

D2.3. CROSS-COUNTRY COMPARISON OF DEFINITIONS AND CONCEPTUALISATIONS OF GENDER EMPOWERMENT IN IMPLEMENTED PRACTICES IN CSOs.

RETHINKING INCLUSION AND GENDER EMPOWERMENT: A PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH



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D2.3. CROSS-COUNTRY COMPARISON OF DEFINITIONS AND CONCEPTUALISATIONS OF GENDER EMPOWERMENT IN IMPLEMENTED PRACTICES IN CSOs.

Objectives

To investigate and unravel distinct conceptualisations of 'Gender empowerment', beyond the written diversity and gender equality policies, within and across CSOs context in five EU countries.

- To examine and unravel the (situated) meanings of gender empowerment bottom-up and participatory approach.
- To focus on different societal spheres with explicit attention to migrant women and girls and the diversity and agency within this group.

SHORT

SUMMARY

In this deliverable, we provide an overview of how participants in 15 civil society organisations and staff members part of these organisations define, approach and evaluate gender empowerment in their everyday lives and CSO activities.

The ReIncluGen Project

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1. INTRODUCTION

Gender empowerment has been widely recognized and promoted by policy makers and civil society as a crucial component of gender equity and social justice policies. In the case of women and girls of migrant background, this concept is often presented as a fundamental tool to boost their social inclusion processes and even as a supposed guarantee of their contribution to the receiving society.

However, despite their evident contribution to social and economic reproduction, and the variety of situations and social changes that arise from the dynamics between mobility, globalisation and gender (Kofman & Raghuram, 2012; Parreñas, 2001; Sassen, 2000, among others), women of migrant background continue to be invisible or portrayed homogeneously as passive subjects, lacking agency, subjected to the tradition of their own community and without leadership or participation in key areas of public life, such as the labour market or the political sphere (Anthias, 2008; Yuval-Davis, 1997).

Literature on gender and migration has extensively documented the multiple and specific forms of vulnerability and oppression faced by migrant women in different spheres of social life. These women are exposed to particular forms of discrimination, violence and lack of access to basic rights and deploy multiple strategies to resist them (Anthias, Kontos, Morokvasic-Müller, 2013; Mahler & Pessar, 2001). Global power dynamics have been found to impact their daily life experiences in particular ways (Brah & Phoenix, 2004), with significant emotional and economic burdens, limited access to full citizenship, and an impact on their overall well-being (Kofman & Raghuram, 2012).

In response to the above challenges, the need to promote policies aimed at addressing the specific needs and vulnerabilities of migrant women has become evident. Policies should focus on combating discrimination and violence, ensuring access to basic services, and promoting women's full participation in society. However, the many intervention proposals that target women of migrant background often refer to the promotion of "gender empowerment" in a diffuse way.

Some critics argue that it has become a vague and ambiguous concept, used inconsistently and even contradictorily in different contexts, from academia to public policies and interventions of civil society organisations and even in feminist approaches in different contexts. Everything indicates that while "gender empowerment" has penetrated the international political agenda and has become institutionalised, together with the idea of "gender mainstreaming", it has lost the political and social transformation sense it had in its beginnings, from a feminist perspective (Sardenberg, 2008).

Feminist theory has discussed the importance of overcoming the vision of gender empowerment as a simple means or tool and recognizing it as an end in itself. It should be understood as a continuous process of social and personal transformation that seeks to overcome systemic inequalities, and promote agency and well-being, collectively, beyond the individual dimension (Kabeer, 2005).

This report aims to understand the nuances of conceptualizations of "gender empowerment" beyond the frameworks that make explicit diversity and gender equality policies, to explore the perspectives of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) working with women and girls of migrant background, within and among them, in five EU countries (Austria, Belgium, Italy, Spain and Poland).

In order to provide further contextualization, this paper presents the results of the comparative analysis carried out in the five participating countries. The process followed has pursued the following specific objectives:

- To examine and disentangle the (situated) meanings of gender empowerment from a bottom-up and participatory approach.
- To explore the experiences and perspectives of migrantised women and girls themselves, in different social spheres with explicit attention to heterogeneity and agency within this group.

The data collected through an ethnographic and participatory approach reveals new evidence that allows for a deeper understanding of the heterogeneity of these women's experiences. This study identifies common elements associated with women's perceptions of empowerment, the barriers they face in their social inclusion processes, and the strategies or agency employed to overcome them. In addition, the analysis offers a general mapping of the approaches and practices implemented by civil society organizations (CSOs) in each context.

The following sections delve into the research findings. Initially, the theoretical background and existing debates on the concept of gender empowerment are compiled and the methodology implemented is detailed. Subsequently, we present the results obtained, divided into two parts.

The first part delves into the approaches to gender empowerment implementation identified in the fifteen civil society organizations (CSOs) in the five countries, together with their reflections on the topic.

The second part presents the perspectives of migrantised women and girls themselves, pointing out the key elements that emerge as determinants of their life experiences associated with empowerment.

Taken together, these findings make a contribution to broadening and refining the concept of and highlight the imperative need to adopt a situated intersectional approach for the comprehensive and contextualized promotion of gender empowerment-oriented policies.

2. MAIN BACKGROUND AND THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Gender empowerment is a complex concept for which there is no single definition. Understood as a multidimensional phenomenon, it has been transformed over time from different perspectives and disciplines. This concept has been central to various feminist theories in recent decades and is understood as a cornerstone of policies promoting gender equality (Nazneen, Darkwah & Sultan, 2014). Established in the 1980s, it has since been promoted and measured by specialised research, policy makers and CSOs internationally and particularly in the EU.

Some critics argue that it has become a vague and ambiguous concept, open to multiple interpretations and methodological difficulties in its measurement (Phillips, 2015). It seems that its institutionalisation, together with the idea of gender mainstreaming, has meant that it has lost the political and social transformation meaning it had in its beginnings (Sardenberg, 2008).

Most of the works have their roots in different social movements of the 1960s, mainly in the African-American civil rights movement and in popular education from the perspective of poverty (which emerged in Latin America from the pedagogical theories of Freire). What they have in common is the understanding of the concept as **a collective process** in which people from the socially disadvantaged group participate, **become aware** of their social position and promote a transformation or **change in order to resist and subvert the** established **unequal order** (Fernández de Castro, 2012).

In terms of antecedents that specifically refer to the subordination of women, their origins lie in second-wave feminism, and some of the main references are, for example, Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1970). This defines patriarchy as a system of oppression and subordination of women that permeates all levels of society, from personal relationships to social institutions, in structures that limit women's autonomy, control over their bodies and access to opportunities. It sees empowerment as the process of **overcoming patriarchal oppression in order to achieve self-determination**. It specifies that it is a collective process to dismantle the patriarchal system and includes **participation and the capacity to choose** in the political dimension; **independence and control** in the economic dimension; **resistance and redefinition** of norms, gender roles and cultural expectations in the social dimension; and **agency, autonomy and self-esteem** to decide one's own life goals in the personal dimension (Millet, 1970; Valcárcel, 2000).

It was undoubtedly in the 1980s when the concept gained definitive momentum with Development Feminism or third world feminism and **the GED or Gender in Development approach** became popular, and in particular the rights perspective, which articulates feminist thought with the postulates of popular education (Batliwala, 1994 in Sardenberg, 2008).

Prominent authors such as Sen (1993) or Batliwala (1997) focus attention on **patriarchal power relations** that constrain women's choices and autonomy and negatively affect their well-being and see the need for greater control or a redistribution of power. Longwe and Clarke (1997) also refer to **access to resources, awareness, participation and taking control** of one's life as circular or spiralling processes of empowerment. Women, then, "become empowered" when difficulties in accessing

resources motivate them to greater awareness and this leads to greater participation and control of resources, both material and symbolic. This framework, known as the "Women's Equality and Empowerment Framework", is part of the **"bottom-up"** approach to development, as it is women themselves who must recognise their strategic interests and mobilise for them (Murguialday, 2006). In the same vein, Kabeer defines empowerment as, *"The process by which those who have been denied the ability to **make strategic life choices** acquire such an ability"* (1999:435). For this author, to exercise choice includes three interrelated dimensions: **resources** (access, but also future claims, to material, human and social resources); **agency** (processes of decision making and other manifestations such as negotiation); and **achievements** (well-being outcomes) (Kabeer, 2003).

However, it is considered that one of the most important steps towards the establishment of the concept of "gender empowerment" was the proposal made by feminist activists and researchers in the DAWN-MUDAR Network (Development Alternatives for a New Era) who formulated an alternative vision to the development discourse by analysing the state of poverty of women in what was then known as the "Third World". This group of women proposed in 1985 to apply the term "gender empowerment", through the proposal of Sen and Grown (1987) "Development, Crisis, and Alternative visions", in which gender empowerment is defined as a multidimensional process linked to collective action for transformation. This document specifies that it should not be limited to addressing **gender inequality but also inequality caused by other variables such as social class, race, ethnicity and other social determinants that limit women, including inequality between North and South in the global context** (Sardenberg, 2008).

Its proposal was presented at the Third World Conference on Women held in Nairobi in 1985, taking the first step towards its transfer to the United Nations International Political Agenda and as the first antecedent (Murguialday, 2006; Sardenberg, 2008). But it was not until the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing ten years later, in 1995, that the term 'gender empowerment' came into full force as a strategic objective together with gender mainstreaming and was defined in paragraph 13 of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, as follows:

"The enhancement of women's roles and their **full participation** on an equal basis in all spheres of society, including participation in decision-making processes and access to power, are fundamental for the **achievement of equality, development and peace**".

Thus, from the 1990s onwards, the concept became present in the development agenda and at the end of the decade it was consolidated in the context of international development organisations for poverty reduction, such as the World Economic Forum (2019) or the Millennium Development Goals (goal 3) firstly, and then the Sustainable Development Goals (goal 5), which understand gender empowerment and equity as a means for the reduction of poverty, exclusion and sustainable development.

The concept has similarly also permeated EU policies and strategies promoting gender equality and women's rights since its inclusion in the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR), e.g. in strategies such as The Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality Action Plan (WE-GAP) or The EU's External Action on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment).

The "process of accessing resources and developing personal capabilities to be able to participate actively in shaping one's own and one's community's life in economic, social and political terms" (European Commission, 1998).

This institutional implementation has been accompanied by the need to measure and monitor its evolution in different spheres and contexts. In this line, one of the most relevant indicators is the GEM "Gender Empowerment Measure", developed by UNPD to assess gender gaps in the economic and political sphere (Schüler, 2006; Dongre, 2012).

From critical perspectives, there is agreement that this concept has shifted from being understood as a process of awareness-raising that drives collective political mobilisation to transform unequal power structures, to a **minimised concept**. The idea of empowerment that has been consolidated reproduces the postulates of liberal feminism, from the perspective of equality, and demands equal opportunities focusing on the economic dimension and individual decision-making (see also Mahmood, 2005, 2006, 2009). As Kabeer (1994) pointed out, this approach does not question the model of modernity, but rather the fact that women do not benefit from it. Some research points out that it has come to play a role in legitimising international development policies and programmes, for which it is seen as a means rather than an end in itself (Calvès, 2009). Finally, other criticisms point out that it has gone viral as a **depoliticised concept**, embracing neoliberal rhetoric and deludedly positing the possibility of a conflict-free redistribution of resources, understood as a technique to be implemented, in which foreign resources are obtained on an individual basis (Murguialday, 2006; Sardenberg, 2008).

For the **ReIncluGen project**, gender empowerment is understood from the perspectives of critical feminist studies as a **multidimensional and holistic process**, and analysed from the perspective of **situated intersectionality** (Yuval-Davis, 2015; Anthias, 2012) which refers to its sensitivity to the geographical, social and temporal power locations of the individual or collective social actors. In other words, situated intersectionality takes in to account the contested, shifting and multiple meanings of specific social locations, notably historical moments (cf. transtemporality) within particular social, economic, political and cultural contexts (cf. transcalarity) in which some social divisions (gender, race, ethnicity, citizenship status, ability and age, among others) have more saliency and effect on particular people and/or society as a whole (cf. translocality) than they have on others (Yuval-Davis, 2015).

As elements of gender empowerment processes, attention to the link between their life experiences and social inclusion processes has been considered, including:

- The **conditions of participation and access to resources** in different spheres of social life, as factors associated with taking control, the capacity of making choices or exercising rights.
- Position or **location in the social structure and awareness** of the experience of inequality and social injustice, or lack thereof, linked to processes of **resistance and agency**.
- The **individual and collective** dimension.

3. METHODS & TECHNIQUES

This research is based on an **ethnographic, comparative and participatory approach** inspired by the rapid ethnography technique (Vindrola-Padros, 2021) with civil society organisations and their participants, under the principle of shared authority/ownership (Bergold & Thomas, 2012; Areljung et al., 2021; Van Praag, 2021). The unit of analysis consists of three CSOs from each of the five participating countries (Belgium, Austria, Italy, Spain and Poland), including the CSOs that are part of the ReIncluGen project partnership (15 CSOs in total).

3.1. Sample

A **purposive sampling** (Barnard, 2012) was designed according to criteria of the CSO typology, scope (local, regional, national or international), composition of the target migrant population (intra-ethnic, mainstream or mixed), and social sphere covered by its mission and type of relevance in the country context (socio-cultural, participation, socio-economic, social-education and Gender based violence).

Table 1: Criteria for CSO selection

Typology of CSO's	Scope	Composition of migrant population	Social spheres	Relevance
Problem based related to specific gender issues	Local	Intra-ethnic	Socio-cultural / participation	Demographic: principal migrant influx
General mission (including practices targeting women and girls)	Regional	Mainstream/ mixed	Socio-economic / labour	Socio-political: relevant risks and key debates
	National		Social / education	
			Gender-based violence	

Source: authors' elaboration

Each country selected three CSOs following the established criteria and also taking into account the possibility of accessing the fieldwork according to the reality and circumstances of each country. Each partner also added information on the characteristics of the sample, such as the mission, type of activities or issues being addressed.

Table 2: Characterisation of final sample

	CSO1	CSO2	CSO3
Austria	Target: women with migrant and refugee background, mostly Turkish- and Arabic speaking Sphere: social, cultural, legal Issues: counselling, education, shelter and forced marriage. Scope: national	Target: Turkish or Kurdish-speaking women Sphere: Social, cultural, political Issues: education, counselling, community work and therapy, support integration process. Scope: national	Target: women with different migrant background, mostly Farsi and Dari speaking Sphere: Social, cultural, legal Issues: legal counselling, workshops, classes. Scope: national
Belgium	Target: people with migrant background Mainstream & inter-ethnic Mission: promote inclusion Sphere: Socio-cultural / participation general social issues/inclusion, participation, empowerment and representation Scope: regional	Target: migrant people, focus on women. inter-ethnic Mission: inclusion. Sphere: Socio-cultural / participation General social issues focussed on facilitating participation and education Scope: regional	Target: migrant women inter-ethnic Mission: promote professional projects, training Sphere: Socio-economic / labour socio-economic inclusion and empowerment through economic autonomy and personal growth Scope: regional/national growing towards international
Italy	Target: women with migrant and refugee background, Mission: reception and accommodation Sphere: Social Inclusion Self-determination Scope: local, regional	Target: women with migrant and refugee background Issues: language's classes Sphere: Education Work inclusion Scope: local, province wide	Target: women with migrant and refugee background, Issues: gender violence and reception. Sphere: gender-based violence, kinship-based violence, education scope: local, regional
Poland	Target: women, including migrantised women, victims of gender violence. Issues/activities: support, workshops. General social problems (gender-based violence) Sphere: socio-political Scope: national	Target: migrant women Mission: communication between migrant women and local communities. General social problems (labour market inclusion) Sphere: socio-economic Scope: local	Target: women, including migrantised women Mission, issues: focus on reproductive rights Key political debates (reproductive rights) Sphere: socio-political Scope: national

Spain	Target: youth, women, and specific projects with focus on migrant women. Mission : cooperation, education, awareness Sphere: socio-cultural /education Scope: international	Target: migrant population focus on unaccompanied minors from Morocco, mostly men. Mission: support, awareness, Focus on education and training. Sphere: socio-cultural / educational Scope: regional/local	Target: women victims of forced marriage (mostly young migrant women). Mission / activities: shelter, support needed, financial, counselling, emancipation. Awareness Sphere: gender violence Scope: national
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Source: authors' elaboration

The choice of project countries is based on geographical, cultural and socio-economic diversity. These factors allow us to obtain a more complete and representative view of empowering practices in different European contexts. In addition, each of the selected countries has specific characteristics in terms of migration policies and levels of gender equality, which enriches the comparative analysis and facilitates the identification of common patterns and significant differences in migrant women's empowerment experiences. The project countries are geographically spread across north-western, eastern and southern Europe and differ in terms of migration flows and policies, as well as in terms of gender policies and inequalities. The Gender Equality Index (EIGE, 2019) shows significant differences in the areas of gender equality between the participating countries.

Table 3: Comparing Gender Equality (GE) Index between countries in different spheres (EIGE, 2023)¹

Country	Index	GE in political sphere	GE related to work	GE in social sphere
<i>Spain</i>	76,4	86,6	75,4	77,8
<i>Belgium</i>	76	87	75,4	58
<i>Austria</i>	71,2	81,6	76,4	65,3
<i>Italy</i>	68,2	62,4	65	59,2
<i>Poland</i>	61,9	47,2	69,6	26,2
<i>EU</i>	70,2	61,4	73,8	61,5

Taking into account the time the consortium was composed, we have both countries that score well above average in the Gender Equality Index, such as Belgium (rank 8) and Spain (rank 6), and countries that score above average, Austria (rank 11) and Italy (rank 14), and also one country, Poland (rank 23), which scores lower. It is also interesting to see that there are differences according to the domains analysed.

In an earlier phase of this research, a comparative analysis of state policies linked to gender empowerment in different areas of everyday life in the participating countries was carried out (see deliverable 2.1. *Overview of policies that promote gender empowerment across Europe, to situate the*

¹ <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2023/compare-countries/power/3/bar>

different contexts and their policy implementation). A random sample of participants from each civil society organisation (30 in each), contacted through fieldwork in the CSOs, was selected. The final sample of women in the different countries covers a wide heterogeneity of profiles. First it covers a wide range of ages, from 16 to 72 years old. Second, it includes women with different family circumstances: childless, with children born in the country of origin or in the host country, and some who have reunited their children. Third, there are women with different employment situations: some unemployed, others with stable or temporary jobs. Fourth, for some, immigration has been a path to social mobility, while for others it has not represented a significant change in this sense or on the contrary has meant a decline. There are first, second and third generation women. Among the first-generation women, they come from more than 43 different countries. In addition, the sample includes women with a variety of educational backgrounds, from tertiary education to those with no formal education, and with different levels of proficiency in the language(s) of the host country. Finally, in terms of religion, the sample includes Muslim, Christian and non-denominational women.

3.2 Techniques and instruments

Fieldwork in (and with) CSOs was carried out through the implementation of a battery of qualitative techniques, which included:

- **Participant observation:** 20 meetings were held to observe and analyse the activities (both planned events as well as day-to-day activities) of each CSO.
- **Focus groups:** A total of 15 focus groups (3 per CSO in each country) were conducted with members of the organisations (staff). In the case of Belgium, an exploratory focus group was conducted.

To implement these techniques different instruments were designed: Guidelines for ethnographic observations, topic guide for Focus Group Discussions with CSO staff members and drop-off forms for collecting demographic information from participants in the FGD.

The research teams in each country also used their own field diaries as a tool to collect participant observation data.

In addition, qualitative work has been carried out in each entity with the women participants, implementing the **photo-voicing technique** complemented by discussion groups with the participants in each entity.

- **Focus group:** 3 focus groups with participants in each country (one per CSO).
- **In-depth interviews:** 30 women were interviewed in each participating country, about 10 women in each CSO, in three different sessions (a total of 30 women per country, 90 interviews per country).

The first interview consisted of **a life story**. At the end of the first interview the participants were invited to gather photos or objects for the next session to reflect on the concept or ideas linked to gender empowerment experiences. They were offered inputs that could help them choose the photos and were asked to either choose them from photos they already had or take them themselves for the session.

The second interview was structured around the researchers' analysis of the life story and the conversation that took place in which the **photos (or objects)** provided were used as a **method of elicitation**. **Participants** were asked why they had chosen specific photos (or objects) and what elements related to their definitions and experiences of empowerment emerged, or they could also be used to talk about other related topics such as the moments in their lives that they represented.

Finally, the third interview was conceived as a **final moment of conversation about the process and co-creation/selection of the final photograph**. In some cases, it consisted of the participants choosing one of the photographs they had contributed, and in others a photo session was held with the participant.

It should be noted that it was not possible in all cases to gather 10 female participants in each entity. In addition, some of the women interviewed did not complete the 3 interview sessions. This was compensated for by including more women in the sample from other entities and/or extending the participant observation sessions.

All the material was recorded and transcribed, in line with the ethical guidelines mentioned in deliverable D1.2. and discussed with the Independent Ethics Advisor. All data was thematically analysed in two phases, first inductively by each research team, and then focusing on the relevant factors identified by critical feminist theory associated with empowerment, as outlined in the previous section. In this way, five national reports were produced with the main findings. Based on these national reports, this comparative report has been compiled.

3.3. Some reflections regarding the fieldwork conducted

Conducting fieldwork that explores the definition of a concept, such as gender empowerment, and the experiences surrounding it is not an easy task, especially as this exploration evokes sensitive issues. Moreover, the participatory approach of the project has attempted to alleviate some of the challenges of researching such issues, but it has also brought with it other challenges or dilemmas. This section discusses some of the ethical and practical issues that have been faced by researchers in different countries. Many reflections on the ethnographic experience are shared across the five countries, while others are specific to particular contexts. For example, in Poland, recruiting participants has been particularly challenging due to the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. These women, many of whom are not fluent in the local language and may have difficulty understanding the purpose of the project, found it especially difficult to participate in such personal interviews where reliving difficult experiences was unavoidable, despite the researchers' efforts to avoid such sensitive topics.

Some common themes are:

Confidentiality and privacy: Many researchers express concern about ensuring confidentiality and privacy, especially when discussing sensitive topics such as trauma and abuse. The ethical protocols followed have been carefully reviewed by different ethical committees. However, there have been times when women have expressed mistrust, which required reassurance that their information would be safe. To this end, the process was explained again, their doubts were listened to, and they were given as much feedback as possible, clarifying that anyone with access to their information would have to sign a confidentiality document. On some occasions, women specified that certain topics should not be

mentioned, and in one case in Belgium, a woman asked that a portion of her interview be deleted. It is important to consider that many of these women have had negative experiences with authorities or come from conflict zones, which can lead to fears or mistrust that certain information will be recorded. In other contexts, such as Spain, there were no difficulties in this regard and one participant was even proud and determined to have her story recorded as a form of denunciation.

Overcoming the language barrier: In some of the countries, especially Austria, Poland and Italy, some of the women did not have sufficient linguistic competence to conduct the interviews in the host language, nor did the researchers have competence in all of the participants' languages. In these cases, different strategies have been implemented to increase trust and achieve communication. Sometimes through other people in the teams who shared the language of the participants. In other cases, through interpreters. In most cases, this collaborative work was considered to have been positive, as the interpreter also had information about the context of the interviewee and the interviewers paid much more attention to information that was not exclusively verbal. However, this situation entails the risk of reduced rapport and possible biases.²

Gaining the trust of participants: In some countries the process of linking with participants has been quick, successful and a considerable bond has been developed. Exploratory fieldwork is seen to have played a key role. In other contexts, however, reflections have been made on how they could have reached more women or in a more fluid way. One element already mentioned was language barriers. However, some teams appreciate how sharing language, culture, but also age, migration experiences, motherhood or any other shared experience is key to finding that point of connection and trust.

Trauma sensitivity: In all countries the researchers talk about how handling highly sensitive issues has been more challenging than anticipated. The protocols that the team had in place were clear on how to act if dangerous situations arose during the interviews, and while training was provided to adopt a trauma-informed approach, there were situations that the researchers found particularly difficult to handle once the interview was over because of the impact it had on them. It is worth noting that women have explained that participating in the project has helped them to reflect on sensitive issues and that for some of them it has even served as "therapy", and that they have felt better after this reflection. Many women also valued being listened to, and even when there were very emotional situations where the researchers told them that they could stop the interview, they insisted that they had never had the opportunity to explain the experience to someone and wanted to do so.

² For more information about the ethical considerations when conducting photo-eliciting methods, more insights can be gained in the following chapter: Van Praag, L. Miri, A., Klaver, K. Deneva. N. forthcoming "Ethical considerations during photo-eliciting trajectories of migrantised women focused on 'gender empowerment' in civil society organisations", in Qualitative research ethics for Emerald Advances in Research Ethics and Integrity Series, edited by Helen Busby

4. GENDER EMPOWERMENT AND CSOS

4.1. Definitions of gender empowerment “in theory”, as written in documents

Most CSOs in our sample do not explicitly define "gender empowerment" (GE) in their policy documents and programs. The fifteen organisations observed in the five countries present two profiles according to their mission and target population: 1) either they work specifically with women of migrant origin, or 2) they address the migrant population or the population of women, in general. Some of them have a specific project or action with women of migrant origin/ migrant women or include a gender perspective in their mission. The term gender empowerment is only explicitly mentioned in the documents of two of the three CSOs in Spain, using the definition of the gender equality approach, that is, to overcome structural disadvantages. In other countries it could be the case that only 'empowerment' was mentioned, e.g. a Belgian CSO, or other terms linked to 'gender empowerment' were used such as 'emancipatory'.

IMPLICIT DEFINITIONS OF GENDER EMPOWERMENT

Although the concept of GE is not explicitly defined, most organisations use references to the concept in their discourse, mainly from three approaches: 1) Overcoming sociocultural, economic, labour or political barriers to (equal) participation, 2) Capacity building of the migrant-origin population as a general mission and 3) Informing about rights, strengthening choice, agency or freedom.

- **Overcoming sociocultural, economic, labour or political barriers to (equal) participation**

On the one hand, there are organisations that aim **to eliminate the specific barriers faced by women of migrant origin**, for example in the social and economic sphere, which prevent them from being able to develop professional projects due to a lack of connections. For example, for this reason, the CSO3 in Belgium aims to support the entrepreneurial skills of migrant women and specifies this in its mission statement:

“A place where every woman with a diverse cultural background can grow into her potential and develop more entrepreneurial skills. Welcome to CSO3. We offer a unique platform for talent across ethnic-cultural backgrounds. We highlight these women’s stories and skills, support them in realising their projects or ideas and collect their expertise in an online Talentpool. It is for women born and raised in Belgium as well as those recently calling Belgium their new home. It is for women who establish themselves as entrepreneurs, young potential and upcoming talent” (BE CSO3 web)

It is worth noting that this approach tends to coincide with entities formed with intra-ethnic teams, but it can also be found in CSOs with teams that mostly do not have a migrant background. For example, in Italy, in CSO1, empowerment is involved with the autonomy that derives from financial independence: *"The empowerment arises from the autonomy of the individual, which means financial independence, having a home, and a car."* (IT CSO1 staff focus group).

- **Capacity building of the migrant-origin population as a general mission**

In general, CSOs whose mission is to **develop capacity-building among populations of migrant origin** tend to have a discourse that is less focused on gender equality, but most of them develop actions aimed at women of migrant origin.

In those CSO's that were not originally born with a clear gender perspective, there are hardly any specific mentions of gender. For example, CSO1 in Belgium explicitly uses vocabulary related to inclusion issues: *"We bring people together in their leisure time and strengthen them, as communities, groups and individuals"*, as stated in their mission statement (BE CSO1 website). However, although it does not explicitly mention EG, it does emphasise the importance of the **participation** of women of migrant origin. In Spain, the only entity that does not explicitly mention the concept of empowerment is one that does not focus only on migrant women; in fact, in spite of expressing a gender perspective in its vision:

"We use documentary images as a tool for training and collaboration with all kinds of projects and initiatives that promote social aid, the defence of human rights with a **gender perspective...**" (SP CSO2 web)

Furthermore, in its policy documents, most of its participants are young men of migrant origin. However, although they do not mention the concept of EG, they do talk about **giving voice** and **supporting training processes** through photography and documentary courses and helping participants to create their stories in the first person, as well as promoting emancipation processes. In this type of entity, it is possible to infer in their written and oral discourses a willingness to promote empowerment processes for their female participants, but **without a clear plan** of how to realise this objective.

In addition, some organisations change their perspective over time, as in the CSO2 in Belgium, which despite not originally being an organisation targeting migrant women, but rather the migrant population in general, in recent years has focused more on migrant women. However, in their documentation they still do not explicitly talk about EG, but they do talk about **empowering in general** all the people they work with *"want to empower these groups so that they are strong enough to build bridges to other groups and the broader society"* (BE CSO1 policy plan). This probably has to do with an origin in the 1990s with a clear male-centered discourse of migration. This organisation was set up by a man, and started in a context in which the far-right politics gained strength in Flanders, resulting in a prioritisation and focus on the importance of social inclusion.

- **Informing about rights, strengthening choice, agency or freedom.**

CSOs whose mission is problem-based related to specific gender issues, such as CSO3 in Austria, which targets women and girls affected by human trafficking and violence, or CSO3 in Poland, which works in the area of reproductive rights, emphasise the principle of informing every affected woman of her rights and options. These cases implicitly link empowerment with **access to the information necessary to claim rights and ensure choice capacity**.

In those entities where there is a clear feminist positioning, it seems that this influences the adoption of a gender perspective based on advocating for basic human rights and promoting gender equality. This is for instance the case of CSO3 in Poland or CSO3 in Spain. In these cases, the influence of founders

committed to the feminist movement seems to have had a clear influence on their discourses and further actions.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that in some organisations, the reason why the term GE is not found is simply because they do not have documents in which they set out their policies and programmes. For example, in the case of Spain, we have seen that CSO2 does not include the concept nor does it have a very developed line regarding its gender approach. This could probably be because its focus is more general on the entire population of migrant origin. In addition, the fact that it is a very young organisation with few resources could explain this lack of documentation and well-developed policies and objectives where they could elaborate more on the term 'gender empowerment'. In Austria, the entity CSO1, which in its oral discourse does have a clear commitment to gender equality from an intersectional perspective, does not have any publicly available documents that set out their policies, objectives and programs, due to the lack of time and staff.

EXPLICIT DEFINITIONS OF GENDER EMPOWERMENT

- **Gender equality perspective**

Only in Spain, the concept of gender empowerment is explicitly found in the documents of two of the CSOs (CSO1 and CSO3), from the gender equality perspective, or overcoming structural inequality. The first CSO does not work exclusively with women of migrant origin or migrant population, although many of its actions and activities have to do with our target population. In general, its documents refer to this approach, incorporating **the individual and collective dimension** of empowerment and complementing it in relation to **capacity building and a rights-based approach** (women's training and processes of raising awareness of their rights as preconditions for empowerment), as shown in the references on their websites and policies mentioned below:

"Principles guiding our work: Implement the women's empowerment strategy. Recognise their authority and forge relationships of equal participation between men and women." (SP CSO1 web).

"(...) promote processes of individual and collective empowerment of women who see the exercise of their rights limited as a consequence of the multiple forms of structural oppression and exclusion imposed on them by this model". (SP CSO1, Strategic plan, p.18)

"strengthening of community or local structures (...) supporting literacy processes, technical and political training as an essential path to empowerment, self-recognition of their rights and protagonism in their own life process." (SP CSO1, Strategic plan, p.19)

This concept is presented as a tool for these objectives and linked to **different spheres of women's lives**: legal, socio-educational or socio-cultural. Some of its documents also make explicit an **intersectional perspective** although it is not mentioned using its term.

"From a more plural and intercultural vision, it introduces the analysis of power inequality, including men, and proposes strategies of empowerment and mainstreaming, beginning to talk about other factors that converge with gender inequality such as cultural background, age,

different abilities or sexual choice. (...) this is the approach we feel most comfortable with and from which we have extracted concrete keys and tools." (SP CSO1 Gender policy document, p.19).

On the other hand, the second CSO, whose target population is young women of migrant origin and whose mission is to eradicate forced marriage, makes explicit the same perspective on confronting the structural, social, cultural and economic disadvantage experienced by women compared to men, emphasising **freedom and autonomy/independence**.

The CSO3 in Spain emphasises empowerment as a **condition opposed to this coercion** or subtraction of freedom –forces marriage- and offers holistic means of support to ensure this process of empowerment, to confront and overcome gender-based violence:

"We offer them an integral accompaniment in the decision to face the internal conflict of the young woman, to empower her, to give her strength and confidence, to design perspectives for the future and to inform her of the resources available to her" (SP CSO3 website).

These identified nuances emerge clearly impregnated, on the one hand, by the specific history of each entity and, on the other hand, by the responses they develop to be competitive in the funding calls of the governmental and supranational agencies.

As an example of this, we see how both entities refer to the Sustainable Development Goals in their programmatic documents, mentioning SDG 5 of the United Nations 2030 Agenda ("Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls" (United Nations, n.d.). One of the reasons for this, could be that it may be influenced by the requirements of the agencies that provide them with financial support (top-down effect in their discourses).

4.2. Definitions “in practice”

In practice, we find the concept of empowerment used in a variety of ways in civil society organisations. Only in the entities of the Spanish sample is the term GE explicitly mentioned, and therefore we can only assess in these cases the consistency, or lack thereof, between the definitions that appear in the CSO documents and their practices. In the Spanish CSOs, we find all possible situations: in one organisation, the extreme coherence between discourse and practices is surprising, and, as we will see in later sections, it even extends to the discourse of the participants. In the others, on the other hand, there is not always coherence; either critical perspectives arise within the organisation's staff or there is a variety of intra-organisational interpretations (influenced by the values of the organisation's staff, new critical perspectives, or differences between the organisation's different local branches/teams).

In general, through the practices observed in the CSOs and the discourses of the professionals in the five countries, there emerge meanings associated with the concept of gender empowerment that help to nuance and re-signify it.

From these reflections gender empowerment is also....:

- **...asking for help and accepting support or acknowledging trauma.**

In CSOs whose mission is based on specific problems linked to gender issues (gender-based violence, forced marriage, trafficking in women...), they claim that attitudes that may appear to be weak or evidence a subordinate position are also part of the process of women's gender empowerment. For example, in CSO1 in Austria where women have to make decisions that can potentially lead to the loss of family support, the priority is to ensure spaces where women do not feel judged. In this type of organisation, they also conceive of these "safe" spaces as places where they can provide stepping stones to empowerment such as overcoming the trauma caused by specific forms of gender-based violence and developing the capacity to ask for help:

"You are not only strong if you can do everything on your own, but you are also particularly strong if you can ask for help." (AT CSO3 FGD staff).

"For me, empowerment, however, is not only the strengthening of resources, but accepting frailties, accepting what are your weaknesses, your limits; and only by accepting them can you develop and strengthen the skills you have" (IT CSO3 FGD staff).

Thus, a critical approach emerges with **respect to those conceptions that highlight women's "autonomy and independence"** as evidence of empowerment.

- **...overcoming socio-cultural constraints and strengthening resilience and agency**

Some organisations, such as CSO2 in Austria or CSO3 in Spain, work to raise awareness of the restrictions implied by intra-community gender mandates, and when referring to "freedom of choice", for women to review what they have been allowed to desire within their socio-cultural context.

"Yes, it's important, because not everyone wants that, you're right. But not everyone knows either, they don't know that they are not free, they believe that they are free because that's the world and that's how it is for them. But once they realise that something else is possible, they can also achieve. That's actually possible too, you kind of get them on board a bit, I think." (AT CSO2 FGD staff)

This quote emphasizes the different interpretations of the concept "freedom" between CSO staff and participants.

In order to promote this critical reflection, their activities emphasise the strengthening of women's agency, which they articulate through "working on self-confidence", an objective that is found in many other CSOs and which we must question whether it does not blur its initial meaning as it refocuses capacity on an individual level, forgetting the institutional and structural level.

"This is also somehow a topic in the courses, that we have to motivate them intuitively, so that they believe in themselves, that is really a fixed component in the course units, because they often have no self-confidence at all." (AT CSO2 FGD staff)

They also attach particular importance to giving participants the opportunity to broaden and diversify their social network, in order to avoid the pressure of social control that the community itself implies.

"We don't have explicit offers for networking, but there is already a lot of networking going on in the courses [...] I might even leave breaks longer so that they can communicate a bit more and gossip a bit and so on." (AT CSO2 FGD staff)

These reflections are therefore critical positions on an idea of empowerment as "**freedom of choice**" detached from a patriarchal and/or cultural structure that conditions it.

- **...confronting racism and discrimination**

Some of the organisations focus their efforts on denouncing the racism and discrimination experienced by women of migrant origin in key areas of social life, such as housing and education. They often promote the creation of what they call "**safe spaces**" where women share their everyday experiences and where CSOs make explicit critical reflections that facilitate the participants' awareness of the issue. For example, CSO1 in Spain carries out workshops with migrant women with this objective as reflected in the final report of one of its projects:

"From the X project, our goal is to enhance spaces of listening and care, such as those generated through these workshops, while deconstructing hate speech on topics such as gender and migration. The testimonies of these migrant women move us away from stereotypes and prejudices, bringing us closer to a diverse and intercultural society" (SP CSO1 as mentioned in a final report of one of their projects, p. 6).

The importance of promoting this awareness among participants is an issue observed in most CSOs in all countries. Some organisations even reflect on **the dilemmas shared by their participants**, who recognize that migration has meant for them to move away from a gender system that subordinates them, but that this does not imply greater well-being in their daily lives. The members of the CSO reflect the hardship that many immigrant women face when they arrive in Italy: unskilled, low-paid jobs, the challenge of rebuilding their lives from scratch without having many resources to fall back on - in terms of social and economic capital, and so on. It seems as if the freedom that some women find when they arrive in Italy comes at a price, the price of independence.

"There was a case [...] she was with us for a long time, she was started on a path of job placement, study possibilities, opportunities and so on; at one point it seemed like a lot of work to her. I mean, I remember her saying to me during a meeting: 'If I had stayed at home, my father would have made me marry someone, he would have probably had 2 or 3 shops, I would have been a lady, I would have had 2 or 3 children, I would have lived on my income, no one would have ever asked me to work'..." (IT CSO3 FGD staff).

Many CSOs also extend their range of intervention to **raising awareness among the general population**, understanding that women's empowerment requires not only awareness but also a structural transformation (e.g. the work of CSO1 and 2 in Spain).

This nuance regarding **the awareness of racism and the need to promote tools** to confront it can be interpreted as a **critical perspective** to those discourses that explain the gender subordination of migrant women solely by intra-community gender mandates and point instead to the responsibility of a system of social stratification in which migratory status and processes of racialisation play a central role in the production of the inequality experienced by these women.

To address these objectives the CSOs identify as relevant **some methodological strategies** that involve:

- **A holistic approach to meeting participants' needs.**

In general, most CSOs report that beyond the activities they offer, they try to use a holistic approach, with intervention in different areas or spheres of women's lives, and based on their needs, so that a tailored approach is often applied. In Poland, as in Spain, organisations that work with participants in long-term processes (CSO1 and CSO2) offer different services, from psychological support to legal counselling within this holistic framework. In Austria, despite the fact that the current funding schemes promote specialised services, all three organisations have this approach; either because they offer a wide range of services like CSO2, or, like CSO1, because in addition to offering diverse services, they also refer their participants to other services when they cannot provide a response themselves, such as debt counselling or legal counselling. Interestingly, CSO2 in Austria understands its holistic approach as offering services that respond to needs that are not always identified by women at the outset, and therefore this holistic approach is understood as a process of awareness raising and transformation towards greater social inclusion and choice.

"Sometimes it's the case that a woman comes for counselling for something else and then gets the other offers and can start therapy or German courses and halt, they are, perhaps you could say, picked up and that can sometimes change the world for them. And in this process, of course, they realise what they actually thought they needed, but what they actually need and what they want. I think it's a process like that, along the way you find out what else is out there, what else is possible." (AT CSO2 FGD staff)

- **Implementing networking**

In their reflections, the idea of the **need to strengthen relations with other CSOs and institutions** recurs. In some cases, the **resource constraints** of the organisations are the main reason for this need. In CSO1 in Italy, the focus group highlighted the importance of having developed strong links with other organisations with which they can collaborate or refer cases that they can handle, but there is also a lack of a clearer and more structured intervention plan or protocol for referrals.

In Spain, the three CSOs also highlight the importance of collaborating with other organisations or institutions to **facilitate holistic care for participants**, in a more or less systematised way. It is worth noting that one of them has the mission of strengthening the work of other organisations to ensure the sustainability of the activities. In this sense, it is necessary to distinguish what some organisations call "community work", typical of organisations that support other CSOs to promote work in neighbourhoods, from networking with institutions and other CSOs. While CSO1 in Spain promotes community work, CSO3

promotes networking, which is essential to provide optimal support and accompaniment to migrant women victims of forced marriages. This CSO works in close collaboration with schools, local and regional police, social services, health centres, town councils, universities and training centres, public bodies promoting employment and even with the local population (factory and shop owners) to facilitate the integration of young women into the labour market.

- **Building community and strengthening bonds**

As mentioned above, several CSOs identified as relevant the creation of spaces in which women can feel comfortable to express themselves freely and explore what they want or need. In Italy, in a focus group discussion, CSO2 highlighted that in language classes language teaching was only one of their objectives, and that it was much more important to foster a sense of belonging and connectedness. They stressed the importance of building community and establishing links between participants and how active listening and acceptance were basic to creating the right conditions for this, "listening seems to me an excellent starting point for... the construction of a path, ... for growth, and it is a foundation that cannot be overlooked. (IT CSO2 FGD staff). In Spain, all three CSOs value fostering such spaces and especially in small and young organisations such as CSO2 in Spain it can be observed in their practices. This may have a less structured methodology, but they have achieved a very strong bond with their participants, who value this relationship highly. In Belgium, especially in CSO2, activities are promoted where achieving a feeling of togetherness is a priority: *"We are going to fight polarisation. The main thing is to bring people together, support them, strengthen them. Even though I don't like hearing that word. To give them a push."* (BE CSO2 FGD staff).

In this context, the debate on the composition of staff in terms of ethnic/racial origin or migratory status and the relationship between what they call "gender and culture" emerges. Some organisations argue for the importance of an intra-community staff and a specific "niche" approach that allows for a strong level of linkage and ensures attention to the particular experience of these women in a space free of prejudice.

Where a clear focus on migrant women coincides with work teams also made up of people of migrant origin, the teams value having had similar experiences to their participants. Some CSOs that have hardly any workers from a migrant background, as in the Italian context, express that this is something that they would like to change, and that is a challenge due to insufficient educational opportunities or the non-recognition of qualifications acquired abroad. One CSO in Belgium experiences a lack of diversity as well. Even though they are very focused on changing this in their upcoming policy plan, one employee stresses that quota's and so forth are important, but that an organisation should proactively change their organisational culture if they want attract people of migrant origin:

"I think in the diversity inclusion and equity trajectory there are already very good steps being taken in that, but it's more "we'll see what's coming, and then we'll adapt," or so. That's kind of the attitude we're in now, but that's not how you change a culture. You should do that more proactively, so that people also feel welcome the moment they get here. And that we don't then have to think, "Uh, a prayer room. Can we organise that or not?". (BE CSO1 FGD staff)

However, within a single CSO with workers with migrant and non-migrant backgrounds, such as CSO1 in Austria, women can choose which type of professionals they want to be seen by depending on the

issue they want to address. It seems that what participants value is not feeling judged and being able to freely explore different options. In Belgium, CSO3 aims to promote the entrepreneurial processes of women of migrant origin, arguing that often, the women they reach out to, feel not attracted by, represented or taken seriously by other organisations in the field of entrepreneurship. At the same time, their practices replicate neoliberal empowerment paradigms of *"you can do it"* and *"let go of those that hinder your growth"* as if structural inequalities and unequal state policies did not exist.

In Spain, CSO3, which also works with a similar profile of women, manages to transmit the same proximity despite having a work team that is mainly of non-migrant origin. In this case, they have developed the figure of *"las referentes"* to compensate for this lack of diversity in the team. These are women who years ago were assisted by the organisation, and therefore know first-hand what it means to have lived a similar experience. The importance of these role models is reflected in this quote from the discussion group in which one of the workers described the role of these women:

“For example, I have gone through a situation of violence, forced marriage, etc. So, many girls feel that they are mirrored, they feel that they can go far, that they are not going to stay locked in that loop. They feel accompanied. So, when they come emotionally, when they are very touched, it is also important to give them that support.” (SP CSO3 FGD staff).

The diversity of all these situations invites us to reflect on whether the central issue is the composition of the teams or their approach and capacity for critical review.

In summary, the concept of empowerment that emerges from the reflections of the CSOs studied reveals the importance of a multi-level approach: the role of the peer group and the community versus individual approaches (questioning the focus on autonomy and independence). At the same time, it reveals the importance of critical approaches, which confront and aim to transform structural inequalities (questioning the focus on freedom of choice).

4.3. Internal strengths and weaknesses identified by staff in achieving gender empowerment and inclusion through their CSO

In almost all civil society organisations in the five countries included in this research, **the composition of the technical and management teams** was mentioned as a strength. In cases where the team is made up of migrant or migrantised women, interviewees mentioned the fact of having gone through similar experiences, sharing the migrant *"background"*, understanding the problems first hand and at the same time the fact that the participants feel that they can identify with them, are highlighted as benefits. Likewise, the fact of being able to speak the same language and the ease of communication and trust that this generates is also frequently emphasised.

In the case of organisations in which the technical or management staff is not of migrant origin, the **capacity for empathy and sensitivity, professionalism, training, teamwork, participatory methodologies and a holistic approach** shared by most of the CSOs are also highlighted as strengths. Likewise, the competencies, skills and experience of the different management teams appear as strengths insofar as they allow the design and implementation of a strong intervention model.

However, the very composition, dynamics and modality of work of the organisations can also be perceived **as a weakness**. Some organisations perceive themselves or define themselves as "white" and European, which could generate in part a "distance" from the migrant reality or a lack of identification with the participants. Some other organisations regret not having men on the team or among the participants, which they believe could be positive.

All organisations define themselves as **safe, open and trusting spaces**. Furthermore, in all CSOs across all countries, flexibility in work is mentioned as a positive quality, although this can also bring problems or weaknesses. For example, showing flexibility in attending to migrant women according to their needs can be a strength with which the participants are satisfied, but it can also be a disadvantage for the organisations of work, the routines and schedules of the technical staff or even for their family reconciliation or rest. Extreme trust with participants can also become a problem or ethical dilemma (or weakness) if personal involvement exceeds the limits of what is considered the professional role.

Other issues mentioned as weaknesses are: time in relation to the number of tasks, being a "little known" or "small" organisation, and the lack of dissemination and press of its mission or activities. Aspects related to internal organisations such as (poor) "internal communication", the need to "listen to each other more" and issues related to hierarchies and power relations between different members or departments of the organisation also appear among the weaknesses.

4.4. External threats and opportunities identified by the staff in achieving inclusion through their CSO

In terms of external opportunities and threats, the issue raised most repeatedly in almost all the organisations in the five countries is **funding for specific organisations, projects and programs**. Funding in general for CSO, both private and public, local, national and international, is seen above all as a good opportunity to grow as an organisation and offer better services to migrant women, but it is also seen as a threat in that it sets conditions and criteria, generates dependency and uncertainty, and becomes a bureaucratic workload that leads to staff burnout.

The main problem raised is **dependence on the public administration**, since sometimes funding from public bodies imposes conditions, for example, to deal with certain topics or approaches, or not to deal with certain topics. In the case of private funding, it is sometimes a good opportunity "to pay staff salaries", but it can also present certain ethical dilemmas, such as receiving funding from certain banks, something that was particularly raised by a CSO in Spain. Some CSOs see it as an opportunity to generate their own resources or charge fees, but this can also be a problem, or not enough to cover expenses.

Having more funding also requires more management work and forces CSOs to the allocated staff resources. Almost all CSOs complain about the **bureaucracy and overwork involved in managing funding**, both national and international, time and work that could be invested in other tasks. Another barrier, related to funding, identified by all three CSOs in Austria, is the piecemeal funding for concrete activities and projects, identified as significant by the state funding bodies, which makes providing a holistic and multi-dimensional support more difficult and in some cases, impossible.

Right-wing parties, the right-wing "climate", anti-migrant public discourses, and the European elections that were approaching while doing fieldwork (where a rise of the far right was expected) were mentioned as a threat, especially in Belgium and Poland. Specifically in the case of Poland, in two organisations it was mentioned that they experienced cuts in funding from public funds because their mission did not coincide with that of the right-wing political parties (in government), making them dependent on private donations and international funding. In Belgium, the European elections were accompanied with regional and national elections. Beyond funding, the possible instrumentalization of CSOs by right-wing groups, who criminalise Muslim men as violent, was also raised in Belgium, a fear that was also raised in a CSO in Spain. In Austria, the CSO that works specifically with supporting women in forced marriages or abusive relationships, also experiences challenges with navigating between protecting and empowering women and not contributing to an anti-Muslim anti-migrant public discourse coming from the far-right political space, which uses such cases to blame all Muslim migrant men as a threat. However, the rise of the far right was also raised in Belgium as an opportunity to generate actions to encourage political participation.

"You have now, for example - I think we now have the ... there's a threat, by the polls, that say, right-wing parties are going to win, but we've also tackled that as an opportunity to do a project to sensitize people, and also empower them." - (BE CSO1 FGD staff)

Other external aspects mentioned as threats in several countries (especially in Italy and Spain) are the **lack of opportunities for migrant women in the labour market** and **difficulties in accessing housing**, two key aspects of inclusion and empowerment.

The war in Ukraine was especially mentioned by Polish organisations as a threat because of the challenge it presents in terms of reception (language training, support with documentation, etc.) and because of the lack of infrastructure in the country to care for the refugee population. However, the war in Ukraine was also mentioned as an opportunity in that it allowed the organisation to grow, specialise, learn and work with other women's groups. In the same sense, almost all the organisations in the five countries consider cultural diversity and migration as an opportunity.

Finally, **racism and discrimination**, widespread in all countries and affecting the migrant population in general, but also CSOs indirectly through the fear of possible instrumentalization, should be highlighted as an external threat. For example, a CSO from Austria mentions being in a "difficult position", at the *"intersection of an anti-racist organisation fighting against Islamophobia and a feminist organisation"*. Also, a CSO from Spain mentions the threat of being labelled as racist when denouncing the situation of gender-based violence experienced by many women and girls of migrant origin on the part of the communities, in cases linked to forced marriage practices.

4.5. Link between empowerment and inclusion

Some of the organisations address the reflection on the social inclusion of women of migrant origin, trying to respond to the victimisation or paternalistic treatment they usually receive, with a narrative contrary to this. Therefore, they argue that working for the empowerment of these women goes in another line:

"They are already empowered. We only support them." (AT CSO1 FGD staff)

This same positioning is also found, for example, in the CSO2 in Belgium. One of its staff members questioned some terms such as "emancipation" or "strengthening women" because she considered that these women were already strong. Mixed with these debates emerges the concern about the need to include postcolonial critique in their discourse and practices, and therefore they discuss the relevance of the idea of inclusion and refer to other concepts, such as "**critical interculturality**" (ES CSO1):

"I think that the part of critical interculturality also puts on the agenda the issue that there are power relations between the different cultures, and that they have a historical basis of 500-something years, don't you think? Of coloniality, right? And also internal racism. And that then we cannot... relate in terms, that is to say, of equality, and that there has to be, then, assumption of certain issues, right? Like recognition. I think there has to be a very strong part of recognition, and I think this may also have to do with the empowerment of women and girls. And it also has to do with... Well, with that part of reparation as well. In other words, there is... I mean, just as we talk about historical reparations for discrimination and gender inequalities, so in the case of critical interculturality we have to include racist colonial power relations. And I feel that if we talk about inclusion, that is not there." (SP CSO1 FGD staff)

However, beyond these questions about the classic approaches to concepts, such as inclusion or emancipation, or the dangers of falling into paternalism when focusing on "empowering women", most CSOs in all countries agree **that empowerment processes cannot be considered in isolation from overcoming barriers to inclusion or social participation**. These include the need to facilitate the mastery of the language of the receiving contexts and/or offer translation services, especially in documents containing basic information for accessing their rights; the importance of access to paid work, obtaining citizenship and ensuring social representation. Hence the importance that most organisations give to a holistic approach and the danger that most CSOs also refer to not being able to achieve it due to lack or loss of funding.

5. CSO PARTICIPANTS

5.1. Women's definitions of gender empowerment

In general, in Austria, Belgium, Italy and Poland, **women are not very familiar with the concept of gender empowerment**, as a direct translation of the English term in local languages. Except in Spanish, in most languages there is no translation of the concept, neither in the language of the receiving countries nor in the languages familiar to the participants; so, if the concept is not known in English, it is difficult for it to be a familiar concept for the participants. The only women who did incorporate the concept in their discourse were found in the Spanish context. Significantly, in Italy, the only woman who is familiar with the concept is a woman who currently lives in Italy but was previously trained in Spain.

Younger participants, second or third generations, trained in European countries or with more educational background, are more familiar with the term; but more implicit definitions of the concept are identified through the telling of their life stories, and not so much by explicitly formulated abstract definitions.

IMPLICIT DEFINITIONS

One idea that is picked up in different definitions or explanations of the concept is the one that links empowerment with being considered "a person". Often this approach has to do with **a gender equity and human rights perspective**, but it also has to do with the experiences of racism that many of the women interviewed have experienced.

When delving deeper into the definitions that emerge in the different interviews, differences can be observed according to women's situatedness in our project referring to socioeconomic status, migrant generation, whether or not they have experienced gender-specific discrimination, such as forced marriage, experiences in their place of origin, and reception and integration conditions in the receiving countries. For example, women in CSO3 in Austria from Afghanistan or Iran relate empowerment to freedom in terms of mobility or access to education. In Spain, in CSO3 working to eradicate forced marriage, definitions revolve mainly around intra-community pressure on their life choices and explicitly to "freedom".

In countries, such as Italy, many participants, mostly first-generation migrants, link empowerment to overcoming the challenges and difficulties involved in migrating to Italy. In the Belgian context, with many second or third-generation participants, many of the implicit definitions of empowerment are closely related to the tensions of having to simultaneously respond to various gender mandates and experiences of cultural misunderstanding or racism.

Finally, in Poland, with many women coming from Ukraine, immediate opportunities and challenges are viewed through the prism of the war. In other words, the understanding of empowerment is heavily influenced by the context-specific factors in which they find themselves and the context from which they come or to which they remain linked.

However, there are also recurrent concepts. In the different interviews in the five countries, concepts such as agency, (religious) freedom, rights, independence or equal opportunities are mentioned. In general, the definitions that emerge from their life stories or when asked about concepts close to the possible meanings of gender empowerment can be grouped into at least four major typologies: **definitions related to independence and autonomy, definitions related to equal opportunities and gender equity, definitions related to agency and choice, and definitions related to self-determination.**

- **Definitions related to independence and autonomy**

"In my opinion, financial independence leads to empowerment, that's a fact." (CSO1_AT_7pt1)

Financial independence is mentioned by many women in our sample. Women in situations of gender-based violence especially emphasize access to the labour market as a tool for gaining independence and being able to leave these situations of violence:

"For me, self-empowerment for a woman means financial independence and that can only be secured through a job, so without work, without this financial independence, her position in

society will remain weak. I say that because me and my husband didn't agree, but I had my job, I had my income, my association, my activities, I was somehow independent. And he couldn't put me under pressure, so he couldn't touch me, so to speak, he couldn't beat me up and as soon as I no longer had that, the violence came and the oppression.”(CSO1_AT_2pt1).

It is also a way to acquire greater status, respect, and rights within the family:

“If a woman works and earns whatever amount she does, but earns her own money, she has a different status in the family and is respected more or has more say. And this situation of begging for money from the man is somehow not there. Well, it's not nice, she says. [...] Well, because she doesn't work, she has the feeling that somehow she doesn't have as many rights.” (CSO2_AT_3pt2)

Financial independence is also highlighted in the narratives as something fundamental among migrant women who have not suffered from gender-based violence, but in whose migratory trajectories access to the labour market has been (and is) crucial for acquiring agency and status in the reception context, beyond obtaining income for a living. For example, in the case of Italy several women explain the stigma related to asking for assistance when one does not have a job, so that financial independence means not only a way to achieve autonomy, but also not to feel stigmatised.

Financial independence is also mentioned regarding access to knowledge of their rights and the legal systems of each country. For example, in the case of Poland, many women from Ukraine explain how being self-sufficient gives them a sense of control over their lives, which is especially important given that they come from a wartime background. However, access to decent employment is only possible if they are familiar with the country's legal system and their rights:

“Many migrant women work for very little and without a contract, so it's easy for the employer to get rid of them and the Polish legal system is hard, they [women] don't know how it works. They don't know why it's important to pay ZUS [social security] and what they can get in return. That's why it's important to explain this to people who are new in the country, it's important for them to know their rights” [CSOX_PO_C1].

- **Definitions related to equal opportunity and equal rights between men and women:**

“Yes, so she assumes that it's man and woman and she says that you only have to be seen as a human being. [...] there doesn't have to be a difference, they just have to be the same, because they are simply human beings. They have two eyes, two ears, two hands, two feet, that's how it has to work.” (CSO2_AT_P6)

Many women link the concept of gender empowerment to **equal rights for both men and women**. Women should be considered as a “*human being, like a man. She can work, she can live normally, [...]. She can earn her own money and live a normal life.*” (CSO1_AT_5pt1). This is especially clear when women talk about the way they want to raise their children: “*It's um, I only have sons, I don't have any daughters now. But it's clear to me that they should have the same rights, so now women and men, boys and girls.*” (CSO1_AT_7pt1).

Important here is to mention that many women did not want to chase the same position as men in society as they were also critical of toxic masculinity or more generally, considering men as a higher standard towards which aim. In Belgium, for instance, especially younger women mentioned the importance of getting equal chances as men while many also confirmed being happy with some gendered divisions in the household for example. In this sense women also mentioned **childcare and domestic work**. One of the Spanish participants spoke of how her mother was an example of an empowered woman. Although her mother had criticised her in the past for going against community gender mandates, she, her mother, was a model for her precisely because she had managed to get her father to share the household chores with her:

“Even if you think that women have to get married, I don't know what, but I saw other things here at home, I saw other things, I saw that my father washed the dishes, I saw that my father helped you to carve the tomato, that my father and you paid the bills. You can say a lot that a woman has to do something else, because you want to look like that, but at home I haven't seen patriarchy very, very deeply, because you didn't do that, on the contrary, if you in Guinea..., if you in Guinea they are afraid that you make your husband clean the dishes” (CSO3_SP_P4)

This last quote highlights the **intergenerational tensions** that can be complicated by migratory processes that put more pressure on women to maintain gender mandates that they themselves may have questioned at home. However, for some women this relationship between empowerment and equality between men and women emerges when they contrast their life in the receiving country with their life at home. In this framework of reflection, women express their desire to have the same rights and freedoms as men, without social restrictions based on gender. This obviously depends on the place of origin and the socioeconomic status one has in one place or another; but, for example, in Austria many women from Afghanistan or Iran value gender equality in Austria in contrast to the experiences at home. In Italy, another participant from Nigeria contrasts the pressure she had at home to have children:

“In Nigeria, it's very important. Only one year after marriage, you see your husband's family...Pressure, pressure, pressure... I want a grandchild; I want a grandchild. When you're married, your husband says, 'I don't want you to work. You just stay here, take care of the children, and I'll see...But sometimes your husband lets you work...In Nigeria, it's crazy” (I4 CSO1_IT).

In the framework of gender equality, empowerment is also linked to the fact of defending and fighting for women's rights, as explained by one of the CSO1 participants in Belgium or as observed in some of the explicit definitions collected in Spain.

- **Definitions related to agency and decision making**

“So here I feel more free, more... I'm not doing anything wrong either, huh? You know? I'm fine, I'm living my normal life, working and such. But I feel good. Because nobody judges me on how I dress, nobody judges me on how I walk, or how I talk, or anything else.” (CSO1_SP_P2).

Many women who contrast their experiences at home with their experiences in the host country link empowerment with the ability to make decisions for themselves without social control. For instance, when being asked what freedom means:

“The freedom of making decisions that she wants to make, on her own without being pressured.”
(CSO1_AT_2pt2)

In addition, several women emphasise the **fear and restrictions they suffer**, even in basic interactions such as eye contact or movement in public spaces. The importance of freedom for women is stressed, both in terms of personal choices (e.g., clothing) and broader opportunities (education, travel or work).

Some women go further and connect control over their **sexuality** as an element of empowering choice:

“In this respect, the woman is self-empowered. The man is not allowed to tell her what to do and what not to do. He can't force her to sleep with him. If he does something she doesn't want, it's seen as harassment and the woman can decide for herself whether she wants to or not.”
(CSO3_AT_FGD women).

Along these lines, one of the women interviewed in Spain refers to the reconstruction of her clitoris as an “empowering choice” as opposed to a community imposition that had deprived her of her ability to choose. In Austria, a participant from Mexico, who identified herself as queer, precisely links empowerment with living this dimension of her life freely and living freely with her wife, something she says she can do more easily in Vienna than in her country of origin.

Also, when some women see empowerment in their femininity, in looking at themselves in the mirror, it can be interpreted in the framework of having **the ability to make choices about your body**. Especially, when this breaks with the roles that are presupposed for women at different stages of their lives in their cultural contexts of origin:

“She says she likes the fact that older women in Austria also make themselves beautiful and go out on the street and not like in Turkey, for example, as soon as you are old and an old woman, you are supposed to sit in the corner and no longer wear nice clothes or have your hair done, so she likes that very much. (CSO2_AT_4pt1).

Important to mention is that this ability to make choices also implies the choice to cover (a part) the body. In Belgium for instance, many Muslim women referred to the importance of wearing the hijab and how this has become a part of their identity. Some participants clearly raised concerns about Islamophobia and how this was linked to discrimination in society.

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Choice within intra-community gender mandates

“Let a woman be a woman, however she defines it and how she wishes to interpret it.”
(CSO2_BE_4)

But not all women mention choice when comparing their lives back home and in the host country. In Belgium, some women insist that what may be empowering for one woman is not empowering for another. They understand freedom of choice in the framework of being able to decide on life choices even when these seem to contradict definitions of gender empowerment concerning equality between women and men.

"That's actually a bit of... all of it, I have to look at it a bit person by person. For example, one person finds a successful family life very powerful and strong, a mother who says "my job, my most important job is to be a mother and take good care of my children, I don't want a career," if in her eyes that is strength - come on, powerful and be strong, then that is beautiful, then that is her vision. So, there's nothing wrong with that. Another woman says, 'Yes, for me it is really purely about my work and career and I want to grow, I want to become CEO' that is nice for me too. As long as you do what you want to do, then you show a little – all of it, then you actually show that you are strong and that you can achieve that. If you want to, you really have to do what you want to do and what you want to achieve. Yes, but everyone has a different definition for it"(CSO1_BE_1).

Understanding **empowerment from the perspective of women's desires and choices**, whether to get a job as CEO or to stay at home and take care of the children, is problematic from the point of view of the analysis of structural inequalities. Some reflections refer to the impact of racism, discrimination and negative experiences that lead to **rethinking the balance of the migration project**. For example, in Spain, a participant reflects on the machismo experienced in Morocco, which she had suffered especially in her two marriages (the second, forced), and her two divorces. However, despite appreciating the freedom in Spain, she also refers to the nostalgia she feels for Morocco and how tiring it is to feel questioned for her religious practices, such as during Ramadan, with phrases such as "but you are modern".

In Belgium, some participants (second and third generation) spoke of their dreams of emigrating to an Arab country, such as Morocco or Saudi Arabia, where they would be accepted for their religion and not as "different" or "the Other". In particular, when asked about gender equality, one participant responds that this "equality" is not necessary and that she perceives men and women as complementary, if they can make their own decisions. In other countries, some of the women interviewed also refer to this idea when they present their idea of gender empowerment as a complementary system in which men and women are equal but different and should complement each other. Many women explain that their focus is their family and children, and that is also what they want, but **with the support of men**.

"I am in favour of equality, but not for this definition of equality that feminists often use, that we are equal, because we are not equal, because you can't say that. Physically we're different, our genes are different, for example a man can work as a tradesman, he's a plumber and he does that for eight hours, my body isn't made for that, he can't do that and I don't want to do that". (CSO1_AT_7pt1).

In relation to gender roles, there are also women who reproduce or do not question gender stereotypes regarding work or care. One of the women interviewed in Austria, from Poland, comments that, in her

opinion, women have the opportunity to acquire the same education as men, but that *"women are better for certain jobs and men for others"*:

"For example, nursing, I think that's best for women's work and for men, that's lorry drivers, builders or something like that. Those are men's jobs, I think. Heavy work is for men and this bit lighter work is for women." (CSO3_AT_9pt1).

- **Self-determination link to overcoming hindrances**

"I am really aware that it is really a process. You may not see where you're going to end up, but you're going to get there eventually. It seems very far, but it is close. When I now look at what 'empowerment' is, I think it really is: I am now really taking my life into my hands. A tear or two here and there, but still. You wake up in the morning, just go and just wake up. Do a little for school, do a little for your business. Do it little by little. You're not going to see that progress immediately, but at least you've done a little today. Tomorrow again a little bit. Ah you went to class? Literally I sent a message to [friend's name] saying "Hey, I went to class for the first time!" And she would reply "I'm proud of you girl!" (CSO3_BE_5)

Almost all women link empowerment with the determination they have despite the obstacles and the progress they make over the years. Some of them, as expressed in the following quotes from a CSO1 participant in Italy and a CSO3 participant in Belgium, distance themselves from the idea of empowerment as related to power and present it as the determination to keep trying to achieve their goals and overcome adversity: *"I feel like I've put myself out there a lot, but in reality, I could have done much more, maybe over time I did...you know, there are many insecurities that you carry from childhood."* (I10-CSO1_IT). or as put by CSO3_BE_6: *"It's not about being invincible, it's about being unstoppable"*.

In fact, this approach **links empowerment to the process** and not so much to the final objectives, a perspective that is seen in most women regarding the barriers they face. In a system full of obstacles, the need to value the process of empowerment beyond the final achievements seems logical.

EXPLICIT DEFINITIONS

Among the women interviewed in Spain we found explicit and elaborated definitions of the concept of gender empowerment. This may have to do with the fact that it is a word present in the Spanish language, and also with a concept that is known and used in the feminist movement and third sector organisations, beyond its political institutionalisation. This is especially evident in the case of CSO3 participants (who explicitly use the term empowerment both in CSOs programmatic documents and in workshops and activities with participants). Thus, there is total coherence between the CSO definition and the definitions referred to by the women. All the participants refer to **being able to decide for themselves, to "freedom" and to being able to take control of their lives**, as also shown by following quotes:

"Don't let them decide for me. That I already have a voice for myself. That I don't need any... No social group, no culture, no image, no activity, no people that nothing, that is, that everyone has their own opinions and that it doesn't matter if you are a woman or a man, you have to respect it.". (CSO3_SP_P2).

“Empowerment is very important. Because without it people cannot make their decisions and other people control you, and this is not good. Each person has his own way of thinking and his own way of making decisions for his life, and this should not be controlled.” (CSO3_SP_P3).

At another point in the interview this young woman talks about the importance of knowing your rights and knowing how to distinguish between what is right and what is wrong in order to make your decisions, very much in line with how CSO3 in Spain understands its mission and how they encourage the provision of tools so that women can confront situations of coercion within their communities.

It is also very interesting that the young women who have participated in workshops with CSO1 have explicit definitions despite the fact that CSO did not work on the concept with them. In general, in the Spanish context, a greater internalisation of the concept of GE is detected with a clear perspective of equity and insisting on the collective struggle against the different discriminations of each woman.

“Empowerment is closely linked to equality because women did not have the same rights in the past. For the women who have opened the door for us, we have to fight against prejudices, stereotypes and discriminations. And I believe above all that gender empowerment is collective. That it is not only a person who has to represent something, but everyone who has had different experiences.... It has to be shared and then try to overcome it in a collective way.”. (CSO1_SP_P10).

We have seen in reviewing the implicit definitions how, when women adopt a definition based on freedom of choice their particular experiences can lead them to positions that seem contradictory. It is relevant how one of these young women revises the association of empowerment with free choice by questioning the real possibilities of free choice under certain gender mandates.

“For me it would be for women to be able to do what we want and to be able to choose without that idea that they put in you because I know that many times they say that nowadays women have the opportunity to choose what we want and everything, but it's not really true because you can choose what you want, but it's always as if it were something else. Since you are little you are taught that these are girl things or that you have to learn such and such. So they tell you, oh, you choose what you want, but in truth it is something that they teach you, that comes from behind.” (CSO1_SP_P11)

It is evident that these young women have a high level of input on feminist debates in a context such as the Spanish one, but they have also lived very closely the experiences of discrimination of their mothers both at home and outside the home and rethink what empowerment means in multiple ways. They can understand their mothers' experiences of racism that leads many women to "forget" other discriminatory experiences at home while at the same time being aware of the multiple barriers to their empowerment. Thus, the reflections end up being similar to those that emerge in other countries that do not handle the term so obviously.

5.2. Preconditions for gender empowerment

Often, women describe in their narratives experiences that are difficult to clearly define as empowering elements or as prerequisites to a real process of empowerment. In this section, we bring together some of these factors that appear to be means or prerequisites for initiating or achieving an emancipatory experience. However, it is sometimes difficult to determine whether they are more than one. In general, these barriers are related to an idea repeated in the specialised literature on women and migration: the experience of dehumanisation that these women undergo through processes that seem to subtract them from the condition of personhood.

5.2.1. OVERCOMING OBSTACLES TO PARTICIPATION: CITIZENSHIP RIGHTS AND BELONGING

- **Citizenship**

One of the barriers prior to a real possibility of empowerment has to do with access to residence permits or nationality that many of the participants talk about. For obvious reasons this concerns the first generations, for whom, as described by some of the participants in Italy, it is not only a question of accessing full citizenship rights, but also of acquiring a status of belonging, of acquiring a status of "person", in this case, not in comparison with men, but in comparison with the local population whose belonging is not questioned at least in such a visible and official way.

In Spain, one of the interviewees who is a lawyer and who works facilitating administrative processes to access residence permits and citizenship very clearly explains the importance of these rights and the impact of not having them:

"Because the administrative documentation in the path of a migrant is essential. I would not say the first thing, because the first thing is life and subsistence, but it is the second most important thing on the way. Why? Because without documentation you cannot access decent jobs, without documentation you cannot, they question your access to healthcare, without documentation they question your access to education, they question everything, right? And they question you as a person. And all this has a great psychological, emotional and professional impact on people."
(CSO1_SP_P14).

Another participant in Spain presented in her empowerment-related photos a photo of the day she obtained Spanish citizenship. For this woman from Honduras, nationality is especially important because of the freedom of mobility it confers. In fact, for her, access to nationality does not only mean the abolition of barriers in reception, Spanish nationality allows her to move freely in places she could not in origin, such as the United States.

- **Language skills**

Accessing administrative **regularisation** is the first step to being considered a full-fledged person. However, many women also stress the **importance of overcoming language barriers**. In general, in all countries, the limitations of not mastering the language in order to achieve full participation in the host countries are mentioned. A woman interviewed in Austria said: *"I would love to work, I enjoy working.*

Only if I could speak the language, then I could also go to work.” (CSO1_AT_FGDwomen). Mastering the language is often the first thing many women emphasise needing to acquire as this woman makes explicit in the Italian context: “If we find a small house it's fine... I'm not looking now because I don't have money, I don't have a job, I have nothing.... first the language and the job...money, and then a car and a house.” (I6-CSO2_IT).

Some women also express **the emotional weight of not mastering the language** of the place of reception. In Spain, two of the young women interviewed, from Morocco and Guinea Conakry, recall with great frustration their early days in the country, and how the impossibility of communicating prevented them from presenting themselves as they were and defending their opinions. It is very likely that in these cases not mastering the language intersected with episodes of racism for which expressing oneself with difficulty could only add to the sense of frustration and injustice.

In general, beyond experiences of racism due to the lack of mastery of the language of the territory, acquiring the language seems necessary to **gain confidence and be able to function** in all aspects of life without depending on anyone, especially on a male relative:

“She says she is now so well informed that she has more self-confidence. For example, she couldn't go to the doctor on her own and now she can do it, even without her children, when they're not around. Yes, well, she is informed, she knows her way around and she has more self-confidence.” (CSO2_AT_3pt2)

One aspect that Syrian and Turkish women in Austria particularly emphasised was that language functioned as a key factor in their empowerment, mainly because it meant that they could enter the labour market and had the ability to keep medical, bureaucratic or educational appointments on their own. It also made them more financially independent from their husbands and family members and gave them a strong sense of pride. This could additionally be related to the selection of the CSOs that provide language courses.

However, many of the women seem not to quickly acquire the necessary level to function comfortably in the host country for various reasons. In Italy, where the topic of language comes up in many of the interviews, possible factors such as the impossibility of taking courses due to child-rearing, limited space in day-care centres and the start of COVID-19, which prevented attendance at courses, were mentioned.

Not having access to the necessary level is also intertwined with the previous section, since the different countries in some way condition access to full citizenship on demonstrating high levels of the language. In the case of Catalonia, Catalan is not required for permanent residency, but it is required to demonstrate a good level of Catalan to prove rootedness or to access jobs in the public administration.

Regarding language and school, in Catalonia, many young women also speak of language as a barrier in the school system. A young Filipina with a good command of English recalls her experience in England as more positive because of her better command of the language, whereas in Barcelona it had been more stressful. Another young woman from Peru, despite being a Spanish speaker, expresses difficulties with the school language, Catalan, and describes these as the inability to be really heard if not in the school language: *“because at school, what you don't say in Catalan is not heard”*. Once again, reference

is made to not being identified as a whole person or of the same category. In this case, the language barrier is not so much about not being able to communicate but about not being seen as a member of the community. Another bilingual context that seems to add complexity to overcoming language barriers is that of South Tyrol in Italy, where many women explain the need to learn both Italian and German.

- **Labour market participation and conditions**

In many cases, participation in the labour market has been identified as a relevant factor for women, especially having their own income, but also finding a sense of pride of having skills and being independent, and connecting to people outside of their families. In Austria, in the second CSO, many women also stated they felt “stronger” and “free” (CSO2_AT_1pt2), when being able to work, earn their own money. Two women mentioned that before having worked on their own, they had had to “beg for money from him” which was always a “game of power” (CSO2_AT_1pt2). And now *“this situation of begging for money from the man is somehow not there [anymore].”* (CSO2_AT_3pt2) Now that they had their own money, they could *“buy things for [their] children [themselves] or take them out, go eat with them.”* (CSO2_AT_1pt2). Also, in Spain and Belgium we observe how having one's own professional project is associated with self-fulfilment:

“I can't name a moment where I felt strong (...) especially moments where I can be myself, or the moments, those small things...when I am working on a project that interests me, then I feel stronger. Those things make me who I am” (CSO3_BE_4).

However, in the same way that the previous sections explain how difficulties in administrative regularisation and sufficient levels of the reception language can be a barrier to accessing the labour market, other hindrances emerge. These hindrances relate to the homologation of educational qualifications, the lack of social capital or experiences of racism that complicate or prevent participation in the labour market. In addition, in order to be able to participate without barriers in the labour market, it would be necessary to have minimum guarantees from the states in the jobs to which many of the women interviewed have access. The following quote from a Romanian woman interviewed in Italy illustrates how many jobs are often a source of exploitation, sexual harassment and therefore not at all empowering experiences:

“She wanted to improve our situation...then she arrived in Italy...and she worked in worse working conditions...I remember she told me, at a certain point... in this field where she worked, there was this guy, the employer was Romanian, it was worse because... already, employers, whether Italian or of other nationalities, are a bit more arrogant in terms of superiority, this was even worse, in the sense that I brought you here, you have to do this, you have to do that. At one point, my mother told me that the conditions were terrible, they... slept on the floor. At one point, he even harassed her, told her if you want to sleep on a bed, you have to come to bed with me and then she took the job that most Romanians do here...elderly home care...she found a family... and then, she brought me here.” (I3-CSO1_IT).

The story highlights the vulnerability of migrant women staff members in low-wage sectors, where they are often exploited and abused, and contributes to debates around labour, welfare state and gender.

In general, there is a lack of public policies that address more specific situations of women such as single parenthood. The following quote from a single-parent woman in Belgium illustrates the prejudices that this woman has to face, which probably do not apply to men, but also points to this lack of public policy:

“Yes, yes. And I can't really stand that [laughs]. Especially because, I hear that from a lot of people, I am a fairly strong woman. I know what I want and I know where I want to go. And I don't like people feeling sorry for me, so that pity is like 'ah, will that work?' (...) Also, for example, just a simple conversation, during the application they say yes, you know, if you really want to make a career and grow, you actually have to work more hours, so will that work with your child? Hey, will that work? And then I think yes, it's not because I'm a mother that I can't pursue my career. I can combine both perfectly and that is not always really appreciated, people always assume 'oh, she has a child? She's not actually going to give 100%.” (CSO1_BE_1)

However, in addition to the lack of this it is also true that **gender stereotypes and the masculinization of specific jobs** make it difficult to participate on equal terms in the world of work. Many women fondly remember the support of their parents in their academic and professional careers, but also many others the limits, as another participant in the Belgian context, “*women wouldn't be able to achieve this*” (CSO1_BE_5), and then encounter the same prejudices in the world of work. This same criticism of prejudice or subordination in the work context was underlined by Spanish women who have worked in particularly masculinized fields of work, such as the legal field, or outside of it, but in teams made up mostly of men.

Finally, not having access to the labour market is a barrier to overcoming other obstacles to empowerment processes, such as **gender-based violence**. One participant reflected on why she did not leave her abusive husband: “*why does she stay at home? Because she has no opportunity, because she has no job and has nowhere to go.*” (CSO2_AT_6pt2).

- **Access to education and expectations of educational trajectory**

In analysing women's experiences, we have noted the importance of education in women's accounts. However, before education can be used as a mechanism for empowerment, barriers to its access must be removed. Women from rural areas in some countries such as Turkey express the specific difficulties of accessing education in these rural areas: “She wanted to continue her studies, go to school. But that was not possible, in the village where she grew up there were no secondary schools other than elementary schools at that time.”(CSO2_AT_2pt1). However, some of these barriers are determined by the very gender mandates that families and the community impose on women, as the quote from this woman from Syria illustrates: “In Syria we have a system where you have to start a family, so society is structured in such a way that there is pressure for a woman to start a family at some point, it's compulsory.” (CSO1_AT_1pt2). In countries such as Afghanistan, the changes introduced with the Taliban regime is a specific context that has greatly restricted women's access to education, even at the most primary level, and work in recent years.

We also often identified a coexistence of contradictory messages within families. Many of the young women interviewed in Spain and in other countries recognise the messages of encouragement towards academic achievement, but at the same time they receive more pressure to take on domestic work at home or to make the domestic sphere, the family and motherhood a priority in their future: “she insists a

lot on learning to cook and to bake. I think all Latin American women are told that. Because the day I get a husband, then I won't know how to run a household. And I tell her, why is it that only women have to know how to cook? I jokingly tell her that I'm going to get a husband who knows how to cook". This quote also shows the strategies and negotiations of the younger generations to overcome such barriers.

However, many young women interviewed in the project countries also talk about the lack of support or experiences of bullying or racism at school. So, in addition to the pressure to comply with the gender mandates referred to above, there is a school system in the receiving countries that denies experiences of racism and/or is not adapted to the needs of multilingual or newcomer girls in a new school system.

- **Access to housing and a place/space of one's own**

"There was a significant first step, an initial change, when we moved houses; we found our own home."(I3-CSO1_IT)

Having a residence has been identified as an essential prerequisite for the empowerment of most first-generation women. This issue is particularly relevant in countries, such as Italy, where many of the interviewees are first-generation and have been in the country for a short time, or where there are restrictive laws on access to public housing for people who have been in the country for less than five years. In Spain, this problem is also repeated among first-generation women. Moreover, in both Barcelona and Bolzano, two of the cities where many of the participants in Spain and Italy live, rents are particularly expensive due to the large number of houses destined for tourism in Bolzano and Barcelona. This situation has made the housing market more expensive, especially affecting those without informal contacts to access rents. The following quote explains how this situation affects people who are evicted from their homes because they are not "competitive" tenants in a market where tourists pay more for shorter stays:

"Then they [the landlords] say we have to leave that house. I was- I got pregnant, that moment I didn't know. [...] And they threw us out like that. I told my husband: 'let's leave and go because it's so messy...'. we left that house; we went out and our luggage was there for more than a month because we had nowhere to leave it. And... a social worker said let's leave that house, because we can't do it - we can't stay there anymore. So, I went out with my husband, with my pregnancy, we slept three days in the car..."(ID-CSO3_IT).

In addition, many women describe various forms of racism that they have experienced during their search for housing and how this again impacts on the feeling described by so many women, and which we have been collecting, of not being considered "people".

Access to housing is also necessary in order to achieve one of the most important objectives of many of the women interviewed, as we have seen above, namely to bring their children who are still living in the country of origin:

"I want to get an apartment...I have to work hard as I have two children in Ghana...My mother is old now...She's not working; she's taking care of my two children... Because I have to bring them here...my mother is old... she cannot take care of them." (I2-CSO1_IT).

However, access to housing is a fundamental prerequisite for empowerment, not only for mothers who have left their children behind in the country of origin. One of the young women interviewed in Spain, who arrived at the age of 15 on a boat, explains that she first lived in juvenile detention centres, then shared a room in places where she did not feel particularly welcome, stayed in squats and even slept on the streets. She, like other women, emphasises the importance of having her own home as a basis for any other project. Also illustrative is the case of a Honduran woman who works as an intern looking after an elderly woman in Spain, but who decided to rent a flat in a nearby town, even though she can only spend one night a week there. Interestingly, when the situation of the woman she cares for got worse and she was asked not to spend any nights away from home, she decided to keep this flat. Even if she only spends one day a week there, she considers it "her home", a place where she can write, cook or just rest for a few hours.

- **Political participation**

Interestingly, it was only in the Spanish context that some participants mentioned their political participation explicitly, both individually and collectively. Through participant observation in one of the CSOs (CSO1), we observed the strengthening of processes involving women who had organised themselves to form their own CSO to support migrant women. These women worked not only in the host country but also maintained connections with their country of origin, Honduras. CSO1 promotes the organisation of women who are aware of their unequal situation, providing them with the necessary tools to support each other collectively. Additionally, we found the case of a woman with an extensive political background in her country of origin, Bolivia. Her past experience has led her to apply her political knowledge in the host country, recreating support groups, a practice she began at a very young age before embarking on a political career in official positions in Bolivia. This background has likely equipped her with the tools to navigate the new country, preparing her to claim her rights, find necessary information, and participate in the labor market as well as other spheres. Another woman of Chinese origin explained how she helped a group of young people who had been in Spain for less time than her to organise an association to support young Chinese who had recently arrived. She continues to connect with associations to promote training for migrants, helping them find the tools needed to access various rights and enabling them to participate as full citizens.

In the other countries, some women leave their countries for political reasons, as is the case of an Iranian woman in Italy. It would be relevant to explore her level of political participation in her country of origin and if this participation can be transferred in some way to the host country. In Poland, one of the participants was a political refugee from Chechnya. Her husband was killed for his political activism, which forced her to escape her country. It could be said that she was politically involved in her home country. However, after arriving in Poland, she stopped speaking openly and publicly about politics in Chechnya due to fear of repercussions. Despite this, she closely collaborated with some Polish political figures, such as the mayor of the city where she lived. Although the topics discussed were more related to migration and intercultural events, her potential to articulate herself politically can still be identified, despite the silencing caused by the violence she experienced.

It could be also argued that those organisations from Belgium and Austria that were originally formed by people with a migrant background to support the migration experiences of others is itself an act of political participation. What remains to be explored is the extent to which this political participation is actively and

explicitly promoted among CSO participants. Overall, the limited mention of political participation is in itself a result worth reflecting on and requires further investigating.

5.2.2. COPING WITH EXPERIENCES OF VIOLENCE

Overcoming adversities of all kinds, from stress and frustrations to mistreatment, childhood abuse, gender-based violence and forced displacement due to war and violation of fundamental rights, are recurrent in relation to, or as a precursor to, what gender empowerment means in all countries.

First of all, the situation of Afghan and Syrian women in Austria, and Ukrainian women in Poland, all of whom come from **war or conflict zones**, should be mentioned. In the case of first-generation Afghan women, they compare the lack of civil rights for women in Afghanistan with the situation they now experience in Austria, such as being able to go out on the street alone (without fear of being shot by the Taliban), to dress as they want, and to learn to read and write in language courses. In Poland, the war in Ukraine is mentioned not only as a factor in forced displacement but as part of the structural context affecting women's lives. Even women who migrated before the outbreak of the war in 2022 are affected by the war and it influenced their lives and their priorities. The narratives of their life trajectories and experiences are cross-cut by the war and the end of the war would be the condition for "feeling empowered".

Secondly, **gender-based violence** also appears recurrently in almost all countries as a trauma, but also as something that women faced and, in many cases, overcame. As several CSOs are involved in the care of victims of gender-based violence, including victims of forced marriages, the processes of resilience that lead to overcoming trauma and violence are very present in the narratives of migrant women as processes of "empowerment" from experience. For example, in Austria, the importance of financial independence to be able to "leave a man" and get out of violence was discussed. Likewise, in this country, the debate on the cultural change concerning gender-based violence was presented, since "their mothers saw it as something normal, but their generation is more aware of it".

In women's experiences, gender-based violence appears as episodes of physical violence and abuse by men or husbands, but also in its variant of **psychological violence and mistreatment**, from money restrictions to "jealousy controls". Several women explain "frustrations" in marriage by cheating or psychological abuse. For example, women from Honduras in Spain report leaving "toxic relationships", controlling or alcoholic husbands, or being cheated in "parallel marriages"; and in Belgium as well as in Austria and Italy, several women also report leaving situations of divorce or "problematic marriages". In this sense, several women, such as Honduran women in Spain and Syrian women in Austria, see divorce as an "empowering step".

Rape narratives are also present in the narratives about their life trajectories as specific episodes in youth, but also by husbands. In particular, a participant from Belgium explains how her husband got her pregnant with their fifth child *"on purpose, he really wanted to get me pregnant on purpose to keep me at home"* in which she describes in detail what was clearly rape.

Still within the framework of gender-based violence in the broad sense, **trafficking and prostitution** are also present in the narratives of experiences. In Italy, the experiences of women who have fled

prostitution in particular stand out, highlighting the lengths to which some women will go to free themselves from oppressive situations. The following account from Italy illustrates women's agency and resilience in escaping the violation of fundamental rights:

"he said: 'come to Europe, you go to school, so many opportunities, many possibilities...I believed that. I went with him to France. (There) he said: 'Now you work for prostitution because I want my money'. So, he beat me so much, and I stayed there for 5 months...I couldn't continue. So I had to run...I take a train from France, and I go to Italy." (I4-CSO1_IT)

Thirdly, **mistreatment and/or abuse in childhood**, as well as bullying, are also present in the accounts of experiences to confront and overcome. In Spain, several participants (especially those hosted by the organisation to eradicate forced marriages, although not only) mention having received mistreatment and neglect in childhood by their family, whether mother, father or father's partner. And in Belgium, one participant (a migrant from Chile) reports having been sexually abused by her stepfather.

In Spain, CSO3 mentioned to have no doubt that the first step is **psychological support** to get out of violence and they have a psychologist, whose support and professionalism is particularly mentioned by all participants. In Austria, Syrian women commented that they found it "empowering" that through the CSO they learn a vocabulary that helps them to talk about gender and family violence and to better understand how it affects them, i.e. to promote awareness-raising processes. And in Poland, Ukrainian women refugees from the war say that they need to talk and share their anxiety about what they are going through in order to try to alleviate their suffering and post-traumatic stress.

Despite trauma, lack of affection and violence in childhood, all the women say they have moved on, showing **strong resistance to submission, oppression and violence**. A 20-year-old woman hosted by an organisation in Spain recalls "never having been treated as a person" and regrets not having had a family "like everyone else's": "In short, I am 20 years old, but I feel like I am 60 because of all the suffering I have been through". But despite all this, she is a girl with a temperament and determination to forge a future of her own with calm and well-being, without giving up educational expectations.

Resistance to gender mandates and the processes of resilience then become a form of "empowerment": "everything that was haram I did" says a young woman of Algerian origin born in Spain. While some women speak of "inner strength" to overcome these adversities, it is worth highlighting the role of organisations as an important support that, from a professional point of view, offer a "family" community, emotional support and containment.

However, beyond the collective support work of the CSOs, it is interesting to note the different **strategies and "forms of escape"** mentioned by the participants **themselves** to overcome the childhood traumas and adversities they have faced. In Italy, some women comment on the importance of sharing these traumatic experiences with others, for example by writing a book or speaking to younger generations, and in Spain several young women comment that their ways of escape were reading, writing or other artistic expressions. One woman who suffered bullying explains that she first learned to defend herself by being "strong" and also using violence, but eventually "learned to forgive". Other women comment on the fact that they have "recovered their roots" and reconciled with their origins despite their experiences,

for example through dance or singing. Among these strategies, mechanisms and "escapes" for survival, religion and spiritual help are of course present.

In conclusion, the women interviewed explain diverse experiences of empowerment and resilience in the face of all kinds of adversity, according to their different life trajectories, cultural backgrounds, socio-economic status, migration experiences and also according to their personalities and hobbies. Overcoming adversity, especially in relation to family and violence, is closely linked to what many women understand as gender empowerment from their own experience. Resisting, "having strength" and "getting through" are almost synonymous with "empowerment". This is explicitly defined by a participant from Spain, who relates gender empowerment to women overcoming adversity, a definition that could represent the experiences of women in all five countries.

"When you say empowerment, the first thing that comes to mind is a woman. Not a man, but a woman. When I say empowerment I think of single mothers who are at home carrying a family forward; families that are very bad economically and they keep going; high school girls who are suffering bullying and every day they feel they can't go on, but they keep going. Women who have suffered violence at some point, be it domestic, sexual, psychological, but they have moved on... That is empowerment for me". (CSO3_P05_Sp).

5.3 Women's experiences of gender empowerment in their everyday lives

Beyond women's definitions and reflections on gender empowerment, or key elements of citizenship rights that have emerged as prior factors or that their achievement has been empowering experiences, the analysis of their life stories allows us to identify other experiences and achievements that women generally perceive as empowering. The most recurrent of these are detailed below.

5.3.1 CARE, MATERNITY AND TRANSNATIONAL MOTHERHOOD

Motherhood is identified in all countries as an extremely important aspect of gender empowerment, either because of the priority of childcare, or because of the contradictions that motherhood raises in migrant women's lives, both as women and because of the experiences of the migration process. In almost all countries, the women interviewed who are mothers mention the welfare of their children as a top priority and central aspect of their lives, and very often as the main incentive or motivation that led them to design a migration project:

"Thinking about the future. Of my children. Of course, because if I were on my own, I would stay there. I don't care. But of course, you think about your children. No, it's better not to let them stay there. I'm doing my best to bring them here. OK." (CSO1_P02. Sp)

In the narratives on motherhood of migrant women in the five countries, three different circumstances appear in relation to the migration process: 1) **transnational motherhood** (when women migrate alone "leaving their children behind", send money and exercise motherhood "at a distance" or transnationally); 2) **plans, aspirations or the moment of family reunification** (when they are reunited with their children at destination), and 3) the fact of facing and **managing motherhood at region of destination** (when it

concerns children born in the receiving country). On the other hand, in almost all countries, narratives also emerge around the issue of single parenthood, linked to transnational motherhood and motherhood in the host countries.

Transnational motherhood has been a much-discussed topic in academic studies and the narratives around it do not vary much from country to country. It is a family migration project where transnational motherhood is a strategy for escaping poverty, sending remittances, and paying for housing and education for children as a way of gaining status and projecting "a future for them". In other words, it is an effective economic strategy but it also leaves certain costs for families, both children and mothers, who are often stigmatised for "leaving their children behind".

At a certain point, family reunification becomes a priority and many women (especially mentioned by participants from Italy and Spain) are trying to achieve it, either by processing "papers" or by adapting their work and housing conditions. The migrant women interviewed often explain that they have been able to overcome situations of personal difficulty by thinking about the wellbeing and future of their children. For all of them, transnational motherhood has **not been a free choice but a necessity**, which they have had to bear by thinking about what is the best option for their children. In this sense, it should be emphasised that transnational motherhood is a gender empowerment strategy in the sense of emancipation and survival, and that the children who stay behind are called "children left behind", but they are at all times "children first".

But transnational motherhood does not only appear in the narratives of migrant mothers, but also in the **narratives of young women** who were reunited as children. The most illustrative case is that of a 17-year-old Honduran girl (a migrant in Spain) who recalls the years she spent in Honduras without her mother with sadness and anguish at the treatment received from the relatives who looked after her. She remembers the moment of reunification with joy at being with her mother again, but also as a time of stress and family problems due to the labour exploitation her mother suffered as a domestic staff member. Nevertheless, the young woman says she values her mother's effort and sacrifice and sums up: *"I understand her as a woman, but not as a mother"*.

Like her, all the young women interviewed, both regrouped and second-generation, value the efforts of mothers in the migration project and in family reunification in order to achieve a better status and future for their children. In Belgium, for example, a woman who emigrated from Morocco at the age of 11 years old emphasises that what she is most proud of is the upward social mobility that her family was able to achieve.

For children born in the host country, **motherhood is problematised in relation to care**, especially in countries with family-based welfare states such as Italy and Spain, where care is highly dependent on family or personal networks. But it is also mentioned in Poland, where Ukrainian and Chechen women repeatedly emphasise their role and responsibility as mothers. The situation that emerges as "most problematic" is of course that of single parents and divorced women. Some women have had to turn to shelters for destitute women, while others have to apply for maintenance allowances or to lawyers to claim maintenance from the father.

On the other hand, and beyond the issue of care and maintenance, motherhood in the host country (including single parenthood) also appears as a "turning point" in the migration process, as for example in this case of a woman from Italy:

[Talking about the time of pregnancy] 'Oh yeah, I said to myself 'look I'm no good, I'm still young, how am I going to manage on my own with a baby, on this divorce road'... then I said to myself 'look, the baby is already here, so I have to...'. I don't have to think about these things, I have to ignore these things and I have to start a woman's life (IY-CSO3_IT)'.

As the report from Italy comments, for this young woman, the arrival of her child gave her an impulse towards personal maturity and the need to take control of her life. Similarly, in Poland, women mentioned to care for each other, especially when supporting during mothering.

“She didn’t speak Polish then and later, after two months she spoke better than I did. And she knew how to count, in English, in Polish, she counts and writes and sings and says rhymes and all. Other mothers said it was the same for them a month before and now it was normal. They said “Just don’t miss her too much, just let go. Do your own business. Don’t think if she’s there crying, just leave her and go”. And it was as they said. And it really helped me.” (CSO2_PL)

However, despite "the problem of care", motherhood is sometimes also associated with gaining social recognition. In this case, the fulfilment of the gender mandate offers the status they do not find in other spheres. The case of a pregnant participant from Spain of Guinean origin leads us to reflect on how this is amplified in the case of "mixed" couples.

In short, motherhood in relation to gender empowerment presents a series of contradictions, from what migration means and "leaving everything" for children as an absolute priority, to facing gender mandates and the "anomaly" of being a migrant mother, to the challenges, challenges and care management of having children at destination, to "giving everything". For some women, the need to invest all their energy and resources in the family completely overrides their needs as individuals, as illustrated by the testimony of a woman from Italy:

“When I got a job, everything was going well. Thirty-eight years of work. [...] I gave everything, psychologically and physically, for my husband and my daughters, for my family...” (IN-CSO3_IT)

And for other women, motherhood has meant encouragement or even a higher status as a person regarding inclusion in the receiving country.

It is worth noting that some non-mother participants have referred to situations of caring for other family members or significant relationships (especially having protected siblings in situations of family violence) as aspects of which they are proud, and which lead to the idea of self-satisfaction and empowerment.

5.3.2. TACKLING RACISM

Racism plays an important role among the adversities that migrant women reported experiencing throughout their trajectories and experiences and was mentioned repeatedly in all five countries by

women from diverse backgrounds. In the case of Belgium, for example, they comment that social exclusion based on gender, religion, ethnicity or migrant background was widespread and marked the narrative of the interviews. Similar observations can be found in many of the interviews from Austria, using interchangeably racism or discrimination based on migrant background. And in Italy, they also mention that racism is a common experience among the participants, regardless of their backgrounds, and is manifested in relation to the search for acceptance, appreciation and belonging, something that also appears in the narratives of women from other countries:

"Wanting to be appreciated, I actually was seeking a family, I realised that sometimes I held back up to a certain point" (I10 - CSO1_IT).

Racism is often linked to the **Islam and Islamophobia**, as in the cases of women of Moroccan origin in Belgium, Afghans or Turks in Austria or Moroccans in Spain. Therefore, it is worth noting that in some contexts, in the account of felt Islamophobia, for example in Belgium (i.e. CSO3_BE_4) the choice for wearing a hijab, as a source of liberation and being oneself, following her religion, emerges. This experience contrasts with other cases, for example, those of CSO3 participants in Spain, who identify it as an oppressive element to oppose and either reject the religious doctrine or adopt it "in their own way".

Racism is also mentioned by Romanian women in Italy or Latin American women in Spain, who also relate it to empowerment. For example, a participant from Spain who comes from Honduras refers to the racism experienced by migrant women and the fact that she is seen as "*a little panchita*".

"I don't tolerate racism, it makes me feel "down". There are colleagues who have the same level as you or a bit more and they feel threatened by a 'panchita', more than once I've been told that. Even though I have a Spanish ID card now, it's not worth anything, because they always see me as a "sudaca". (CS1_P0XX_Sp)

However, the racism experienced in everyday life appears as a barrier, but also as an experience that in the long run strengthens, i.e. as part of the construction of a process of empowerment and "feeling strong", as this participant from Belgium explains:

"I think that women with a migrant background are stronger anyway. Really. They are stronger and just more powerful in their mindset and so on. I'm pretty sure of that. Because they didn't get everything presented on a plate." (CSO3_BE_9)

Linked to this, it is also identified as empowering to reconcile multiple identities in integration processes, overcoming the hostile context, and developing one's own sense of belonging, resisting representations of otherness.

"But yes, that's one of the things, yes. Back... I'm so proud... in general, we're not so proud... Pride is relative. Happy maybe. Yes. Because I look... I was able to build a real life here for a few years, in terms of mentality, in behaviour, in terms of language, so I no longer feel like a foreigner here. But, not because... people look at me differently because I look at me differently. I am also Belgian. Not because it is written on papers, but in... in my mentality. I consider myself more here than Romanian. If I had been there... after a few days... I felt the need to go back home. Someone posted a question on Facebook, a... "Romanians in Belgium", a question; "what

is the meaning of 'home' for you?" And for me, 'home' is here. Because here is my life, here I live, here I work, here is my daughter, but 'home' is also there. Why? My family is still there. But it has a different meaning. 'house' is there - what did I bring here, in terms of feelings, in terms of idea, in terms of opinion, ... but for me, my real home is here." (CSO1_BE_2).

Many women have referred to the need for safe, non-judgmental spaces that allow them to self-represent themselves, to find understanding and to free themselves from the pressure of resisting discrimination.

5.3.3. MIGRATION AS AN EMANCIPATORY PROCESS

Beyond and in relation to spheres of everyday life, such as education, health or work, maternity and care, and also overcoming adversities, **the migration project is presented as a process of empowerment and emancipation as a whole**, including the search for rights and freedoms. The most obvious case is that of Afghan refugee women in Austria fleeing the oppression of the Taliban regime or Ukrainian refugee women in Poland fleeing war, as mentioned above.

But in almost all countries, first-generation migrant women from diverse backgrounds, such as Iran, Syria, Turkey, Morocco, Indonesia, Mexico, Honduras, Peru and Uruguay comment in one way or another that their **migration experiences also reflect a certain "open-mindedness" or "seeing the world", something they did not experience in their countries of origin**. This may correspond both to Afghan women in Austria, who comment on the freedoms and, for example, on the fact of "being able to wear trousers" or "going home alone without a man"; and to Latin American women who, although they may have been guaranteed civil rights at home, migration also meant reversing a violent or traumatic situation, or realising a personal professional project or simply "finding themselves". Similarly, in Poland, one participant mentioned:

"I think that it's easier to be a man [in her home country]. Women at home... how to say. We do everything alone, men don't do anything. In the garden, in the house, with the children, someone dies – you go, there's a wedding, women do everything. And men if they don't work they stay at home. Not all men work, they like it like this, it's comfortable." (CSO2_PL)

Breaking out of poverty is a particular theme that also emerges in the life stories in relation to migration as a project of gender empowerment and emancipation in itself. A 47-year-old woman from Peru (who migrated as a young woman) says that when she was a child the poverty was such that she once jumped into a river, risking swimming against the current to pick up a small wardrobe (which came down from the high mountain due to the rising snowmelt), as her house had hardly any furniture and nowhere to put her clothes. Today the woman is a businesswoman, has managed three shops and now sells products on the Internet, which has given her purchasing power and secured her children's education.

But migration as a process of empowerment in itself is not only about gaining freedoms and civil rights that one did not have in the country of origin, nor is it only and exclusively about escaping poverty, but rather a process of emancipation as a whole, as a life project, as a woman, and "as a person" that seeks freedom in relation to dignity and "inner peace". Sometimes, migration appears almost as an "excuse" to leave the country in order to reverse an unwanted or unchosen situation. This is not usually mentioned explicitly in the first interviews, but it does appear in some form or another in the second or third interviews

when participants become more confident or can explain aspects of their lives in more depth. For example, one woman from Honduras first comments that she migrated to Spain "to support her daughter" in her university studies, but then explains that what she really wanted was to "get out of that relationship" of marriage and "live her own life".

"So, I told her, let's look for a university outside because our daughter can't go on. But deep down, what I had to think about was getting out of that relationship, because it was suffocating me, it was killing me. [...] Now I'm not as I would like to be, but I have my head at ease. If I want to lie down all day, I lie down, nothing happens. Now I don't have to explain myself. I feel very well. As I said, I'm not as well off financially as I would like to be. According to my age, I should be in a different situation, but it doesn't matter. I'm happy like this, I'm at peace". (CSO1_P05_Sp).

It should be clarified that this participant, after four years in Spain, never formalised a separation or divorce with her husband, but rather the "official" story in origin is because she migrated to accompany her daughter. In other life stories and narratives, migration also appears as a way of escaping from a marriage, from social control at home or from certain "toxic relationships", although sometimes in a somewhat covert way. This situation has been picked up in other academic studies, especially with regard to Latin American women migrating to Spain.

Ultimately, migration is also (in addition to a family project) about a project of one's own, about seeking civil rights and freedoms, but also about "personal fulfilment", "experimenting", "meeting other people", escaping certain canons and social control, and generating one's own income to enable decision-making - all aspects and achievements of which the women say they are proud:

"In being able to come here because I came on a boat; I am super proud of this, because not just anyone can do it, risk their life and also wait six years to go and see your parents. I feel that I have matured a lot, and I have also learnt the language. I'm trying to study, I'm proud of many things..." (CSO1_P07_Sp)

5.4. Perceived CSO practices to support gender empowerment

In general, all women consider the work of the CSOs in which they participate to be positive. Those whose **relationship** has been **one-off** or for a short period have less knowledge of the organisation and less reflection on the impact of CSO practices on their empowerment processes; however, even in those cases they value the opportunity to participate in workshops aimed at improving their general wellbeing, such as some of the activities organised by CSOs in Poland, or especially appreciate a more relaxed space where topics that are not normally addressed are discussed, as in the case of the school workshops in CSO 1 in schools. Likewise, in these circumstances, it has been particularly appreciated how **the organisations adapt to the needs of the participants**, either by offering childcare, which is essential for the participation of many women, or by adapting the contents flexibly to the interests or questions that arise in the activity.

Women who have a **longer relationship** with CSOs are able to value different dimensions of organisations, from those that address **their more practical needs** to those that cover **more emotional aspects**, all of which are important to support their gender empowerment.

Among the more practically focused activities, many women consider **language classes as a** key element for empowerment. In 4 of the 5 countries surveyed, women value what the classes have brought them. In Spain, probably due to the type of organisation and the profile of the interviewees, all of whom have a good command of the language, this assessment has not emerged. In Italy one of the women showed how the learning space could go beyond being an inclusive space:

"...they help a lot...because Flora is the first teacher. When my son cries a little, Flora holds him.... They help me a lot" (I1-CSO2_IT).

Thus, not only the practical support is valued, but it is detected that the space goes much further and helps to foster a sense of belonging and companionship among women of migrant background. In the same vein, women in Poland were grateful when they met a translator at activities despite already having some command of the language, noting that this service made them feel more comfortable and confident in expressing their opinions.

Another type of activity that they value from the organisations and recognise as supporting their empowerment processes is related to the **support received in administrative procedures**, some of which are closely related to overcoming barriers to empowerment processes. For example, in Austria, in the case of divorce, some women from Syria were very grateful for the advice and patience of CSO staff.

"After the divorce, I was devastated, I wasn't feeling well mentally either, I was at home a lot, I cried a lot. I was~, it was all too much, they also supported me a lot with applications, with filling out forms. [...] in getting the mail to my new address and helped me a lot [...]. I'm very grateful to them for that." (CSO1_AT_6pt1)

Many women in Poland also highlighted the assistance they received in legal matters, ranging from help in completing the official documents necessary to legalise their stay, receive state benefits or validate their documents; to help in more complex and sensitive cases, such as reproductive rights or legal guardianship of children:

"My older son wanted to stay with his father in Ukraine and I took the younger one with me. My ex-partner threatened he would take him away from me and I was afraid of that, so the lawyers here helped me to sort this out." [PO-U4]

However, what is most valued by the women interviewed are those practices that support them emotionally. These can be carried out with **specific counselling services** as in the case of many organisations working with gender-based violence:

"I see a psychologist regularly and it's much better now. It's helped me a lot but there are still times when it's difficult for me to talk about what happened, to think about it. My son also sees a psychologist every week, he was in a very bad state when we came, had trouble at school,

but now is better. And my other son has just been diagnosed with ADD, in Ukraine no one even mentioned this." [PO-U 10]

Accessing **safe spaces** is especially relevant when they are spaces that allow them to live away from violent situations or when women have no other support or economic resources and are dealing with serious mental health problems that they can only deal with if they receive help:

"Yes, I felt good because you don't have to think about dinner, groceries, lunch, you arrive and everything is ready, let's say. Yes, maybe you help with the cleaning, but... it's also good for you because you're doing something. Instead, I used to just lie down and wait for the children to come for lunch, and then they would say, 'Ah, mum! This is not good, this'. We went shopping and the next day they said, 'There's nothing to eat!'" (IN-CSO3_IT)

However, often the emotional support that is most recognised and valued relates to the general attitudes and opportunities found in the organisations. Women get a **support network through** CSOs that they do not have elsewhere; or through the **friendships** they make there as this woman in Poland expressed: "We've become close friends, we help each other out, we talk. I don't really have any other friends here, most of my friends from before are either still in Ukraine or somewhere else in Poland". [U3]; or by **support through the different activities**:

"I think these offers, all the courses, all the workshops, are very important, so these offers support women mentally [...] This information is important, it's also good that the women hear it and that they know how everything works, for example how to get a divorce. So all this legal information is also very important. It's also very valuable for their mental state." (CSO1_AT_7pt1)

Also because of the **support of the** organisation's **staff members themselves** who, as mentioned by several women participants in different CSOs in Spain, came to feel like "family". As described in the Trento University report, **women feeling seen, recognised and treated with dignity is a fundamental part of the journey towards women's empowerment** and is what many of them highlight when they emphasise the treatment of staff members:

"Sometimes they also help me with my son, yes.... I swear they helped me a lot. I remember M. [name of a social worker] ... my son was sick, he took his car without a child carrier, without anything, he went with me to the emergency room, he was scared too, he stayed with me all day ... It means that they do this job from the heart, not just because it is a job." (IY-CSO3_IT).

Among second- and third-generation women who participated in the CSO3 in Belgium, **finding a community**, a safe space, with like-minded people, but also with a similar position in society, was also particularly valued. As the authors of the Antwerp University report explain, this also corresponds to other studies, in which the compositional effects of context, for example in education, matter for the sense of belonging, educational and professional choices and being ambitious in certain ways. Participants find that in CSOs there is a better fit with their persona - in terms of socio-demographic characteristics, ambitions and positions in society - which itself creates an empowering experience.

One idea that many women have is that organisations are a place where **they can turn to**. One of the participants in Spain emphasised that she knew that she could call this or that staff member and that she

would always find her. We have seen that this can generate dilemmas among the staff members, but from the participants' point of view, it seems that the key element for them to feel the support of the organisations in their empowerment processes and in contrast to many experiences that place them in a lack of recognition as people is precisely being able to count on them. In the following quote this woman values her learning of German thanks to the CSO3 in Austria, however, in this quote, as in many other interviews, what emerges is that the CSO is a place where she feels safe enough to ask for help and that they will respond to her:

“Of course, what positively changed, is that I'm not afraid to talk to Austrian people because before I was afraid because I don't speak so well and so and so and now I don't care. If someone doesn't understand me, I have to ask again and yes, if I don't understand someone, then I say: 'I don't understand, please speak slowly.' I think that has helped me to have more contact with people. That's the way it is. And well, with all my things, what I need in my life, for example, I'm also very happy, because before, when I got a letter, I thought all night: 'My god, what should I do, where can I go with it, who will help me?' But now I know that if I don't understand something or don't know something, I can come to [the organisation]. That's really positive.”
(CSO3_AT_9pt1)

Finally, some women in the different countries also value how the CSOs have allowed them to **learn more about their rights**, both as women, "A lot of things I didn't know, women, they have rights here, she can speak up!" (CSO1_AT_5pt1) and as migrants, "We also learned about rights here. For example, how you can defend yourself in the event of an incident of racism or how you should behave." (CSO1_AT_2pt2). Knowing their rights has enabled women, for example linked to CSO3 in Spain, to make decisions about how to deal with their family and to have the tools not to give in to forced marriage. Another woman in Austria also commented on the importance of having learned about her rights in order to be able to divorce an abusive husband:

“I took this course and I also came to the conclusion that I actually want to get divorced, so when I.. before I started this course..., or did this course, I wasn't so sure.” (CSO1_AT_7pt2).

It is worth noting that, in general, women's perceptions of a lack of support or neglect on the part of CSOs in addressing their needs or guaranteeing their rights have not been identified.

6. RE-DEFINING “GENDER EMPOWERMENT”

The institutionalisation of the concept of gender empowerment has meant its wide dissemination and certain omnipresence in European equality policies, since its inclusion in the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR). Many governments, gender equality policy makers and CSOs have pushed for its promotion, especially when it comes to policies, programmes or projects targeting women or girls with an immigrant background.

Even so, as we have seen, the meanings or concrete actions that are supposed to promote their empowerment are ambiguous and sometimes contradictory to the perspectives that feminist discourses and theory have consolidated in recent decades. This is why it was necessary to understand the nuances

of conceptualisations of "gender empowerment" from the perspectives of a sample of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) working with women and girls from immigrant backgrounds and their participants in five EU countries.

Our results show how the different perspectives on gender empowerment colour the approaches of the different CSOs analysed, the strategies they implemented and the perceptions and discourses they have about it in a varied way, influenced by the social sphere to which they address their mission, among other contextual factors.

- In most contexts, the **implementation of gender empowerment strategies** in EU CSOs appears to be subject to a **top-down approach**, where policies set at EU level largely guide implementation processes at national and local level. The bottom-up nature of Gender Empowerment (GE) strategies in civil society organisations makes the in-depth exploration of this factor even more crucial, as it allows for a better understanding of implementation dynamics and the results achieved.
 - The lack of ownership of the term and the absence of a clear and structured process for its implementation in the key lines of action of the entities make it a diffuse and low priority initiative, despite the many specific actions that can be identified as being carried out to promote it.
 - There were country differences in the referrals to the concept of "gender empowerment" by CSOs, which follow early and more robust implementation of equity policies at national and regional levels, together with the considerable weight of social/feminist movements.

With regard to the conceptualisations of gender empowerment in the CSOs analysed, we can affirm that:

- Most CSOs do **not explicitly define "gender empowerment"** in their policy documents and programmes, although we implicitly identify objectives aimed at promoting the overcoming of barriers to the participation of women and girls from immigrant backgrounds, both from an equal opportunities approach, as well as from a rights and choice approach.
- Implicitly, similarities are identified in their conceptualisations, which are oriented towards a **holistic approach**, highlighting **access to resources and participation** in meeting participants' needs.
 - For CSOs, empowerment processes cannot be considered in isolation from work aimed at **overcoming barriers to inclusion or promoting social participation**. These include language proficiency, work, citizenship and social representation, not to mention other dimensions such as political participation.
 - CSOs identify **networking and community building** as necessary strategies to achieve this purpose. However, in the interventions identified, there is a greater emphasis on individual action rather than collective processes.
 - It is safe to say that for the most part they move away from liberal empowerment perspectives.

- CSOs face a **complex landscape marked by a number of threats** that hinder their work and put their sustainability at risk, among them:
 - **Integration context** characterised by growing social inequality, which widens the barriers encountered by its target population.
 - **Funding and dependence on public administration:** Excessive dependence on public funds and the bureaucracy associated with obtaining these resources limit the autonomy of CSOs.
 - **Hostile political climate:** The rise of extreme right-wing movements that promote gender and racial discrimination, combined with the fear of instrumentalization of CSO actions in debates on anti-racism, feminism and human rights, create an adverse environment for the development of their work.
 - **New emerging challenges:** Caring for refugee victims of violence in war contexts presents additional challenges that require immediate responses tailored to the specific needs of this vulnerable group.

- Beyond the similarities identified, there are **nuances** in their positions or understandings of what this mobilisation of resources and the promotion of social participation entails, mainly in two variants.
 - Some CSOs highlight the context of **structural inequality** (intersecting gender and other variables such as racialisation, foreignness, etc.) and are **critical** of notions of **autonomy and independence** as resources to be acquired individually.
 - Other CSOs highlight the **barriers to equal participation** that women encounter, both from the community itself and from the social stratification of the reception context. They are critical of the idea of empowerment associated with "freedom of choice", detached either from a patriarchal structure that conditions it or from an analysis of the racism present in the contexts of integration. No organisations have been identified that focus their efforts on simultaneously combating these two frameworks of oppression, although many of them make intersectional positions explicit.
 - **Strengthening** women's **agency** is relevant for many CSOs, and is supported by **awareness-raising** processes. Linked to the **two perspectives** mentioned in the previous point (i.e., structural inequalities vs barriers to equal participation), CSOs tend to emphasise different elements: either the constraints implied by intra-community gender mandates, or those implied by being traversed by racism in the context of global capitalism.
 - The strengthening of agency also relies on the **extension of networks, in terms of social capital** (mobilizable resources). But again, these two perspectives make their strategies

disparate, and lead us to associate it with the typologies of social capital identified by Putnam (2000): **bonding** (CSOs that strengthen strong ties with members of their own community, especially those that aim to confront racism) vs. **bridging** (those that strengthen relationships with other social agents, or with peer groups that have moved away from the community, subverting gender mandates).

Finally, we can conclude by applying the analysis of Calvès (2009), Murguialday (2006) and Sardenberg (2008) discussed in previous sections, that the conceptualisation of gender empowerment appears **partially minimised** with respect to its meaning associated with processes of awareness-raising, collective mobilisation and the struggle for structural change. Although they take **critical positions**, their focus is mainly on the redistribution of resources, which means that it can be considered **a depoliticised manner**.

Regarding the participants' own definitions of gender empowerment, it is worth noting that our participants **are not very familiar with the concept of gender empowerment, yet they reflect on their experiences by identifying key factors of gender empowerment**.

The only women who have incorporated the concept into their discourse have been found in the Spanish context, which also relates to the existence of the concept in the locally spoken language.

Analysing the implicit definitions that emerge from the analysis of the life histories, the experiences reported and the reflections they made, we can point out that:

- Many women refer to the importance of being considered as a **person**, and evidence of the multifaceted oppression in which gender, foreignness or racialisation intersect. This overlapping of factors results in a unique experience of social stratification, in some cases leading to the perception of being **stripped of humanity**. The **intersectional analysis** of women's narratives becomes particularly relevant when interpreting the experience of the migrant women interviewed.
- We found **heterogeneity in perspectives on empowerment**: we can recognise that perspectives on empowerment are not uniform among migrantised women and migrants. This heterogeneity reflects the diversity of their experiences and contexts.
 - Emphasis on **independence and autonomy**: Some migrant women prioritise financial independence as key to empowerment. This allows them to make decisions about their lives and escape situations of dependency or control. Autonomy is also associated with the ability to manage their own resources and time, which gives them greater control over their existence.
 - Emphasis on **choice and agency**: other migrant women highlight the ability to choose how to live their sexuality, participate in the community or access education. This perspective highlights the importance of individual agency and the power to make informed decisions about their lives.
 - Emphasis on **rights and equal opportunities**: empowerment is generally perceived as a situated process, closely linked to the conquest of rights and the struggle for equal

opportunities. Migrant women seek recognition of their rights as individuals and as members of the society in which they live.

- The context of integration, as defined by Crul & Schneider (2010) and the **dual frame of reference** that migrant women possess (their origin and the receiving society) are crucial elements in contextualising their experiences and the nuances they bring to the notion of empowerment.
- Based on our analysis, we identify how other variables that generate social inequality also shape migrant women's empowerment processes and their perspectives on them, and contribute to this nuanced heterogeneity. In particular, the following factors emerge as significant: **social class, migrant generation, and specific experiences of gender discrimination** that migrant women have faced throughout their lives.
- Importance of a contextualised analysis in reference to the **transformations of gender relations in the context of migration**, in multiple senses.
 - We identify contradictions in terms of experienced gains and losses. Our participants refer to the "gains" in gender equality and freedom they experience in the context of integration after migrating. This is contrasted against the social control in origin or gender roles in their community. Although these gains are mentioned, this often is weighed against the "losses" or tensions they experience in the immigrant society. These losses are linked to the exploitation and racism experienced at destination. An idea that we could link and give a new meaning in a transnational and global context to the concept of "patriarchal bargains" (Kandiyoti, 1988). This concept refers to women's negotiations within the limitations of the patriarchal system. They might resist certain aspects of the bargain or find ways to gain some autonomy within the system. In the context of migration, the women can consider if the limits imposed by gender systems can be easier to deal with than the social position that migration implies.
 - **Claims about equal opportunities between men and women** are also tinged with the above idea, and this resonates with ideas from black and postcolonial feminism. The analysis of unequal gender relations pointed to by equality feminism cannot be directly translated because men in colonized or marginalized communities are not in a position of "hegemonic masculinity". This means they don't hold this same level of power and privilege.
 - In some cases, the migratory context reinforces the role of **women as cultural transmitters of their community** (Yuval-Davis, 1997), leaving aside their own emancipation processes. This is especially identified in contexts where racism impacts perceived limited rights and opportunities, leading to processes of (partial) identity withdrawal.
 - The idea that women's understanding of empowerment is a **process associated with overcoming barriers and difficulties** caused by their experience of both gendered subordination and discrimination linked to migration status or racialisation is recurrent.

The data also show that a number of factors appear to act as means or **prerequisites for migrant and refugee women** to initiate or achieve emancipatory experiences. These factors can be grouped into the following categories:

- Women's accounts have made evident the **barriers to participation** that they encounter, and how it limits or impacts on citizenship rights and belonging. The most salient elements are:
 - **Citizenship:** One of the previous barriers to a real possibility of empowerment has to do with access to residence permits or nationality that many of the first generation participants talk about.
 - **Language proficiency:** In all countries, the limitations of not mastering the language for full participation in the host countries, the emotional burdens associated with experiences of racism, are mentioned. In contrast, language proficiency is experienced as key to autonomy and independence.
 - **Participation and conditions in the labour market:** Participation in the labour market is a relevant factor for women, associated with their own income. But once again, women of immigrant background encounter various barriers to accessing the labour market: the recognition of educational qualifications, lack of social capital or experiences of racism, in addition to gender stereotypes and the masculinisation of some jobs. The vulnerability of female migrant staff members in low-wage sectors, where they are often subject to exploitation and abuse, should be highlighted.
 - **Access to education and expectations in the educational trajectory:** Education emerges as a capital that most migrant women value. In analysing women's experiences, we have observed the importance of education in their accounts, with barriers to accessing it being mentioned. With regard to young women, both regrouped and second-generation, contradictory messages are identified within families. Many of the young women interviewed in Spain and in other countries recognise messages of encouragement towards academic achievement, and at the same time, increased pressure to comply with traditional gender mandates. This is compounded by a school system in receiving countries that denies experiences of racism and/or is not adapted to the needs of multilingual girls or newcomers to a new school system.
 - **Access to housing and space of one's own:** Having a residence has been identified as an essential prerequisite for the empowerment of most first generation women. Many women describe various forms of racism they have experienced during their search for housing and how this again impacts on the feeling described by so many women, and which we have collected, of not being considered "persons".
- **Undertaking processes of overcoming experiences of violence**, such as war, gender-based violence and child abuse, can be a precursor to a more holistic and multi-level approach linked to processes of women's empowerment.

Finally, despite the challenges, the research process with women also identified a number of experiences that recurrently emerge as empowering for women from migrant and refugee backgrounds. These experiences include:

- **Care and motherhood:** Motherhood in relation to gender empowerment presents a number of contradictions, from what migration means and "leaving everything" for one's children as an absolute priority, facing gender mandates and the "anomaly" of being a migrant mother, to the challenges, challenges and care management of having children at destination, to "giving everything".
- **Confronting racism:** an experience reiterated in all five countries by women from diverse backgrounds, as an element of overcoming or confronting adversity. Building a sense of belonging as a citizen in a hostile context and reconciling multiple identities can become something that confers a sense of pride and well-being.
- **Migration as a process of empowerment:** the migration project is presented as a process of empowerment and emancipation as a whole, including the search for rights and freedoms, as well as a way out of poverty. It is presented as a life project as a woman and "as a person" seeking freedom in relation to dignity and "inner peace". Sometimes migration appears almost as an "excuse" to leave the country in order to reverse an unwanted or unchosen situation.

To conclude, it is worth noting that the perception of support expressed by women regarding CSOs was very high and satisfactory in almost all cases. **Women perceive CSOs as a valuable resource** that offers them a response to their needs, a network of relationships and community, and sometimes a key factor in becoming aware of their rights.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

In this deliverable, we used comparative qualitative fieldwork, collected in five countries (Poland, Italy, Spain, Belgium and Austria), including participatory photo-eliciting approach, observations in CSOs and focus group discussions and interviews with both CSO staff as with their participants. Our findings aim to reflect upon the use of the concept of 'gender empowerment', using a situated intersectional perspective, considering the life narratives, local context and specific nature of the CSO. Our findings reveal that gender empowerment cannot be considered without considering the context - and especially hindrances within this context, including discrimination, barriers related to the migration experience and language issues, separation by migration and sense of belonging. Furthermore, individual definitions of gender empowerment relate to one's personal situation, gender roles and expectations in the immediate environment, region of origin and immigrant country, and nature of migration.

This deliverable highlights the need to approach gender empowerment strategies in civil society organisations from a differentiated perspective, in which individual definitions, aspirations and needs are considered. We hope this research provides input for both researchers and civil society organisations, on how to deal with and communicate together with their target group, within their own organisation and towards the outside world. The fieldwork consisted of an intense period of observations, interviews, narratives, that needed additional care and guidance, both for researchers as for their participants, given their sensitive nature. Our findings can contribute to gaining a better understanding of the measurement

and implementation of the concept in future studies and research, and a critical approach to a unified usage and measurement of this concept.

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