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Editorial

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# Changing surroundings and gender: An inquiry into gender dynamics in migration contexts

Editorial

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This Special Issue of DiGeSt: *Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies* was conceived to highlight imbrications and intersections of gender and migration. It aims at unravelling the distinct ways in which gender identities, roles and relationships are complexly intertwined with and affected by migration dynamics. While recognizing that gender also drives mobilities and structures migration patterns, experiences and expectations, this issue focuses specifically on how gender is navigated when contexts change and transition processes take place in the face of migration.

Context determines the construction and experience of gender. Gender identities, roles and relations are negotiated and construed in relation to particular cultural, political, social, historic and economic realities (Connell, 2002; Mahler & Pessar, 2001). When drastic contextual changes occur as a result of international migration, familiar frames of reference may erode or be challenged, and new ones become imposed (Van Wolvelaer, Schamp & Vindevogel, 2021). Changing surroundings thus bring changing ideals, norms, attributes, expectations, attitudes, and practices to gender. Gender hegemony typically dishonors and subordinates other forms of gender experience and performance that do not match up to this contextually enshrined ideal (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). This impacts lived experiences and performances of masculinity and femininity, in relation to the multiple social spaces that people in migration contexts belong to and that produce diverging – if not conflicting – gender ideals (Van Wolvelaer et al., 2021). In addition, gender ideals are often upheld and at times imposed upon migrants in relation to notions of integration and citizenship. The confluence with allegedly neutral gender ideals as well as stereotypes of migrants' gender roles and relations entrenched in policies and practices of migrant integration and citizenisation (Mullally, 2013; Wilton, 2009) typically leaves limited space for conceiving of gender and practicing it in non-normative ways. This risks to effectuate disenfranchisement of large sections of citizens, not in the least of many new citizens whose sense of gender identity is strongly (co-)shaped by other contexts and alternative ideals.

Such contextual dynamics may lead to a reconfiguration or a complete fracturing of gender (Nawyn, 2010). As a result, people in migration contexts are – either subtly or very explicitly – challenged to engage in processes of revisiting and reshaping their gender identities, roles and relations. The power of the gender order is influential but not absolute. Therefore, it is critical to study and understand how people in migration contexts position themselves individually and collectively towards the predefined order and how they deal with altered gender-related possibilities and limitations. This Special Issue seeks to forward theoretically and empirically grounded understandings of how people in migration contexts make complex and intricate considerations and perform agency in the way they deal with gender influences, whether engaging with or maneuvering around these influences as they transition through migration. We thereby aim to highlight the complexity and ambivalence with which they seek to handle, adjust to, resist, internalize, struggle with, and/or value altered gender influences, ideals, possibilities and limitations. In doing so, we evidently foreground a dynamic and contextual perspective that conceives of gender as an ongoing, fluid process that is shaped and experienced through an array of social institutions – including hierarchies of power and privilege (Mahler & Pessar, 2001). We also endorse an intersectional take on the gender experience, highlighting the intersections of gender and other identity dimensions such as ethnicity and religion, and the disparities associated with it (Anthias, 2012; Yuval-Davis, 2006).

Taking this perspective as their starting point, the four articles that together compose this Special Issue demonstrate that individual considerations and acts are entangled contextually as well as in complex transnational and intergenerational dynamics. Not only do manifold social institutions shape gender concurrently, also dynamics of space and time influence the construction of gender (Nawyn, 2010; Pessar & Mahler, 2003). The included studies demonstrate further that gender is typically experienced and defined through a constellation of everyday formal and informal encounters within and across these social institutions. These encounters, how trivial or mundane they may appear at first sight, turn out

to be very meaningful and decisive for people's capability to agency in dealing with various – sometimes even conflicting – normative frameworks and practices surrounding gender. Moreover, the findings shared in this Special Issue draw attention to the gendered structures, expectations and interaction patterns encountered in and across the various social institutions, which set the contours for how and to what extent people in migration contexts can negotiate, construct, enact and claim their identities, roles and aspirations for the future. As such, they make plain that gendered systems of relations also pervade every aspect of the migration experience.

This issue furthermore seeks to advance the understanding of how gender sensitive and responsive systems of support can be developed in migration contexts and to imagine ways in which these understandings can become a praxis. The articles included in this Special Issue reinforce in their own particular ways the call for a gender-sensitive perspective to migration experiences. They show persuasively that we need to avoid migration procedures and programs that are insensitive to the gendered dynamics and uninformed by the complex realities migrants are facing. Their research approaches foreground lived experiences on the intersection of gender and migration that contribute to an emic perspective and thick understanding of those realities. Based on this, the authors highlight some of the insights that a gender approach can offer to the support of migrant communities and individuals. They develop recommendations for public policy and programming for migration through a gender lens. This Special Issue brings together insights from various fields of study and localities, pertaining to different forms of migration.

The article of **Lucy Hunt** illustrates young refugee women's expressions of individual and relational agency as they navigate gendered educational constraints. Based on fieldwork in Greece, the study shows that the mere provision of educational facilities for refugees does not suffice to accommodate varying needs, strengths and interests and does not result in real opportunities for all – especially girls and women. It further shows how these young women's individual agency to overcome gendered barriers to education is amplified by relational and collective dynamics, hence documenting the role of context in shaping conditions for these young refugee women to navigate constraints and pursue alternative opportunities. As to the various social institutions in which these women are positioned, the study also documents tensions in relationships with family, peers and teachers which relate to the multilevel conditions of 'unsettlement'. The article points out that the design and implementation of educational provision and other supports to migrants should incorporate a gender perspective and be grafted upon lived experiences with gendered educational pathways in migration contexts.

**Jacqueline Bhabha & Vasileia Digidiki** report their qualitative study conducted among Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. This study was set out to analyze the multiple challenges and needs experienced by Rohingya refugee women in the refugee camps of Cox's Bazar. Drawing on key informant interviews and focus group discussions, the authors document how gender-based violence as a war strategy towards Rohingya women is actually sustained and reinforced as these women seek protection in Bangladesh. The study illustrates how gender-based violence is unceasingly perpetuated in the refugee camps, both explicitly through ongoing sexual abuse and harassment, and more implicitly through gendered exposure to oppression, unsafe circumstances, denial of access to basic services and lack of control over relevant resources, among other things. By applying a gender lens to daily experiences and documenting the gendered concerns voiced by women in the camp setting, the study problematizes the sheer absence of a gender approach and the ensuing challenges and forces of oppressions that specifically affect refugee women. The authors argue for a participatory approach to policy and program development in refugee camps, whereby female voices are listened to and appropriately valorized.

**Hanne Dewinter, Hanne Dehertog and Lucia De Haene's** contribution pays attention to the complex constructions of gender identity in Moroccan Belgian youths. They examine how these youths construct their gender identity in relation to different contexts and

how this gender identity acquires meaning in relation to minority/majority relations in Belgian society. Through focus groups with the youths, they explore experiences, meaning making and actions through which these youths construct and claim their identities in relation to the multiple social words they belong to. Their findings illustrate that Moroccan Belgian girls and boys experience different notions of masculinity and femininity being attributed to them, and consequently construct multiple, situational and dynamic gender identities. Their findings also highlight how intersections with race, religion and other socially stratifying factors are at play and need to be taken into account when considering the gender experience of youths in migration contexts. This study further delivers insights pertaining to the impact of public discourses and representations of youths with a migration background, occupying a minority position in society. The authors recommend to incorporate a dynamic approach to gender identity in migration contexts.

**Anna Ropiany** and **Serena D'Agostino** in their contribution critically examine the Belgian asylum system and its influence on the coming out of queer asylum seekers. Through qualitative inquiry with forced queer migrants, they unravel the coming out process and highlight its inherent tensions in relation to the reception context and asylum procedure. The authors forward the tension between hypervisibility and invisibility, and the complex considerations and careful navigation that this tension requires. Their research documents that, in spite of the asylum legislation explicitly welcoming applications on the grounds of sexual orientation and/or gender identity, binary heteronormative cisgender expectations prevailing in the arrival and reception context prevent queer migrants from disclosing their non-conforming gender identities. This study shows that safety concerns are detrimental in this coming out process, hence illustrating how power relations tend to permeate gender experiences of migrants. As such, the findings elucidate the importance of complementing the legal protection systems with the provision of safe spaces for asylum applicants to be able to experience and perform non-normative gender identities, roles and relations. Consequently, the authors point to the urgent need for a queer-sensitive approach in the Belgian asylum system if it is to genuinely provide protection to forced queer migrants.

As guest editors of this Special Issue, we wish to thank these authors as well as the reviewers and general editors of DiGeSt Journal for contributing critically to its publication. This issue was produced during a time that was ongoingly impacted by the global COVID-19 pandemic, affecting the research and publication activities of the scholars who contributed to it or intended to do so. We started out with eight accepted papers and end up with including four of them. COVID-19 led to situations whereby initially proposed studies could not be conducted, submitted papers needed to be totally reoriented, or articles had to be withdrawn at the very last stage because social engagement understandably required priority attention. We express our gratitude for all efforts made to make this Special Issue possible, in spite of these challenging conditions.

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