

Unveiling the Life Journeys of Newly Arrived Immigrant Women in Porto

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Abstract: With the rising number of women relocating to Portugal over recent years, this paper focuses on the lived experiences of newly arrived migrant women, employing an intersectional lens to examine their integration process. In this qualitative exploratory study, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 28 Central and South American women who migrated to the North of Portugal, analysing their perceptions about their migration and integration experience. Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's Thematic Analysis proposal. The findings reveal that these women faced numerous challenges during the integration process, including cultural adaptation difficulties, economic disadvantages, and bureaucratic hurdles. These issues are exacerbated by class, ethnicity, and administrative status, significantly affecting their access to essential services such as housing, employment, healthcare, and social support networks. Participants often navigate the expectations of their new community and those they left behind, illustrating the complex interplay of multiple identities. They often encounter various forms of social discrimination, but despite their increasing presence, they remain underrepresented in national and regional statistics and academic discourse, with their specific needs frequently overlooked in policies and practice.

Keywords: Immigrant Women, Integration, Intersectionality, Porto, Qualitative Research.

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, emigration from Central and South America has grown and changed significantly, transforming the region from one traditionally associated with immigration to one marked by emigration (Castles and Miller 2003). During the 1980s, South American emigrants increasingly selected Global North countries as their preferred destinations. This shift was largely influenced by socioeconomic and political upheavals, including the debt crisis, structural adjustment programs, and free-market reforms (Cerrutti and Parrado 2015). In the 1960s and 1970s, skilled South Americans had already begun migrating in search of better professional prospects, a phenomenon termed "brain drain," which sparked debates over the benefits and drawbacks of emigration. This discourse has evolved into discussions on "brain circulation" and "brain exchange," promoting the idea of reciprocal exchange and circulation of talent (Pellegrino 2003).

Castles and Miller (2003) argue that the economic downturn of the 1980s was a key driver of increased emigration from South America. In the 1990s, a series of political and economic crises intensified this trend, further accelerating migration to the Global North and neighbouring countries. In recent years, the number of South Americans emigrating has continued to grow (IOM 2020), with one of the most notable changes being the increasing presence of women and girls among migrants who seek to reach the Global North, including destinations like Europe and Portugal (Cerrutti and Parrado 2015). The migratory landscape in Portugal has seen

a significant rise in female migrants from these regions in recent years (AIMA 2024, Oliveira 2023).

This paper explores the feminization of migration in Portugal, focusing on the migration pathways of Central and South American women, the challenges they encounter, and their experiences of discrimination during the integration process. The study is set in a country with a colonial past and within a broader, increasingly politicized migration context. Across democratic systems worldwide—particularly in Europe—migration has become a polarizing issue, with anti-immigration sentiments and rising living costs influencing national elections (Nourbakhsh et al. 2023) and intensifying social discrimination. Drawing on Kukreja's (2023) analysis, this political climate is embodied in militarized border regimes that function as control systems intended to deter migration, often disproportionately criminalizing and marginalizing racialized migrant bodies, intensifying the challenges faced by migrant women in Portugal.

2. Migration: An Overview of Central and South American Women's Reality

Migration is an expanding global phenomenon with significant demographic, economic, social, and political implications, with various myths surrounding it (Heins 2024). The World Migration Report 2024 (IOM 2024) highlighted that recent large-scale displacements have resulted from political motivations and climate-related disasters in various regions, including Brazil and Colombia. In Portugal, where migratory flows are on the rise, the primary causes include economic, ethnic, political, and religious issues, as well as natural disasters, wars, and violence, prompting many migrants to seek a better life (Marinucci and Milesi 2012). Migration challenges the established social order, requiring the reorganisation of society to include the interests of all involved, given the diversity of contexts and cultures (Cerqueira 2022).

The experiences of prejudice faced by South American women in Portugal have been extensively analysed in the literature (França and Padilla, 2019; Gomes 2018; Novaes and Rossi 2018). These women are frequently stigmatised as hypersexualized "colonial bodies", an image derived from coloniality that affects their social interactions and self-esteem (Gomes 2013). Although newly arrived women may initially perceive little discrimination—often due to idealising the host country—they still fall victim to these practices. This scenario tends to change as they integrate, with barriers becoming more evident, especially in accessing services and the labour market, exacerbating exclusion and prejudice, as studies revealed that long-term immigrants are more likely to perceive discrimination than new immigrants (Fibbi et al. 2021).

Intersectional discrimination has impacted this population, inviting us to analyse which structural conditions affect individuals and which hierarchies subjectively distort cultural meanings through the interaction of structures stabilised by the oppression matrix in the form of identity (Akotirene 2019). This analysis offers a means to perceive all relevant human rights in a violation situation, as well as the multiple axes of oppression at play, which would not be possible with a traditional approach to human rights violations. Therefore, recognising and addressing intersectional discrimination is necessary to achieve meaningful substantive equality for all (Smith, 2016). In this case, the intersectionality of gender, race, class, and nationality reinforces the reach of the non-discrimination principle in the new territory these women find themselves in (Collins and Bilge 2021).

In this case, migration policies sensitive to women's needs are essential to address these challenges. Portugal is known for its local-level integration policies, promoting proximity between local services and migrant communities, especially through Immigrant Associations. These policies aim to grant rights and responsibilities equivalent to those of national citizens, promoting cultural diversity (Calado 2015). Even so, gender issues are seldom addressed in international migration analyses (Neves et al. 2016). Until recently, female participation in migration was thought to be secondary, limited to family reunification, with men seen as the main migration agents (Marinucci 2007).

In Portugal, studies on immigrant women remain sparse and intermittent, with little analysis of gender-specific aspects of migration (Peixoto 2006). The integration of migrant women requires an intersectional approach that considers gender, race, and nationality for the country's well-being and social cohesion. As Cleiton and Meier (2023) point out, intersectionality reveals distinct material realities and social experiences, including discrimination and exclusion, which are important for analysing and formulating public policies.

Another relevant factor for ethnic minorities is that perceptions of discrimination are often influenced by educational level. More educated minorities tend to perceive more discrimination in countries where education does not guarantee proportional financial returns, a phenomenon known as the "discrimination paradox" (Andriessen et al. 2014). Discrimination and stereotypes harm minorities' life opportunities and are sources of stress that compromise their well-being. In response, affected individuals and groups develop strategies to cope

with prejudice, but experiences of inequality affect how intensely these individuals perceive discrimination (Fibbi et al. 2021).

Integration is only possible with mutual engagement between the host society and the immigrant community. Inadequate treatment in inclusion can result in poverty, discrimination, xenophobia, and even human insecurity, through issues such as informal economic growth and urban marginalisation (Estevens 2018).

This paper aims to analyse the feminisation of migration in Portugal, focusing on the promotion and integration of Central and South American women into Portuguese society through labour markets, education, health access, and documentation. It considers their rights amidst the ongoing struggle for recognition of differences in contemporary society. This process is fraught with contradictions, requiring acknowledgement of the issues at hand and a commitment to finding solutions (Marques and Alcântara 2022).

3. Methodology

The MIGAP Project is an action-research initiative guided by an intersectional and critical approach that aims to shed light on the multifaceted migratory dynamics in the Porto area. The development of the MIGAP Project is being undertaken in phases. In the initial phase, the *Study on Migration Trends in Porto: An Exploratory Analysis* aimed to characterise the profiles of migrants living in Porto and to understand their journeys and challenges in the migration and inclusion process.

In this paper, we seek to understand the experiences, interactions, and integration process of Central and South American women living in Oporto (Portugal). The semi-structured interviews consisted of two parts, the first collecting sociodemographic data, and the second part made up of 3 sections: 1) migratory pathway 2) integration process and 3) discrimination perception.

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of CEOS of the Polytechnic of Porto, as it adhered to all the ethical principles of research-

Participants were recruited through convenience sampling, shared by the MIGAP Project on social media and via partners. Eligibility criteria included: being a third-country national (non-EU), a migrant resident or former resident in the municipalities of Porto, Valongo-Gondomar, Maia, Matosinhos, or V. N. de Gaia, aged 18 or older, fluent in Portuguese, Spanish, English, or French, and residing in Portugal for at least 5 years.

It was also used, the snowball sampling technique, in which participants were encouraged to refer to other women who met the inclusion criteria, enabling wider access to potential interviewees.

The interviews were scheduled through direct contact, telephone, or email after obtaining the informed consent of those involved. Before beginning each interview, the objectives were explained, and the participants were assured of their anonymity and confidentiality. Explicit permission was obtained to record and transcribe the interviews. The interviews were conducted in person and online via the ZOOM platform to suit the convenience of the participants. Participation was completely voluntary, and data collection took place between May and July 2024, with each interview lasting an average of 40 minutes.

A total of 28 interviews were carried out with Central and South American migrant women. 15 of them were Brazilians, five were Colombians, three were Venezuelans, one was Honduran, one was Salvadoran and three of them had dual nationality. Participants' ages ranged from 22 to 63, with an average age of around 36 years.

26 participants self-identified as racialized women. All participants self-identified as cis women, with twenty identifying as heterosexual, two as pansexual, and one as bisexual. Five participants did not answer this question. In terms of educational qualifications, 15 have a university degree; two have attended higher education; three have a technical course; five women mentioned high school as their academic qualification, and one answered primary education. The participants have lived in the country for between three months and five years ($M = 1.81$). Participants had between zero and three children. Regarding the employment situation, 22 interviewees are employed; 6 are unemployed; 1 of them is a student.

The interview process was finished, recognizing that the principle of saturation had been achieved, as no new information or themes emerged, indicating that data collection was complete. Theoretical saturation was attained, signifying that the concepts and their interrelationships had been thoroughly developed and validated, and no additional data was required to further the theory (Fontanella, et al. 2008). To analyse the data, we applied Thematic Analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach, employing two methods: an inductive approach, ensuring that data itself could inform the development of codes and themes without being

constrained by pre-existing theories or assumptions, and a deductive approach, which uses a pre-established set of well-defined categories or themes aligned with existing theoretical frameworks and predefined research objectives. The balance between inductive and deductive approaches were outlined by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase process: 1) Familiarization with the Data: Repeated engagement with the data ensured an in-depth understanding and facilitated the emergence of both data-driven (inductive) and theory-informed (deductive) insights; 2) Initial Coding: Coding was conducted iteratively, with inductive codes developed freely based on the content, and deductive codes aligned with the predefined categories; 3) Search for Themes: Both sets of codes were analysed to identify patterns and overarching themes, ensuring alignment between the data-driven insights and theoretical constructs, 4) Reviewing Themes: Themes were refined by integrating inductive and deductive insights, ensuring they were coherent, consistent, and supported by the data; 5) Naming Themes: Each theme was clearly defined and named to reflect its content and contribution to the research objectives, and 6) Writing the Report: The themes were integrated into the presentation and discussion of results section, with evidence from the data to support each theme.

4. Presentation and Discussion of Results

4.1 Migratory Experience

The Migratory experience of the participants can be analysed through push and pull factors (Gois, 2019). As pull factors, the interviewed reveal intrinsic and instrumental motivations related to the search for better educational opportunities, to improve their careers - *"To have a better opportunity in the part of education because in my country I can study for the master (...), but. It's not the same job opportunities ..."* (P08mHon), as well as the quality of life: *'I came here in search of a better quality of life, security, professional opportunities and personal fulfilment.'* (P01mBra).

Some interviewees made it clear that, although it was a voluntary migration, it was about getting out of violent situations for themselves and their families: *"The intention is for us to leave Brazil, because there was a lot of violence there. (...). A better, more stable life, right? Without violence."* (P21mBra). The participants' migratory journey is characterised by autonomous decision-making, both on their own and with their nuclear family.

While some participants said they chose Portugal and Porto randomly or because other options, like Canada, were closed to them, most selected Porto as their destination. Linguistic and cultural proximity, the city and country's size, and positive references were common pull factors identified in interviews: *"I feel that in general Portugal, (...) have a very good academic offer for psychologists (...)"* (Pm65Col). There were also reasons related to the migrant network theory, as one of the most widely used theories to explain how migration happens (Sha 2021), associating the choice of city with the fact that friends or family were already in the city: *'a friend, my cousin, she lives here, she's lived here for a long time, (...) I spoke to her (...) if she would help me'* (P50mBra).

4.2 Facilitating Elements

Several positive elements were identified in their reception and integration processes, based on a feeling of generalised sympathy for the people of Porto. Despite the challenges associated with instability and what is reported as the condition of being a migrant, the participants classify their experience as positive, reflecting on their personal development and the effective and desired improvement in living conditions, both in terms of weekly breaks and security *'The security that is clear [... my children] have more freedom'* (P46mBra), especially in the case of being a woman: *'as a woman, I feel secure when I'm in public transport (...).'* (P08mHon).

Participants reported support networks with friends and individual support from classmates, especially among international students who highlighted the class's importance, the inclusive setting of higher education, and institutional support network. Support was chiefly found in social economy organisations providing food parcels, donations, or migration services, particularly accommodation, as well as in parish councils. Churches and other social networks were also viewed as key pillars of solidarity to facilitate integration. As one participant noted, *'We got a lot of donations of clothes, donations of things I needed for the house, I couldn't afford to buy them.'* (P21mBra). These initiatives can be classified as informal volunteering or individual assistance, which represent common modes of human helping behaviour (Einolf et al. 2016), particularly through online platforms (Trautwein et al. 2020).

4.3 Cultural Adaptation

Experiencing cultural diversity was a transformative aspect of integration for some participants, fostering self-awareness and broader understanding. One participant reflected on the new cultural contact, saying: *'There was also this new contact with the culture, which [...] made me see, I think, my own culture, you know?'* (P12mBra-Lux). Another participant emphasized the enriching experience of a Portuguese language course that brought together classmates from various backgrounds: *'I studied with Russians, Arabs, [...] people from Thailand, China [...] I think that's very enriching because they are different cultures, and I have gained a broader vision'* (P60mVen). For some, even small details of daily life with classmates provided cultural insights: *'Most of my classmates are Portuguese. [...] they like to drink a lot of espresso [...] Being with my classmates really helped me'* (P08mHon). These interactions, across shared spaces and everyday moments, highlight the way immersion in diverse environments can deepen cultural awareness and connection.

4.4 Mismatch of Expectations

Despite the generalised positive feelings towards migratory experiences, some participants also revealed a certain mismatch between expectations and reality, particularly regarding the cost of living: *"Previously, from Colombia we saw it very easy, or at least I saw it easier. I used to say, with this we can do many things, with this money we save we can do such and such a thing. When you get there, you get a reality check because the economy is different (...). So, that was like the, I don't know if it was an exception, (...) but you don't believe it until you live it'* (P28mCol), as well as the general difficulties: *"I think everyone has a little bit of expectation about living in Europe. But I've found some things here that I didn't realise I'd find. Especially in the situation that Portugal finds itself in today, with many people on the streets, or even homeless."* (P58mBra).

4.5 Challenges

Some interviewees faced pre-migration challenges, notably from the lack of a consulate in their country or city: *'Honestly, this was one of the biggest difficulties for me because I applied for the master's program, was accepted, and received the acceptance letter [from the institution] very quickly, but I couldn't get in touch with a Portuguese consulate in Brazil...'* (P58mBra). Upon arrival, the challenges encountered were broadly related to bureaucratic issues, the lack of consistent, centralized, and standardized information, as well as the slow pace of processes.

Participants highlighted challenges beyond bureaucracy, including lack of support networks, homesickness, cost of living, climate, language barriers, and integration into services such as the labour market, housing, healthcare, opening a bank account, especially as documents like the expression of interest or residence permit, along with associated costs, are required for legalisation and their children's schooling, noting issues of little information, some difficulty in communicating with school management, as well as the lack of places to keep siblings in the same school.

4.6 Perceived Discrimination

When addressing their current life, it was interesting to note the immigrants' awareness that there was a profile of "Central and South immigrants" back when multiple social representations emerged, which now underlie discrimination.

Despite some reports of a generalised perception of not feeling or observing discrimination, most of the participants report situations of xenophobia in public discourses and spaces: *'For example, on the bus, I always see people basically talking about Brazilians.'* (P17mBra). In fact, both in general and sometimes not associated with personal experiences, situations of micro-aggressions are reported: *'But at no time did I feel, did I feel this issue of being prejudiced or treated badly because I'm Brazilian, right? Of course, sometimes there's a little joke, then you say, ha ha ha, how funny'* (P04mBra). Several interviewees acknowledged their privilege, noting that other migrants face greater stigmatisation: *'... we have had to deal with this ugly discrimination. But I have noticed a high level of discrimination against people from Nepal and Indians. It's brutal'* (P65mCol).

Subtle discrimination, especially around Brazilian Portuguese, is noted even in higher education, revealing soft power dynamics and epistemic injustice (Bourgault 2023): *"... when it's group work, someone always has to revise my part to leave it in Portuguese from Portugal. [...] it's annoying, because it's not wrong. The Portuguese language is one [...] We feel a bit inferior'* (P58mBra).

There are also reports of participants who prefer not to report situations that they consider unfair, for fear of reprisals due to their situation of vulnerability or who say that they need to work harder to obtain the same conditions as nationals: *"I have to be more productive, I have to put more effort into things, you know? [...] at university, there are things that we have to put a lot more effort into, we always have to go the extra mile to be equal to the others"* (P12mBra-Lux).

Situations of multiple discrimination are also reported, at the intersection of nationality and age - *"I am a person who has a degree and has studied, but here it is also taken into account that the person is young, so unfortunately I don't have the same priority, that I could have my son, who is much younger"* (P60mVen) - and with gender - *"I lived in Maia for a month, I felt a lot of objectification of the female body like that, this Brazilian thing, this sexualisation, so they mess with me in the street..."* (P58mBra). Situations of direct discrimination occur in different contexts, from the various public services to personal and professional contexts: *"You can't sit at lunch next to the rubbish and pretend that that's OK"* (P65mCol).

Though these women view Portugal as a land of opportunity, they adapt to constraints faced as women, migrants, and often racialised individuals shaped by white Eurocentric ideals. These inequities reflect intersectional discrimination shaped by gender, race, ethnicity, and nationality in Portugal's social structures.

Many participants work in precarious jobs that don't match their qualifications. Despite their short time in Portugal (up to 5 years), their identities are reshaped—not simply as a response to migration but also due to Portugal's colonial legacy and historical domination (Lugones 2013). This 'coloniality of power' (Quijano 2000) perpetuates new post-colonial forms of intersectional exploitation within global neoliberalism (Gutiérrez Garza 2023).

5. Final Remarks

This research aimed to characterise the profiles of migrants living in Porto and understand their migration journeys and challenges in the migration and integration process. Consistent with other studies, it reaffirms that migration involves personal and professional challenges that heighten immigrants' vulnerability and profoundly impact their lives.

While migration offers greater economic independence and security, this study highlights and underscores the specific adversities faced by immigrant women. They frequently face discrimination and xenophobia in various public spaces. In Portugal, they experience precarious living conditions and challenges in accessing public services, underscoring the added difficulties of migration. These findings highlight the compounded challenges arising from the intersection of gender and migration, an area that remains underexplored in migration studies. Addressing these gaps requires the adoption of targeted programs focused on racial issues and gender equality to promote inclusion and integration. Additionally, the study emphasizes the critical role of fostering support networks and dialogue spaces as vital for migrant women to share experiences and build solidarity. Education and social awareness initiatives are crucial to dismantle stereotypes, counter xenophobic narratives, and advocate for inclusive practices. By shifting the focus from macro-level analyses to the micro-level realities of individual migration journeys, this research adds to migration and gender studies by foregrounding the biographical and intersectional dimensions of migrant women's experiences. Situated in a specific regional context where populist anti-immigration narratives are gaining momentum, it provides nuanced insights into the lived experiences of immigrant women, thereby filling a significant gap in both academic and policy discourses.

Moreover, this study calls attention to the need for policy frameworks that integrate critical interculturality and de-colonial pedagogies (Walsh, 2009), particularly in addressing the challenges faced by privileged migrants such as international students. These approaches could offer transformative strategies for inclusion, transcending the limitations of traditional multicultural policies.

This research serve as a valuable tool for fostering reflection among policymakers, professionals, and researchers, helping to identify and inform the design of inclusive measures and strategies that prioritize the needs of immigrant women.

Only through a joint effort can we ensure that these women not only survive but thrive, thereby contributing to the diversity and richness of Portuguese society.

6. Limitations and Further Research

Several limitations were observed in this study. First, the qualitative data cannot be generalised to all immigrant women in Greater Porto and in Portugal. Second, some nationalities were absent from our sample, so it does not fully represent the diversity of Central and South American women in Porto. Third, although participants were encouraged to speak in their native language, some opted for a second language, like English, which may have limited the depth of their self-expression.

Further studies with larger, more diverse samples—including a broader representation of nationalities and qualifications—could significantly enhance our understanding of the challenges associated with migration. For example, the qualification profiles of participants in this study do not allow for an analysis of the 'discrimination paradox,' which refers to the finding that higher-educated migrants often perceive more discrimination than those with lower levels of education (Andriessen et al. 2014).

Also in further research, it may be important to adopt a more systemic and holistic approach, by analysing also the existing responses and services that support the integration of migrant women. Understanding the forms of support being provided to address the key challenges these women encounter in their integration processes and their awareness of women's needs is crucial for enhancing practices and formulating public policies more inclusive and effective.

Another aspect that might be interesting to investigate has to do with the specific realities experienced by Brazilian migrant women and those who come from other South and Central American countries. The historical relationship between Portugal and Brazil, marked by the colonial past, brings complexities to the integration processes that will probably be different from those experienced by other migrants, and this comparative analysis could provide relevant information.

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