

"the power they own just by being"
Refugee and Migrant Women's Political Agency in European Democracy

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Acknowledgement

To Kristóf, my chosen family, who nurtured my light even in the darkest moments of this journey. Thank you for your endless support.

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Abstract

This thesis, titled "The Power They Own Just by Being: Refugee and Migrant Women's Political Agency in European Democracy," investigates the political agency of refugee and migrant women within the framework of European democracy, focusing on their participation in the "AGENCY: Vote With Her" project. Conducted across 15 EU member states, the project seeks to empower these women through training and the photovoice technique, enhancing their political engagement in the 2024 European Parliament Elections.

The research explores the multifaceted motivations of the Change Makers, revealing that their involvement stems from personal experiences, a desire to contribute to their communities, and a drive for social justice. Despite facing significant barriers, including legal, socioeconomic, and cultural challenges, these women utilize alternative routes to political participation, such as involvement in NGOs and lobbying eligible voters.

The study employs a qualitative methodology, including semi-structured narrative interviews with ten Change Makers from diverse backgrounds. The findings highlight the transformative impact of the "AGENCY" project, which has fostered personal empowerment, community support, and a deeper understanding of democratic processes. Participants articulate a shared vision of collective impact, advocating for inclusive policies that recognize their contributions.

This thesis underscores the critical role of refugee and migrant women in enhancing European democracy, advocating for policy changes that support their political participation. By integrating their unique perspectives and strengths, European democracy can become more inclusive and resilient, embodying the foundational values of equality, freedom, and respect for all residents.

Introduction

Democracy is the founding principle and unifying force of the European Union. However, in the face of 21st-century challenges, from the rise of far-right and populist parties to the intensifying refugee crisis, the geopolitical conflicts of the Russian-Ukrainian war, and Israel's harrowing offense on Palestine, the question of how to safeguard European democracy is becoming increasingly important. In this context, my thesis explores the research question: How does the political agency of refugee and migrant women participating in the "AGENCY: Vote With Her" project enhance European democracy in the context of the 2024 European Parliament Elections, focusing on participants' lived experiences and personal narratives? The "AGENCY " project, organised by the European Network of Migrant Women (ENoMW) in collaboration with femLENS and several national organisations, aims to enhance the political participation of refugee and migrant women across 15 EU member states. This is achieved through training sessions on democracy and EU elections, and the photovoice technique, which equips participants to raise awareness about the struggles and resilience of migrant and refugee women, urging voters to elect representatives sensitive to migrants' needs.

Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union, states that the fundamental values uniting all EU member states are “human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities”¹. However, the EU is currently experiencing its deepest political crisis² since its establishment, which endangers all essential values it is based on. The growing momentum of far-right parties, which is deeply connected with migration³, exemplifies these political shifts. In 2019, the coalition of center-left and center-right in the European Parliament lost its majority for the first time in 40

¹ ‘Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union’, 2. ‘Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union’.

² Žmavc and Mirazchiyski, ‘Civic, Citizenship and Rhetorical Education in a Rapidly Changing World’, 65.

³ Davis and Deole, ‘Immigration and the Rise of Far-Right Parties in Europe’.

years⁴. Additionally, far-right parties continue to gain power in countries such as France, Hungary, Finland, Spain⁵, and Germany⁶. However, as many studies illustrate, this trend is not new. Far-right in Europe have been increasing their electoral support for the past decade, says Cathrine Thorleifsson, stating that “democracies in our time, they do die quite slowly by democratically elected authoritarian leaders”⁷.

To foster a more resilient European democracy, it is imperative to examine its origins and true essence, unravelling how we abandoned it in the first place, and what we must do to revive it. Embracing the belief that “democracy means the organisation of government based on principles of human equality and freedom”⁸ and that it inherently involves the acknowledgement of individuals as political equals⁹, through my research, I intend to gain in-depth understanding of the political agency of migrant women and the ways they enrich the democratic fabric. Thus, I will delve into discourse on political participation, fundamental for democracy and the legitimacy of governance, and assess the contemporary research on the declining levels of participation rates in the European Union, the evolving norms of political participation, the shift towards engaged citizenship and alternative ways of influence on political decision-making processes.

My research centres the experiences of migrant and refugee women, highlighting the socio-demographic changes brought by migration in Europe and addresses how barriers to political participation hinder the full realisation of democracy, which requires the equal participation of all residents. By focusing on the women in the "AGENCY" project, my analysis examines the advantages, barriers, and potential solutions for their participation in the democratic process. Despite significant legal, socioeconomic, and cultural barriers, refugee and

⁴ Žmavc and Mirazchiyski, ‘Civic, Citizenship and Rhetorical Education in a Rapidly Changing World’, 65.

⁵ ‘Why the Far-Right Is Increasingly Getting into Power across Europe | Euronews’.

⁶ ‘Germany’s Far Right Rides High on Anti-Immigration, Anti-Green Agenda | Reuters’.

⁷ ‘Why the Far-Right Is Increasingly Getting into Power across Europe | Euronews’.

⁸ Schmalz, *Refugees, Democracy and the Law*, 12.

⁹ Schmalz, 12.

migrant women possess unique perspectives and strengths that can enrich democratic processes. Therefore, I will delve into the complexities of gendered differences of migrants' political participation, which remains an important part of the "unresolved dilemma of democracy"¹⁰, emphasising the key role of women's participation in advancing egalitarian democracy in the European Union. This is exemplified by ENoMW's initiatives, such as the "AGENCY" project, as they directly address barriers by facilitating training sessions and participatory campaigns, empowering migrant women to become advocates and exercise their agency through alternative ways of political participation.

The significance of my study lies in its potential to inform policy recommendations and advocacy strategies by centring the lived experiences of migrant and refugee women. By capturing their unique perspectives and challenges, as demonstrated by the successful campaigns of the "AGENCY" project, my research aims to highlight how the political agency of refugee and migrant women can foster deeper and more inclusive democratic processes.

¹⁰ Gatti, Buonomo, and Strozza, 'Immigrants' Political Engagement', 19.

Background

Political participation and democratic principles

When considering Europe's democratic principles, it is crucial to acknowledge the individuals excluded from the political process. The World Migration Report 2022 reveals that over 82 million international migrants resided in Europe in 2019, marking a nearly 10% increase since 2015¹¹. Currently, foreign-born individuals constitute 8.5% of the population, with migrant women in EU Member States making up 49% to 53% of this group¹². However, despite their substantial presence, these migrant women find themselves marginalised from political decision-making processes, challenging the alignment of the EU's foundational principles with its practices. The active involvement of migrant women in political participation is not only a matter of democratic inclusivity but a central challenge for the realisation of European democracy itself. It unveils a fundamental conflict, namely that democracy “builds on the principles of human equality and freedom on the one hand, yet on the other hand requires concrete institutions”¹³ that are exclusive and pose impenetrable limitations for the refugee and migrant population of Europe, which deny almost a tenth of Europe's population the basic democratic rights of participation and equality.

Despite the European Parliament's assertion that women's political participation is a “fundamental prerequisite for gender equality and genuine democracy”¹⁴, women's engagement still falls behind men's due to gendered socioeconomic power struggles and restrictive migration policies. Migrant women are particularly marginalised, often overlooked

¹¹ ‘WORLD MIGRATION REPORT 2020’.

¹² Anthias, Kontos, and Morokvasic-Müller, *Paradoxes of Integration*, 26.

¹³ Schmalz, *Refugees, Democracy and the Law*, 13.

¹⁴ Ionel, ‘Women in Politics: A Global Perspective’, 1.

by governing bodies, leading to societal disharmony. They tend to be less informed, interested, and involved in political spheres than men, which gender disparity is attributed to three main factors: political socialization into passive roles, structural issues leading to over-representation in low-participation groups, and situational factors like family responsibilities that hinder full participation¹⁵.

However, the landscape of political participation has shifted significantly, reflecting changes in how citizens engage with democratic processes. Traditional participation, such as voting, remains vital but offers limited policy influence. Notably, the 2009 European Parliament elections saw the lowest turnout in its history, with only 46.2 percent of eligible European Union participating, which is a significant decline from the 1979 participation rate of 67.6 percent. While some view this decline as voter apathy, most scholars recognise it as alternative forms of engagement emerging as formal participation declines. In response to electoral limitations, migrants and refugees increasingly use non-electoral methods, allowing their direct engagement in policy decisions. Activities like signing petitions, participating in protests or hunger-strikes, and contacting political representatives have surged¹⁶, covering a wider range of Arnstein's "ladder of citizen participation"¹⁷. The internet, political consumerism, and direct political contacting provide accessible activism tools, enabling individuals to focus on specific issues and control their participation. This diversity in political action enriches democratic participation by including a broader spectrum of voices, ensuring a wider array of perspectives and strengthening the democratic framework.

¹⁵ Gatti, Buonomo, and Strozza, 'Immigrants' Political Engagement'.

¹⁶ Gatti, Buonomo, and Strozza, 2.

¹⁷ 'A Ladder Of Citizen Participation', 217.

Human rights and legal frameworks of political participation

Relevant human rights literature underscores the critical nature of political participation as a fundamental right, highlighted by international frameworks such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, and the European Convention on Human Rights. The ICCPR, particularly Article 25, affirms the right of every citizen to participate in public affairs, vote, and be elected¹⁸. CEDAW, through Article 7, mandates the elimination of discrimination against women in political and public life, ensuring that women, including migrant women, can participate on equal terms with men¹⁹. Similarly, the ECHR, under Protocol 1, Article 3, obligates the signatory states to hold free elections at reasonable intervals by secret ballot, ensuring the free expression of the opinion of the people²⁰. Moreover, the UN Committee on Human Rights, through General Comment 25, elaborates on "The Right to Participate in Public Affairs, Voting Rights and the Right to Equal Access to Public Service", emphasising that all citizens, regardless of status, should have the opportunity to engage in public affairs and access public services equally, reinforcing the necessity for inclusive political participation²¹.

However, EU law presents a contrasting approach regarding political participation, especially in voting in local elections. While the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights grants EU citizens the right to vote and stand as candidates in municipal elections in any member state, these provisions do not extend to third-country nationals, highlighting a disparity in the inclusivity of political rights within the EU. Citizenship, on the other hand, allows individuals to enjoy full political and civic rights, as expressed in legal frameworks, such as Articles 39

¹⁸ 'International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights | OHCHR'.

¹⁹ 'Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women New York, 18 December 1979'.

²⁰ 'European Convention on Human Rights'.

²¹ 'UN Committee on Human Rights, General Comment 25, "The Right to Participate in Public Affairs, Voting Rights and the Right to Equal Access to Public Service'.

and 40 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights²² and Article 25 of the ICCPR²³.

However, since these provisions primarily focus on citizens, migrant and refugee women face restrictions on their political and social rights. Article 7 of CEDAW addresses this issue, by ensuring women's right to participate equally, irrespective of their citizenship status. Similarly, the 2016 "Resolution on the Situation of Women Refugees and Asylum Seekers in the EU"²⁴ emphasizes the importance of promoting the political rights of migrant and refugee women, addressing barriers such as legal restrictions, socio-economic disadvantages, and lack of access to information and resources. The Convention on the Participation of Foreigners in Public Life at Local Level²⁵, established by the Council of Europe in 1992, also aims to address deficiencies in migrants' political participation by enhancing their involvement in local public life. By granting them the right to vote and stand for election in local authority elections, provided they meet certain conditions such as lawful and habitual residency for at least five years, this convention promotes their active participation in the democratic process. Despite its potential to foster inclusivity, as of 2006, only eight member States had ratified this Convention, highlighting a gap between the commitment to democratic principles and actual policy implementation.

However, political participation rights for immigrants vary significantly across EU member states. Emphasising cultural pluralism, Sweden allows foreign citizens with at least three years of residence to participate in municipal and county-level elections, while Norway permits foreign nationals with three years of residence to vote in local elections but restricts national parliamentary voting to naturalised citizens²⁶. In Belgium, foreign residents can vote at the local level after residing in the country for over five years²⁷. In contrast, Spain restricts

²² 'Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union'.

²³ 'International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights | OHCHR'.

²⁴ European Parliament, 'The Situation of Women Refugees and Asylum Seekers in the EU'.

²⁵ Council of Europe, 'Convention on the Participation of Foreigners in Public Life at Local Level'.

²⁶ Seidle, 'Local Voting Rights for Non-Nationals', 30.

²⁷ Seidle, 36.

voting in national or regional elections to Spanish citizens only, and Germany does not permit non-EU citizens to participate in any elections²⁸. Austria has only recently begun to acknowledge migrants as political participants, while Denmark has allowed immigrants to vote in local elections after three years of legal residence since 1981²⁹.

When discussing political participation and migration, it is crucial to recognise that social rights are inseparable from political rights. A lack of resources can hinder political participation even when rights exist, as socioeconomic barriers such as poverty, inadequate education, and limited healthcare create substantial obstacles, compounded by the discrimination and marginalization of migrant and refugee women. The interdependence of social and political rights is crucial, as the realisation of one set of rights often depends on the fulfilment of the other. Ensuring social rights such as education, healthcare, and economic stability is therefore not only a matter of social justice but also a prerequisite for genuine democratic participation, as underscored by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in Articles 21 and 25³⁰, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in Articles 12 and 13³¹. Without addressing fundamental social rights, efforts to enhance political participation among marginalised groups remain incomplete.

The European Network of Migrant Women and the "AGENCY: Vote with her" project

The European Network of Migrant Women (ENoMW) is a feminist, secular platform led by migrant women, dedicated to advocating for the rights, freedoms, and dignity of migrant,

²⁸ Seidle, 30.

²⁹ Bird, Saalfeld, and Wüst, *The Political Representation of Immigrants and Minorities*, 45.

³⁰ United Nations, 'Universal Declaration of Human Rights'.

³¹ 'International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights | OHCHR'.

refugee, and ethnic minority women and girls across Europe. Established in 2012, ENoMW emerged from the collaboration of several migrant women organisations that recognised the need for a formal network to address the unique challenges these women face at the European level. With a central office in Brussels, ENoMW has expanded to include over 50 member organisations across 23 European member states.

ENoMW's mission is multi-dimensional, promoting equal treatment, human rights, and integration of migrant women in Europe. The organisation actively participates in shaping EU policies and supports its members through training, resources and collaborative actions, amplifying migrant women's voices at international, European, and national levels. The principles of the organisation are deeply rooted in the understanding of the gendered nature of immigration, acknowledging that migration and asylum policies often impact women and men differently. Committed to upholding human rights, ENoMW advocates for “policies and legislation ... sensitive towards women and girls”³² ensuring the dignity and integrity of migrant women throughout their immigration, asylum, and integration processes. They recognise that discrimination against women is the “outcome of globally manifested patriarchal norms and traditions that crosscut ethnic, cultural, economic and age differences”³³ and is “historically entrenched in other patriarchal projects such as colonialism, imperialism, war-fare and exploitation of natural resources”³⁴, and therefore tailor their work to address these deeply rooted issues.

ENoMW's influence and advocacy efforts are particularly crucial as Europe approaches the 2024 European Parliament Elections. Through initiatives like “FULFIL: Protecting & Promoting Fundamental Rights of Migrant Women in Europe,” “FORUM: Intercultural Dialogue and Civic Participation against Stigmatisation of Migrants And Refugees,”

³² ‘Our Values - European Network of Migrant Women’.

³³ ‘Our Values - European Network of Migrant Women’.

³⁴ ‘Our Values - European Network of Migrant Women’.

“Changing the System: Enhancing Participation of Young Migrant and Refugee Women in International Political Processes,” and the “AGENCY: Vote With Her” programs³⁵, ENoMW empowers migrant and refugee women to engage actively in the democratic process, and through legal analysis and policy recommendations ensures that these women's voices are heard and their interests are represented.

The "AGENCY" project is organised by ENoMW in collaboration with femLENS and several national organisations across the EU, is aimed at enhancing the political participation of migrant women in the context of the 2024 European Parliament elections. It operates across 15 European Union member states, targeting a broad demographic of women from diverse ethnic and age groups. Change Makers participating in my research reside in Finland, Ireland, Greece, Lithuania, France, Sweden, Italy, Germany, Cyprus, and Hungary. However, I couldn't interview participants of the project living in Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, and Belgium. Notably, 40% of my research participants have refugee status or background, while the remaining 60% are migrants. The significance of this project lies in its direct challenge to the barriers of traditional political participation, which "grow exponentially as they are linked with their legal and (low) socio-economic status"³⁶, and prevent migrant women from participating in EU elections, due to their lack of EU citizenship or other legal and social barriers. While many migrant women, including second and third-generation migrants, possess EU citizenship by naturalisation or birth, others remain disenfranchised or unaware of possibilities of participation. The project emphasises that EU parliamentary decisions impact all residents, regardless of voting eligibility, and therefore, even those who cannot vote can encourage others to exercise their democratic right, highlighting the relevance of EU elections for all migrant women.

³⁵ ‘Projects - European Network of Migrant Women’.

³⁶ ‘ENOMW-Submission-CEDAW-Political-Participation-2023.Pdf’, 2.

Being launched with the support of the European Parliament, the "AGENCY" project is grounded in the belief that women's active political participation is essential for fostering egalitarian and democratic societies. The project embraces the concept of co-governance, a model that combines representative democracy with participatory democracy, reflecting Article 11(4) of TEU and Article 24 of TFEU. ENOMW recommended this approach during the CEDAW Committee's 84th session³⁷, in regards to the General Discussion on Equal and Inclusive Representation of Women in Decision-Making Systems, emphasising that excluding women from political spheres perpetuates gender inequalities and harmful patriarchal practices, simultaneously rendering women invisible in crucial decision-making processes. ENOMW's 2021 report further highlights that women with "migrant backgrounds are at the intersection of several systems of discrimination"³⁸.

Starting in May 2023, the project facilitated a series of online training sessions and in-person bootcamps covering topics from EU institutional architecture, legislative processes to campaigning and advocacy. These sessions prepared over 50 Change Makers from 14 EU states to lead their campaigns effectively, who were recruited by Country Facilitators and local partner organisations. From January to May 2024, the participants created and led their campaigns within their local communities, using the photovoice method, a participatory documentary photography technique, designed to help individuals convey their stories and political messages through the medium of photography. These campaigns varied significantly, from photographs of impactful migrant women, showcasing refugee-led initiatives, or exploring identity struggles through images of afro hair. Despite their diversity, all campaigns aimed to raise awareness about the struggles and resilience of migrant and refugee women, using visual narratives to articulate Change Makers' concerns, sensitise voters, transform local

³⁷ 'ENOMW-Submission-CEDAW-Political-Participation-2023.Pdf', 2.

³⁸ 'ENOMW-Submission-CEDAW-Political-Participation-2023.Pdf'.

perspectives and foster broader community engagement in the EU elections. Following the successful creation of the photo campaigns, Change Makers organised further awareness-raising events, setting up window-shop displays, holding more established exhibitions and facilitating training sessions about the EU, political participation and human rights for their community.

Overall, the "AGENCY" project emphasises the agency of migrant women in enhancing political engagement across Europe. The project seeks to empower migrant women to become advocates both vertically and horizontally, and inspire voters to actively participate and exercise their democratic rights during the 2024 EU elections. However, the project not only seeks to increase voter turnout but also foster deeper and more inclusive democratic participation through its Change Makers.

Literature review

The political participation of migrant and refugee women in Europe intersects with human rights, political science, and gender studies but remains underexplored. My literature review synthesizes key academic works and theoretical frameworks on migrant women's political agency and its impact on European democracy, focusing on political participation, barriers faced, and their transformative potential in democratic processes.

Central to my study are various conceptions of power and agency, as articulated by scholars such as Amy Allen, Lisa VeneKlasen, and Valerie Miller. Traditional views of power, often seen as "power over," highlight domination and control, especially in political contexts where decision-making can perpetuate inequalities. However, this view is expanded through concepts like "power within," "power with," and "power to." These concepts emphasise internal empowerment, collective action, and the capacity to achieve goals, highlighting the resilience and transformative potential of refugee and migrant women. Moreover, to frame my findings and address the expanding definitions of agency, I will use the definition of agency as "power to effect change rather than power over others"³⁹, consolidating "migrant agency as a political force"⁴⁰, highlighting its potential to effect systemic change which is further explored in the following chapter.

Russel Dalton's work on citizenship norms and the expansion of political participation is crucial for my analysis, and guided my understanding of the evolving nature of political engagement among migrants. Dalton addresses concerns about declining traditional electoral participation⁴¹, perceived as an erosion of civic capacities, and a shift from duty-based to engaged citizenship⁴². Noting that while voting rates may have decreased, other forms of

³⁹ Piper, 'Gendering the Politics of Migration', 149.

⁴⁰ Jonsson, 'A Society Which Is Not', 215.

⁴¹ Dalton, 'Citizenship Norms and the Expansion of Political Participation', 89.

⁴² 2005 'Citizenship, Involvement, Democracy' survey

political action have expanded⁴³. He argues that this change does not indicate a decline in democracy but rather a transformation that can strengthen democracy by adapting to new forms of participation. Following Dalton's approach, this evolved form of democracy would be more equipped to include refugee and migrant participants by being receptive to the alternative ways they already exercise political agency. This pattern of alternative political engagement among research participants aligns with Rast and Ghorashi's concept of "deep democracy,"⁴⁴ which advocates for seeking the wisdom of minority voices through dialogue and discussion. This approach was key for my analysis, as it suggests that active engagement of newcomers in community initiatives can strengthen democracy by making it more inclusive. The Netherlands' development into a "participation society"⁴⁵ exemplifies this, where numerous community initiatives support refugee reception and integration, which also ties into the framework of "created" or "claimed spaces,"⁴⁶ where less powerful actors engage in public discourse outside institutionalised policy arenas. However, my analysis adopts Rožman and Cortés's definition of political participation as "the engagement of the public in different activities affecting politics"⁴⁷ which guides the understanding of political agency throughout my thesis.

Key literature identifies several barriers to political participation for migrant women, including legal, socioeconomic, and cultural obstacles. I drew on findings from the "Strengthen Girls' and Women's Political Participation and Decision-Making Power"⁴⁸ study, which describes that minority women face additional challenges in political participation due to "interconnected systems of power"⁴⁹ and "intersectional discrimination."⁵⁰ This study outlines systemic barriers to meaningful political inclusion on three levels: individual, institutional, and

⁴³ Dalton, 89.

⁴⁴ Rast and Ghorashi, 'Dancing with "The Other"', 189.

⁴⁵ Rast and Ghorashi, 189.

⁴⁶ Rast and Ghorashi, 189.

⁴⁷ Žmavc and Mirazchiyski, 'Civic, Citizenship and Rhetorical Education in a Rapidly Changing World', 63.

⁴⁸ Kameri-Mbote and Kabira, 'SDG 5'.

⁴⁹ Kameri-Mbote and Kabira, 2.

⁵⁰ Kameri-Mbote and Kabira, 4.

sociocultural, which are all evident in the personal stories of my research participants. Additionally, Pajnik and Bajt highlight how lack of resources, stemming from socioeconomic disparities and labour market segregation, is a barrier to political participation for migrant women⁵¹. Migrant women experience a much larger pay gap compared to native-born women⁵², with gender segregation confining them, especially third-country nationals, to low-paid, low-skilled occupations, restricting their access to resources and opportunities for political participation⁵³. Despite their crucial role in the EU labour market, their jobs often lack regulation, leaving them vulnerable and limiting their integration in terms of rights and opportunities. These findings are further supported by research in Italy⁵⁴, which highlights that “gender is one of the main sources of inequality in political participation”⁵⁵ and underscores the need for gender-specific strategies to support female migrant engagement and avoid “participatory chasm”⁵⁶ arising from the intersection of gender and migration.

Despite the critical role of migrant and refugee women in European society, their political participation is underexplored, particularly regarding their unique perspectives and lived experiences. My research fills this gap by examining agency of women in the "AGENCY" project, demonstrating how their involvement can enhance European democracy and foster inclusivity in the 2024 European Parliament Elections.

⁵¹ Anthias, Kontos, and Morokvasic-Müller, *Paradoxes of Integration*, 97.

⁵² Anthias, Kontos, and Morokvasic-Müller, 27-28.

⁵³ Anthias, Kontos, and Morokvasic-Müller, 33.

⁵⁴ Gatti, Buonomo, and Strozza, ‘Immigrants’ Political Engagement’.

⁵⁵ Gatti, Buonomo, and Strozza, 2.

⁵⁶ Gatti, Buonomo, and Strozza, 2.

Theoretical framework

Using concepts from Amy Allen, Lisa VeneKlasen, Valerie Miller, and Duncan Green, I framed my findings by exploring different conceptions of power, such as power over, power within, power with, and power to, in relation to the political participation of refugee and migrant women. Traditionally, power is understood as power over, defined by Amy Allen as the ability to constrain another's choices⁵⁷. This form of power often links to domination and oppression, especially in political contexts where decision-making and resource control can perpetuate inequalities⁵⁸. However, such a one-dimensional view does not fully capture the resilience and transformative potential of refugee and migrant women.

Therefore, my framework integrates alternative conceptions of power, power within, power with, and power to⁵⁹. Power within, as described by Miller, is rooted in an ethical value base that promotes human rights, responsibilities, and respect for individual differences, encompassing the capacity to imagine, hope, and affirm the shared human pursuit of dignity and fulfilment⁶⁰. This intrinsic sense of self-worth and agency enables women to recognise their rights and value⁶¹, which is crucial for challenging internalised oppression and fostering self-confidence as Green notes⁶². Addressing power within is essential to counter internalised domination, where individuals or groups see themselves as inferior which is many times the case with refugee and migrant women. Developing power within is foundational, providing the basis for recognizing power with and power to. As Duncan Green emphasised, “Unless people

⁵⁷ Allen, ‘Rethinking Power’, 33.

⁵⁸ Lisa VeneKlasen and Valerie Miller, ‘Power and Empowerment’, 45.

⁵⁹ Duncan Green, *How Change Happens*, 33.

⁶⁰ Lisa VeneKlasen and Valerie Miller, ‘Power and Empowerment’, 6.

⁶¹ Lisa VeneKlasen and Valerie Miller, ‘Power and Empowerment’.

⁶² Duncan Green, *How Change Happens*, 33.

first develop a sense of self-confidence and a belief in their own rights, efforts to...organize and demand a say may not bear fruit”⁶³.

Power with involves collective action and mutual support, essential for creating impactful social movements and fostering a sense of community⁶⁴. Lastly, power to denotes the capacity of individuals to achieve their goals and effect change, highlighting the importance of personal empowerment and alternative forms of political participation⁶⁵, which Allen defined as "the ability of an individual actor to attain an end or a series of ends"⁶⁶.

In the context of refugee and migrant women, who often lack "power over" due to their inability to vote, these alternative forms of power become pivotal. Power within manifests through their intrinsic motivations and agency, empowering them to overcome personal and systemic barriers. Power with is evident in their motivations to support each other and build solidarity within their communities. Power to encompasses the various ways they engage politically outside traditional voting, such as through advocacy, community organizing, and participation in initiatives like the "AGENCY" project. This multifaceted understanding of power underscores the dynamic and transformative potential of refugee and migrant women's political participation, enriching democratic processes and fostering more inclusive societies.

⁶³ Duncan Green, 33.

⁶⁴ Allen, 'Rethinking Power', 35.

⁶⁵ Allen, 34.

⁶⁶ Allen, 34.

Methodology

I employed a qualitative research design to capture the nuanced experiences of refugee and migrant women in the Agency project. Qualitative research was particularly suitable for my study as it allows for an in-depth exploration of complex social phenomena, particularly the lived experiences and personal narratives of individuals. This approach was essential for understanding the experiences of the Change Makers regarding their active political participation and agency.

My research is grounded in interdisciplinary approach at the intersection of human rights, political science and gender studies, with special emphasis on the political rights of women, migrants and refugees. It integrates socio-legal study principles, combining legal analysis and qualitative research, to elucidate the unique contributions of refugee and migrant women in electoral politics and in the context of European democracy. This includes the analysis of international human rights instruments such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and relevant documents from the Council of Europe and European Union law. Moreover, although the terms "migrant" and "refugee" are used interchangeably in some cases in my study, it is acknowledged that they refer to distinct legal and social categories.

I employed semi-structured narrative interviews for data collection, following the methods of Hesse-Biber and Sharlene Nagy⁶⁷, to capture the experiences of ten Change Makers from the "AGENCY" project, who live in ten different EU Member States and represent diverse age, ethnic, and racial groups. Inspired by feminist research methodologies introduced by Gwendolyn Beetham and Justina Demetriades⁶⁸, this approach addressed the ethical challenge

⁶⁷ Preissle and Han, 'Feminist Research Ethics'.

⁶⁸ 'Feminist Research Methodologies and Development', 200.

of assuming homogeneity among women. The semi-structured format allowed participants to openly share their motivations, systemic challenges, and unique contributions to the democratic process, enriching the research with diverse perspectives and detailed narratives of refugee and migrant women. Using a viewpoint-centric qualitative approach was integral to my research. By centring the questions around the lived experiences of the participants, the study aimed to amplify the voices of refugee and migrant women. This approach not only served to humanise the research but also provided in-depth understanding of the intersectionality between political, migrant and refugee rights. The semi-structured interviews thus served as a critical tool in uncovering how participants navigate the political landscape, revealing their roles as active agents in shaping European democracy. This method not only humanized the research but also provided an in-depth understanding of the intersectionality between political, migrant, and refugee rights, revealing how participants navigate the political landscape and shape European democracy.

The interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes each and were conducted either in person or via online video calls using the Meetingtor program, tailored to each participant's geographical location and preferences. All interviews were recorded with participants' consent, stored according to CEU guidelines on my SharePoint, and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy⁶⁹. For their privacy, pseudonyms were used for some of the research participants.

I employed the thematic analysis framework described by Braun and Clarke⁷⁰ to analyse the interviews, interpreting key patterns within the qualitative data. Thematic analysis involved familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report⁷¹. Main themes explored included motivations for participating in the "AGENCY" project, systemic barriers encountered within

⁶⁹ Tong, Sainsbury, and Craig, 'Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ)'.

⁷⁰ Victoria Clarke, Virginia Braun, 'Thematic Analysis'.

⁷¹ Tong, Sainsbury, and Craig, 'Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ)'.

the political landscape, perceptions of democracy and agency, and views on the impact of their involvement in the "AGENCY" project on European democratic processes.

Participants were selected from the AGENCY project using purposive sampling, focusing on refugee and migrant women actively engaged in political processes. This approach ensured the relevance and richness of the data, highlighting exemplary cases of political activism. As a contracted Country Facilitator for the Hungarian branch of the AGENCY project, I gained access to participants through established communication channels like the program's Slack platform and my connections with other Country Facilitators, who recommended Change Makers as study participants based on their activity. Acknowledging potential self-selection bias, the sampling strategy intentionally targeted exemplary cases among the Change Makers, focusing on the most actively engaged participants.

When developing the ethical approach for my interviews, I incorporated feminist epistemological principles and drew inspiration from the feminist ethics articulated by scholars Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings. I aimed to "move beyond harm minimization"⁷² by building connections with participants, attending with them the "AGENCY: Amplifying Migrant Women Political Voices" conference in Brussels and organising exhibitions for their campaigns in Budapest and Vienna. Although I believe in "making decisions based on the right principle"⁷³, Noddings's relational approach to ethics, and using "care" as the framework for my "ethical ideal"⁷⁴ guided my interactions with the participants of the "AGENCY" project, fostering trust and mutual respect through long-term engagement and support of their work.

Given the sensitive nature of the research, strict ethical measures were applied throughout, including obtaining ethical clearance by completing the Course on Research Ethics based on the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans

⁷² Mackenzie, McDowell, and Pittaway, 'Beyond "Do No Harm"', 300.

⁷³ Preissle and Han, 'Feminist Research Ethics', 518.

⁷⁴ Preissle and Han, 518.

(TCPS 2: CORE 2022). Moreover, consent procedures were designed to be culturally appropriate, informed by Catriona Mackenzie's guidelines, ensuring participants were aware of the study's scope, risks, outcomes, and their right to withdraw, ensuring respect for refugee and migrant participants' autonomy⁷⁵.

Several limitations influenced the findings and interpretations of my research. Access to participants was constrained by the socioeconomic and linguistic barriers endured by refugee and migrant women in Europe, affecting their availability and the scope of data collected. I initially aimed to interview one Change Maker from each of the 14 EU Member States participating in the "AGENCY" project; however, obstacles such as visa issues, language barriers, limited resources, time constraints, and rigid work schedules made this unfeasible. Language barriers further complicated data collection, as communication challenges impacted the depth and clarity of the interviews despite efforts to accommodate multilingual participants.

In conducting this research, I was conscious of my privileged position as an EU citizen with voting rights at both national and EU levels, contrasting with the challenges faced by refugee and migrant women in the "AGENCY" project. My role was to facilitate their expression and contributions to European democracy, particularly in relation to the 2024 European Parliament Elections. I aimed to present their stories authentically, acknowledging the inherent power dynamics within refugee settings⁷⁶, and my own socio-economic and educational privileges. While my interpretations are inevitable, I was committed to conduct the research with sensitivity, respecting and amplifying the participants' voices to enhance our understanding of migrant women's political participation in Europe.

⁷⁵ Mackenzie, McDowell, and Pittaway, 'Beyond "Do No Harm"', 309.

⁷⁶ Mackenzie, McDowell, and Pittaway, 309.

Findings and discussion

Change Makers' motivations for participation

The motivations of the Change Makers in the "AGENCY" project are pluralistic and multifaceted, stemming from lived experiences, a desire to contribute to their communities and host society, the transformative impact of motherhood and the ongoing struggle for social justice and integration.

Despite their varied socio-economic, ethnic and migratory background, all ten participants of my research linked their motivation to lived experiences, with refugees focusing on migration-related trauma and non-refugees on personal aspirations. Refugees such as Aisha Farshar, Hadia Ibrahim Khel, Mahnaz Peruz, and Meri Shirzai, who represent 40% of the participants, drew heavily on their traumatic experiences of displacement and persecution to fuel their agency. This aligns with findings of Umer and Elliot, who highlight the "ability to mould trauma into something that wields power."⁷⁷ Umer and Elliot's study utilises a positive psychological perspective that recognizes trauma as a catalyst for growth, emphasizing that traumatic experiences can empower individuals to advocate for their communities. This is consistently supported by my findings, which shows that refugee participants transform their trauma into a powerful motivator for political activism. Aisha, an Afghan refugee and women's rights activist of Hazara background now relocated in Sweeden, exemplified this driving force of lived experiences. Her dedication to advocate for migrant women was sparked by her experiences with gender-based oppression in Afghanistan, particularly when she translated for a 10-year-old girl married to an older man and subjected to severe abuse. " I was 22, double the age of her, and I was single. When I compared myself to her and heard the situation, I

⁷⁷ Umer and Elliot, 'Being Hopeful', 955.

couldn't continue translating, I couldn't stop my tears for her. (...) I remember that case, and I think that was one of the reasons why somehow my body promised me to go in the right direction and try to change the situation.” she shared.

The rest of 60% of participants, all non-refugee migrants such as Rania Al Najjar, Diana Maria Olsson, Rochelle Lazaro, Selah Tamiga, Iana Kopylova, and Sabina Ushmeokhavor, are motivated by factors such as education, family reunification, and personal growth. There is a visible difference in the depth of lived experiences that motivate their participation, creating a divide between refugee and non-refugee participants. However, 100% of participants share a common desire to give back and support their communities, which unites all Change Makers, despite their diverse backgrounds. Rania, a Lebanese woman living in Cyprus since 2010, exemplifies this perspective. While she doesn't speak from personal experience, her professional knowledge working with refugees and migrants fuels her dedication to strive for change. Her sense of duty to support those migrants without a voice in political processes, motivates her participation in the Agency project: "Their life is not safe. It makes me feel like I need to raise my voice. I need to talk about something that needs to be heard.” Rania's reason to participate also represents a recurring theme behind the Change Makers' motivations, namely realising their privileged position of having resources such as time, energy, money, and education, in contrast to the majority of other migrants who lack these advantages. This awareness led to a sense of responsibility to use their resources for the common good and fight for better opportunities for their community, in alignment with findings of Ortensi and Riniolo, who underscore that "addressing economic (...) conditions can incentivize activism among migrants."⁷⁸ The importance of addressing these economic and social conditions is echoed in the articles of the ICESCR, such as Article 6 and 7, which emphasize the right to work and

⁷⁸ Ortensi and Riniolo, 'Do Migrants Get Involved in Politics?', March 2020, 149.

favorable working conditions, and Article 13, which underscores the right to education⁷⁹. These rights are crucial for the integration and political participation of migrant and refugee women.

However, the high dropout rate of nearly 50% from the AGENCY project, as shared by Rosa González, the "AGENCY" Project Facilitator, underscores the critical need for social rights to ensure political participation. Many participants cited lack of resources and complications related to migration as primary reasons for their withdrawal. Out of 90 initial participants, only 50 remained, highlighting that without adequate social rights and support, migrant and refugee women cannot fully exercise their political agency. Rochelle, 34-year-old migrant women from the Philippines now residing in Ireland, emphasises the link between resources and political activity. She reflects, "I am politically active because I have the opportunity. I have the education, I have the resources, and I have the social support", which is emphasised by Aisha, who explains that not having family or children allows her to dedicate her time to political activities. This aligns with findings from Italy⁸⁰, which highlights that immigrant women often become "time-poor"⁸¹ as they try to reconcile full-time jobs with their roles as primary caregivers. This time scarcity, which also feeds into gendered socioeconomic power structures⁸² significantly limits their capacity for political engagement.

Moreover, participants feel a duty to leverage their relative advantages and use their newfound agency to advocate for systemic changes that benefit all migrants. Realising their interdependence, they aim to inspire fellow migrants to reach their potential, share their stories, and advocate for change. Meri, a 22-year-old Change Maker born to Afghan parents in Moscow, joined the project to reflect her journey of self-empowerment and inspire other migrant women. Initially uncertain of her voice, she realised her potential impact through her

⁷⁹ 'International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights | OHCHR'.

⁸⁰ Gatti, Buonomo, and Strozza, 'Immigrants' Political Engagement'.

⁸¹ Gatti, Buonomo, and Strozza, 5.

⁸² Piper, 'Gendering the Politics of Migration', 139.

participation in the "AGENCY" project: "I do have something to say. I could be a good example because it was hard on me as well." Affected by discriminatory experience as a Ukrainian woman in Greece, Iana also uses her lived experiences as a driving force to correct misconceptions and advocate for a more nuanced understanding of migrant contributions: "I think it mostly comes from my anger (...) to show that there is much more to migrant women."

Besides wanting to give back to their communities, participants also aim to contribute to the host society that welcomed them. Iana's complex feelings about identity and belonging underline the common desire to integrate and contribute, which was shared by all ten participants. This idea was reflected by Hadia, a 24-year-old Afghan asylum seeker in Italy, whose initial motivation to participate stemmed from her traumatic experiences under the Taliban and by a desire to make her voice heard in a society where she often feels alienated. This is also true for Mahnaz, who shares a sense of duty to use her experiences to advocate for broader changes and give back to her host society, sharing: "As an immigrant woman I want to participate in society. I'm here in Germany, and it is important to me."

Moreover, a recurring motivation among both migrant and refugee participants was motherhood, profoundly influencing their desire to join the "AGENCY" project, intertwining personal and political aspirations. Selah's traumatic experience of losing a child, underscores disparities in healthcare tied to citizenship: "the nurses in the hospital told me, if you were a citizen, we would have protected you." Similarly, Diana's custody battle and loss of her son deepened her commitment to advocating for migrant women in similar crises. On the other hand, Mahnaz, a 34-year-old refugee who fled to Germany after being targeted by the Taliban, now expecting her first child, contrasts her newfound safety with her past in Afghanistan. Her participation in the project is driven by a desire to create a peaceful world for her child, expressing hopes for "a Europe with no war and no powerful parties that are anti-immigration. I want a Europe in peace, a world in peace."

In conclusion, it is essential to recognise, that the motivations of the Change Makers are diverse and reflect the complex, multifaceted identities of migrant women and their various paths to activism, which are linked by the concepts of "power with"⁸³ and "power within"⁸⁴. Power within is demonstrated by the participants' intrinsic sense of self-worth, agency, and capacity to transform their traumatic experiences into powerful motivators for political activism, as exemplified by Aisha's commitment to advocate for migrant women after her experiences in Afghanistan. On the other hand, power with is manifested in their collective efforts and mutual support, exemplified by Rania's dedication to giving voice to marginalised migrants. Their personal investment in social justice makes them formidable agents of change within European democracy, each narrative contributing uniquely to the collective effort of shaping a more inclusive and empathetic society.

Exploring participants' concepts of agency

The Change Makers' definitions of agency provide a rich scope of interpretations that reflect their diverse experiences and cultural backgrounds. Much like their motivations, their understanding of agency is multifaceted, revealing key patterns such as advocacy, collaboration and representation, facilitating change, and personal autonomy. This aligns closely with Burke's approaches to understanding agency⁸⁵: resistance agency, empowerment agency, and instrumental agency. Moreover, this diversity in Change Maker's interpretation is crucial, especially considering that migrant women's agency is often rendered invisible in the political sphere⁸⁶.

⁸³ Gaventa, 'Finding the Spaces for Change'.

⁸⁴ Allen, 'Rethinking Power'.

⁸⁵ Burke, 'Women's Agency in Gender-Traditional Religions'.

⁸⁶ Anthias, Kontos, and Morokvasic-Müller, *Paradoxes of Integration*.

Aisha and Hadia share a perspective on agency that emphasises representation and collaboration, although from slightly different angles. Aisha defines agency as a medium for advocacy, stating, "Agency is representation for me, representing something or someone, an idea, or an ideology," highlighting its role in vocalising individual and collective aspirations. Hadia echoes this notion but adds a twist by emphasising a broader context that includes various stakeholders; she remarks that it means "Unique cooperation, not just from migrant women but also from external stakeholders," thereby expanding the view of agency as an inclusive collaborative framework, which aligns with Ferguson's definition of empowerment as "the ability to act with others to do together what one could not have done alone."⁸⁷

Iana and Rania's perspectives, aligned with Hadia's, offer a more action-based approach to agency, viewing it as a means to facilitate and enact change. "Power to" refers to an individual's ability to achieve specific goals, a concept crucial for understanding these action-oriented views of agency. Allen defines it as "the ability of an individual actor to attain an end or a series of ends,"⁸⁸ which resonates with Iana and Rania's interpretations. Iana characterises agency as "action to be heard", emphasising its assertive and expressive nature, while Rania describes it as "facilitating life", highlighting its supportive and enabling role. This form of power underscores individual potential and the capacity to shape one's life and environment, merging the expressive, facilitative, and transformative dimensions of agency. Meri and Rochelle emphasise an individualistic view of agency, personal power and independence, which is in alignment with feminist theorist Lois McNay's definition, who perceives agency as "the capacity for autonomous action in the face of often overwhelming cultural sanctions and structural inequalities."⁸⁹ This perspective perfectly reflects the concept of power within, as it highlights the intrinsic sense of self-worth and agency that enables individuals to recognise

⁸⁷ Piper, 'Gendering the Politics of Migration', 149.

⁸⁸ Allen, 'Rethinking Power', 35. Allen

⁸⁹ Lois McNay, 'Gender and Agency', 10.

their rights and value⁹⁰. Meri further exemplifies this, noting that agency involves "Taking things into your own hands (...) owning your life," and Rochelle defining agency as "independence." Both perspectives highlight the individual aspect and autonomy in agency, which is in harmony with the "power within" concept, as it involves a person's sense of self-worth and self-knowledge, grounded in an ethical value base that fosters a vision of human rights and responsibilities. Explained by Miller, it is "the capacity to imagine and have hope; it affirms the shared human search for dignity and fulfilment."⁹¹ I believe this form of power to be foundational to enabling participants to develop self-confidence and believe in their rights to make their voices heard, challenging the inherent power imbalance and exclusion in European democracy.

On the other hand, Mahnaz and Sabina emphasise a collectivist and pluralistic angle of agency. Mahnaz believes agency encompasses "creativity, sisterhood, the political participation and influence of migrant women in the EU parliamentary election process," linking it directly to political engagement and collective empowerment. Sabina's concept of agency as "pluralism" aligns with this, echoing the principles set out in Article 2 of TEU as well. Moreover, Mahnaz's focus on collective political participation, complemented by Hadia's emphasis on inclusive cooperation, resonates with the concept of "power with", which emphasises collective action and mutual support, essential for achieving shared goals. Allen defines it as "the ability of a collectivity to act together for the attainment of a common or shared end or series of ends." Acting collectively can help migrant and refugee communities generate a stronger impact and provide a sense of connectedness, which is crucial for social movements and political advocacy. This is further underscored by examples from Anderson's case study on Waling, a migrant domestic workers' organisation, and their support group,

⁹⁰ Lisa VeneKlasen and Valerie Miller, 'Power and Empowerment', 6.

⁹¹ Lisa VeneKlasen and Valerie Miller, 43.

Kalayaan⁹². These groups successfully forged citizenship "from below"⁹³ leading a successful campaign to ascertain legal status, demonstrating "power to" through their capacity to achieve goals and effect change via personal empowerment and collective action.

Understanding the impact of the "AGENCY" project

My next chapter explores the transformative impact of the "AGENCY" project on its participants, focusing on their perceptions of personal empowerment and their capacity to shape European democracy through the 2024 Parliament elections. The analysis reveals that all but one participant felt empowered through the program. The Change Makers highlighted four areas of empowerment: feeling politically influential, a sense of social impact, fostering supportive communities and gaining new knowledge. This chapter delves into their reflections and assesses the broader community impact on refugee and migrant women, highlighting that all form of civic engagement offers a sense of purpose, helping migrants reclaim agency and expand their social networks, as noted by Pajnik and Bajt⁹⁴ as well.

The project's most profound impact was transforming Change Makers into active political agents, which was true for all ten participants of my research and aligns with the concept of "power to". Rania's experience exemplifies this journey from non-involvement to active participation, facilitated by the project's framework: "I was not interested in European elections, democratic rules (...) but it was a beautiful experience, and it really opened my eyes." Moreover, many participants articulated a newfound understanding of the significance of each vote in shaping the political landscape. Aisha emphasised: "I got to understand that my

⁹² Anderson, 'Mobilizing Migrants, Making Citizens'.

⁹³ Anderson, 3.

⁹⁴ Anthias, Kontos, and Morokvasic-Müller, *Paradoxes of Integration*, 114.

vote as a citizen can affect, and it is really possible that citizens' votes can change the EU". This realisation encouraged her to appreciate the collective power of voting: "maybe, as one person, I could say my vote doesn't take any place in the whole election, but my vote, your vote, and ours do.", which collective realisation is an example of Allen's "power with" concept. A deeper examination of their narratives, particularly concerning the 2024 European Parliament elections, reveals that the EU elections served as a platform for realising this newfound political agency. This is crucial, since the international level of politics can enable refugees to exercise influence in ways that the national level does not allow⁹⁵, highlighting the importance of these platforms for political engagement.

This is exemplified by a noticeable pattern among the Change Makers, whose perception expanded from local to broader political arenas, illustrating the project's role in broadening their political vision. Mahnaz highlighted this shift, sharing that the project "showed us a new way to influence the European Parliament elections." Moreover, several participants contrasted their disinterest in the politics of their homeland with their newfound aspirations for political engagement in Europe. As Aisha explains, "I wasn't interested in politics in Afghanistan. I thought politics were nasty there. But in Sweden, I would like to participate", highlighting a shift to hopeful participation. Many research participants reported a deepened understanding of voting's significance in the context of the EP elections, which is exemplified by Meri, who shared: "We often overlook the European level of politics beyond the national level, which we are part of as well." This shows that by enhancing their feelings of "power to," Change Makers' sense of "power within" also grew, reinforcing their self-confidence and intrinsic motivation to participate in the political process.

⁹⁵ Schmalz, *Refugees, Democracy and the Law*, 76.

Participants' sense of empowerment also extends to their communities. Mahnaz discovered a new role in her community by identifying many eligible voters and encouraging them to participate in the European Parliament elections. She also expressed her growing confidence as a new member of German society, noting that the Agency project gave her the opportunity to make her voice heard, which was difficult to achieve on her own as a newcomer. Mahnaz's transformation underscores the importance of "power within," defined by Miller as the sense of self-worth and self-knowledge that allows individuals to recognize their human rights and responsibilities. Meri also expressed a shift in self-perception, recognising her ability to influence societal changes and her community. As the youngest interviewee at 22 years-old, Meri encourages others to overcome limitations imposed by age and other circumstances. This underscores a significant transformation in how she views her role within the broader social context, emphasising self-empowerment and proactive engagement, and highlights "power within," which is foundational for building self-confidence and recognising one's rights⁹⁶, as Green emphasises.

Moreover, several participants noted the project's role in creating a sense of community among migrant women. Hadia described the project as a gathering that transcends cultural and national boundaries, "It brings migrant women from all around the world together. It's not just Afghan women; it also includes Iranians, Pakistanis, Indians, Bangladeshis, and, all around the world. (...) we get to have this sisterhood community where we can share our stories, our contacts, and our network." The creation of a supportive community is the manifestation of "power with," which emphasises the strength derived from collective action and mutual support. All Change Makers shared the belief that the community aspect of the project is vital in providing emotional and social support, which is instrumental in empowering women to participate more actively in their new societies. This observation aligns with findings of Pajnik

⁹⁶ Duncan Green, *How Change Happens*.

and Bajt, who highlight that active civic engagement helps migrant women establish personal and social networks, which provide valuable contacts, a sense of achievement, empowerment, and community⁹⁷. By fostering such connections, projects like "AGENCY" assist migrant women to become active in the civic space and feel entitled to political participation in their host societies, thereby reinforcing their "power to" effect change collectively.

Empowerment through gaining knowledge was also a key theme in the interviews. Aisha shared that learning about women's rights in Europe inspiring her to be politically active. She found the information, statistics, and training provided by the "AGENCY" project highly motivating, a sentiment echoed by several participants. On the other hand, Hadia found the project highly impactful in enhancing her abilities and knowledge about EU policies, sharing that the program also enhanced her skills in public speaking at the EU level. She also emphasises the importance of education among the migrant community, noting, "The first key to any problem is education. The second is representation. (...) and the third is a sense of community.", highlighting the diverse impact of the project. Similarly, Sabina highlighted the project's role in raising awareness among both Europeans and migrants: "This is the best part of the agency: raising awareness on both sides." This empowerment through skill development and knowledge is a critical aspect of the project's impact on both vertical and horizontal levels and also reflects the European Commission's Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027, which promotes the inclusion of migrants and EU citizens with a migrant background in various aspects of society⁹⁸. Moreover, knowledge is crucial for both "power within" and "power to," enabling individuals to act independently and with confidence in their rights and abilities.

⁹⁷ Anthias, Kontos, and Morokvasic-Müller, *Paradoxes of Integration*, 113.

⁹⁸ 'European Commission's Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027'.

In conclusion, the "AGENCY" project has significantly empowered participants by enhancing their political influence, fostering community engagement, and providing valuable knowledge. Reflecting the concepts of "power to", "power with" and "power within", these elements collectively contribute to a stronger, more inclusive European democratic process. As Rochelle illustrates, "if ten people saw each and every single project, you multiply that by 60, then you get 600. That's a huge impact." Her perspective highlights the "power with" concept, demonstrating the exponential impact of collective action and awareness, as the program not only gives voice to migrant women but also raises awareness about their issues, fostering broader engagement and understanding within the community.

Barriers to political participation

The previous chapter highlighted that the program's most significant impact was transforming participants into active political agents, a crucial aspect of immigrants' integration in the receiving country⁹⁹. However, when discussing their political agency, the Change Makers repeatedly described systemic barriers, undermining their participation in European democracy. Their narratives reveal an interplay between internal resilience and external challenges, focusing on non-traditional channels of influence and thus practicing their "power to".

All nine non-EU citizens highlighted significant obstacles, particularly voting rights, that prevent their full political participation. Most prominently, participants' narratives illustrate the institutional and legal barriers to political participation, as Change Makers articulate the direct link between citizenship challenges and their political agency. Hadia's

⁹⁹ Gatti, Buonomo, and Strozza, 'Immigrants' Political Engagement', 2.

experience with Italian bureaucracy perfectly illustrates how legal barriers impede political engagement, emphasising the disenfranchisement that comes with lacking proper documentation: "You cannot vote if you don't have citizenship, if you don't have residency, or if you don't have any identification documents from Italy." Conversely, Selah, Rochelle, Hadia, Meri and Iana, previously excluded from political participation in their home countries due to age, now face citizenship constraints in their host countries, restricting their civic participation rights and social integration. This reflects a broader issue highlighted Schmalz, where refugees often experience dual exclusion, as their political membership in the state of origin is often suspended, while they simultaneously lack access to political participation in their host countries¹⁰⁰. Moreover, Aisha emphasised that acquiring citizenship could expand her opportunities to vote in the EU elections and even run for office aligning with Pajnik and Bajt's research, which asserts that the "acquisition of citizenship is (...) the most potent measure of integration into a society"¹⁰¹.

The complex interplay of citizenship norms and their implications for political engagement is outlined by Dalton, who states that political participation is essential to democratic citizenship, encompassing voting, standing for office, and broader civil engagement¹⁰². The study identifies two dimensions of citizenship: duty-based and engaged. Duty-based citizenship emphasises traditional participation, such as voting and obeying laws, aligning with Aisha's view that acquiring citizenship enables fulfilling civic duties and integrating into the political fabric of the host country. On the other hand, engaged citizenship involves direct and participatory political actions, such as involvement in civil society groups and political activism. The Change Makers in my research, who engage politically through non-traditional channels, exemplify engaged citizenship and the concept of "power to", raising

¹⁰⁰ Schmalz, *Refugees, Democracy and the Law*, 8.

¹⁰¹ Anthias, Kontos, and Morokvasic-Müller, *Paradoxes of Integration*, 99.

¹⁰² Dalton, 'Citizenship Norms and the Expansion of Political Participation', 80.

questions about their exclusion from legal citizenship and traditional political participation. Although traditional definitions of citizenship, emphasise political participation, autonomy, acceptance of state authority, and solidarity, it is essential to broaden our horizons¹⁰³. Migrant and refugee women, despite lacking formal citizenship and not fitting neatly into traditional definitions, fulfil many aspects of engaged citizenship through their active participation in non-traditional political channels. Recognising these contributions is crucial. Addressing systemic barriers and promoting both duty-based and engaged citizenship ensures these women are integrated and empowered, enriching the democratic fabric of Europe and making it more resilient and representative.

Apart from Diana, who is a European citizen, Rania is the only participant who no longer faces legal barriers to traditional participation and thus can practice "power over". She proudly shared that she now votes as a Cypriot citizen, having obtained citizenship two years ago and participated in the recent presidential election. Her active participation in elections contrast with findings of Bird, Saalfeld and Wüst, who show that voter turnout of migrants, including non-citizens and naturalized citizens, is consistently lower than the overall electorate¹⁰⁴. This research indicates that citizens with a migratory background participate less frequently in elections, although the turnout gap decreases with the length of residence in the country. Rania's engagement, driven by her participation in the "AGENCY" program, contrasts these trends and highlights the potential for increased political participation among migrants as they integrate into their host societies.

Meanwhile, Diana highlights a major finding from the interviews by drawing attention to the link between financial burdens and political activity: "I was thinking of finishing the project (...) because it damaged my bank account. You're doing a lot of work that is not paid."

¹⁰³ Dalton, 'Citizenship Norms and the Expansion of Political Participation'.

¹⁰⁴ Bird, Saalfeld, and Wüst, *The Political Representation of Immigrants and Minorities*, 57.

This statement underscores the broader issue of economic barriers in political participation, where the lack of resources can limit sustained engagement. This is supported by findings of Schäfer and Schwander, who consistently find that income inequality reduces voter turnout in rich democracies, suggesting similar dynamics might be at play among migrant communities in Europe¹⁰⁵. Exacerbated financial challenges, as reflected in Diana's experience, limit political engagement, highlighting how "political engagement is a gender process shaped by class"¹⁰⁶, meaning that economic status and gender inextricably linked to hinder political involvement for migrant women. Addressing these income inequalities is crucial for supporting sustained participation in projects like "AGENCY".

Moreover, Change Makers like Selah, Aisha and Rochelle express the emotional barriers to participation, often feeling resigned. This represents the lack of meaningful political inclusion on the individual level¹⁰⁷, which is illustrated by Rochelle who admits: "I don't even know how I maintain it. I don't know. I just keep going." This struggle is intensified by the discouraging contrast between the political systems in their countries of origin and European democracy, as Hadia and Sabina both observe the higher level of political participation in Europe compared to the countries they previously lived in.

Despite these systemic barriers, Change Makers demonstrated an unwavering belief in their "power to" and right to participate. They highlight their conviction in their meaningful contributions and the value they bring to the political landscape, supported by academic findings that showcase migrants' political engagement as vital for democratic societies¹⁰⁸. One prominent theme was their shared belief in the significant impact refugee and migrant women can have on European democracy. All Change Makers highlighted the strength migrant women can gain through unity and increased political knowledge, which highlights the importance of

¹⁰⁵ Schäfer and Schwander, "Don't Play If You Can't Win".

¹⁰⁶ Gatti, Buonomo, and Strozza, 'Immigrants' Political Engagement', 5.

¹⁰⁷ Kameri-Mbote and Kabira, 'SDG 5', 2.

¹⁰⁸ Ortensi and Riniolo, 'Do Migrants Get Involved in Politics?', March 2020.

"power with" in their experiences. This is echoed by Diana who states, "They can offer support with information and experience about equality internationally and across different cultures. It's beautiful that we have these differences." However, Rania further underscores the need for unity and organisation among migrant women, so this power can be harnessed and their concerns can be heard and addressed. She articulates a vision where collective action can lead to significant impacts, "When they all have one voice, they can positively impact Europeans, people who can vote." She further emphasises, "I always say in the choir that I am a conductor, but without the choir, I'm nothing." This metaphor highlights the essential nature of collective action in advocacy, since no significant change can be achieved in isolation.

Another significant finding was the realisation that Change Makers' experience with political participation in their home country contributes to their perceived "right" and ability to participate in European politics as well. Diana, who was already politically active in Lithuania, views her relocation to Sweden as a continuation of her civic engagement. "If I could do something good in my country, I can do something good in Sweden" she asserts, emphasising that her experiences in Lithuania's national television and working in the parliament have prepared her to contribute positively to European democracy. This finding is particularly insightful when viewed in light of broader academic discussions on transnational electoral behavior and political engagement among immigrants. The study of Mügge, Kranendonk, Vermeulen and Aydemir¹⁰⁹ indicate that voters engaged in homeland politics are often more interested in politics in their country of residence as well¹¹⁰, highlighting a zone of intersocietal convergence¹¹¹. This underscores that pre-migration experiences, such as exposure to oppressive political systems, can shape migrant and refugee women's political attitudes and behaviors in the new country¹¹². Diana's experience exemplifies this, as her active involvement in Lithuania

¹⁰⁹ Mügge et al., 'Migrant Votes "Here" and "There"'.

¹¹⁰ Mügge et al., 403.

¹¹¹ Mügge et al., 401.

¹¹² Gatti, Buonomo, and Strozza, 'Immigrants' Political Engagement', 5.

has not hindered her integration into Swedish society but instead prepared her to contribute effectively to European democracy. This supports the argument that political participation is a crucial aspect of well-functioning democracies, and that recognising and fostering this transnational dimension can enhance democratic practices within the European Union.

Research participants' narratives reveal that migrant and refugee women view themselves as vital contributors to European democracy, advocating for greater inclusivity and recognition of their potential. Despite systematic challenges and barriers to their participation, lacking "power over", they believe in the transformative power of sustained advocacy and "power with" and "power within". As Iana states, "everything that we do has some kind of result, even if it's small." Building on these findings, it is crucial to develop strategies to enhance the political participation of migrant and refugee women, ensuring positions of political power are accessible to all women regardless of age, socio-economic status, or geographical origin¹¹³, thereby strengthening European democracy. This inclusivity is vital for ensuring diverse representation in political decision-making, directly addressing the institutional barriers that the Change Makers face. My findings highlight the significant impact of citizenship on political participation. According to the International Migration Outlook 2023, countries that simplify citizenship and voting rights, as seen in the province of Nova Scotia in Canada¹¹⁴, and in Luxembourg, where recent electoral law amendments¹¹⁵, provide effective models which can mitigate the disenfranchisement experienced by participants like Hadia and Meri. Recognising the political agency of migrant women requires broadening the concept of citizenship and understand that "Citizenship is about political belonging beyond just legal status and rights."¹¹⁶ Citizenship should encompass political belonging and agency, allowing for the recognition of non-traditional forms of political participation. This expanded

¹¹³ Kameri-Mbote and Kabira, 'SDG 5', 4.

¹¹⁴ Bird, Saalfeld, and Wüst, *The Political Representation of Immigrants and Minorities*, 226.

¹¹⁵ OECD, *International Migration Outlook 2023*.

¹¹⁶ Lazar and Nuijten, 'Citizenship, the Self, and Political Agency', 4.

definition aligns with the engaged citizenship demonstrated by the Change Makers and reflects the view that citizenship is an "ethical project of working on the self to create good citizens"¹¹⁷ rather than a right.

Alternative routes of participation

After examining the structural barriers that prevent Change Makers from formally engaging in politics and understanding why they perceive their participation as crucial, the next section of my analysis delves into the alternative routes they have discovered for political engagement as a practise of their "power to".

Dalton addresses concerns about declining traditional electoral participation¹¹⁸, perceived as an erosion of civic capacities, and a shift from duty-based to engaged citizenship, noting that while voting rates may have decreased, other forms of political action have expanded according to empirical evidence¹¹⁹. He argues that this change does not indicate a decline in democracy but rather a transformation that can strengthen democracy by adapting to new forms of participation. Following Dalton's approach, this evolved form of democracy would be more equipped to include refugee and migrant participants by being receptive to the alternative ways they already exercise political agency. My findings align with contemporary research of unconventional participation as central to mainstream politics¹²⁰, and reveal three main strategies Change Makers' pursued to influence European politics: involvement with NGOs, influencing voters and decision-makers in the context of the 2024 EP elections, as well as their active engagement in the "AGENCY" project. These methods underscore Ortensi and

¹¹⁷ Lazar and Nuijten, 4.

¹¹⁸ Dalton, 'Citizenship Norms and the Expansion of Political Participation', 89.

¹¹⁹ Dalton, 89.

¹²⁰ Ortensi and Riniolo, 'Do Migrants Get Involved in Politics?', March 2020, 136.

Riniolo's idea that "there is more to politics than just voting"¹²¹, represent active citizenship¹²² and "power to". Change Makers' reports all confirm that while citizenship status enables traditional political participation, it is the "activity of political participation that fills citizenship with content"¹²³.

Many participants found alternative ways to express their political opinions through involvement in organisations and projects, which are among the most common forms of civic participation of migrant women according to the research of Pajnik and Bajt¹²⁴. They integrated into civil organisations, participated in conferences, work with NGOs such as the Hungarian Helsinki Committee and other charities advocating for women's and migrants' rights, and used platforms like the Cannes Film Festival to spread political messages.

Another significant pattern my research revealed, was the awareness among participants to exert political influence through lobbying for those with voting power. Mahnaz encapsulates this strategy, noting: "Maybe I can't vote straight, but I can try to talk with people who can vote and who can choose the right representative." This highlights a crucial aspect of political activism for those who are disenfranchised or lack direct voting rights. All participants in my research demonstrated a keen understanding that political influence extends beyond the ballot box. They aim to influence voters not only to participate in elections but also to support candidates and policies that advocate for more inclusive and supportive migration frameworks. Meri, for example, empowers eligible voters through educational events, emphasising the importance of understanding the electoral process and the power of individual votes. "I want them to see the influence they can have and the power they own just by being," she explains, highlighting her role in enhancing voter awareness despite her non-citizenship status. By engaging in conversations, raising awareness, and educating those who have the power to vote,

¹²¹ Piper, 'Gendering the Politics of Migration', 149.

¹²² Anthias, Kontos, and Morokvasic-Müller, *Paradoxes of Integration*.

¹²³ Schmalz, *Refugees, Democracy and the Law*, 45.

¹²⁴ Anthias, Kontos, and Morokvasic-Müller, *Paradoxes of Integration*, 114.

Change Makers ensure their voices are indirectly represented despite their disenfranchisement. Rochelle emphasised voters' direct influence in EU elections on decisions affecting the entire community, saying that "Those who can vote will be the ones making decisions for us." Similarly, Sabina noted that voting is the primary tool and power of society, illustrating the widely shared view of Change Makers, that political participation is essential for advocating personal and communal interests. Sabina also highlighted voting as crucial for personal power for migrant and refugee women: "Otherwise, if they don't vote, where else is their power? Their power is their vote."

A third way the Change Makers exercise political agency is through the "AGENCY" project itself, where their participation helps reframe migrant women as "deserving of democratic participation"¹²⁵ and highlights their potential as authoritative figures in the democratic discourse. Every Change Maker of the project, expressed that participation in the 2024 Parliament Elections is crucial. The importance of this participation in their views centres around the key motivations of representation, and impact on policy, which is seen as particularly crucial given the current socio-political climate in Europe concerning migration. Rania, Mahnaz and Hadia emphasised collective impact to influence EU policies. Hadia describes that "just one person with one campaign is not able to bring change to policies in the EU, but collectively we can", emphasising that Change Makers create numerous campaigns across several EU Member States, which are then assessed by ENoMW and used in their project report and recommendations to the EU. This means their impact on EU policy is both direct, through network membership, and indirect, by participating in the "AGENCY" program and submitting recommendations via the network. The research of Gatti, Buonomo, and Strozza¹²⁶ further highlights the key relevance of individual involvement in grassroots movements. It

¹²⁵ Reeves and Holvikivi, 'Migrant and Refugee Activists as Security Agents', 3.

¹²⁶ Gatti, Buonomo, and Strozza, 'Immigrants' Political Engagement'.

suggests that migrants involved in associations are more likely to be interested in politics¹²⁷, to participate, and to integrate into the societies in which they live.

Moreover, participants like Diana, Aisha, and Rochelle share personal experiences illustrating the project's impact and their vertical influence. Diana recalls a poignant moment from a photography exhibition in Brussels, where positive feedback reassured her that her efforts were making a difference. Aisha recounts delivering a speech at the European Parliament, using the platform to advocate for Afghan women, demonstrating how personal narratives can influence broader policy discussions. These experiences highlight the personal connections and emotional resonance from sharing one's journey and artistic expression.

To conclude this section of the findings, it was evident from participants' responses that without the right to vote, the Change Makers primarily understand political participation through the lens of the "AGENCY" project and through their newfound agency, which helps them to address "overlapping dynamics of inequality and power"¹²⁸, allowing their meaningful political participation. Moreover, this initiative significantly shapes their perceptions of agency, showing a strong correlation between their involvement and personal conceptualization of agency, as supported by findings from "Paradoxes of Integration: Female Migrants in Europe". Although, migrants' political participation remains "a central challenge to our democracy"¹²⁹, preventing the full realisation of democratic societies which require the equal participation of all residents, this chapter illustrates that migrant and refugee women still able to enhance European democracy through diverse and unconventional political participation, which is fueled by their faith in "power with" and "power within".

¹²⁷ Gatti, Buonomo, and Strozza, 6.

¹²⁸ Kameri-Mbote and Kabira, 'SDG 5', 2.

¹²⁹ Ortensi and Riniolo, 'Do Migrants Get Involved in Politics?', 1 March 2020, 1.

Political goals and views of Change Makers'

Having explored the alternative paths deemed effective by the Change Makers, the next section of my analysis will focus on the shared vision of collective impact held by all ten research participants as well as their advocacy goals in the context of the 2024 European Parliament elections.

The experiences and views of the Change Makers reflect a nuanced engagement with political issues from the perspective of refugee and migrant women in Europe. However, their narratives focus on pragmatic issues and systemic challenges rather than political programs. Without example, all ten Change Makers avoided traditional partisan language, instead focusing on concrete problems affecting their communities. For instance, Shariffa and Rania emphasise the complexities surrounding immigration status and residency rights. Shariffa's experience as an immigrant in Sweden highlights the barriers to citizenship faced by migrants who actively contribute to society. She points out that, even after eight years in the country, she has not been granted permanent residency and advocates for more straightforward and supportive policies for migrants to achieve permanent residency across Europe. Her perspective underscores a fundamental issue in European migration policies, the lengthy and often disheartening process to secure permanent residency or citizenship, which prevents refugees from "formal structures of political participation"¹³⁰ and formal ways to exercise their "power to". Iana's experience further underscores these challenges. She uses her frustration over the bureaucratic obstacles she faces in obtaining citizenship to fuel her advocacy work: "Unfortunately I don't have any voting power in Greece. And it's also related to my anger for a lot of years. You need a lot of years to get a passport in this country. I've been here for twelve years." Traditionally, citizenship grants access to rights and benefits unavailable to non-

¹³⁰ Schmalz, *Refugees, Democracy and the Law*, 4.

nationals. However, increasing international migration has blurred these distinctions. The 1992 Treaty of Maastricht¹³¹ enabled EU citizens residing in other member states to vote in local elections and stand as candidates. Prior to this, some countries had already granted local voting rights to non-nationals to facilitate immigrant integration. By the late 2000s, more than half of EU member states permitted non-EU nationals to vote in local elections¹³². While these evolving policies aim to integrate immigrants politically, personal stories like Iana's highlight persistent barriers. Despite these challenges, migrant and refugee women continue to enhance European democracy through diverse and unconventional political participation, demonstrating resilience and adaptability in their pursuit of greater inclusion and representation.

Shariffa's assertion that "They deserve to have citizenship by proving it, not by waiting several years" advocates for a merit-based system that recognises and rewards the contributions of migrants rather than a passive time-bound approach. Historical precedents support this perspective, such as early post-war immigration to the UK from Commonwealth countries, where immigrants were granted citizenship rights and immediate voting opportunities upon arrival¹³³. Similarly, the Netherlands granted municipal voting rights to foreigners in 1985, following Ireland and the Scandinavian countries, while in the Dutch system non-national inhabitants automatically receive voting rights after five years of legal residence¹³⁴. The historical contexts underscore the potential benefits of a merit-based approach to citizenship and voting rights, suggesting that integrating migrants through formal political participation can foster a sense of belonging and enhance their contributions to society. This is echoed by Meri, who recalls her active participation and socially engaged activism in Hungary but still handled as an outsider, not receiving citizenship: "If I do all this, why am I not worthy of being

¹³¹ 'Maastricht Treaty'.

¹³² Seidle, 'Local Voting Rights for Non-Nationals'.

¹³³ Bird, Saalfeld, and Wüst, *The Political Representation of Immigrants and Minorities*, 52.

¹³⁴ Bird, Saalfeld, and Wüst, *The Political Representation of Immigrants and Minorities*.

part of this society?" Her frustration highlights the shortcomings of current policies that fail to acknowledge migrants' contributions, treating them as perpetual outsiders despite their active engagement. The European Union's legal framework¹³⁵ emphasises political and civic participation for integration, recommending the right to vote and stand for election at municipal, regional, and European levels for immigrants and refugees after a specified residency period, to facilitate this, European governments should implement Article 34 of the 1951 Refugee Convention and Council of Europe Recommendation 564 (1969), which among others advocate for naturalisation by considering total residence periods, removing legal obstacles and ensuring accessible procedures. Measures promoting full participation of migrants and refugees in their new societies enhance diversity and democratic processes within the EU, emphasizing the need for inclusive, merit-based citizenship policies that recognize their contributions and foster a truly participatory political system¹³⁶.

Moreover, several of the Change Makers, like Rania, Hadia and Mahnaz, focus on specific rights such as education, work opportunities and integration. Rania insists on the importance of treating migrants fairly and providing them with work opportunities as means of solving many societal problems: "We need to give people work, not money to eat." Similarly, Hadia speaks passionately about the recognition of educational credentials for migrant women and the obstacles they face in the workforce: "the very first thing that I advocate for migrant women is education (...) The second would be work. (...) The third is psychological support." These perspectives align with of Pajnik and Bajt¹³⁷, which highlight that migrant workers significantly contribute to the working-age population in recipient countries, sustaining economic growth and complementing the native labor force without causing displacement. In the UK and Denmark, for example, healthcare and social services heavily rely on migrant

¹³⁵ 'EU Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) 2019-2024'.

¹³⁶ Jakab, 'Three Misconceptions about the EU Rule of Law Crisis'.

¹³⁷ Anthias, Kontos, and Morokvasic-Müller, *Paradoxes of Integration*.

women. Additionally, the European Commission found that without inward migration, the EU's population would have declined by 500,000 people in 2019, highlighting the vital demographic and economic contributions of migrants¹³⁸.

Mahnaz also stresses the importance of fighting anti-immigrant sentiments and creating laws that ensure equal civil rights for immigrants, as well as provide work opportunities: "The first serious issue is the fight against anti-immigrants. (...) Another issue is to provide the right opportunities for integrating immigrants, including entering the job market and academic settings." These views reflect a broader call for policies that recognise and protect the human dignity and potential of every individual, emphasising practical measures that facilitate integration and self-reliance, thus enabling migrants to contribute more effectively to their new societies.

Meri's perspective on democracy within the European Union adds another layer to this discussion. After being asked about her political views, she says "I don't really like to, how do I say it, group myself.", then she continues to express a preference for focusing on people rather than political spectrums. Her comments on enhancing democracy to make it more human-centric aligns with a broader desire among the Change Makers for a Europe that better serves its citizens, especially in places where democratic norms are under threat. Rochelle on the other hand, advocates from a clearly defined left-leaning political identity, focuses on tangible issues such as the safety and transparency of policies affecting migrants. She argues that without transparency and well-defined policies, efforts to be inclusive are merely superficial. This aligns with findings of Wüst, who identifies a common voting pattern among immigrants and their descendants, who tend to support left-wing parties more than centre-right parties, a trend that remains stable over the first two generations¹³⁹.

¹³⁸ 'Statistics on Migration to Europe - European Commission'.

¹³⁹ Bird, Saalfeld, and Wüst, *The Political Representation of Immigrants and Minorities*, 99.

Iana's criticism of the European Union's complacency reveals another facet of the desired change. She perceives a lack of motivation and drive within Europe to address pressing issues, stating, "Europe should become stronger." which is also supported by Diana.

Perspectives on European Democracy

After examining their political goals, the final chapter of my analysis will explore how the research participants perceive European democracy, despite the systemic barriers they encounter in their efforts to participate.

When asked about their transition to Europe and if this influenced their views on democracy, many Change Makers share intriguing details. Upon arriving in Europe, Aisha appreciated the clearer and more transparent democratic processes in Sweden compared to Afghanistan, particularly in terms of women's rights and legal integrity. "I think it is much easier here to get your voice heard, and democracy is followed here much more than in my country. Women's rights are better here than in Afghanistan," she notes, pointing out the significant improvements in her living conditions. Other participants also echo this notion. Rochelle expresses her frustration with the Philippines' corrupt political system, while Iana shares a similar sentiment, explaining that she moved to Europe because she recognised significant issues in Ukraine's political system that need substantial reform.

On democracy's role, they express nuanced appreciation intertwined with critical observations. Meri, drawing from her work experience with the Hungarian Helsinki Committee, underscores that democracy's declared support for human rights must be accompanied by a framework for accountability. Rania echoes this sentiment, emphasising the need for respect and basic rights within democratic settings, particularly the right to work, which she links to dignity and societal contribution. In contrast, Selah and Hadia offer more

critical perspectives. Selah succinctly describes democracy as "selective", suggesting that it does not always serve all equally. Hadia expands on Meri's point, highlighting contradictions between democracy's theoretical promises and its actual implementation, particularly concerning migrant integration and rights. Hadia's critique that "Democracy, if you were to translate it word for word, basically means the government of the people (...) However, when you compare it to the democracies right now, it seems like the power is a monopoly of either one gender, one race, or one religion." underscores a fundamental disconnect between the ideal of democracy and its practice. Historically, the term democracy derives from *demos*, meaning people or administrative unity, and *kratos*, meaning rule or governance, translating to "rule of the people." The Roman law principle *quod omnes tangit ab omnibus approbari debet*, meaning "what affects everybody, must be approved by everybody,"¹⁴⁰ further reinforces the ideal, that true democratic governance requires the approval and participation of all affected parties. However, migrants and refugees continue to be marginalised from the political sphere due to restrictive laws, institutional barriers, discriminatory cultural practices and policies¹⁴¹, leading to a significant discrepancy in contemporary European democratic practices. To prevent "post-democracy" and the "hollowing out of democracy," where formal democratic structures exist but lack meaningful connection to the citizenry¹⁴², it is essential to ensure the political inclusion and participation of refugee and migrant women. By promoting their integration and enabling their full participation in democratic processes, we strengthen the legitimacy and representativeness of democratic institutions. Hadia's critique thus highlights the need for a more inclusive and representative democratic practice that aligns with democracy's foundational principles.

Regarding the most valued aspects of European democracy, all Change Makers agree

¹⁴⁰ Schmalz, *Refugees, Democracy and the Law*, 70.

¹⁴¹ Kameri-Mbote and Kabira, 'SDG 5'.

¹⁴² Jakab, 'Three Misconceptions about the EU Rule of Law Crisis'.

on the importance of inclusion, freedom and the right to participate in the political process. Aisha expresses “I love democracy because everyone has rights. Right to talk. Right to choose.” Rochelle connects to this perspective, sharing “I value freedom of speech.” This sentiment is reflected in Iana's emphasis on freedom as the most cherished aspect of democracy, linking it to protection and the ability to act freely. These perspectives align with findings of "Paradoxes of Integration: Female Migrants in Europe," which highlights that human rights discourse and political activism is prominent in female migrants' narratives, underscoring their awareness and preparedness to participate in European democracy. The Change Makers' experiences in my thesis reflect these broader findings, further emphasising the need for democratic practices to truly embody the principles of inclusion and freedom.

Moreover, these values resonate with the EU's aspirations as a "global normative actor"¹⁴³ expressed by Gráinne de Búrca, as well as the "maximalist myth"¹⁴⁴ described by Smismans, suggesting that fundamental rights have always been central to the EU's identity. However, Change Makers' critiques highlight the discrepancy between these ideals and practical realities in Europe. While the EU seeks to project an image of robust democracy and human rights protection, implementation often falls short. Although investing in girls' and women's right to political participation is a necessary step to achieving gender equality and democratic governance¹⁴⁵, the experiences of the Change Makers highlight the need for the EU to bridge this gap, ensuring its democratic practices genuinely reflect its foundational principles of inclusion, freedom, and equal participation for all as expressed in Article 2 of the TEU.

¹⁴³ Gráinne de Búrca, 'The Road Not Taken.Pdf', 5.

¹⁴⁴ Smismans, 'The European Union's Fundamental Rights Myth', 88.

¹⁴⁵ Kameri-Mbote and Kabira, 'SDG 5'.

Conclusion

My thesis has explored the underutilised potential of migrant and refugee women's political participation as a critical element in fortifying European democracy, which involvement can be comprehensively understood through the framework of power to, power with, and power within. Through interdisciplinary qualitative research, including semi-structured interviews with Change Makers from the "AGENCY" project, this study demonstrated that recognising and empowering these women can reinvigorate democratic participation.

Since the 1990s¹⁴⁶, rising levels of immigration have become an "established feature of contemporary social and economic life"¹⁴⁷ within the EU, with over 82 million migrants residing in Europe, which exceeds 10% of the population in the majority of EU member states, and will consistently rise according to the World Migration Report 2022¹⁴⁸. Despite their substantial presence, migrant women remain marginalised in political decision-making processes. As political participation "represents one of the essential dimensions of immigrants' integration in the receiving country"¹⁴⁹, it is crucial to recognise, that without integration, the European Union is even more exposed to the jeopardizing elements of the far-right as well as other internal and external conflicts. Moreover, migrant and refugee women's exclusion from political participation raises fundamental questions about the alignment of democratic principles with current practices, denying almost a tenth of Europe's population the basic necessities of democracy, participation and equality. Therefore, recognising and integrating migrant and refugee women into Europe's democratic fabric is essential for the sustainability

¹⁴⁶ Anthias, Kontos, and Morokvasic-Müller, *Paradoxes of Integration*, 26.

¹⁴⁷ Piper, 'Gendering the Politics of Migration', 140.

¹⁴⁸ 'WORLD MIGRATION REPORT 2020'.

¹⁴⁹ Gatti, Buonomo, and Strozza, 'Immigrants' Political Engagement', 2.

and resilience of European democracy. To strengthen the democratic system, we need to return to its true meaning, and embrace inclusivity and participation for all. Therefore, I believe that migrants' political participation emerges not only as problem, but as a fortifying force, a remedy for integration challenges and a catalyst for the realisation of a genuinely inclusive democracy.

The "AGENCY" project has been pivotal in empowering migrant and refugee women, transforming them into active political agents capable of influencing European democracy. The Change Makers' political agency is evident from their increased awareness of democratic processes and community engagement. Their narratives reflect a shared vision of collective impact and advocacy goals, particularly in the context of the 2024 European Parliament elections. Despite facing systemic barriers, the Change Makers' unwavering belief in their right and ability to participate in European politics is a testament to their resilience and determination. Their involvement in alternative forms of political participation, such as grassroots movements and community initiatives, underscores the importance of non-traditional civic actions in enriching the democratic fabric of Europe.

My research underscores the significant barriers that refugee and migrant women face in political participation, including legal, socioeconomic, and cultural obstacles. These systemic barriers, however, do not diminish the unique perspectives and strengths that these women bring to democratic processes. My research advances the understanding of migrant and refugee women's political agency through showcasing their critical role in enhancing European democracy by going beyond existing research. Unlike previous studies, it highlights non-traditional forms of political engagement, such as photovoice campaigns, demonstrating their effectiveness in amplifying voices and influencing policy. By focusing on their unique perspectives and strengths, this study reveals their transformative potential as a vital force for democratic resilience. These findings advocate for policy changes to support and recognise the

contributions of migrant and refugee women, offering actionable insights for fostering a more inclusive and participatory democratic framework in Europe.

In conclusion, the active involvement of migrant and refugee women is essential for realising a truly inclusive and participatory democracy. Their agency, resilience, and commitment to civic participation are integral to the strength and sustainability of European democratic institutions. As Europe continues to navigate complex political challenges, embracing the contributions of these women will ensure that the democratic values of human dignity, freedom, and equality are fully realised for all residents. By adopting inclusive policies, challenging traditional norms, and fostering engagement through various channels, Europe can pave the way for a more representative and participatory democratic landscape, fortifying the democratic fabric and upholding the EU's foundational values of equality, freedom, and respect for all residents—truly embodying the slogan "United in diversity"¹⁵⁰.

¹⁵⁰ 'EU Motto | European Union'.

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