

Essentialism and intersectionality in the selection and recruitment of staff: The devaluation of migrant women's skills in France and Italy

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Abstract

While skilled migration has become one of the most acceptable ways of entering Western European countries, the skills of migrant women with tertiary education continue to be undervalued in labour markets. To understand why these women are confined to the bottom of the employment structure, we argue that it is necessary to analyse how essentialism, based on the intersection of gender and racialization, influenced by colonial imaginaries and global inequalities, shapes recruiters' representations. The article is based on multi-sited fieldwork which consisted of 52 in-depth interviews conducted in France and Italy with migrant women, recruiters, and social workers. Our analysis emphasises that intersectional essentialism influence recruiters' assessments of education, work experience, soft skills, and language skills while it reinforces the eroticisation of migrant women's bodies, ultimately leading to the devaluation of migrant women's capacities.

Keywords

colonialism, essentialism, intersectionality, migrant women, recruitment, skills

1. Introduction

In the context of the global competition for talent (Boucher 2016), skills have become central in migration regimes to define the desirability of migrants. The construction of skill regimes (Shan and Fejes 2015) as a way of controlling and modulating the desirability of individuals in the labour market is based on the idea that there is an objective and unique way of interpreting the concept of skills. However, skills are a highly contested domain that works as

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a social marker according to which some bodies are marked as skilled, and others as unskilled (Vasey 2021).

While *skilled* migration has become one of the most acceptable forms of entering Western European countries (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, Boucher 2016), the skills of migrant women with tertiary education tend to be disregarded. These women are particularly exposed to social and professional downgrading, especially if they were born in countries perceived as being of low and medium income (Kofman and Raghuram 2015). With the same level of education, they tend to access jobs with lower social recognition, compared to non-migrants (Eurostat 2021).

Over the past decades, scholars have intended to explain why migrant women are confined to the bottom of the employment structure, emphasising how the low recognition of titles and skills gained abroad (Kofman and Raghuram 2015), migration regimes (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013), and networks (Massey et al. 1993) contribute to restricting them to jobs with low social recognition, regardless of their education level. However, this literature has scarcely studied the influence that essentialism has in limiting access to jobs.

We propose to address the gap in the literature by analysing how essentialism, based on the intersection of gender and racialization, influence representations and ultimately limit migrant women's access to jobs. We argue that essentialist representations of migrant women, influenced by colonial imaginaries and global inequalities deriving from past and current colonialism, lead to devaluing migrant women's skills and confines them into the bottom of the employment structure. We study the phenomenon by concentrating on recruiters' practices and on the way essentialism influences their assessment of skills. In doing so, we answer the call to further analyse the social power exercised by labour market intermediaries in constructing skilled migration (Findlay and Cranston 2015).

In this paper, we refer to the definition of *essentialism* by Grosz (1990, p. 334), according to which it corresponds to the "attribution of a fixed essence to women", which is assumed to be "given, universal, and is usually, though not necessarily, identified with women's biology and 'natural' characteristics". According to Grosz (Ibid), essentialism refers to the existence of "fixed characteristics, given attributes, and ahistorical functions which limit the possibilities of change and thus of social reorganisation". We propose to enlarge this definition to encompass other forms of essentialism. Indeed, racialisation can be approached as a form of essentialism, that uses markers such as the colour of the skin, the country of birth, culture or religion to justify superiority and privilege (Grosfoguel et al. 2015).

Focusing on the concept of essentialism permits us to emphasize the process and the power relations through which dominant groups impose categories on oppressed groups to justify inequalities. Adopting a broader definition of essentialism also enables us to foster the intersectional perspective and stress how racialisation interacts with other forms of essentialism based on gender, and eventually class. In this regard, although age, religion and other social relations are important in defining access to work, the paper concentrates on essentialism based on the intersection of gender and racialisation, referring also to class when relevant.

The article focuses on migrant women with tertiary education, as they hold academic titles that should facilitate their access to positions in line with their studies. In this regard, the OECD (2019) has stressed that demand for tertiary education in high-income countries is still strong despite a larger supply of graduates. Moreover, although women enrol in fields with lower earnings compared to men, such as education, arts, and humanities, holding tertiary education is still associated with higher earnings. However, returns on education for migrant women are reduced compared to non-migrants because their skills tend to be devalued (Cuban 2016, Grigoleit-Richter 2017).

To analyse the issue from multiple perspectives, the article considers the views of labour market gatekeepers, including recruiters and social workers, on the one hand, and potential candidates, namely migrant women with tertiary education, on the other hand. The idea is one of putting in dialogue the perspectives of the various stakeholders involved in the process of enabling (or preventing) migrant women to access employment. As argued by Fauser (2018), we believe that crossing different research subjects' views provides distinct knowledge, as it sheds light on the multiple aspects of the social phenomenon.

The article concentrates on France and Italy, two countries that were involved in colonial expansionism and which colonial project went hand in hand with the appropriation and eroticisation of colonised bodies, in particular, that of women (Dorlin and Scott 2014; Petrovich Njegosh and Scacchi 2012). A comparison between France and Italy is of particular interest as they are identified with different models of addressing migrants' otherness and inclusion into society: while otherness tends to be censured in the context of French Republican *universalism*, it is idealised and stigmatised under Italian *differentialism* (Scrinzi 2013, p. 169). Moreover, in both contexts, scholars tend to be reluctant to refer to colonial legacies to analyse social phenomena (Dorlin and Scott 2014, Giuliani 2015). As a result, the impact of colonial legacies on present inequalities is particularly understudied.

2. The devaluation of migrant women's skills

Scholars have highlighted that skills are relational and socially constructed (Vasey 2021). The skills valued in the labour market change over time and vary according to the production process (Shan and Fejes 2015). Moreover, they are open to constant contestation as their social recognition defers according to power relations (Vasey 2021). In this regard, scholars have emphasised that skills discourses contribute to reproducing hierarchical social order, defining whose abilities are to be compensated and whose are to be hidden (Shan and Fejes 2015).

Feminist scholars have argued that the concept of skills is ideological and has been used to devalue women's labour (Phillips and Taylor 1980). Historically, jobs performed by women have been regarded as being low-skilled. Indeed, according to Sen (1999, p. 104), "wages rarely reflect skills and the description of jobs as skilled were not analogous with the actual amounts of training or ability required for them". Similarly, queuing theory argues that employers' selection of applicants is not only driven by candidates' training and skills, but also by the host society's racial and gender hierarchies (Reskin, McBrier and Kmec 1999).

When it comes to skills in the migration context, the very same person can be perceived as skilled in one specific country and unskilled in another, leading to the phenomena described as *deskilling* (Cuban 2016). Studies have emphasised that recruiters might have essentialist views on candidates from specific countries, perceiving them as homogeneous groups that hold or lack specific skills (MacKenzie and Forde 2009). Accordingly, essentialist representations are used to differentiate between migrant candidates to be considered "good workers" and those to be excluded from the selection process (Ibid).

There have been calls to adopt an intersectional perspective on the phenomena, as essentialism based on gender interacts with racialisation to naturalise skills in specific bodies (Alberti and Iannuzzi 2020). In this regard, scholars have emphasised that gender and racial ideologies play a significant role in naturalising embodied capacities (Wolkowitz 2006).

The few publications that have studied the impact of intersecting essentialism in the recruitment and selection of staff have focused on the hospitality and tourism industry (Dyer et al. 2010, Alberti and Iannuzzi 2020), show business (Dean 2008), nursing (Likupe 2015), and the domestic and care work sector (Scrinzi 2013). These studies have highlighted that essentialism interferes at different stages in the recruitment and selection process. However, they do not particularly study the way in which intersectional essentialism leads to devalue the skills of migrant women with tertiary education. Moreover, this literature overlooks how

colonial legacies and global inequalities deriving from colonialism shape essentialist representations and how this process interferes with the assessment of skills.

In this regard, post and de-colonial scholars have stressed that migrants who move to Europe do not arrive in neutral areas but in ‘metropolitan spaces’ that are already ‘polluted’ by ‘racial power relations’ inherited from colonialism (Grosfoguel et al. 2015 p. 641), that affect the way migrant women are perceived in Western societies (Vergès 2019). This literature has also emphasised that the perception of migrants depends on the positioning of their country of birth in the international arena and on global inequalities (Sayad 1990), which are marked by the colonial past and new forms of colonialism that are not solely related to settler colonialism but also to neoliberal economic models and exploitation (Amelina 2022). While the impact of colonial legacies on literary and cultural production has been studied (Bhabha 2012), less has been written on the way it shapes migrants’ employment opportunities.

When it comes to migrants arriving from specific geographical areas, scholars have highlighted that in Western European societies, including France (Dorlin and Scott 2014, Vergès 2019) and Italy (Petrovich Njegosh and Scacchi 2012, Giuliani 2015), Black African migrant women are particularly exposed to essentialism and hypersexualisation, influenced by colonial imaginaries. Meanwhile, recent publications have also analysed from a post and de-colonial perspective how Western Europe relate to Eastern European countries (Kołodziejczyk and Şandru 2012). These studies have highlighted that Eastern European countries hold an in-between status, as they are considered ‘close but still discursively and politically subordinated Other’ (Kołodziejczyk and Huigen 2023, p. 5) and this representation ultimately affects how migrant women from this area are considered and disregarded in Western Europe. Although this literature has permitted to stress the various forms in which colonialism impacts the way migrants are perceived in Western Europe, these studies have not explored how the phenomenon particularly affects skills assessment and migrant women’s access to jobs. To address these limitations, the present contribution identifies and deconstructs essentialism, based on gender and racialization, and influenced by colonial legacies and global inequalities, in the discourses and practices of labour market gatekeepers.

3. Research contexts

The analysis of this paper is based on fieldwork that was multi-sited. Studying similar groups of migrants in different places makes it possible to de-centre factors that have been taken for granted and further contextualise a particular social phenomenon (Bloemraad 2013). Our multi-sited approach allows us to contextualise how labour market gatekeepers’ selection

practices are driven by essentialist understandings of migrant women's skills, based on the intersection of multiple axes of hierarchisation, such as racialisation and gender.

The study was conducted in France and Italy, two European countries with different models of addressing migrants' otherness and including them into society. France is traditionally perceived as following a Republican model, in which diversity is regarded with suspicion (Fassin 2006) and migrant women feel pressure to erase signs of cultural difference at work (Scrinzi 2013). Italy, on the other hand, has been described as following a model of 'subaltern integration' (Ambrosini 2010), in which differences are exacerbated and migrants are accepted as long as they take the humblest jobs, without aspiring to disrupt social hierarchies. As far as educational attainments are concerned, migrants' educational attainments are higher in France compared to Italy, migrants in France are less affected by overqualification than they are in Italy, and the difference between natives' and migrants' overeducation rates is narrower in France (Eurostat, 2021).

Despite the differences, both France and Italy were involved in colonial expansionism. While Italian colonialism was officially dismantled after the Second World War, France clung to its colonial empire until the 1960s at the cost of bloody wars that lasted over 17 years, and Paris continues to exercise direct authority over many territories worldwide. In both countries, colonialism went hand in hand with the whitening of national identities and the construction of gendered racial models. In both colonial empires, colonised women were either victimised or hyper-sexualised (Dorlin and Scott 2014, Petrovich Njegosh and Scacchi 2012).

Our fieldwork was carried out in two local labour markets, those of Alsace (France) and Veneto (Italy), which share several features. They both have relatively low levels of unemployment compared to national levels and similar proportions of migrants (10–12% of the overall population), the majority of whom are women (INSEE 2017, Veneto Lavoro 2019). In addition, in both areas, migrant women with tertiary education have higher rates of unemployment and less access to graduate jobs compared to non-migrant women (Romens 2019, INSEE 2017).

Both Alsace and Veneto are marked by a colonial past that continues to impact representations of migrants and minoritised groups. Colonial propaganda was spread widely in Alsace, especially after the First World War and the region's reunification with France, to justify the subjugation of colonial subjects and affirm the whiteness of the French identity (Amougou 2002). Similarly, in Veneto, colonial fascist propaganda attempted to whiten the national identity, as Italian emigrants in the US tended to be regarded as non-whites (Giuliani 2015). Moreover, the colonial legacy of the Republic of Venice, which had overseas possessions in

the Balkans, has contributed to the persistence of a colonial attitude towards migrants who are perceived as being of Slavic origin (Wolff 1997). The influence of these colonial pasts on the stratification of local labour markets continues to be understudied.

4. Methods

This paper is based on fieldwork, involving 52 interviews: 29 of these focused on the Veneto region in Italy, while 23 focused on Alsace in France. Our fieldwork aimed to bring together the perspectives of two groups of participants: labour market gatekeepers and potential migrant women candidates. The first group of participants consisted of 17 labour market gatekeepers, including recruiters employed in both public and private organisations, recruiters working for intermediary employment agencies, and professionals employed by public organisations or NGOs whose duties included supporting migrants in their job hunting.

The second group of participants consisted of 33 migrant women with tertiary education. All of them were born and had completed at least secondary school either in sub-Saharan African countries or European countries outside of the European Union. We interviewed women from these two geographical areas as previous research (Scrinzi 2013, Grosfoguel et al. 2015, Kołodziejczyk and Huigen 2023) has stressed that they face different forms of racialisation and we wanted to further explore how they perceive intersecting essentialism. Moreover, scholars have called for further research on so-called ‘skilled African women’ to challenge the dominant tropes that see these women as being uneducated, immiserate, and disempowered (Wong 2014 p. 41). All names are fictitious.

Our fieldwork was conducted from 2017 to 2019, namely before the war in Ukraine started. The war and the way it has been covered in the national media may have modified the way in which Ukrainian and Russian women are perceived in local labour markets, as suggested by recent studies (Bashri, Tadam, 2023). Similarly, the change of regime in Niger may have also influenced the way in which women migrating from this country are perceived, particularly in France. These examples underline the importance of relating the analysis of representations to international politics (Lewicki 2023). Despite the importance of studying such a phenomenon, the paper does not specifically analyse its impact in influencing gatekeepers’ representations.

As far as interaction with participants is concerned, the intent was that of conducting *dialogical interviews* (La Mendola 2009). An outline was prepared but the interviewer did not

necessarily stick to it, as the intent was that of giving room to interviewees' narrations and expressions.

The outline consisted of three phases. First, the participants were asked to speak about their lives. Second, interviewees were asked to describe specific recruitment and selection processes in which they had been involved. Lastly, the interviewees were asked for their opinions on the challenges faced by migrant women with tertiary education.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed, except in one case in which the interviewee, a recruiter, asked not to be audiotaped and preferred the researcher to take notes. His request highlights the fact that migrants' access to employment can be perceived as a highly sensitive issue by labour market gatekeepers. The interviews were analysed using thematic analysis (Terry et al. 2017). Special attention was paid to the parts of narration in which interviewees referred to specific groups with which they were associated or that were external to them. We took particular care in analysing these fragments, paying special attention to the vocabulary used to describe groups.

5. Results

5.1. An essentialist view on education and working experience

Formal education is often used as a proxy to assess candidates' skills. However, scholars have stressed that the value and meaning of tertiary education acquired abroad are unclear for employers and are often disregarded (Chiswick and Miller 2009). Our analysis highlights the influence that recruiters' perceptions of the country of education have on the value they attribute to foreign qualifications. Thus, recruiters' assessment of foreign tertiary education partly relies on representations influenced by colonialism and global inequalities. Indeed, degrees from educational institutions in medium- and low-income countries tend to be disregarded even though Western international indexes might rate them higher than local universities.¹ The account of Senna, who worked as a recruiter in Veneto, illustrates this trend:

Maybe degrees [from] abroad, [obtained] in countries, I don't know, like [in] Africa or Eastern Europe, they may not be seen as, with the same level of quality. I mean, degrees are often not recognised.

Senna, recruiter, Italy

In contrast, qualifications obtained in countries perceived as powerful in the international arena might be ascribed more value. Selena, a social worker in Italy, considered that foreign degrees were assessed differently depending on the position in the international arena of the country where they were obtained:

It's easier for [an employer] to hire a person [...] who has followed a certain course of study here in Italy, or it's obvious that if one has a degree from Padua and then a master's degree from London, that's another matter, we are not talking about that, we're talking about [a woman] who did her master's degree in Nigeria, which is quite a different country [...]. So for these people, the path is uphill.

Selena, social worker, Italy

In parallel, recruiters also assess skills through the prism of previous working experience, which international transfer is also problematic (Liversage 2009). Our fieldwork revealed that the value of work experience gained abroad varies according to recruiters' perceptions of foreign economies, cultures and institutions, which can also be influenced by colonial pasts and global inequalities. A striking example was provided by Spruce, an intermediary recruiter in Italy, who was cynical about hiring a woman candidate born in Ghana and with experience gained in her country of birth for the position of export manager:

A Ghanaian woman who sold, I don't know, pots for cooking for explorers maybe... as an Export Manager for Western Africa. Here we are talking about Europe and only Europe. [...] Products that are sold [in Ghana] are those which for us are a bit obsolete or not good.

Spruce, intermediary recruiter, Italy

Spruce's perception of the Ghanaian economy, which was influenced by global inequalities deriving from the colonial past and new forms of colonialism, might have had a significant impact on the way he assessed, and likely underestimated, the experience of candidates with work experience in that country.

5.2. Essentialism and soft skills

We propose to further analyse how essentialism, based on gender and racialisation, influences the recruitment and selection of staff by focusing on two specific skills. The first

skills on which we concentrate are *soft skills*, as they have become crucial within the production processes, and their assessment is highly subjective (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, p. 141). Our fieldwork revealed that, both in Italy and France, essentialist representations that intersect racialisation and gender influenced recruiters' perceptions of these skills.

In Italy, essentialist processes that associated gendered and racialised bodies with specific soft skills were made explicit, especially for accessing a vast range of jobs that involved bodywork² in the service sector. Sirelli, an intermediary recruiter, referred to essentialist processes in the hospitality industry that connected specific behaviours with essentialist perceptions of workers based on the intersection between gender and nationality:

Some nationalities are excluded [...] depending on the job position. [...] Maybe a certain kind of, how do you say, nationality is considered to have, I don't know, people with a more dominant personality, and others more submissive. The classic example is that of the Filipino who is described as docile and kind, and so on. [...] At the opposite extreme, the Ukrainian woman, is generally seen as a woman that is authoritative, strong, almost grouchy.

Sirelli, intermediary recruiter, Italy

In both Italian and French fieldwork, stakeholders mentioned personality traits of migrant women that are valued in the labour market, all of which corresponded to conservative models of femininity. While in Veneto, Ukrainian women were considered to have 'authoritative' and 'strong' personalities and were treated with suspicion, similar comments were made in Alsace about other essentialised groups of migrant women. Daphne, who worked in Alsace for a public institution that aims to facilitate access to jobs, found that Chechen women were perceived as 'elegant', 'coquettish', 'submissive', and were more likely to be hired for positions involving bodywork and contact with customers compared to women from sub-Saharan Africa, who were essentialised as having a 'strong personality'.

Our fieldwork also indicated that essentialism based on gender and racialisation intersects with class. For instance, Senecio, an intermediary recruiter in Veneto, indicated that female candidates from Eastern Europe were excluded from the selection process for a nurse position because they were perceived as having a habitus associated with that of 'in-home caregivers':

The ladies from Eastern Europe who came to do the interview for care assistants, well, often they were disregarded [...] because they had this in-home caregivers' way of doing things. Some recruiters find that [this attitude] is 'inherent' in the culture of these... in the nationality of these people.

Senecio, intermediary recruiter, Italy

In Senecio's example, class habitus understood as the embodied state of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986) is associated with a specific job that is considered with disdain. His statement stresses that the feminised and reproductive work of in-home caregivers – which, in Veneto, is mainly performed by migrant women from Eastern Europe (Vianello 2023 – continues to be devalued in local labour markets.

In contrast with Senecio's account, female migrant participants in both Alsace and Veneto believed that Eastern European women were associated with work ethics that employers appreciated and were considered more committed to work than locals, echoing the findings of MacKenzie and Forde (2009) in the UK. For instance, Abelia, who was born in Russia and lived in France, estimated that the stereotypes held by her former manager regarding Eastern European women contributed to her being selected for a position as a shop assistant. Although Abelia thought that her employer's beliefs enabled her to overcome the stereotypes mentioned earlier, she still had to face the violence of being essentialised:

I think, for the [shop manager], hiring is also a bit of a stress. He needs to hire someone who will more or less do what he has signed up for, well, that comes to work the other day.[...] And well, I think maybe [candidates from] Eastern countries, well, maybe we have a good reputation.

Abelia, France

5.3. Essentialism and language skills

We extend our exploration of the influence of essentialism in recruitment and selection processes by focusing on language skills, which tend to be associated with *hard* skills (Babić and Slavković 2011). Focusing on these skills is of relevance as women tend to be overrepresented in sectors, such as services and care work, that involve interacting with clients and using communication skills, including language skills. Moreover, having a mother tongue different from that of the dominant majority can be an advantage in gaining access to jobs that require a *foreign* language (Garrouste 2008).

Human capital theorists estimate that higher proficiency in speaking the local dominant language enhances an individual's occupational attainment (Chiswick and Miller 2009). However, our fieldwork shows that the assessment of this skill is far from neutral, as it is also significantly influenced by essentialism, mainly connected to representations based on colonialism and global inequalities. In this regard, migrant women from countries that were colonised by the French and Italian empires might be fluent in the language of the former colonial center. However, although colonisation has left them with a common language, it has also led to the construction of racial-social systems that continue to influence social representations (Killian and Manohar 2015).

The experience of Callaia, who worked as a nurse in France, illustrates this tension. Having been born in a former French colony, namely Niger, where the official language is that of the former coloniser, Callaia had completed all her studies in French. However, she was shocked to find that the director of a midwifery school wanted her to complete a dictation exercise; it seemed that the director did not expect her to be able to speak and write French correctly: 'There was, the director of the school, she wanted me to take a dictation exercise, to see if I could read and write French [...]. It was the first blow I received.' (Callaia, France).

As well as the ability to speak local national languages, the capacity of interacting in *foreign* languages has become crucial within the production process (Garrouste 2008). However, foreign language skills might not be equally valued depending on recruiters' perceptions. Depending on their language, accent, country of birth and racialisation, migrant women may have access to certain jobs with different levels of monetary return and stability within the employment structure. To analyse the phenomenon, we focus on recruitment and selection for positions in which foreign language skills are required.

First, our fieldwork highlights that both in Veneto and Alsace, multiple language skills primarily facilitate migrant women's access to employment in the feminised and low-paid social work sector,³ especially in the field of cultural mediation. However, these positions might not necessarily reflect migrant women's academic background, as foreign language skills might overshadow other abilities and know-how acquired through education or previous experience (Kofman and Raghuram 2015). Scholars estimate that the presence of migrants in this feminised sector also relates to the assumption that they share an 'ethnic-cultural closeness' with the persons targeted by social policies (De Rudder and Vourc'h 2006, p. 182).

Second, we found that migrant women face challenges to work in international trading and access jobs, such as that of export managers, in which workers interact with foreign commercial partners. In this regard, countries of the former Soviet Union are among the primary

areas with which companies in Veneto trade (Ufficio Statistica della Regione Veneto 2018). Consequently, recruiters frequently look for Russian-speaking candidates. However, our fieldwork shows that, depending on their specific country of birth, migrant women might have different access to these positions. Spruce, a recruiter in Veneto, specified that employers might have specific expectations concerning the gender and nationality of workers, favouring only a subset of Russian speakers:

For the back office, nationality is asked there [by clients], ‘I want the Russian and not the Ukrainian’, just to be specific, because the Russian is Russian, and the Ukrainian is Ukrainian. [...] For the back office, they take ladies.

Spruce, recruiter, Italy

Third, our fieldwork highlights that African women who are English speakers can face significant challenges in having their language skills valued in local labour markets, especially in the Italian context. For example, Senna, a recruiter in Veneto, often looked for English speaker candidates to work as social media managers, but indicated that she had mainly hired candidates born in the United Kingdom or the United States, while Nigerian candidates were excluded from the selection process:

From Nigeria, those countries there, the accent is very strong, and there are also some differences in writing, and therefore they are not very compatible with writing for our customers.

Senna, recruiter, Italy

Senna’s experience illustrates how recruiters anticipate employers’ and clients’ stereotypical attitudes. Her experience is also symptomatic of the inequalities faced by racialised migrant women in accessing jobs and of how colonial hierarchies continue to shape access to jobs. These women are often excluded from recruitment and selection processes, and judged according to the position of their country of birth in the international arena rather than by their concrete language skills.

5.4. *Between Exoticism and Jacksonisation*

We propose to close our analysis of empirical data by focusing on how migrant women’s bodies are perceived by labour market gatekeepers. Scholars have emphasised that

women's bodies tend to be subject to sexualisation at work (McDowell 2011). As a result, the selection of staff involves high levels of scrutiny over female candidates' bodies, which we argue must be analysed from an intersectional perspective.

In line with the literature, our fieldwork stresses that aesthetic labour is a requirement for accessing a broad range of positions, even when employers do not make this requirement explicit. In both French and Italian fieldwork, the prettiness of female candidates was mentioned as a feature that was required or at least appreciated. The importance of good looks was mentioned especially for accessing positions involving bodywork. In these fields, Senecio, an intermediary recruiter in Veneto, indicated that when selecting candidates for a nursing position, the client, who was a male director of a retirement home, intervened to make sure he would select an attractive female candidate. In his example, aesthetic criteria intersected with gender, age and specific soft skills:

When the nurse was pretty, young, [the director was] saying '[A candidate] like that goes very well'. If maybe she was over 45 [years old], with a tone of voice a little bit... imperative, and maybe not particularly interesting from a physical point of view, [he would say] 'But is this one okay? Are we sure?' [...] I realise that in many contexts, in many situations, but also [in] very normal service companies rather than manufacturing, [...] when they have to select a woman, she has to be pretty.

Senecio, intermediary recruiter, Italy

To explore this further, we can ask what the aesthetic characteristics that conform to recruiters' expectations are, especially in terms of racialisation. In this regard, scholars have estimated that white women are more easily represented as aesthetically pleasing (Dyer et al. 2010). However, our fieldwork provides a more complex picture in which racialised female bodies are also subject to eroticisation. This trend connects to the colonial imaginaries and gendered racial models that depicted colonialised women as sexual preys (Dorlin and Scott 2014, Petrovich Njegosh and Scacchi 2012).

In Alsace, female recruiters and stakeholders made an implicit reference to the trend of eroticising migrant women by referring to *exoticism*. Daphne, who worked for a public agency supporting access to employment, referred to exoticism in the context of diversity management, indicating that minoritised women were preferred over men for positions aimed at bringing 'diversity' to a company because they looked 'exotic'. However, Daphne stressed

that, while migrant women might be preferred in the context of diversity management, they might not be able to access positions as managers:

We're going to be selected because we're women, we're pretty, maybe elegant, maybe beautiful, that's it, and that's exoticism, quite simply. [...]. My clients are diverse, so I must correspond to the image of my customers [...]. I hire different people, Asians, Blacks. That's it. But for the quota of diversity, exoticism, they will favour women. But it will not necessarily be for executive positions [...]. For *cadres*⁴, it's quite a bit more difficult.

Daphne, social worker, France

Daphne's comment echoes Mears' (2014, p. 1338) account of aesthetic labour, where women are the 'frontline aesthetic labor', but they have limited access to managerial positions and their work does not translate into earning power. From a scholarly perspective, as the majority of owners in the service and sex industries are men, the value of women's bodies is accumulated in men's pockets (Mears 2014). Similarly, in the context of diversity management, we argue that the value of the bodies of racialised and eroticised migrant women is primarily monetised by managers, who are mainly white, upper-class men.

In contrast with Daphne's comment, both in Veneto and Alsace, Black African migrant women felt they were requested to mitigate their blackness to access jobs. Rose, who was born in Congo and lived in Veneto, believed that recruiters negatively judged her for the colour of her skin. She observed that appearance and middle- or upper-class habitus mitigated racial stereotyping: 'Even though you are Black, if you are well dressed, and you express yourself well, [that's] the first impression that you leave'. Rose's comment echoes Franz Fanon's (2008) observation on the intrinsic relationship between class and racialisation, and that continues to be topical.

Similarly, in Alsace, Clemensia, who was born in Senegal, indicated that she felt there was pressure on non-white people to look like whites when looking for work. She described it as 'Jacksonisation': like Michael Jackson, those identified as Blacks are expected to modify their bodies to look as white as possible. Her account illustrates that Black women's bodies are a site of social control (Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly 2018), but it also shows how women resist and negotiate hegemonic beauty standards (Rowe 2019):

Does the French society, to finally integrate young people, want everyone to Jacksonise [or] what? That everyone becomes Michael Jackson, that we get a nose job. [...] I will not uncurl, change the colour of my skin, get a nose job, remove my lips, remove my buttocks. [...] I am not going to change the colour of my skin for an employer.

Clemensia, France

6. Discussion and conclusions

This article highlights the multiple ways in which essentialism, based on the intersection of gender and racialisation, influences the recruitment and selection process in two countries with different models of addressing migrants' otherness. The comparison between France and Italy permitted us to contextualise the social mechanisms that engender discrimination against migrant women and study the extent to which settings and inclusion models influence recruiters' discourses. In this regard, recruiters in France tended to be less talkative about the impact of essentialism in recruitment and selection, compared to Italy where the pressure to silence discrimination in accessing jobs seemed to be slighted. This divergence in denying or acknowledging essentialism is in line with previous research that distinguishes France's Republican *universalism* in which differences are silenced from Italy's *differentialism* in which otherness is exacerbated (Fassin 2006, Scrinzi 2013). Despite the differences, our fieldwork has highlighted that, in both contexts, labour market intermediaries rely (at least partly) on essentialist representations intersecting gender and racialisation, and that associate migrant women with characteristics that are appreciated or disdained.

Overall, our paper contributes to the literature that studies employment stratifications and migrants' access to employment (Portes and Bach 1985, Yuval-Davis 2015), departing from the analysis of the phenomena in two labour markets in which the issue is understudied (De Rudder and Vourc'h 2006, Scrinzi 2013, Fullin 2016). Our analysis also stresses that migrant women cannot be considered a homogeneous group, as their skills are ascribed various meanings based on colonial legacies, global inequalities and the intersections between racialisation and gender.

By concentrating on two specific skills, it was possible to highlight the impact of essentialism in the assessment of competences regarded as *soft* and *hard*. When it comes to soft skills, our fieldwork supports findings reported in the literature by stressing that recruiters tend to associate specific behaviours with groups defined by gender, country of birth and racialisation (Dyer et al. 2010). Our analysis adds to existing research by emphasising that these

forms of essentialism also intersect with class in the recruitment and selection process. Moreover, we stressed that the personality traits that are valued in migrant women tend to correspond to conservative models of femininity in a broad spectrum of jobs that extend beyond domestic work (Scrinzi 2013).

The focus on language competencies also allowed us to highlight that skills which are regarded as hard (Babić and Slavković 2011) are also influenced by intersectional essentialism. Although fluency in foreign languages can facilitate migrant women's access to specific jobs connected to their migrant identity (Liversage 2009), it appears that language skills are valued or disregarded depending on essentialist perceptions of candidates based on racialisation and country of birth, and influenced by colonial past and global hierarchies.

Our findings also highlight the interaction between intersectional essentialism, colonialism and the commodification of migrant women's bodies in the context of diversity management. The analysis permits us to enlarge Mear's (2014) reasoning on the monetisation of women's bodies in aesthetic labour, as the value of the bodies of racialised and eroticised migrant women is primarily monetised by managers, who are mainly white, upper-class men. Conversely, our analysis also stresses that bodies are political terrains from where racialised migrant women resist and negotiate hegemonic beauty standards (Rowe 2019).

In conclusion, this article demonstrates that recruiters' assessments are influenced by essentialist preconceptions that intersect gender and racialisation, causing them to devalue the skills of migrant women. In this regard, our results contribute to the literature on the social construction of skills by emphasising that social categorisation, such as gender, and racialisation, shape migrants' work trajectories. The recognition of skills is the result of workers' social performance and recruiters' perception of degrees, knowledge, technical expertise, and work experiences (Vasey 2021).

To transform these preconceptions, there is a need to decolonise imaginaries (Vergès 2019), which involves acknowledging past and current instances of colonisation. This broad project implies questioning socially constructed categories such as that of 'migrant' and detecting the colonial power relations and narratives of 'doing migration' in institutional, organisational, and everyday settings (Amelina 2022, p. 2407). More specifically, training courses and monitoring mechanisms could be promoted among labour market gatekeepers, including recruiters, social workers, and employers, so that they critically assess the categories and criteria used to select candidates, especially those with a migratory background, and become sensitive about the crucial role they play in reproducing inequalities or eventually bringing social change. To complete our analysis, further research could be conducted to analyse how

contingent international politics, their covering in national media and the extent to which it is influenced by colonial imaginaries shape recruiters' representations and ultimately contribute to confining migrant women into specific jobs.

Notes

1. According to the Times Higher Education World University Rankings (available at <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/2019/world-ranking>), the Ca' Foscari University in Veneto has a lower score than seven African universities, while the University of Haute Alsace ranks significantly lower.
2. Bodywork includes service sector employees who work with their bodies and the bodies of others (McDowell 2011).
3. In 2020, over 30% of women in Europe were employed in education, human health or social work activities compared to 8% of men. See: <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2020/domain/work>
4. *Cadre* includes both workers who use in-depth knowledge to perform their job and managers with supervisory functions (Hamiot and Merle 2017).

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

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