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Migrant Women's Work: Intermeshing Structure and Agency

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Introduction

In this article we address the question of migrant women's experiences in accessing the labour market in Slovenia and examine how welfare policies, or the lack thereof, affect migrant workers' lives. By focusing the study on migrant women and their position in the labour market, we problematise these women's perpetual de-skilling and socio-economic exclusion. Drawing on migrant women's narratives we also point to their activity in counteracting experiences of discrimination and downward social mobility.

Demographic trends show that the European population will continue to age and that a smaller portion of citizens will be available for care of the elderly, both financially and in terms of actual care (Lisiankova, Wright, 2005). In recent decades, European states have increasingly relegated various forms of care and domestic work to migrant women, which has been the case also historically. Migration theorists tend to use economic paradigms to explain these trends, referring to a push-pull model and the demand and supply dichotomy. Gender sensitive analysis (Anthias, Lazaridis, 2000; Lutz, 2008, 2011) has proven that such explanations are gender-blind in their arguing that domestic and care work is "just another type of work". In fact, however, this work is deeply embedded in "gender regimes", in social constructions that deem this type of work to be women's work, characterised by a high degree of dependency of the female worker on the employer and by highly personalised and emotional work relationships (Lutz, 2008, 1).

It seems that theorising care and domestic work, service and sales work, as well as sex work, all of which are increasingly performed by migrant women, can avoid generalisations of rationalised economic theory only after the interrelationships of gender, class, ethnicity, and other social divisions are taken into consideration. Here we draw on the concept of intersectionality (Yuval-Davis, 2006), which helps

us understand how the marginalised positions of migrant women are intermeshed in social divisions functioning around gender, nationality, class, as well as migrant status and labour market segmentation (McDowell, 2008). By acknowledging the interrelations of various forms of subordination, intersectionality as a concept reminds us that inequalities emerge at the crossings of positions related to gender, ethnicity, age, class etc. The narrations of migrant women presented in this article reveal the empirical disempowerment strategies that the intersectional approach has tried to capture theoretically.

Social divisions are manifested in various forms,¹ and our analytical focus here is twofold: we analyse divisions that are expressed in specific institutions and organisations such as laws and state agencies, and we are also interested in how migrant women – subjectively and exerting their own agency – experience and counteract social divisions in their everyday lives. We acknowledge the need for contextual analysis that does not separate the institutionally reproduced differentiations from the actual experiences with oppression and inequalities (cf. Anthias, Yuval-Davis, 1983).

We also draw on the concept of "positionality" (Anthias, 2002), for it relates to the space at the intersection of structure as position in the system, and agency as individual positioning, meaning, and practice. It is a space between social constructionism and the agency approach, the interrelations of which are even better explained by "translocations" or "translocational positionality", which more explicitly captures the various belongings of migrating subjects (Anthias, 2002, 502). Such an approach enables us to challenge the hegemonic analysis that reifies institutions and their laws and to avoid the essentialisation of specific identities.

Data for several European states shows that in the current global financial and economic crisis, the migrant workers are the first to face layoffs (e.g. Pajnik, Campani, 2011), yet the trend in hiring migrants for the most precarious jobs remains unabated. Statistics show that, even though the labour market increasingly rejects workers with low levels of education and skills, the overwhelming majority of jobs accessible to migrants in Slovenia are classified as unskilled. The demand has long been the highest for "unskilled work in construction" – a typically male profession, and "cleaner" – a paradigmatically female migrant's job.² Migrants have traditionally found work in sectors that are socially considered "dirty" or underpaid. This persists and is in Slovenia connected to the perceived "female migrant profession" of cleaning. It might

- I.e. organisational, intersubjective, experiential, and representational forms (Yuval Davis, 2006, 198).
- 2 Most jobs available to migrant workers based on quota permits were for low or semi-skilled and low paid positions, mainly found in construction and heavy industrial sector. Prior to the recession, the number of foreign workers in Slovenia was continuously on the rise (it tripled in the last decade) and in 2008 about 90,000 held valid work permits. Comparatively, only 31,000 migrants hold valid work permits in 2013.

appear that the current "native" work force, particularly the rising number of long-term unemployed women, could meet such a demand (Hrženjak, 2007). Nevertheless, it is often the case that the work in question is physically-demanding, underpaid and garners low levels of social respect. In addition, it is also unregulated and mostly part of the grey economy, with known breaches of worker's rights. Not all unemployed women are prepared to or even capable of performing such work.³ As a result, migrant women are bridging this gap, meeting the demand for services, particularly in the form of undocumented household work, childcare, and care of the elderly. Similar to other developed countries, Slovenia has seen a steady rise in the tertiary sector, and this is reflected in the labour market's demand for services. It remains unclear how many migrant women find work in industrial cleaning, hotels, and restaurants, let alone in informal domestic work, though their shares point to the feminisation of these sectors of migrant work.⁴

Overlooked in policies, denied of agency and equal labour market access

The majority of the foreign-born population in Slovenia comes from the former Yugoslavia; almost half is from Bosnia-Herzegovina. The construction of the European Union's external borders classifies former co-nationals into "third country nationals", a category inherent in migration and integration policies and to the detriment of their full inclusion. Women migrants are also predominantly citizens of Yugoslavia's successor states, especially of Bosnia-Herzegovina. In recent years, more women than men have come to Slovenia from Ukraine and the Russian Federation; and migrant populations from Thailand, Romania, the Czech Republic, Moldova, the Dominican Republic, the Philippines, and Colombia are also largely female. Only a fragment of the "third country nationals" in Slovenia come from Asia, the Americas, or Africa.

Our data is drawn from 26 biographical interviews with migrant women between 22 and 48 years of age who have migrated to Slovenia from different countries in the last 15 years, most quite recently.⁵ In this perspective, they can be seen as part of "new" migrants who face even greater difficulties compared to migrants who have lived in

³ Most of the long-term unemployed women in Slovenia are above the age of 50, while it is also significant that some are unemployed because of disabilities.

⁴ Data for 2008, when seasonal permits were still issued for work in "hotel, catering and tourism industry", show that 55 per cent were held by women.

⁵ Biographical narrative interviews were conducted in Slovenia between 2006 and 2007 as part of the 6FP project "FeMiPol" – Integration of Female Immigrants in Labour Market and Society: Policy Assessment and Policy Recommendations. For more, see http://www.femipol.uni-frankfurt.de/.

Slovenia for longer time. The women have diverse socio-economic and educational backgrounds, come from different geopolitical contexts, and live and work in various social situations. The diversity of the sample, which at the same time reflects the official statistical trends, enables us to infer from the data that the same structural problems permeate the lives of migrant women, regardless of their education or professional qualifications and their sector of work.

In order to reside and work legally in Slovenia, migrants, particularly "non-EU nationals" need both work and residence permits. Regarding employment of "foreigners", state policies expect employers to be the ones who arrange all the necessary documents. On the one hand, it is helpful for migrants that, officially, they do not need to arrange all the necessary documentation themselves, especially if they are migrating for the first time and are unfamiliar with the new environment, language, laws, and procedures. Yet at the same time this can also be discouraging for those migrants whose qualifications may not be in great demand or whose potential employers are not familiar with the official procedure of lodging an application for work permits. As a teacher from Croatia explains, she managed to find an employer, but upon enquiring about the procedure to employ a "foreigner", decided it was "too much hassle". Melanija⁶ was thus told that she would not get the promised job because it was easier to hire a Slovene worker. Marija, meanwhile, a university graduate from Moldova, speaks of having to pay high sums of money for her work permit, suggesting that her employer circumvented legal regulations which stipulate the employer's responsibility to cover these costs.

Migrant women in our sample offer various accounts of how a complete reliance on their employers often made them feel they had no choice but to endure discrimination and harsh working conditions for low pay or sometimes no pay at all. The narratives illuminate that being employed on a contract for a fixed-term period of time is disadvantageous compared to regularly employed workers because contract work puts employees at greater risk with respect to job security and prevents them from being entitled to the same social security or other benefits, such as paid vacation. Migrant workers were dependent on their employers because of their temporary residence permits and employment regulations, which up until 2011 tied work permits to specific employers, rather than allowing free movement of migrants between positions and employers. A particular sub-pattern connected to work migrants could be recognised where women adopted roles that followed the established patterns of work migration. This led them from their countries of

⁶ All names are pseudonyms.

⁷ Eurostat data for 2012 shows that Slovenia exibits above the EU average shares of fixed-term employment.

birth, through an apparently smooth transition, to a pre-arranged work setting and accommodation that was tied to fixed-term work contracts. Yet, at least initially, they remained tied to the same employer because the work permit they possessed precluded free choice of employment. In addition to the fact that migrant women are limited in accessing the labour market and often face discrimination, precarious work conditions and limited social security, they had also been reliant on their employer in order to keep their residence permit.

The narratives show that even migrants with personal work permits who were formally equal to Slovene citizens in competing for jobs noted several obstacles in their attempts to find work, as well as problems accessing social welfare. The migrant life stories illustrate that they experienced numerous obstacles in accessing the labour market on a footing equal to that of the "native" workers; the narratives also reveal, however, that they faced additional hindrances due to language barriers, lack of educational recognition, lack of informal networks, as well as overt discrimination because of their presumed otherness. For instance, even though the Employment Service is supposed to provide administrative help, state institutions in general are slow in fulfilling their obligations towards foreign nationals, leaving several of the migrant women in our sample disappointed at being prevented from participating in the so-called Active Employment Policy programme. The narratives illustrate the need to facilitate better access to labour market in a manner which would be helpful for all migrants regardless of their status or work permit type.

Experiences of precarious jobs and de-skilling

Even though the sample was purposefully designed to examine the practice of migrant de-skilling and low-skill sectors of work, a major finding is the notable de-skilling of migrant women regardless of their status, mode of entry, educational level, or prior work experience. Even in cases where migrants manage to arrange formal recognition of education, their abilities and qualifications remain devalued (Bajt, Pajnik, 2013). Many women speak of being unable to find work suitable to their qualifications – like Melanija, a teacher who works as a cleaner because her Slovene is not fluent enough to allow her to teach. Despite valuable work experience and possession of skills that are advertised as greatly needed in Slovenia, Sandra, a medical nurse, works as an undocumented kitchen aide. Ada, a lawyer from Bosnia-Herzegovina, has been unable to find a job suitable to her qualifications, despite trying for several years; her attempts at finding employment in her field included trying to get a foot in the door by volunteering at a courthouse. Though her education is recognised in Slovenia, her lack of work experience prevented her from passing the

obligatory bar exam, which further limits her chances of ever finding work suitable to her expertise.

Migrant women are significantly hindered in their attempts to access the labour market, and it is not uncommon for university educated women to work as waitresses or shop assistants. Working in low-skill sector jobs, some report poor working conditions and exploitation by employers. Our sample revealed cases of migrant women discovering that employers never registered their employment or that they registered them for a significantly shorter period than the length of their actual employment. Such violations, even though also an issue with numerous Slovene citizens, affect migrants even more because they result in a lack of social insurance for migrants, no paid vacation or right to sick leave, and, above all, problems in accessing healthcare and pension schemes. Forced "inactivity" in the formal labour market is a significant problem for migrant women, who experience long periods of time in which accessing the labour market is difficult. This has negative consequences on their self-esteem and can contribute to a precarious existence and the need to seek undocumented work. After a certain period of unemployment, the fact that they cannot find employment aligned with their expertise and education often becomes "accepted" as an unavoidable predicament. As a result, many migrant women resolve to accept any kind of employment, either because they need financial means, or because they wish to avoid seclusion and inactivity. This means that some migrant women resort to undocumented low-skill and low-paid positions, whereas others manage to find jobs at lower levels within their sector. This is a problem that stems from labour policies, which systematically favour the employment of the "native" workers and restrict the number of work permits issued to "foreigners".

The "third country" status profoundly affects the labour market access of the women categorised as such, because all "third country nationals" need to secure work permits in order to legally work and reside in Slovenia. Therefore, their stories describe undocumented work experiences. Some are engaged in "illicit" work in order to supplement their regular earnings, and all their narratives show that their decision to accept work in the black market was the consequence of inability to find regular employment.

With high education [...] I was ready to mop the floor only to get that job [...] I was aware that I'm going to foreign country, that it'll be tough and that people are foreign and that it'll be hard to get among people. But I said to myself I'll get used to it [...] Why are foreign people not appreciated? Why? [...] Your Slovenia will go on because of that [...] Give me normal salary, respect me, and I'll do what you need. Is it so or not? And also Slovenia will in the end prosper [...] And you [a migrant] don't have the right to say anything

to anyone! Don't have the right! Can't. Hard. Really hard. I can see that some don't do anything and they have three times bigger salary than me. And you go and toil away like a horse, and you have lower pay. (Marija, 30, Moldova)⁸

Undocumented domestic work: An arrangement to sustain the gender divide

As is the case for women in general, for migrant women who work, employment and family obligations also result in a double burden that constrains what kind of job they can perform and what career opportunities they are able to take on – if they are able to find work at all. Lilia, a qualified seamstress, for instance, supplements her earnings by working as a baby-sitter. She cares for a young boy whose parents need additional assistance because they work at night. This arrangement of childcare is illustrative in two ways. On the one hand, it shows how undocumented domestic work is used as a way to earn money, which Lilia notes, makes her feel more independent, or, as she states, "A woman needs to have her own money". On the other hand, the night work performed by the boy's parents shows the need for extra childcare that is not being met by regular state-organised kindergarten facilities. There is an obvious demand for childcare, and this demand provides migrant women with paid but undocumented work. Unless young parents have the support of grandparents or other family members or friends, they resort to employing help for childcare. Illustrating the double burden of female migrants, Marija's case is particularly telling:

Everybody wonder how I manage. Because at my home it is so clean [...] I live like robot. From Monday to Friday, work from 7 to 3, or from 8 to 4, I make 8 hours. I go straight to school, take my daughter home – she has that additional at school – come home and I take vacuum cleaner straight away, clean, make the beds, iron, cook, dinner. Then my daughter in bed, must go to sleep by 9 because must get up in the morning [...] And on Saturday I clean up everything, on Sunday I cook. I don't have time never. (Marija, 30, Moldova)

I like to work, it's not hard for me and not a problem. I'm tired from time to time, especially now when we moved. When I have to be at 6 o'clock [at work], I get up 20 past 4 [...] And I have to deal with kid all day, I mean, all day, have to work, and come back, and collect kid from kindergarten, and deal with kid from 4 till 9 in the evening, and at 9, I don't know, clean house a little, do a little this, a little that, and it's 12, 1, and then at 4 I have to get up, and it's really sometimes a problem. But ok. You get used to it. (laughs) (Sandra, late 20s, Kosovo)

⁸ All the quotes have been translated into English without language editing, thus purposefully retaining the language proficiency varieties as these appeared in the interviews with migrant women.

Moreover, Melanija, a Croatian with a degree in pedagogy, who is employed as a cleaner in a school and is in charge of domestic work at home, also performs domestic work outside of working hours in her "free time" in order to earn extra money. Her undocumented additional job, therefore, results in Melanija performing domestic work in three different places: in the school that is her workplace, at home, and in a household where she cleans for cash as additional undocumented job.

These examples reveal the double burden placed on migrant women who perform domestic work in their homes for their own families as well as in somebody else's household. Outsourcing domestic household and care work to migrant women has become an accepted habit that actually supports the "institutionalized genderisms" (Lutz, 2008, 48) – allocating household work to migrant women does not question the traditional gender divide; rather, it sustains it. By calling on the migrant woman to act as a nanny or a nurse, the image of a caring mother is maintained at the crossings of gender and migration regimes that reactivate traditional gender roles.

Performing domestic work in other people's homes represents an additional or sometimes the sole financial resource for migrant women. Since domestic work is performed in the private sphere and in most cases as an undocumented "arrangement" between the migrant woman and her employer, she is exposed to the usual dangers of illicit employment. Even though in our sample one migrant woman performing such work notes that she is content with cash payments, such arrangements present potential dangers. Most obviously, a migrant may not be paid after performing her job, and since her employment relationship is based on an oral agreement alone, she has no possibilities to demand money that is owed to her through formal official channels. This precarious situation, involving a lack of social security, job security, healthcare, and other benefits, is particularly relevant in the case of undocumented domestic work. In addition, this type of work is profoundly characterised as low status, even if paid or acknowledged as a profession. Furthermore, personalised and emotional work relationships that accompany care work add additional pressure to the already precarious migrant situations (Lutz, 2008; Šadl, 2007).

Migrant women's agency through self-employment and re-skilling

Contrary to the rhetoric of victimisation of migrants (cf. Agustín, 2003), the participants in our sample confirm their active agency. This was particularly the case for migrant women working in the area classified as "dance", a sector that is habitually associated with dubious nightclub "exotic dancing" related to sex work and trafficking. Most of the narratives show how migrants continuously try to

improve their situation. For example, the Czech migrant Nika found a way out of working in nightclubs by working as a cleaner. Similarly, migrants who arrived on work visas as dancers expressed unhappiness with their initial job and had hence put their efforts into changing their line of work. Three migrant women in our sample who began working in Slovenia as nightclub dancers have since become waitresses. Though being a waitress is a low-paid position that may also expose them to unwanted male advances and a precarious socio-economic existence, in their eyes it represents a step up, an improvement. Moreover, night work prevents the women from having a "normal life". While they note the pay is good, working at night is physically tiring and prevents migrant women from establishing contacts with local people, forging friendships, or finding a partner. In contrast, being a waitress is presented as a good opportunity to establish new contacts and to practice speaking the local language:

What I tell you before about that nightclub where I was [...] Now I work in ordinary bar. No problem getting that work because I have a friend and he did for me [...] I only knew that I don't want dance, I return to Czech Republic. And my friend called [and] said his friend is looking for waitress [...] And I said that I don't know. He said that I try one month, two, and I will see, right. Actually I come back [smiles]. I called that boss, very kind she was, everything. (Natalija, 24, Czech Republic)

No, I don't work no more in a bar, I am now in waitress job in a day bar, right in that carwash [smile]. Yes, like that. I don't work no more as dancer [...] It's better for me here, day work, because night work is hard. Even if you work two hours, your free time for sleep no good, eh. You cannot only dance all your life, you must change life. That's it. (Irina, 27, Ukraine)

I tell you, when I was dancer – for some time I was dancer, then went home, then come back here – no problem then. That changed now – no dance as such, as before. Before were shows, professional ballet dancers, but no more now [...] And when you work like that for so long time you don't enjoy any more [...] And cannot find other sort of job straight away. Cannot find. Simple. So you must look, make effort, find somebody to help you, help you as foreigner, find job. Long-term job also difficult. Well, I got it, I was lucky, eh. And how I was lucky? To change job. To go from that bar to normal company, to work as cleaner. I worked for 6 years. Said YES straight away. I didn't mind, cleaning or whatever, only to go away from that [...] I cleaned offices in bank, I was employed, it was quite good. For me it was, for that time, I was very satisfied then because I got normal job, day job, to live normally, like normal people, new environment and all new. (Nika, 35, Ukraine)

Self-employment is another strategy for coping with limited access to the labour market, as well as a way of earning money in a migrant woman's preferred field of expertise. In our sample, self-employment as a coping mechanism is featured in two narratives. Mariana is a hairdresser who saw a market niche in offering her services outside of established hair salons, which she believes are not offering sufficient cutting edge skills; so she decided to give it a go on her own. Even though Mariana encountered problems having her education recognised (she was overqualified) and also struggled to understand Slovenia's regulations, procedures, and tax system when trying to set up her own hair salon, she succeeded. Another example of a self-employed migrant is Xan, a woman who, after working alongside her husband in a Chinese restaurant, eventually decided to leave him and open a shop together with her sister as a business partner.

Then I decided to make a hair-, to work for myself [...] But then, when I started making my firm, it was so many, so many problems. And you have to have it, up, down, various documents, permits, different things. I don't know, that was really, really hard [...] Mhm, because I'm not used to it, right. In Peru we don't have it that hard. If you want to have hairdressing, you have. You don't need permission, paper for [...] electricity, for how it looks inside, nothing. There you do it very easy. You have one place, buy [...] Here such permissions that you can't, right. Hard, if you don't have money, right. (Mariana, 32, Peru)

In the beginning I worked in restaurant, every day I get up at 10 in morning and at 11 in evening I finish with work [...] Such life I lived for 10 months and then I start thinking about me open little shop and start working alone, then I searched [a Slovene acquaintance] to help me rent a flat [...] We don't have this shop with husband, we with my younger sister joined and we have it together, he still works in restaurant [...] I couldn't do it myself, there's many things in these [administrative] offices that need to be arranged and they [Slovene acquaintances] help me to arrange all this. (Xan, 33, China)

The two self-employed migrant women in our sample, Xan and Mariana, both spoke of highly complex bureaucratic procedures. Mariana did not fully understand the lease contract, nor did she know whether its provisions were in accordance with the law. Similarly, Xan did not understand the proper formal procedure for opening a store. While they managed to overcome the administrative obstacles with the help of the social network of their Slovene friends, these examples speak of a wider problem – namely, that migrants are excluded from all institutional schemes and left reliant entirely on their own social capital. The fact that Slovenia does not

stimulate self-employment of migrants is of particular relevance, especially as both interviewees complained about not fully understanding the administrative procedures required for self-employment, the leasing of premises, and so on. Given the total lack of policy measures, which could promote migrant employment, migrant workers are in a disadvantaged position.

Conclusion

In examining migrant women's experiences with accessing the labour market in Slovenia it is evident that the existing labour laws and welfare policies result in the exclusion of migrants. They experience de-skilling, lack equal options, and are limited in realising their full potential. The socio-economic exclusion is particularly apparent with "third country" migrant women, whose status renders their positions highly dependent. Reliant either on family reunification policies or the existence of labour market demands in order to secure work permits and thus legal residence, the migrants also experience prejudice and discrimination based on gender, age, ethnicity, religion, etc. The narratives in our sample describe how migrant women's access to the labour market is systematically shaped by the intersection of social divisions pertaining to gender, ethnicity, and class, but particularly by their migrant status. Revealing these intersecting influences, the migrant women's stories illustrate the impact state policies have in terms of labour market access and social benefits, particularly since migrants are frequently exempt from state assistance.

We conclude by listing a few policy recommendations, considering the fact that the demand for migrant work, particularly the need for women's labour in terms of personal services and domestic work, not only remains unabated even in the current economic recession, but is expected to increase as the demographic trends of population aging already show. This strongly suggests the need to assist migrant workers in accessing the labour market even if their professions are not in high demand, which at present seems to provide the (only) incentive for employers to put the required extra effort into acquiring the needed migrant workers. Moreover, correct, fast, simple, and inexpensive procedures for issuing work permits are crucial for ensuring that migrant women can access the labour market, as well as for enticing employers to hire migrants. Also, policies need to seriously consider abandoning the mechanism of work permits that frequently represents the source of migrants' precariousness, address the lack of opportunities for migrant women to find jobs that are not confined to domestic and

⁹ The *Employment and Work of Aliens Act* even stipulates that the government may adopt special measures to restrict the number of self-employed "foreigners" – as indeed any migrant workers – if "justified" by, among other reasons, "the general economic interest or the situation and foreseen shifts in the labour market", which is especially relevant in the current economic crisis.

care work, and thus endeavour to recognise the persistence of a gender divide created with the double burden of domestic work. "Engendering" of migration regimes seems an appropriate response. In addition, policies should recognise that informal work performed in the care sector is only accessible to those who can afford it. Class divisions are noted here, where migrant women are directed to performing low paid domestic and care work, without having their needs recognised.

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Delo migrantk: prepletenost strukture in delovanja

Ključne besede: delovanje migrantk, spol, delavske politike, gospodinjsko in skrbstveno delo, Slovenija

Migranti se tradicionalno zaposlujejo v sektorjih, ki jih ima večinska populacija za umazane in premalo plačane ter se jim zato izogiba. Zaposlovanje migrantk za gospodinjsko delo in osebno nego je tako v zahodnoevropskih državah že postalo običajna praksa. Medtem ko smo priča rastočemu trendu prelaganja izvajanja storitev skrbstvenega in gospodinjskega dela na migrantke, katerih delo postaja pomemben odziv na vrzeli v zagotavljanju teh posebnih storitev, je dejanski položaj migrantk na trgu dela v migracijskih in integracijskih politikah še vedno slabo reflektiran. Članek obravnava izkušnje, ki jih imajo migrantke z dostopom do trga dela v Sloveniji, in ugotavlja, kako socialne politike oziroma njihov manko vplivajo na življenja migrantk. Skozi intervjuje analiziramo ponavljajoče se izključenosti migrantk in obenem osvetljujemo njihove aktivne prakse. Članek izhaja iz koncepta intersekcionalnosti, skozi katerega razpravlja o različnem odnosu med strukturnimi omejitvami in individualnimi izkušnjami migrantk z namenom opozoriti na potrebe po izboljšanju marginaliziranega položaja migrantov.