

# MIGRATION PROJECTS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION: A PERSPECTIVE FROM WOMEN'S VOICES

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## Abstract

Currently, there is an intensification of migratory flows related to the search for Higher Education Institutions, to attend bachelor's degrees, master's degrees, doctorates, and post-doctorate courses. In Portugal, the migratory trajectories associated with the optimistic search for education have particular significance in the feminisation of migratory flows from Portuguese-speaking countries. Based on the observation of this circumstance emerging from broader research carried out within the VIW-Voices of Immigrant Women project, the aim of this article is to contribute to the understanding of the migratory experience of immigrant women attending higher education. The VIW - Voices of Immigrant Women1 - project has as its main objective: to contribute to the construction of an inclusive higher education system, addressing the major societal challenges represented by migrations and, more specifically, the migratory flows of women in the current European context. It is a project funded by the European Commission, with the participation of several European institutions and civil society organisations, including the Instituto Politécnico de Bragança, Portugal. Following the methodological proposal of the project, immigrant women were interviewed, and from these interviews narratives were constructed, which give an account of the challenges and adversities they encounter, as well as the strategies (institutional and personal) mobilised to overcome them. And, from a larger set, we propose the analysis of seven narratives of women who came to Portugal with the purpose of studying. The results obtained point to a very positive evaluation of educational opportunities in the definition of migratory projects; to the identification of challenges and difficulties derived from the intersectionality of being a woman, young and immigrant. From the point of view of the strategies mobilised to face the difficulties, there is systematic reference to the support of family networks; strategies related to the reconfiguration of identities are also mentioned (in a perspective of accommodation to the host culture or resistance) to make their efforts of inclusion effective. The results of this study may contribute to a better understanding of the motivations, challenges and opportunities that studying in higher education may bring to these women. At the same time, it is also important to contribute to the construction of knowledge about the educational processes promoted by higher education institutions in contexts of cultural diversity, consolidating the social function of higher education as an agent of transformation and ensures the fundamental right to development and equal opportunities.

Keywords: Gender, Migration, Higher Education.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The processes of inclusion of immigrant women have been the subject of discussion and debate within various organisations in society and the academic community, so that conditions may be created that enable these women to face the problems and constraints they face during their migratory process. In Portugal, as in other European countries, the migratory processes have been increasing, which is a challenge on a global scale, requiring cooperation involving concrete action at all levels of political decision-making and civil society. In addition to the aforementioned increase, we are witnessing profound changes with regard to the migratory objective, particularly of women. The "distribution of residence visas by reason for entry into Portugal according to sex shows quite distinct profiles between foreign women and men" (p.35-36), with the relative weight of women continuing to stand out in residence visas for study, student exchange, professional internships and volunteering (to represent 50.8% of these visas in 2019 and 51.4% in 2020) [1]. With regard to the countries of origin of study

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residence visa applicants, Brazil, Angola, Cape Verde and Guinea-Bissau stand out [1]. These data show that the demand for higher education in Portugal is particularly strong among Portuguese-speaking students. Undertaking a migration project oriented towards the continuation of studies is a phenomenon on a global scale, since it has been verified that the number of students seeking a foreign country for their academic training in higher education has consistently increased over the last years [2]. From this perspective, it is essential that higher education institutions in Portugal adapt and (re)organise themselves to respond to the increasing number of migrant students they receive, providing them with effective responses that facilitate the construction of their training process. The processes of internationalization of higher education have been analysed using a gender lens, namely regarding the gender gap of international students in different countries [3, 4], the permanence in the country after finishing their studies [5], the identity [6], and the interaction of multiple discriminations [7], among others. It is important to explore these aspects with regard to higher education in Portugal, to further identify the specificities of receiving, above all, African and South American women and to try to understand their particularities taking into account their country of origin, the area and cycle of studies that they attend.

Higher education institutions, due to the increasing diversity of students, constitute a pillar for the process of inclusion of migrants, in particular women who seek higher education as a way to affirm themselves and have better living conditions, designing their migratory project around higher education. Women international students constitute a group of migrant women, highly qualified, who do not represent migrant women in general, nor women from their countries of origin. However, despite being a group with particular characteristics, they are subject to processes that are similar to those of the inclusion of other migrant women. Their situation is marked by the intersection of several socially constructed categories which interact with each other and accentuate various factors of discrimination such as 'race', 'ethnicity', 'class' or 'nationality' [8] and also the issue of religion.

The Voices of Immigrant Women (VIW) Project which aims to respond to the need for students to develop better knowledge and sensitivity to the topic of women's migration, considering the interrelationship of factors such as: gender, status, ethnicity, age, religion, origin and political opinion. The project analyses migration movement from a gender lens with the aim of contributing to a more inclusive higher education by bringing a holistic approach to the whole process. In this article, in particular, the voice of immigrant women whose migration goal is related to obtaining academic qualifications is emphasised. It seeks to understand their path, associated with the motivations that lead them to leave their country of origin, the main obstacles, constraints and challenges they face in host countries and the strategies mobilised for their inclusion, in this case in Portugal.

## 2 METHODOLOGY

From the point of view of the research design, this qualitative study, with descriptive and interpretive characteristics, aims to understand behaviours, feelings and ways of thinking of the women participating in the research. In this study, the methodological approach focuses on narrative research, since one of the fundamental characteristics is the simultaneous valorisation of biography, history and society [9], this trilogy is particularly relevant in the analysis of migratory phenomena since it associates the dimension of the individual perspective with the associated socio-historical dimension. In order to collect the necessary information for the construction of the narratives, in-depth interviews were carried out. The interview script was developed by the team from Pablo de Olavide University, responsible for the scientific coordination of the VIW Project) and in each country several immigrant women were interviewed. The use of the in-depth interview allowed the possibility to present what, in narrative research, Freeman [10] calls the big stories, which reflect the most significant events that are explored in the interview situation when participants share their life experiences, through the description of the events, justifications and arguments that give them meaning. Thus, from the interviews, case narratives were built focusing on the topics defined by the working group: Problem addressed, Resilience strategies, Description of the implemented integration initiative, Personal story, Analysis of the initiative and the individual story, Outcomes and Impact.

For this article we analyse the narratives of seven immigrant women who came to Portugal in order to start or further their academic training at Higher Education level.

The analysis focused on the selection and systematisation of the main ideas emerging from the narratives focused on three dimensions: (i) Motivation for the migratory goal; (ii) Difficulties experienced; and (iii) Strategies mobilised to face difficulties.

### 3 RESULTS

The presentation of the results begins with a brief characterisation of the protagonists of the narratives under analysis. The data in Table 1 presents information on the nationality of the women and the cycle of studies they were attending when the interview was carried out. It should be added that the ages of these women vary between 29 and 38 years.

Table 1. Characterisation of the protagonists of the narratives.

<i>Narrative</i>	<i>Nationality</i>	<i>Study Cycle</i>
The country where I put down my roots.	Cape Verdean	Graduate
It is a love story, yes!	Polish	Doctoral Programme
Deconstructing the country of Floribella.	Cape Verdean	Graduate
Brazilian Portuguese as a Statement.	Brazilian	Doctoral Programme
From invisible to visible.	Cape Verdean	Graduate
The migrant female body.	Brazilian	Doctoral Programme
Preparation and information lead to integration.	Brazilian	Doctoral Programme

The analysis of the narratives is organised, as we have already had the opportunity to mention, the results are based on three aspects: Motivation for the migratory goal, Difficulties experienced, and Strategies mobilised, which are described in the following subsections.

#### 3.1 Motivation for migratory objective - To study in Portugal

Regarding motivation, it is possible to see that it is situated in four dimensions: Affective factors, Horizon and improvement of living conditions, Empowerment through Education and Deepening and focusing on the continuation of study in Europe.

With regard to affective factors, the narrative "*It is a love story, yes!*" portrays the focus of a decision based on a love relationship initiated in the country of origin of the protagonist with a boy from the host country. Thus, her choice arises from the reconciliation of wanting to live a love story with the opportunity and desire to study in another country. She says that coming here was natural "I was 19 years old and in love", it was therefore the right time for this adventure. In the institution where she applied she found it easy to get into the degree course of her preference.

The narratives "*Deconstructing the country of Floribella*" and "*The country where I put down my roots*" bring with them the importance of studying in order to obtain better living conditions. The first one is based on the importance attributed to learning and training. shee points out that a broader life horizon has always been part of her life, as well as the possibility to contribute to the improvement of the economic, social and cultural life of her biological mother and brothers and to support the old age of her adoptive grandparents. In articulation with this motive, it is the "illusion" fed by the imaginary reproduced by juvenile television series, portraying school environments, which leads her to the choice of Portugal. The second narrative also reinforces the importance of studying in order to have a better life and help the family. The woman who is the protagonist of this narrative learned, through the Town Hall of her home town, about the existence of Technological Specialization Courses. These were post-secondary courses, developed by higher education institutions and others, with a duration of one year, with a strong link to the labour market and also the possibility of continuing studies in higher education. Although she felt that there were few explanations about how it worked, about the country, the city and the host institution, she took the option to apply, as did one of her sisters, reiterating that the main objective was to study.

In the narrative "*From invisible to visible*" it is clear that the protagonist assumes that empowerment through education would be a form of emancipation and personal self-worth, but also that she could be a reference for other women in the same conditions. The understanding that obtaining high levels of education could be an opportunity to improve her life also functions as motivation. In higher education, her choice for the area of sports enabled her to develop a sports activity as a federated athlete. However, an injury forced her to abandon sport and also the diploma, and she embarked on another degree course which she completed and which led her to her country of origin.

The narratives "*Brazilian Portuguese as a Statement*", "*The migrant female body*", and "*Preparation and information lead to integration*" all have a common focus on further studies in the field. In the narrative "*Brazilian Portuguese as a Statement*" the search for post-graduate education is emphasized. The migratory goals of this woman, situated in the field of training and research, have expanded as opportunities and successes have arisen. Allied to these conditions, she recognizes that in her country there is an enchantment for Europe, which is materialized in a certain valuation of the diplomas obtained outside Brazil. It was also highlighted that the choice of Portugal is attributed to the ease of the language and cultural proximity. In the narrative "*The migrant female body*", the migratory objective was related to the improvement of academic qualifications in a particular focus: the issues of feminism and sociology. Although she had worked as a lawyer and teacher, she understood academia as a good space for her professional aspirations. Considering that her training in law was too short and the need to train in subjects of a more critical nature brought her to Portugal. She believes that in this country she has found a very practical approach to law. In the narrative "*Preparation and information lead to integration*", the decision of the protagonist to emigrate to Portugal was mainly aimed at completing her doctoral studies, also in the area of law. Since she was young, she had the aspiration to study abroad. The option for Portugal seemed to be the most appropriate given the affinity of the culture and the influences that Portuguese law has on Brazilian law. Her goal was to complete her doctorate, however, she ended up finding a job in the area she wanted and decided to stay in Portugal.

### 3.2 Difficulties experienced in the migration process

About the difficulties experienced in the migration process, it was possible to identify financial difficulties, difficulties related to bureaucratic aspects and socio-cultural difficulties.

The narratives "*Deconstructing the country of Floribella*", "*The country where I put down my roots*", "*From invisible to visible*" and "*The migrant female body*", have in common financial difficulties. For example, in the narrative "*The country where I put down my roots*" the protagonist identifies her first month, in the host city, as remarkable in her process because of the great financial difficulty she felt to survive. She says that money was always scarce, it was necessary to make a great effort to finish the course: "We had a very, very difficult year". In the narrative "*The migrant female body*" it is pointed out that the great obstacle was not being able to obtain scholarships for the continuation of studies.

In the narratives "*Brazilian Portuguese as a Statement*" and "*Preparation and information lead to integration*", difficulties related to bureaucratic aspects are noted. In the narrative "*Brazilian Portuguese as a Statement*" the obtaining of a visa to come and study in the host country is identified as the main difficulty, which was also felt in their country of origin. Problems with the recognition of diplomas for work purposes, i.e. for access to a job related to the training area, are also identified. In the narrative "*Preparation and information lead to integration*", the difficulty of recognising foreign degrees outside the European space is specifically pointed out. She characterises the process as complex and bureaucratic and as a basic barrier to accessing more qualified professions. She also felt some difficulty in dealing with the institutional "no's" which were stated in a more crude way. In a process of arrival, it may be difficult to get around because the person does not know the space and the entities where they have to go. In addition, she suggests that public entities have a discourse that is disjointed in the transmission of information.

In addition to financial and bureaucratic difficulties, other sociocultural difficulties have also been identified, such as racism and stereotypes. It is essentially black women who indicate situations of racism ("*Deconstructing the country of Floribella*", "*The country where I put down my roots*" and "*From invisible to visible*").

In the narrative "*Deconstructing Floribella's country*", the protagonist assumes that there are situations of racism in the host country and that she experienced and lives them, although it is clear that she relativises them. In this sense, she considers that the difficulties experienced are related to the search for understanding (or even excusability) of the other's perspective when facing racist attitudes and behaviours. The woman from "*This is the country where I raised my children*" states that she worked as a cashier in a supermarket and it was there that she became aware of racist attitudes. She noticed that there were people who changed queues to avoid being served by a black employee. In addition, she felt a very big cultural difference. In her country of origin, she lived in a culture where people talk to each other on the street, where they know their neighbours, which is not the case in her host city. In "*From invisible to visible*", racism gives way to invisibility, this becoming the biggest problem to be faced.

Brazilian women identify situations of prejudice, discrimination and stereotypes. In the narrative "*The migrant female body is very visible prejudice*", the protagonist mentions that, in her first coming to

Portugal, her boyfriend's family never called her by her name, she was only Brazilian. She feels that the prejudice against Brazilian women, in Portugal, is very heavy because those who work in public institutions assume that Brazilians always want to take advantage of the system. She identifies, in Portugal, as gender issues "the sexualisation of Brazilian women". In the narrative "*Brazilian Portuguese as a Statement*", the woman, upon arrival in the host country, was not aware of the discrimination. Over time, she realized that the interaction with the Portuguese men and women was very marked by the stereotype that associates the Brazilian woman to prostitution. The linguistic prejudice associated to the use of non-European Portuguese is also identified. She is aware that the Brazilian woman suffers from a stigma associated with her body (sexuality) but has never felt it. In the narrative "*It is a love story, yes!*", for the protagonist only the language was identified as the obstacle to her integration.

### 3.3 Strategies mobilised to tackle the difficulties

To face financial difficulties, these women develop a set of measures and actions to achieve their personal and professional goals, highlighting the search for work, the crucial role of family and close friends, mainly those from the same country of origin (informal immigrant groups) and obtaining research grants.

In the narratives "*Deconstructing Floribella's country*", "*The country where I put down my roots*", "*From invisible to visible*", "*The migrant female body*", "*Brazilian Portuguese as a Statement*", the strategies mobilized to face the problems, focused on getting financial support. In all of them, the resilience to achieve their goal is visible. Specifically, in the narrative "*Deconstructing the country of Floribella*", the protagonist states that she made the decision to achieve financial autonomy to reach her migration goal, having chosen to go to work for 3 years in another country (Spain), which she achieved with the help of an adoptive aunt. Already in the narrative "*The country where I put down my roots*", in the first phase of her migratory process, she counted on the financial support of her mother, but also the welcome provided by a colleague from the same country and the support of the training institution. In the second phase, it is the support of the City Hall of her hometown that becomes relevant to achieve her goal. In the narrative "*From invisible to visible*", the financial difficulties were overcome with resource to her own savings and with the help of family members, and, finally, the obtaining of a grant for her research project that led to the achievement of her goal. Similarly, in "*Brazilian Portuguese as a Statement*", the protagonist had her family as a support and knows that she will have it if she feels the need. In this case, the work was understood as a strategy to make ends meet and was therefore temporary.

For the bureaucratic difficulties it is clear that only time can bring some "help". In the narrative "*Preparation and information lead to integration*", the protagonist is of the opinion that her integration process took place without difficulties. The timely preparation of all documentation and the fact that she had previously got to know the space contributed to that. The coming to Portugal was prepared a year in advance. Regarding the treatment of immigrants in institutions, she usually says that she "has been beaten up a lot", but she thinks that "it is not out of malice".

To deal with racism, in "*Deconstructing the country of Floribella*", the woman chooses to find in herself, in her capacity of reflection, the search for knowledge and understanding of the diversity of perspectives, activating these processes as the main strategy to deal with racism. However, her choice to join the African students' association led her to intervene more with her colleagues and support them in practical issues of integration in the community, as well as to advocate for the recognition that we can all live better in community, regardless of colour, culture, gender and experiences. She considers herself a woman activist. The woman in the narrative "*The country where I put down my roots*." says she feels used to cultural difference and to devaluing situations of racism. She says that today she relates to some of the people who in the past she felt exposed her to situations of racism. She finds in herself, in her determination and in her entrepreneurial spirit the feeling of integration and also in the fact that she now experiences a comfortable financial situation. The narrative "*From invisible to visible*" highlights the protagonist's urge to leave invisibility, assuming her voice and creating the opportunity to be the voice of other women. Her strategy is attributed to "the luck of meeting the right people", who gave her the impetus and enabled her successful integration. It is also evident that her integration in different countries gave her the knowledge and structure to redefine her trajectory and to position herself as a black and African woman. The construction of her own company appears as a way of asserting herself socially and financially.

As for the strategies used by Brazilian women, in the case of "*The migrant female body*", the learning carried out during the first time she was an immigrant in Portugal stands out. Thus, when she returns, for the second time to Portugal, ten years later, she refers: "This experience is an experience that I had somehow put deep in my memory, so it was nice to live it". She understood that the strategy involved

"a performance", which consisted of pretending to be another nationality taking advantage of her dual nationality and thus overcoming less qualified jobs. Despite feeling that there are "the intersections that tear at my body", she perceives that she is white, with abilities, occupying a privileged position.

In the narrative "*Brazilian Portuguese as a Statement*", the strategies mobilized to face the adversities experienced changed over time. But as time went by, she became aware of the weight that the fact of being a Brazilian woman had and tried to adjust her behaviour and the way she dressed and behaved to minimise the derogatory comments associated to the prejudices related to Brazilian women. She realized that "as soon as she opened her mouth" all this effort became vain. In the present moment, actively positioning herself when she perceives the prejudice, verbalizes the discomfort and identifies the discriminatory behavior as such.

In the narrative "*Preparation and information lead to integration*", the participant has the opinion that her integration process took place without difficulties. The timely preparation of all the documentation and the fact of having previously known the space contributed to that. However, she is aware that discrimination exists and she knows of cases that she has heard about but never witnessed directly. She understands that gender problems are a problem of the macho society in general. She takes care of her body. In relation to language, she does not think that this is xenophobia, but it is common for Portuguese people to joke about the way Brazilians speak. At work, this circumstance can be impacting because it provokes a need to adapt to the language.

In the narrative "*It is a love story, yes!*" the support of her boyfriend and classmates and her persistence (studying hard) meant that six months after her arrival she was able to speak and write in Portuguese, even though she kept her accent.

#### 4 CONCLUSIONS

The analysed narratives were selected because they illustrate paths of women who came to Portugal to study, in almost all the cases analysed (except for the narrative "*It is a love story, yes!*") the search for educational opportunities and consequent job opportunities were the main factors for choosing Portugal as a destination country. It should also be noted that most of the women who fit the profile of the migrant woman who selects Portugal to study, come from Portuguese speaking countries, the exception being again the one reported in the narrative "*It is a love story, yes!*" whose protagonist is a citizen from the European Community. The results presented in this work are thus in line with the data on the increase in female migration for the continuation of studies [1].

With regard to the adversities and difficulties encountered, the simultaneous presence of various factors of precariousness and discrimination are highlighted. It is clear that the situations reported are diverse and marked by individual specificities, but it seems clear that there is an intersection between various socially constructed categories which, by interacting with each other, accentuate various factors of discrimination such as 'race', 'ethnicity', 'class' or 'nationality' [8] and also the issue of religion. This aspect is particularly stressed by women who, during their formative process (formal, informal and non-formal), have learned to recognise and interpret situations of discrimination. Thus, there is mention of some aspects associated with feelings of discrimination, which are related to stereotypes that are very present in Portuguese society, such as for example some prejudices associated with language (non-European Portuguese), thus being a determining factor for inclusion, and the persistence of behaviours and ideals that prevent the visibility of crucial issues such as racism, discrimination, xenophobia.

Regarding the strategies mobilised by these women to face adversities, the support from family or friends stands out, both in terms of economic difficulties and in terms of social and emotional support; in this process, migrant communities assume particular relevance.

The search for employment in the host country is another of the strategies followed to achieve their goal, despite the mention of unequal pay, labour conflicts and insertion in the labour market in positions that do not correspond to the academic and professional qualifications, especially when this certification is obtained in the country of origin.

However, despite all these difficulties, these women also mention the role of higher education institutions through international cooperation protocols and other international mobility programmes, and also the concrete measures of inclusion and facilitating access to public services promoted by the higher education institutions that receive them.

As immigrant students are strongly represented in higher education institutions, it is important that these institutions define and implement measures to combat discrimination, racism and exclusion. In the

speeches of the participants in the study it is clear that they value education and the progression of studies as an added value for their integration. It should be noted that in some situations the studies have placed immigrant women in a more comfortable position, from a social and economic point of view, which has determined their permanence in Portugal. In sum, education is seen as a factor of empowerment, of promotion of social and economic status, of self-worth, that is, it is a facilitating process of integration and can be a way to influence other women.

Higher education institutions should promote strategies and trigger mechanisms that promote the inclusion of immigrant students, including, for example, concerted actions between the educational process and student associations or other relevant bodies in academic life.

In short, they should make concerted efforts to promote greater sensitivity in higher education and in society in general in order to reduce xenophobic attitudes and rejection towards migrant women.

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