Cheruvallil-Contractor 2016; Erel 2011). Several participants indicated that their life had become more fulfilling and richer once they had children:

It became better (with children) of course. When you are alone, you are just sitting around doing nothing. Every day is the same. With children every day is different. (...) And so the days pass. You kind of ‘forget’ your family [in Morocco]. (Meryem, literate, eight years in BE)

When [my children] were born, life became more beautiful. (laughs) Then I started to love Belgium. I have changed a lot, you know. (...) A while ago, I didn’t feel like caring for little children anymore. (...) But these days, when I talk to my mother and tell her what I did with my children, she says: ‘Good my daughter. You are wise now and know how to educate your children.’ God gives you that pleasure and reason. (Hajar, low literate, two years in BE)

As motherhood is an important identity marker (Erel 2011), it can be identified as a common ground between mothers regardless of their backgrounds (Cheruvallil-

Contractor 2016). In a society that often ‘polices’ mothers (Garwood 2014; Henderson, Harmon, and Houser 2010), the exchange of maternal experiences in the local programme functioned as an antidote. In a group of which all members were in a relatively precarious situation, sharing personal stories with each other made them feel more hopeful and at ease.

More particularly, sharing the ‘real’ experiences of bodily experiences of pregnancy, labour, and nursing, or emotional experiences of pride, joy, hardship and doubt led to more self-awareness and maternal confidence. Their so-called empowerment thus came from the attempt ‘to fashion a mode of mothering that affords and affirms maternal agency, authority, autonomy and authenticity and which confers and confirms power to and for mothers’ (O’Reilly 2004, 15).

But the mothers did not only exchange views and experiences. Mutual care-giving and childcare support amongst the mothers was also informative of their community-building (see Ryan 2007). For instance, based on the idea that ‘it takes a village to raise a child’, the mothers would take care of each other’s children. This approach to caregiving fundamentally countered normative ideals of motherhood within the nuclear family structure which were taught within the programme. In a conversation, Hajar told us how she and Loubna would look after each other’s children and exchange clothes or toys.

I am grateful, we keep each other company when we go outside together. When our husbands are not there, we go outside together. The children play together. My children like to play with the children of Loubna. (Hajar, low literate, two years in BE)

Additionally, the mothers also looked after each other and referred to one another as ‘sisters’. Many reported that their arrival in Belgium entailed a profound loneliness and social detachment. They found Flemish culture individualist, cold and distant, and they pointed repeatedly at the lack of community. The impact on some participants was large, as they felt increasingly alienated in the public sphere and stressed the importance of community-building.

Muslims must be like one strong rope. Muslims must encourage each other to do good and to have faith. The rope must be properly tied. It is not beneficial that one person holds the rope and the other lets go of it. [...] I have had many people visiting my home, both people I know and people I don’t know. I expect nothing in return. Thank God I did it for them and they left happy. I’m proud of that. (...) We have to cheer each other up ... We as Moroccan women in Europe must enjoy ourselves. (Aicha, literate, three years in BE)

To many participants the local programme was a way to get together and to connect in and beyond the classroom. Whereas the programme’s main focus was a more child-centred notion of care, based on their religious and cultural capital, the participants gave proof of a communal care on different levels. This included providing care for each other’s children, care for one another, their husbands, in-laws and even families abroad, whom they oftentimes continued to support emotionally and economically (Svašek 2008). For instance, this communal care occurred during the classes, as the women had an agreement of sharing food during coffee break and every week some mothers would bring home-made Moroccan pastries or cake and share it with the entire group. Another example of this communal care was when Shayma and Zohra gave birth, Norah and Aicha each in their turn made a traditional Moroccan dish to share and celebrate. Once, some women bought gifts and planned via *WhatsApp* to

visit Shayma after class. Consequently, many women indicated that this mutual caregiving and community-building provided a sense of belonging in the new context.

However, we must be careful not to exaggerate the role of the local programme in 'bringing the women together'. Whether the women 'leave the house' and connect with others largely depends on their situatedness (education, marital relationship, personality, citizenship status, etc.). Again, the women who were more educated or had a better financial or legal status were more likely to find their way to social life, engage in activities and meet other migrants. Conversely, as one mother illustrated, mothers can also 'live in isolation' yet have meaningful lives within their families. It is nonetheless clear that, inside or outside the classroom, the women's agentic potential stemmed from community and mutual care.

Analysis of the data repeatedly reveals the centrality of care work in the mother's lives, or rather, caring about, taking care of, care giving, and care receiving (Fisher and Tronto 1990; Tronto 2009). Feminist migration and citizenship scholars have shown how the relation between care work and citizenship is ambiguous and often strained (Erel 2011; Longman, De Graeve, and Brouckaert 2013; Mookherjee 2005). Moreover, a great deal of the economy and the citizens' overall wellbeing rely on both formal and informal care work, family work and community work. Our analysis therefore corroborates the plea to move beyond a stigmatising citizenship model that foregrounds the 'productive' or the 'rational', and instead strives to be more inclusive of a citizenship that values the embodied care work performed by many (mostly) women (Lister 2007). Several scholars have termed this 'affective citizenship' (Ahmed 2004; Fortier 2016). We define affective citizenship here as a 'holistic' and inclusive citizenship that also considers 'contextual features as crucial factors in citizens' decision making and actions', 'emotions, feelings and sensitivity in terms of personal particularity', 'individual bodily experiences as significant elements in identifying issues, [and] in problem-solving' and 'deliberative reasoning, as well as perceptive sensitivity, rational thinking and attentive care' (Hung 2010, 496–497). We particularly follow Mookherjee (2005) in her analysis that affective citizenship 'supports the different components of women's autonomous functioning, through a universalistic commitment to the creative expression of their hybrid identities' (31). Muslim migrant mother's views of belonging, empowerment and citizenship typically differ from the liberal classical citizenship conceptions of people's rights and duties based on shared histories, values and norms, which are now challenged by migration and globalisation (Siim 2013). Instead, they may demonstrate novel belongings, subjectivities and civic identities.

4. Conclusion

Throughout the empirical study, it became clear that our participants both consciously and unconsciously defied the assumption that migration follows 'a linear trajectory of loss or accumulation of capitals' (Griffiths et al. in Erel and Ryan 2019, 250). After the programme, the women did not start endorsing entirely different views of what motherhood, citizenship or success should look like. For instance, in the beginning of the programme, the overwhelming majority of our participants had initially indicated that language-learning and being financially independent constituted main goals in their lives, and after the programme, the women still also endorsed specific affect-based

citizenship ideals. As caregiving proved to be important in the religion, family culture and the precarious migrant position of our participants, the latter actually challenged a hyper-individualised notion of maternal care in Western culture. Not only did the participants draw on their existing capital, they might also have inspired an alternative 'ethics of care' towards a model of affective citizenship in the majority society.

Having discussed in this paper the ambivalences of the programme and the frameworks it uses, we would like to conclude with some policy directives based on these frameworks. Seeing the similarities between many of the integration policies directed to migrants across Western-Europe and beyond, we believe our analysis in the Flemish-Belgian context also might hold wider relevance. Firstly, several participants as well as the organisers have complained about the cumbersome and inconsistent reunification policy which mostly affects migrant women. Current policies obstruct the latter's independent position and entry into the labour market results in an emancipation backlog that is difficult to bridge afterwards (EWSI 2018). In order to improve migrant mothers' (financial) autonomy, certain measures need to be revised that thus far sustain migrant women's dependency in their households and with respect to their residency status (Miri 2020).

One way to do so is obvious: female family reunification migrants should be given labour opportunities in order to earn their own living. Another suggestion concerns childcare. As childcare is very expensive, many reunification migrant mothers will not take courses. In this respect, the integrative nature of the studied local programme, most especially the provision of social orientation, language courses and childcare were key in the mothers' participation. During the interviews we heard time and again how essential it was that the participants had cost-free childcare in order to follow the classes. The studied programme, unlike most other programmes, took into account that migrant mothers have different needs than other migrants. By addressing the migrant women not only as migrants but also as *mothers*, both the migrant women and society in general benefit (EWSI 2018). A final recommendation for supporting female (reunification) migrants' autonomy is the provision of separate classes. Many Muslims operate in separate gendered spheres, so mixed courses constitute a problem for many in the Muslim (and other traditionalist minority) migrant communities. The gendered separation of courses which is only provided by this unique pilot programme, however, is heavily opposed by Belgian policymakers. The reason for this, is that this would not be in line with Western liberal values of equality (Van Leuven et al. 2018). However, from a pragmatic point of view, a gendered separation could be potentially beneficial to migrant Muslim women, and potentially also migrant women with other traditional cultural, ethnic or religious origins, and their integration into society. Currently, husbands or male relatives oppose their wives' or female relatives' going to these mixed courses, which makes the women even more dependent on the men. Ensuring the female migrants' going to the courses will provide more tools, knowledge and empowerment to these women, so that they may make future decisions more autonomously.

Putting forward these directives, we would like to emphasise the importance of civil society actors working *with* migrant mothers, proceeding in ways that work *for* migrant mothers. Making sense of the intersections of these women's lives, is empowering to the women and it is only in such a space that their critical self-reflexivity may arise, which is needed to partake in re/building their own lives in the immigration context.

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