

Navigating Discourses: Masculinities, Racialisation and Vulnerabilities

Rachid's journey

I met Rachid in the federal asylum camp where I conducted a large part of my research. He always managed to keep himself busy in the facility, which was a challenge due to the idleness people were subjected to. Diligently, he made sure that all the plastic tea glasses that were scattered around the compound found their way back to the kitchen. In general, he was polite and seemed to get along with both the staff and the other residents.

In his North African country of origin, Rachid told me, he left school when he was 13 and started working from a young age because his family depended on his financial contribution. He remembered his youth as quite wild, with minimum control from his parents. He would meet up with friends, drive around on his scooter and play sports. He also experienced his first relationship with a woman – and was profoundly disappointed by her. However, he later married another woman with whom he had a daughter. This relationship did not last long, and Rachid's wife took their daughter and left the flat they shared.

As Rachid told me, it was these family problems, but also financial difficulties, that prompted him to go to Italy in 2006 when he was 29 years old. With the help of smugglers, he reached Italy by boat via Libya. His mother was already living in Italy with her new husband and supported Rachid during his first years there. Rachid hoped to work in Italy so that he could afford to divorce his wife – which he actually did after some time – and start a new life.

'I arrived in Italy. It was a different thing [to what I had imagined]. It was not what they say in our country. That is not true. There was no difference [to the life in my country of origin]. ... Even there was no work in Italy. Italy has become full, full, full of migrants. You don't find any work. ... I sold some things on the market. ... Later, in winter, I worked in agriculture. I collected olives, also oranges,

kiwis. ... And later, the law of 2009 came, the law to make the *sanatoria*, to make documents.' (Interview in Switzerland in 2014)

In 2011, Rachid succeeded in regularising his status in Italy due to a specific regularisation programme in Italy, the so-called *sanatoria*, which allows employers to apply for a residence permit for irregular workers so that they can legalise their stay and work activities (Sciarra and Chiaromonte, 2014: 123). Rachid told me that he had to pay 2,000 euros for someone to organise an employment contract for him, which was a requirement to qualify for the *sanatoria* programme (see also Tuckett, 2018: 15f).

With an Italian residence permit he was now able to travel to his country of origin, where he could finally see his daughter again, who was already five years old at the time. Back in his home country, Rachid wanted to give his marriage another chance, as he also wanted to be closer to his child. And so he married his daughter's mother for the second time.

However, Rachid soon returned to Italy for work reasons. This time he went to Central Italy where, he said, he sold merchandise on the beach. After a year, he moved back to his country of origin. This time he even resumed his former job as a taxi driver but was unable to earn enough money. Rachid remembered this time as difficult and recounted that he was constantly tired – 'both morally and physically'. Following the failure of their marriage, Rachid divorced his wife a second time and returned to Europe – but this time he left for France.

I asked him why he decided to go to France, to which he replied: 'Because I speak some French. I did not have difficulties in communicating with people. However, his situation in France was difficult.' He said that he did not receive any support from his fellow citizens living in France. 'They have changed, they don't help you. They have become French.' He stayed in France for four months but could only find work for a few weeks.

'I did not work for three months. I did not work. ... There is an association where you go and eat, take a shower. ... It's like Italy. ... You lose much time just for moving around.' (Interview in Switzerland in 2014)

Rachid still had valid papers in Italy, which allowed him to travel within the Schengen area, but not to work in European countries other than Italy. Lacking good contacts in France, it was not possible for Rachid to find a job in the informal labour market, and he decided to return to Italy where he also had to renew his residence permit. He was able to stay with relatives in Italy and tried for three months to find work, but again he was unsuccessful. Then he moved to a town in Northern Italy, hoping that the job situation would be better there.

'I heard that in [North Italian city] there is much work. But these are lies. There is nothing. I made requests at the work agency. I left my CV. However, nothing. It was like the first time [I came to Italy].' (Interview in Switzerland in 2014)

Rachid described how he was homeless during this time and had to resort to makeshift solutions. When a friend recommended that he apply for asylum in Switzerland, he hesitated at first. He said, 'I have never done asylum and I never thought about doing it'. However, his friend convinced him:

'My friend told me that they would give me some work. ... Better than having nothing at all. Even 10 francs a day or 20 francs is something. "You will find a place to sleep and take a shower" [my friend said].' (Interview in Switzerland in 2014)

Once in Switzerland, however, Rachid's asylum application was rejected within a short time because he had already obtained documents in Italy. After four months in Switzerland (including one month in a deportation prison), he was deported back to Italy.

A year and a half after our first meeting in Switzerland, I interviewed Rachid again, this time in Germany. He was now almost 40 years old and did not seem to be in good shape. Some of his teeth were missing and I got the impression his living conditions were still very precarious.

Rachid recalled that shortly after arriving in Italy, he left the country again and travelled by train toward Germany. Originally, he wanted to go to Sweden, but since it was winter and very cold at the time, he spontaneously decided to stay in Germany instead of moving even further north. During our conversation, Rachid compared his situation in Germany with that in Italy:

'It is good. No – it is the same thing but different. It is a little different. Also, there are opportunities. If you have papers here, it is not like Italy. It is expensive, but you can live. Without asking for asylum and all that. ... In Italy, I searched for two years for work. Two years! Here, I searched for two weeks, and I found something.' (Interview in Germany in 2016)

Rachid stated that upon arriving in Germany he was able to stay in a homeless shelter for some time before he then managed to arrange a room of his own at an acquaintance's place. Having made some contacts with Arab people in the city, he was supported in finding a job in the informal labour market. However, these jobs were only temporary and did not offer much stability. Nevertheless, at the time of our encounter in Germany Rachid seemed hopeful that he would soon be able to exchange his Italian documents, which he had renewed every year, for a permanent residence permit. This would allow him to work throughout the European Union. Regarding his Italian papers, he said, 'Italy has given me only documents. ... How can I explain? Their only value is [that they allow me] to cross borders. That is their value for me.'

I asked him how he feels now in Germany. He said:

'I don't feel well. ... I feel like when I came for the first time when I entered Italy without documents. That's how I feel now as well. ... You feel like a clandestine.

I became a clandestine after I had documents and everything.' (Interview in Germany in 2016)

After our conversation, we went for a walk through the city centre. At one point Rachid glanced at me and said, with a look of exhaustion, 'Without documents, you're worthless. I am nothing. I count nothing.' He had not yet succeeded in finding what he had wished for: 'It's my dream to live in peace. Live in peace. That's it. And afterwards ... when I have the means, I want to think about starting a family.' He expressed his desire to fulfil this dream in his country of origin, where he wanted to return and work as a cab driver again. But to do so, he would first have to earn enough money in Europe to be able to afford a car.

When I switched off the recording device after my second interview with Rachid, he seemed worried about an observation he had shared during our conversation. It was a comment about how the world had changed after the 9/11 terrorist attacks and how it had become more difficult for Arabs (than for people from Latin America or India, as he said) to find work in Italy. Although I did not find his comment particularly problematic, he seemed to fear that it would put him in a potentially vulnerable situation, as suspicion of Muslims had become pervasive in the Western world. I was surprised by his concern, especially since Rachid had also revealed information that seemed more sensitive, such as regarding his informal employment and the acquisition of illegal documents – both aspects that put him at risk of prosecution. However, he seemed mainly concerned about being associated with terrorism or fundamental Islam.

Most of my interviewees came from countries with a high proportion of Muslims and identified themselves as Muslims. Only five of my key research participants from West Africa, and one from North Africa, had a Christian background. Much of the public discourse on unwanted migration today revolves around the association of migrants with militant Islam. In addition, images of migrants from Africa circulate, linking them to criminal networks (such as media reports on people from Nigeria who are often associated with drug dealing; see, for example, [RTL NEWS, 2019](#); [NZZ, 2021](#)). My conversation with Rachid shows how this public discourse about and portrayal of certain migrant groups permeates everyday interactions in that individuals feel pressurised to distance themselves from terrorism and criminal behaviour, testifying to the pervasive atmosphere of mistrust towards migrants – in particular male migrants with a Muslim background.

Migrant men are often portrayed as potentially dangerous in public and political discourse. It has been argued that such a representation is often instrumentalised to enforce and legitimise restrictive migration policies

(Scheibelhofer, 2017). This was the case, for example, after the ‘Event Köln’ (Dietze, 2016) when sexual assaults by ‘North African-looking men’ were reported on New Year’s Eve 2015 (see also Yurdakul and Korteweg, 2021). The incidents were highly publicised in the media, and political demands to expel ‘those who were believed to endanger post-feminist Germany’ (Boulila and Carri, 2017: 286) followed. This incident is just one of several cases where calls for the protection of women fuelled the demand for tougher migration law enforcement, serving nationalist agendas (Farris, 2017; Wyss, 2018).

These public discourses contribute to the social construction of certain migrant masculinities – particularly those with a Muslim and/or African background. Such racialised and gendered public images manifest themselves in the narratives and experiences of men with a precarious legal status who are often portrayed in the media and by politicians as ‘bogus refugees’ or discussed in the context of ‘asylum abuse’ in order to imply that they do not ‘deserve’ legal inclusion or access to support structures.

In this chapter, I will describe the group of people this book is about. However, I am not interested in delineating their socio-cultural ‘identity’. Given the heterogeneity of their backgrounds, this would be an impossible undertaking. Rather, I attempt to explore how this – however heterogeneous – group of people is legally, politically and discursively constructed. Bridging the literature on migrants’ ‘deservingness’ with work on the social construction of migrant masculinities, I examine the production of the ‘undeserving other’ and its impact on migrants with a precarious legal status from an intersectional perspective. Exploring the question of how gender-specific experiences of racism, criminalisation, but also incapacitation manifest themselves in the everyday life of male migrants with a precarious legal status, the chapter thus provides a counter-narrative to the public discourse by shedding light on the gendered experiences, affective needs and vulnerabilities of migrant men.

Some authors have rightly criticised that attributing vulnerability¹ to certain groups of people risks disregarding their agency (Ticktin, 2017). However, I use the term here deliberately because this book is about young heterosexual migrant men, who are often fundamentally denied vulnerability in political discourse, as vulnerability is usually attributed to women, children, people identifying as LGBTIQ*, people with health problems and older people. Indeed, ‘gendered expectations regarding men’s agency and strength may actually increase their vulnerability’ (Griffiths, 2015: 483f). However, my point is not to label male migrants as vulnerable a priori, but rather to draw attention to certain male-specific vulnerabilities that arise from men being denied vulnerability.

The chapter first explores the question of how migrant men with a precarious legal status are portrayed in public discourse. With reference to

literature on migration and gender, the second section underlines the need for an intersectional analysis of men's migration processes. Such an analysis allows for shedding light on how the 'undeserving other' is a gendered and racialised social construction, which is based on the colonial image of the 'threatening foreigner'. Drawing on my fieldwork and interviews, I then explore how such gendered and racialised images of migrants affect law implementation, but also permeate into migrants' personal lives and push them to react to these negative representations. This chapter thus also illuminates how my interlocutors are forced to navigate not only complex laws and regulations, but also discourses and stereotypes that exclude and 'other' them.

Constructing the 'undeserving other'

Given the heterogeneity of national and socio-economic backgrounds, migration motives and the fluidity of legal categories, I have already pointed to the difficulty of applying clear-cut categorisation to individuals with a precarious legal status ([Chapter 1](#)). Rather than focusing on a nationality, an ethnicity or a specific legal category of people, I have chosen to look at a group of people who are socially constructed as the 'undeserving other', thereby also not running the risk of perpetuating otherness on the basis of cultural attributions ([Abu-Lughod, 1991](#)). Instead, this chapter aims to reverse the gaze and examine how the European migration regime discursively, politically and legally creates 'undeserving others' in the first place and the consequences this has on the lives of those concerned. The ways my interlocutors are represented in the public are underpinned by gendered, racialised and classed rationales shaping their experiences of in- and exclusion.

In recent years, marginalised male migrants have been at the centre of media and political attention in European countries and have often been used as scapegoats to justify harsher border controls or security measures. Negative connotations such as 'fraudulent asylum seekers' or 'economic migrants' serve to discursively portray certain migrants as 'undeserving' and to distinguish them from those who are seen as 'deserving' ([Malloch and Stanley, 2005](#); [Sigona, 2018](#)).² Deservingness is 'a core and long-used tool of governmentality' ([Patel, 2015: 11](#)) and shapes the relationship of an individual to the state. In the context of migration, it refers to the 'extension of entitlements and social and citizenship rights to those who cross national boundaries' and defines 'whether or not [migrants] are viewed as deserving of such support, which in turn is based largely on the discursive framing of border-crossers' motives for migrating' ([Yarris and Castañeda, 2015: 64](#)). Consequently, attributions of deservingness are important preconditions for access to rights and support services – both in relation to state authorities

(Ataç, 2019; Kraler, 2019) and civil society actors (Kalir and Wissink, 2016). The legal procedures my interlocutors have experienced mostly define them as undeserving of protection – and in many cases, also of the right to work and reside in Europe. Such attribution of ‘undeservingness’ legitimises in turn the implementation of strict and often-excluding laws and practices (Lynn and Lea, 2003).

There are different grounds on which deservingness is attributed to non-citizens (Chauvin and Garcés-Masareñas, 2014): on the one hand, there are performance-based rationales (such as successful ‘integration’ in the country of residence) emphasising the neoliberal underpinnings of mechanisms of inclusion (Matejskova, 2013). On the other hand, there are vulnerability-based rationales, which are, for instance, related to a person’s persecution in the country of origin, or to health issues (Fassin, 2012). In my opinion, what is often missing is an intersectional analysis (Yuval-Davis, 2006) of those aspects that influence the assessment of deservingness. It is important to analyse the ways in which deservingness is attributed to some people and not others from a perspective that takes into account the role of race, gender and class. I will first focus on the role of race and class in this section, before then looking in depth at the role of masculinity in the attribution of deservingness in the next section.

The current production of the ‘undeserving other’ needs to be understood in a tradition of colonial othering (among many others, see, Said, 1979; Abu-Lughod, 1991) as the construction of the ‘dangerous male perpetrator’ perpetuates colonial thought patterns and knowledge categories (Castro Varela et al, 2010: 179), reproducing racialised images of non-European others. Processes of racialisation differentiate people based on attributions of ‘racial and/or ethnic subordination caused by societal, political and historical processes, which has constituted racial identities, privileges, and discriminations’ (Keskinen and Andreassen, 2017: 65). Importantly, these socially constructed and ascribed differences, in turn, normalise and legitimise power inequalities and are materialised in people’s everyday lives (Keskinen and Andreassen, 2017: 65) inflicting upon them structural violence (Galtung, 1969). This structural violence is inscribed in and reproduced through the precarity of migrants’ legal status.

Often, the racialisation of marginalised migrants is related to anti-Muslim racism that associates migrant men *a priori* with patriarchal Islam and the oppression of women (Hess et al, 2016a). Indeed, ‘looking “like a Muslim” is to become hyper-visible and racialized as a type of danger’ (Mayblin and Turner, 2021: 142), which is mirrored in the interview fragments presented later in this chapter. Such social constructions of the ‘other’ also determine who is seen as belonging to a national community – and especially who is seen as not belonging – and can thus serve the agenda of political nationalism (Dahinden et al, 2018, 2020). Lastly, racialisation

always intersects with class hierarchies. Attributions of ‘deservingness’ must therefore always be considered in the context of a neoliberal capitalism that includes the ‘other’ only under conditions of its productive labour force (Rajaram, 2018).

In short, ascriptions of (un)deservingness describe and affect the positioning of individuals within the migration regime, which in the case of my interlocutors manifests itself in the (legitimation of the) precarity of their legal status. In the public discourse, the protagonists of this book are frequently represented as ‘fraudulent refugees’ or potential ‘perpetrators’, and, at the same time, due to their mostly low-class background they are not welcomed as skilled workers who promise to benefit the labour market, as they are often ‘unable to valorise their body power’ (Rajaram, 2018: 628).

Gendering the ‘undeserving other’

In general, the ‘bad migrant’ is a man. (de Noronha, 2015: 9)

Discourses on unwanted migration, which subject male (often Muslim) migrants with a precarious legal status to a specific (racialised) suspicion are highly gendered (Allsopp, 2017; Scheibelhofer, 2017). As de Noronha argues in the earlier quote, the typical figure of the undeserving migrant is represented as male. Griffiths (2015: 469) notes that ‘gender is an unspoken but critical dimension of the creation and management of the “failed asylum seeker” immigration category’. And Khosravi (2011: 77) argues that ‘[i]n the case of Muslim men, the gender and racial aspects of the border intersect, making Muslim men the main targets of the current border regime’. Indeed the public discourse on the fight against terrorism is often blended with the discourse on unwanted migration, which is quickly identified as a major gateway for terrorists. Hence, migrant men run the risk of being perceived and socially constructed as dangerous. Whereas the male gender generally entails being advantaged, I argue that there are certain male-specific vulnerabilities worth mentioning, resulting from male migrants’ predominantly negative public image in combination with generalised attributions of male strength (Wyss, 2018).

Studying the effects of ascriptions of undeservingness from an intersectional perspective includes considering how ‘different social categories mutually constitute each other as overall forms of social differentiation or systems of oppression’ (Christensen and Jensen, 2014: 69). As Christensen and Jensen (2014: 69) write, ‘masculinity can intersect with other categories in specific configurations that challenge or even subvert male privilege’. The male gender of my interlocutors attributes them a particular position within the migration regime, an aspect that deserves still little attention in migration and border studies.

Until the 1980s, migration research mostly lacked a perspective on gender. Men were seen as the ‘universal reference’, which led to the invisibility of women in migration processes – even though women have always been present in migratory movements (Morokvašić 2015, 356). Whereas early studies on migration have often focused on single ‘young economically motivated male’ (Morokvašić 2015: 358), attention to the ‘feminisation of migration’ (Castles and Miller, 1998) has shed light on women’s migratory experiences (see also Phizacklea, 1983). The critique by feminist migration scholars resulted in increasing awareness of gender as an essential structuring aspect of migration experiences as well as of the governance of migration. This has led to a growing number of studies paying attention to women’s migration patterns and experiences (among many others see, Phizacklea, 1983; Morokvašić, 1984; Constable, 1997).

Whereas the invisibility of women in migration studies has been reduced, it has been noted that gender-sensitive explorations of male migrants’ lived realities remain rare (Krause and Scherschel, 2018) and that ‘gender’ is often used as a ‘substitute’ for women (Morokvašić, 2015). Similar to other research fields, engagement with gender more often addresses women than men, which strengthens the conceptualisation of men as the ‘unmarked’ category (Wyss, 2018). While research on precarious migration is often based on interviews where the majority of research participants are male (see, for instance, Collyer, 2007; Schapendonk, 2011; Bhatia, 2015), many studies nevertheless rarely consider gender as a structuring category of the migration process. In recent years, however, there has been an increase in contributions to constructions of migrant masculinities and male migrants’ experiences (see, for instance, Ahmad, 2011; Charsley and Wray, 2015; Griffiths, 2015; Allsopp, 2017; Ingvars and Gíslason, 2018; Scheibelhofer, 2018; Turner, 2019; Wyss and Fischer, 2021). Much of this literature draws on Connell’s (2005) book *Masculinities* and particularly her notion of ‘marginalised masculinities’, which refers to men who are disadvantaged, for instance, because of their class, their sexuality or race, and which thus takes an intersectional approach to study the lived experiences of men.

The representation of male migrants and refugees is ambivalent and revolves around a broad spectrum of racialisation, emasculation and criminalisation (Khosravi, 2009; Wyss and Fischer, 2021). In relation to male asylum claimants, for instance, Griffiths (2015) states a certain contradiction: on the one hand, they are demonised to a certain extent, which leads to a securitisation of migration policy, and on the other hand, men experience emasculation, as they are basically made dependent on authorities and support structures. Mainwaring (2016: 290) emphasises the temporality and spatiality of such ambivalent ascriptions: boat refugees may be portrayed as victims

on a dangerous journey across the Mediterranean Sea, only to ‘become risky, securitized bodies, possible villains, who must be detained’ after their arrival on European territory. This fluidity of representation is reflected in the interrupted journeys of my research participants, who move along a continuum between being surrendered to a humanitarian regime (Fassin, 2012) and having to grapple with securitisation, surveillance and lack of support. This highlights their requirement to adapt quickly to changing expectations and adjust practices and tactics to the respective context.

Some scholars have pointed to the productive role of gendered discourses regarding migrants with a precarious legal status (Dietze, 2016; Farris, 2017). Scheibelhofer (2017: 97), for instance, illustrates how political discourse in Austria on ‘foreign masculinity’ was used ‘to portray refugees as a threat to society, to delegitimise solidarity with them and to argue for restrictive measures’. Similarly, in the aftermath of the incidents in Cologne, the appropriation of feminist argumentation by conservative groups served to strengthen the narrative on the threatening Muslim migrant other, which ultimately was used for nationalist purposes (Boulila and Carri, 2017). As Ticktin (2016: 285) argues, ‘through a discourse against sexual violence, men of North African and Muslim origin are excluded as barbaric and uncivilized, and now as violators of women’s human rights’; sexual violence is indeed more likely to be problematised when it is perpetrated by the identified other.

What is often missing in contributions on migrant masculinities is an analysis of the consequences of such gendered and racialised images on migrants’ lived experiences (but see Griffiths, 2015; Scheibelhofer, 2018). As Rowe (2009: 19) has argued, whereas the vulnerabilisation of particular groups of women are ‘sound and defensible, the emphasis not only reifies patriarchal notions of feminine weakness but neglects the often severe vulnerability of particular groups of men’. While there is a certainly necessary trend towards growing awareness that migrant women need specific support (Hess et al, 2016a), I find it essential to explore how gender-sensitive measures are often accompanied by a certain de-vulnerabilisation of migrant men, who are implicitly presumed to be strong and who, as a consequence, receive less attention and support (Schuster, 2003; Freedman, 2007).

The negative image of (Muslim) migrant men has been very present in the narratives of my interlocutors and amplifies their feelings of exclusion, stigmatisation and precarity. In what follows, I am interested in how social constructions of foreign masculinity impact my interlocutors’ everyday lives as migrants, fathers, sons and partners. Thus, for the remainder of this chapter, I will focus on how these attributions impact and shape male migrants’ experiences of marginalisation and their navigation of the European migration regime.

Impact of gendered and racialised images on migrants' lived experiences

Negative representations of migrant masculinities can result in experiences of general mistrust from authorities, during police checks in public spaces or within asylum structures. Drawing on observations and interviews, I demonstrate how the social construction of the dangerous (mostly Muslim or African) man becomes evident in gendered state practices and the private lives of people with a precarious legal status, but also how my interlocutors negotiate their public representation.

Everyday victimisation, suspicion and criminalisation

The ambivalent public images of male migrants with a precarious legal status range from them being represented as 'deceptive, dangerous, and too undesirable to live in mainstream society' to being addressed as victims, resulting in emasculating and infantilising treatment within state structures (Griffiths, 2015: 483). These representations lead to equally ambivalent modes of governance: criminalisation and securitisation (Huysmans, 2000; Stumpf, 2006; Gerard and Pickering, 2013; Bhatia, 2020), on the one hand, and humanitarianism (Fassin, 2012; Campesi, 2015), on the other. Here, I will first show how the victimisation of individuals within the asylum regime subjected my interlocutors to a paternalism that gave them little room for manoeuvre and led to forced idleness that was experienced as profoundly emasculating. I will then argue that men are sometimes deprioritised compared to women when it comes to support structures. Finally, they are continuously exposed to criminalisation because of the gendered and racialised suspicions they face.

Being involved in asylum and other legal procedures, and thus visible and within reach of the state, people are compelled to be very compliant with a substantive body of state regulations. Bureaucratic guidelines, house rules within asylum facilities and limited rights regarding work and residence impose various restrictions on migrants' room of manoeuvre. Above all, asylum seekers are somewhat expected to lack agency as their victimhood is the prerequisite to be granted protection. Whereas the expectation to comply with the law is surely not restricted to protection seekers, in the case of people with a precarious legal status, adherence to laws and rules permeates everyday life more than is the case with citizens, and the 'care' of the state is highly conditional and only available to those who abide by the many rules imposed on them.

Besides having control over the people in their care, collective centres for asylum seekers draw on the image of the refugee as a victim. People who have often lived for years under difficult conditions, who have despite all the impediments eked out their way to Europe and who have shown extreme

strength and endurance are suddenly denied agency and decision-making ability. Consequently, asylum seekers experience a loss of control over their already heavily constrained lives.

The following quote from Khosravi's autobiography (2011) has always moved me as it so aptly depicts the process of 'becoming a refugee' when entering the asylum system. In his auto-ethnography, the present-day anthropology professor wrote about his arrival in a Swedish asylum camp after fleeing Iran:

Apart from the medical examinations of my body, I was treated, according to the most positive interpretation, as a child who did not know what was good or bad for him. The clientization of the refugee began as soon as she or he entered the camp. In the Arctic camp, I was educated to become a 'victim'. Neither lashes on my back, time in prison nor a year of statelessness could take away my dignity as the Arctic camp did. Until then, I might have lacked documents and a state, yet I was full of life, will and courage. All that I lost in the process of 'becoming a refugee'. As a Rwandan man in a refugee camp put it, 'they educate us to be refugees' (Malkki 1995: 222). (Khosravi, 2011: 271)

The excerpt clearly highlights the powerlessness that the migration regime produces – moreover, that it demands. In Sweden, says Khosravi, he experienced the deepest degradation. While he had lived before under often precarious and dangerous conditions, now he was de facto denied agency and dignity. In the refugee camp in Sweden, he was 'educated' to behave like a refugee. Such victimisation not least renders people more manageable and controllable.

In the refugee camp where I conducted one year of participant observation, residents followed a meticulously structured daily routine, where they were not allowed to work and where they received weekly pocket money which could also be suspended if residents broke any house rules. If residents did not show up for cleaning duties, they were not allowed to leave the camp the next day. Another sanction – mostly used in cases of conflicts – consisted of making people sleep outside the camp in a container – the so-called 'consciousness cell' (*Besinnungszelle*). Many residents criticised being stripped of any decision-making capacity, which made them feel they were not being treated like adults. Everyday life in the camp was thus heteronomous and surveyed, not least due to the constant presence of security staff in these centres, entering dormitories without knocking and thus invading residents' privacy. Many people experienced the restrictions as degrading, patronising and often dehumanising.

Everyday life within enclosed asylum facilities is furthermore defined by an enforced idleness. Many of my interlocutors told me how they suffered

from being dependent on state support and not being allowed to work and earn their own money. In a follow-up interview in Austria, in 2016, Daniel from a West African country, remembered his time in the Swiss camp: 'Staying in asylum makes you a nobody, like a guy in a wheelchair.' This idleness is accompanied by feelings of worthlessness and de-personalisation as there is little space to accommodate individual needs and aspirations. This experienced denial of 'personhood' was a recurring theme in conversations around the condition of illegality but especially around experiences within the asylum system. Some people explained how they felt like animals, their daily purpose being to eat, sleep and be housed in a kind of 'poultry house' as Obinna, a young man from Western Africa, described it.

Because people who are awaiting an asylum decision rarely have an opportunity to work, they are faced with an abundance of 'empty time' in their daily lives: except for sitting in the courtyard, fulfilling one's cleaning duties, taking part in a limited number of occupational programmes or watching TV, there are not many things to do. In addition, the lack of money makes it difficult to do anything else.

In an article on gendered experiences of men living in a Tanzanian refugee camp, [Turner \(1999: 145\)](#) writes: 'In this situation young men are particularly challenged, as they are at a stage in life where they ought to be finding their place in society as fathers, husbands, protectors, and providers – in short, as men'. And [Charsley and Wray \(2015: 407\)](#) observe that male asylum seekers who are stuck in a limbo-like situation while waiting for a decision on their case often experience 'frustration over inability to fulfil masculine role aspirations' ([Charsley and Wray \(2015: 407\)](#)). This feeling of not being able to comply with their ascribed gender roles was similarly present in the narratives of my interlocutors.

In asylum camps, we can thus see how processes of victimisation intersect paradoxically with processes of securitisation, which yet again are reflected in the ambivalent and gendered depiction of migrants with a precarious legal status. Increasingly comprehensive security measures are legitimised by the prevailing image of threatening masculinities. The resulting enforced idleness, in turn, has gendered repercussions on male migrants who fail to accomplish the expectations associated with their ascribed breadwinner role.

Furthermore, the image of the male 'unwanted' migrant in combination with the assumption of men generally being less vulnerable than women and children results in a certain deprioritisation of men in terms of care services. This has repercussions on the ways they are sheltered, supported and controlled in the asylum system ([Schuster, 2011a: 402](#); [Morokvašić, 2015: 359](#)). For instance, this is reflected in the gender-specific accommodation of (rejected) asylum seekers in Switzerland. In certain cantons, men are housed in extremely precarious conditions in underground military bunkers with no natural light. Women are also housed

in very poor conditions, but tend to have a little more privacy and slightly better accommodations.

Adama, whom I met for a follow-up interview in Italy in 2015 after he had been subjected to a Dublin deportation from Switzerland, had no access to state accommodation while he was waiting for a decision on his asylum request. He explained that this would not be the case for women: ‘They “overwelcome” them!’.³ This is of course an over-exaggeration, but NGO workers in Italy confirmed that female asylum seekers are more likely to access accommodation than men. Griffiths (2015: 474) states that ‘there is a systematic assumption that male refused asylum seekers can cope with hardships that would not be the case for their female counterparts’.

The implementation of deportations from Germany to Afghanistan is another example that demonstrates the de-vulnerabilisation of men and their elevated risk of being exposed to rigid law enforcement. German authorities argued that it is legitimate to deport healthy young men to Afghanistan – despite the confirmation by several human rights reports that the security situation in the country had in fact exacerbated (Schuler and Klormann, 2017; UNAMA, 2018). Importantly, the official discourse on these deportations emphasised that only male Afghan delinquents, people posing a threat or people who refuse to disclose their identity are deported. However, newspaper reports have argued that some of these deportees did not, in fact, belong to any of these groups (Bauer et al, 2018; see also Sökefeld, 2019). This supports the argument that political discourse often draws upon the image of the threatening migrant man who does not deserve protection to legitimise harsh enforcement of laws. Gendered images of migrants thus become manifest in migration control practices, which aggravates feelings of exclusion and processes of othering, and notably shows how men are perceived as more threatening and less deserving of protection and care.

The security regime established within the Swiss asylum camp, which was located on a military compound, epitomised the suspicion directed at migrants with a precarious legal status. Regular body checks upon entering the facility, the constant patrolling of security staff and locking away of personal belongings such as mobile phones made many people confide in me that they felt they were being treated like prisoners. They told me that they had not expected it to be like this in Europe. Sometimes, police would come to the camp, handcuff a person and take him or her away to deportation prison. After such incidents, residents were shocked and worried, realising that similar things could soon happen to them as well. Many wondered: how could a refugee be taken away like a criminal? This reflects a Europe-wide trend towards encampment and the convergence of criminal and migration law (which scholars have termed ‘crimmigration’; Stumpf, 2006) and is closely linked to the perception of migrants as a threat to European security.

The topic of police control and racial profiling frequently caused a lot of outrage, and people shared their personal experiences of it. When I explained my research project to Ebrima, a young man from Western Africa, he suggested writing some pages of my book himself as he could tell me a lot about how ‘crazy’ Switzerland is. Just the weekend before, he had gone to a nearby city with his friend. At the central station, while waiting for a bus, the two men were stopped and checked by four policemen. They had to open their mouth and stick out their tongues so that they could be screened for drugs (the image of the West African cocaine dealer is prevalent in Switzerland). They were then ordered to return to the camp, even though asylum seekers in Switzerland are allowed to move within the country.

Noah, another camp resident from Western Africa, described a similar experience. Clearly very agitated, he showed me a police report and told me about his experience of being frisked at the train station while he was taking a stroll. According to the report, the way Noah was looking around and over his shoulder was interpreted as nervous and therefore suspicious, which is why the police decided to stop him. The report also described Noah’s resistance to take his hands out of his pockets and to show the police his documents. Noah said that this was not an accurate depiction of the incident. Also, he could not understand why, for no apparent reason, the police wanted to check his identity. Allegedly, due to Noah’s resistance and his unruly behaviour, the police handcuffed him in the middle of the train station. When they saw his nationality on his asylum seeker’s papers, they asked him if he was carrying any drugs. The report mentioned that his unwillingness to disclose his hands, together with his nationality, was interpreted as an indication he was involved in drug dealing. When Noah resisted being searched, he was taken to the police station. In the end, they found nothing and therefore could not hold him. Noah could not understand why someone could be treated this way just because of his nationality. These examples and many other similar observations indicate that men are more at risk of being exposed to racial profiling (Schwarz, 2016: 258; Naguib et al, 2017). Thus, on the one hand, men can be denied support because they are assumed to be able to cope with destitution, and on the other, they are more exposed to everyday racialised suspicion than female migrants, which again reinforces the dominant discourse on dangerous migrant men.

Curiously, migrants are categorised along the lines of (un)deservingness by different actors – state officials, non-state agents as well as civil society actors (Kalir and Wissink, 2016). They thus all take part – albeit in different ways – in the reproduction of the social construction of undeservingness. A man providing pastoral care to asylum seekers in a Swiss refugee camp, for instance, admitted being most worried about shy Eritrean women who risked being deported to Italy according to the Dublin Regulation. ‘How

can such a woman survive there? ... Because a man, I think, can somehow muddle through.'

To give another example, it can be more difficult for men to access legal counselling than women. Isabella, a legal advisor in Switzerland, reflected on being often overwhelmed by the number of people who needed her support and on how she had to decide whom she would help. Whereas she found it obviously challenging to select the cases that were 'worth' dealing with, she admitted that her decision was usually based on the chances a case has. When asked whom she would support in trying to prevent a Dublin deportation, she said: 'In the case of Italy, I am really consistent: single women – whether young or old – and families with children. ... As for the men, I must honestly say that they have zero chance in the case of Italy' (interview in Switzerland in 2015). Overworked NGOs know that male applicants are less likely to win an appeal against a negative decision than women or families. Hence, as in Isabella's example, appealing might more often be considered a waste of time if it concerns a young and healthy man, which renders access to legal support again highly gendered. Coutin (2000, 79) aptly remarks that although advocates challenge decisions by the state, they reinforce official and unofficial legal notions at the same time and therefore 'become, in an odd way, agents of the state'.

The support individual migrants receive, or the control practices they must fear, are thus dependent on gendered perceptions of vulnerability. Migrants, in turn, internalise, appropriate, or reject such ascriptions of deservingness. The next part of the chapter explores how these images are reflected in the self-representations of individuals with a precarious legal status.

Ambivalent self-representations

'In Italy, I have a white page. The police have never arrested me for something. ... I found out that these people [who apply for asylum] are not good people. ... People come to get asylum, but they are not really [here] to get asylum, to get the documents, to get a job. ... They don't like anything. ... They always [say], "I don't like this, I don't like that". What is this? ... This is not our country. ... These people [working in the asylum system] help them, they have the right to put them far away from the city, far away like that. They analyse you. ... They see how you behave. ... They don't find difficulties with me because I was always like that.' (Interview with Rachid in Switzerland in 2014)

The negative public image of male migrants was reflected in many of my interlocutors' accounts. Being aware of their limited chances to obtain refugee status and of their ascribed lack of deservingness, research participants

frequently distanced themselves from other migrants by highlighting their integrity, honesty and their willingness to work, thus acting upon the experienced public suspicion and their negative image as perpetrators, potential terrorists or abusers of the social welfare system – just as Rachid did in the interview fragment above where he highlighted having a clean slate in comparison to many other asylum seekers who, in his opinion, would just complain about restrictive rules and who would not be willing to work.

Within asylum structures, an atmosphere of general suspicion is omnipresent (Poertner, 2017; Bohmer and Shuman, 2018; Jubany, 2018; Borrelli et al, 2021a). It infiltrates asylum hearings and determination procedures, which rely to a large extent on the ‘credibility’ of the motives of flight presented by asylum seekers to bureaucrats responsible for the assessment of individual cases (Good, 2007). Asylum seekers need to present a coherent and credible story that complies with the Geneva Refugee Convention, as their narratives will be considered by decision-makers who are trained to disbelieve them (Affolter, 2021).

Jamal, a man in his mid-thirties from a South Asian country who had spent the past 16 years trying to legalise his status in various European countries (Chapter 4), suffered from the recurrent experience of not being believed during asylum hearings. He told me about acquaintances who had apparently lied and invented a ‘good story’ and had been granted a residence permit. He said he could not do this. Evidently exhausted from being repeatedly denied access to a legal status, he stated, in a calm voice:

J: Nobody is going to believe me. ... If you talk to someone they say ‘Ok, this guy is just talking bullshit.’ ... Nobody is going to listen to you. Refugees are just like cheap, cheap things, you know? ... Anna, it’s not just once, it’s not twice, I told you it’s [been] 16 years. Ok? If you go, if you put yourself at that point as a refugee. If you go inside somebody’s interview. She or he looks at you like, like a ... to be honest like someone ... someone asking you for a lot of money. ... It happened so many times [that] she or he said straight to me, ‘You’re lying.’ Ok? Straight. ... Because these people [other asylum seekers] make nice stories. Yeah. And they have everything. Nice. Lying stories. Because I know about their lives. ... Ok? And I never did that.

A: Why [not]?

J: Because, you know, from inside I’m not good at lying. (Interview in Germany in 2016)

Jamal’s continuing experience of not being believed aggravated his feeling of being stuck in a limbo-like situation. Like him, other interviewees felt that they were not listened to or believed when they expressed their individual

problems and needs, but that bureaucratic decisions were simply made as quickly as possible to fit their story into a box. Several research participants – like Rachid and Jamal in the earlier quotes – emphasised that they were honest and distanced themselves from the many others who apparently lied to tailor their personal stories according to the requirements of the Geneva Refugee Convention. Thus, by highlighting their honesty, they underlined their deservingness – not least because of ‘the import placed on truth-telling in the asylum system’ (Griffiths, 2012: 8). This insistence on being honest reflects the constant experience of mistrust by the host society, and also during court proceedings aimed at establishing the (in)credibility of a person.

Jamal felt unfairly treated during the asylum procedures he experienced in different countries as he was convinced that he actually deserved a protection status which in fact, many of his fellow citizens were granted. Others among my interlocutors were only too aware of the slim chance they had of being granted a protection status. Fozi, for example, a man in his early thirties from a Maghreb country, made it clear that he knew there was no legal ground for him to obtain a residence permit through an asylum procedure. Nevertheless, what seemed to be more important to him – like in Jamal’s example earlier – was that he told the truth during the asylum hearing. He had travelled a long way from his country of origin via Turkey and the Balkans and had been intercepted by the police while crossing the border from Italy to Switzerland. Exhausted from his long journey across the so-called Balkan route, the option to ‘rest’ in an asylum shelter seemed like a good temporary solution – and importantly, it prevented him from being arrested due to his illegal entry into Switzerland. As a result, he submitted an asylum claim, which was, however, swiftly dismissed, as Fozi had been registered in Hungary. I asked him if he understood why the Swiss authorities rejected his asylum claim.

F: I don’t know why. But I did not do anything here in Switzerland. I did not get any *Strafe*, any punishment, I don’t make a fight, I don’t have any problem with anyone, but they give me a negative. ... Maybe after one year, two years, if I make papers [somewhere else], I will come back here. ... I want to come back here to tell [them] ‘I am a good person.’ Ok? They don’t accept me, but I will be back.

A: Do you think that they believe you are a bad person?

F: Yeah, yeah. They gave me negative. (Interview in Switzerland in 2015)

Fozi assumed here that decisions are based on the individual applicant’s good, or respectively bad, behaviour. During the rest of the interview, he demonstrated some understanding of asylum and migration policies

that included, for instance, information on the Refugee Convention and the Dublin Regulation. However, he clearly saw the rejection of his case as being at least partially caused by authorities' – in his opinion, wrong – assessment of his character and not because they failed to identify a need for protection in his case.

This kind of distancing is partially a result of the experience of stigmatisation by the racialised images of male migrants. People from countries with a high proportion of Muslims, for instance, often distanced themselves – mostly without me even mentioning the topic – from terrorists and Islamic fundamentalists. Others affirmed that they would behave correctly and thus resisted the image of the criminal foreigner. Gendered and racialised representations and the negotiations thereof by male migrants thus become manifest in their self-representation as illustrated by the following quote of Hedi, a man in his forties, also from a North African country:

Well, there are things where the police are right. You know why? Because there are many [of my co-nationals] here. I have heard that they steal. That they do many strange things. They are right. ... I came to Switzerland and have not done anything abnormal. I don't steal. ... You have to respect me. Not all [of my fellow citizens] steal. ... Not all [of them] are bad. One needs to respect that. (Interview in Switzerland in 2014)

Interestingly, he reproduced the prevailing image of North Africans as petty criminals and thus sought to 'de-criminalise' himself by dissociating himself from his fellow citizens. Like Hedi, many research participants felt compelled to distance themselves from the behaviour of other people in a similar situation and stressed that they were not involved in criminal activities.

Interlocutors who admitted being involved in criminal activities (such as low-level drug dealing or stealing), underlined that due to their precarious situation they felt forced to 'misbehave' and emphasised that in the past, they could never have imagined committing a crime. They thus justified their illegal activities with the fact that they had been driven into precarity.

The constant suspicion and criminalisation of migrants – and above all, the state of 'deportability' (De Genova, 2002) – also holds an inherently disciplinary dimension (Wyss and Fischer, 2022). 'The incessantly communicated threat of possible deportation that, along with the quest for employment, structures the lives of undocumented migrants represents a first-class disciplinary instrument that serves perfectly to keep the lowest echelon of an increasingly split society both in line and at arm's length' (Wicker, 2010: 240). Staying away from, however petty, criminal activities

might thus help people to remain inconspicuous and avoid interception by the police or deportation to their country of origin. An employee of a supranational organisation working in the field of migration in Austria told me, for instance, that authorities prioritise the deportation of criminals (note also the aforementioned discourse on deportation of Afghan nationals), which might simultaneously delay the removal of people who show a more law-abiding behaviour.

Besides being portrayed as villains or as a threat, migrants with a precarious legal status are in many contexts treated as victims devoid of agency and incapable of deciding for themselves what is good for them. Presumably, not least as an attempt to act upon this infantilising image, some of my interlocutors depicted their journeys to and through Europe as a kind of adventure, proudly narrating how they outsmarted border police and managed to resist state control attempts.

I first met Obinna in Switzerland. He had previously applied for asylum in Italy. After his claim was rejected, he appealed but found himself without shelter or other state support, which is why he decided to move on to Switzerland to lodge an asylum request. However, according to the Dublin Regulation, his case was dismissed. Fearing deportation to Italy, he decided to go back on his own. When I met him for a second interview in Germany, where he had moved on after his return to Italy, he recalled this decision:

It wasn't what I wanted, to [leave the Swiss asylum camp] with handcuffs. So, I had to just go to Milan by myself. That's how I went to Italy. Yes. It was December, something like that. ... It was cold. But it was good. Because it was my idea. No one told me to do that, it came from me. I had to do this. For what came out of it, I had to blame myself. I don't need to blame someone else. ... Follow your mind. Either good or bad. That's how I went to Italy. (Interview in Germany in 2016)

Even in the most constraining and patronising context, Obinna found a way to frame his actions as self-determined. Other interlocutors presented their journeys more in terms of an ongoing adventure (see also [Bolay, 2017](#)). Representing successful border crossings as empowering moments can be understood as a re-appropriation of manhood in a context otherwise experienced as infantilising and emasculating. [Palillo \(2018: 28\)](#) demonstrates in an article on male asylum seekers in Italy how his interlocutors renegotiated their masculinity by framing their journeys to Europe in a heroic way and thus 'contesting the dominant image of the passive, feminized, helpless subject at the heart of "the genuine refugee" public narrative'. Such a self-representation highlights 'endurance, courage, and competence' ([Palillo, 2018: 28](#)), characteristics associated with masculinity.

During two lengthy interviews with Mustapha, a man in his late twenties from a North African country, he told me in detail about his numerous border crossings. His journey took him in a sometimes-erratic order from a North African country to Turkey, to Bulgaria and Serbia. After several failed attempts to enter the EU, he went back to Turkey, from where he later managed to enter Greece and then arrived in Switzerland. He applied for asylum but was soon deported to Bulgaria, the country responsible for processing his asylum case. Shortly after his deportation, he moved on again and managed to go to Germany.

As with other research participants, Mustapha's narrative focused heavily on border crossings, which he depicted as difficult, risky and dangerous (which they certainly were). Mustapha represented himself as tricking border guards, mastering mapping technologies to find his way, helping others to do the same and being resistant to the numerous failures he experienced (such as being imprisoned when intercepted or being deported to a country where he had stayed before). After he was forced to leave Switzerland, he continued to keep me informed about his experiences via Internet communication. He even sent me pictures of himself and a compilation of animals that were potent symbols of strength (like horses, wolves or lions). Sometimes these animals stood in a dark forest, illustrating the danger of Mustapha's clandestine border crossings, where he spent nights and days in the woods. He once wrote to me: 'I admit that I am a lion. ... Unfortunately, I leave [probably, he meant 'live'] [the] life of monkeys and traitors.' His self-representation shifted here from very masculine symbols to illustrations of his restricted and constrained masculinity, which were also present when he later sent photographs of empty beer bottles, signifying his desperation during the first period in Germany.

Like Mustapha, Khaled, a man in his mid-twenties from a Maghreb country, portrayed himself as an unafraid adventurer – only fearing Allah, as he said – who is not bothered by his very uncertain and unstable lifestyle. He said that not even the boat journey to Italy, where he apparently lost two friends and where many others on the same boat died, frightened him. At the end of our interview, he opened up a bit and told me that he missed his family and that his situation was quite unbearable to him. Like the earlier narrative by Mustapha, I got the impression that Khaled's self-representation as a resistant and opposing character was one way of dealing with the fact that he lived in a fenced asylum facility, an environment which he described as agonising. Emphasising successful border crossings and overcoming hardships instead of focusing on daily suffering and the resulting weakness was probably not least a strategy to avoid losing face as a man in front of a female researcher.

The ambivalent public images of migrants with a precarious legal status thus become manifest in people's self-representation in a similarly ambivalent way. On the one hand, some emphasise their peacefulness or honesty to

counteract prevailing images of them as potential threats to society or as being untrustworthy. On the other hand, some of them portrayed themselves as resistant and being capable of subverting states' attempts of control, thus re-appropriating their masculinity within a highly disempowering setting.

Contested intimate lives

Research has highlighted the gendered and racialised nature of street-level bureaucrats' decision-making (Scheel and Gutekunst, 2019). For instance, bureaucrats' assessments of binational couples who apply for family reunion are often fraught with suspicion towards foreigner men who are accused of only marrying to obtain residence permits while their female partners are in turn believed to need protection from such alleged abuse (Lavanchy, 2014; Gutekunst, 2016). In contrast, and as I have argued elsewhere (Wyss, 2018), several of my interlocutors who told me about their present or current relationship with a European woman felt themselves vulnerable because of their precarious legal status, which rendered them dependent on others' support. In combination with the negative image of male migrants, the precarious living conditions put pressure on such relationships. Degrading public images, mechanisms of illegalisation and marginalisation infiltrate lives and evoke further gender-specific vulnerabilities of migrant men with a precarious legal status.

A precarious legal situation makes it extremely difficult to fulfil the role of the male breadwinner as access to work is severely restricted – if not illegal. Not being able to work and depending on others is experienced as humiliating, as Jamal, for instance, expressed to me. He wished to be finally able to work 'like a man'. Goran, from a Balkan country, said:

'If you are without a status, you cannot marry, right? ... You are not registered here. ... Look, I come to Switzerland, I don't take asylum. I don't take anything, I live with you – just with you. I don't pay anything, no food, no ... nothing at all. ... How can I get married?' (Interview in Switzerland in 2015)

Also, Obinna could not even imagine thinking about creating a family in his situation, living in an asylum shelter awaiting the decision of the migration agency:

'I'm alone. Life of a man begins when he has a responsibility. When there's responsibility. Responsibility is like ... he'll be thinking of how to feed and to put food on someone else's table. Like a kid or a wife. ... That's when life begins. You take care of someone else. You are now an adult man.' (Interview in Germany in 2016)

In these two quotes, Goran and Obinna expressed that their inability to provide for a partner or children due to their precarious living conditions prevented them from starting a family or getting married because they could not fulfil their role as breadwinners.

Also, men's marginalised position in Europe puts them in a vulnerable position in relation to their families back home who might hope to receive support in the form of remittances. I got the impression that most relatives in the countries of origin were not aware of the very precarious living conditions of their brothers, sons or fathers. Hedi, a man in his forties from a North African country, felt embarrassment towards his teenage son but at the same time missed him dearly: 'I cannot talk to my son [on the phone]. ... What would I tell him? What would I tell him?' (interview in Switzerland in 2014).

Some interlocutors also shared their embarrassment because they engaged in criminal activities, which put them in an ambivalent position towards their families in the country of origin. Family members back home might be aware of certain aspects about their son's or husband's life in Europe, but many difficulties are not easy to tell – such as living in a camp environment or being involved in criminal activities like a man from Western Africa who was selling drugs in Italy emphasised:

'This one is very dangerous, this money. At the same time, you say that you are Muslim. You are Muslim and you are doing this thing ... So that money that you send to your mum. Then, she "eats" that money. In our Islamic way, it's not good. ... So, Anna, for me, if I get a job. Even if they pay me [only] 20 Euro a day, I will do it.' (Interview in Italy in 2016)

On the one hand, people told me that they felt responsible for supporting their families financially. On the other hand, there were no legal job opportunities, which compelled them to obtain money illegally to fulfil their family's expectations. However, they were too embarrassed to share information about their living and working situation with their families.

Several interlocutors also told me that the prevailing mistrust against male migrants affected their encounters with European women. Mustapha had the impression that women in Europe were hesitant to meet him when they learned that he was from a North African country. Karim, who also originates from a Maghreb country, had an Austrian girlfriend. He recalled a meeting with a judge of the Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum, during which the judge warned the girlfriend of Karim's impending deportation. According to Karim, the judge said to his girlfriend, 'You don't need this person. You can leave this person because he will get a negative anyway and has to leave Austria' (interview in Austria in 2016). As a result, the couple

separated because Karim's girlfriend was afraid that the couple would not be able to stay together in the event of deportation. Karim's precarious legal situation thus not only put his stay in Europe at risk but directly affected – and made impossible – his relationship.

Eymen who was relying on emergency aid in Switzerland after his asylum request had been denied similarly experienced how his legal situation put a severe strain on his relationship with a Swiss woman. Not only did his living situation in a collective accommodation for rejected asylum seekers make it almost impossible for the couple to have any privacy, but Eymen's girlfriend also had doubts about the genuineness of his feelings. Eymen recalled the situation as follows:

'We talked a lot, until we came to the topic of papers. She did not have trust one hundred per cent or something like this. ... She wanted to know how I am thinking about getting papers. I told her I want to find a solution on my own. Okay, we were two. Maybe we can find a solution together. But, for example, I did not want to ask her to get married ... so that I will have papers. That was an important issue in our relationship. ... I wanted that she feels good with me, that she feels that I am a man ... that I am normal ... that I have a real feeling for her. If she can tell me this, we can find a solution to marry for this reason. But I don't want papers, and I have really told her that I don't want this. Up to now, I don't want to have a relationship in order to have papers.' (Interview in Switzerland in 2015)⁴

As this interview fragment shows, borders penetrate even romantic relationships. Eymen struggled to convince his girlfriend of his genuine feelings as she feared that he was only with her for the sake of regularising his status (Wyss, 2018).

In her ethnographic study in a German consulate in Morocco, Gutekunst (2016) underlines how border control practices overlap with gender constructions, and thus how *doing border* overlaps with *doing gender*. She explored how the discourse on forced marriages has gendered repercussions on officials' decision-making. Consulates scrutinise couples applying for a family reunion in Europe to identify sham marriages. Gutekunst observed that Moroccan men applying for reunion with their spouses in Europe are construed as dangerous and deceiving. According to her, the reproduction of the social construction of the single Muslim man as a danger and the incorporation of patriarchy is even reinforced by authorities' victimisation of the German partners (2016: 235). Again, the racialised and gendered image of the fraudulent male migrant is highly effective in that it can lead to the rejection of applications at the consulate (see also Scheel and Gutekunst, 2019). Whereas being a woman often implicates a disadvantage in struggles

over mobility, Gutekunst (2016: 235) shows how, in the context of her research, it can also be an advantage.

Compelled to unmask potential sham marriages, street-level bureaucrats doubt the ‘authenticity of love’ of couples who want to get married and live in the same country. In a way, this reverses the relation of marriage and the ‘authenticity’ of romantic feelings as the marriage is not seen as proof of love but rather as a cause for suspicion (Wyss, 2018). Eymen did not want to ask his girlfriend to marry him as this might have intensified her concerns. However, by not getting married their relationship was severely jeopardised as Eymen was constantly at risk of deportation. Similarly, Karim shared the impression with me that European women are always scared that a relationship would only be about obtaining a visa.

Several of my research participants who were – or had been – in a relationship with a European woman thus found themselves in a vulnerable position as a result of the asymmetrical relationship because of their illegalised status. On the one hand, their illegalisation put pressure on them to get married; on the other hand, they feared that they would fit the image of the fraudulent migrant who pressures European women to marry in order to obtain residence papers. Migrants’ illegalisation and the effects of racialisation thus make it difficult for marginalised migrant men to engage in intimate relationships and to build a family, both of which are strongly shaped and constrained by migration control practices. However, as I show in Chapter 6, marriage is indeed often the only way for many to legalise their status.

Concluding remarks

An intersectional approach considers a variety of entangled social divisions including the negative implications of a precarious legal status. I have argued that the governance of migration is predicated on social constructions of the ‘undeserving other’ that legitimise the implementation of restrictive measures and the ignorance of male migrants’ vulnerabilities. It is important to acknowledge the racialised and gendered underpinnings of such representations and their effects on migrants’ lived realities.

Migrants with a precarious legal status are sometimes depicted as victims, which manifests in patronising and often degrading state structures that are legitimised by humanitarian reasons. This also allows for state authorities to deflect how the current migration regime takes part in creating vulnerabilities, on the one hand, and on the other hand, it disregards the agency of migrants at the margins. At the same time, representations of male migrants as dangerous and criminal call for more securitisation of migration governance. Colonially shaped representations of the threatening male intruder are productive as they serve to legitimise restrictive policy making and harsh law enforcement. Migrant (Muslim) men are thus placed in

a difficult position: on the one hand, they are represented as a threat to European society and on the other, it is precisely this representation that leads to increasing precarity. It is essential to emphasise how these negative representations cause even more precarious living conditions and result in male-specific vulnerabilities.

Turning our focus to the discourse around labelling and categorising migrants helps us gain an understanding of how political and public discourse and legal classification mutually influence each other but also how many actors, contexts and policies are involved in corroborating or contesting the categorisation of certain groups of people. Concentrating on the discursive construction of migrant masculinity has thus brought literature on gender and migration into conversation with migration regime studies, which has to date rarely been done (but see [Amelina and Horvath, 2020](#)). I have demonstrated that the way migration law is set in practice relies strongly on gendered and racialised assessments of deservingness, which become manifest in the way migrants are perceived, categorised and treated. Simultaneously, migrants have to navigate these stereotypes by distancing themselves from negative images and creating new representations for themselves. They thus act upon these ascribed categories and challenge them. Furthermore, the chapter has highlighted the relevance of looking into how migrants' representations manifest themselves even in the everyday personal lives of migrants with a precarious legal status, for instance when they affect intimate relationships.

By underscoring male-specific vulnerabilities, I certainly do not want to neglect female-specific vulnerabilities or challenge in any way the rise of awareness for women's need for specific support. However, critical *deconstruction* of simplified gender constructions needs to avoid an essentialist conception of gender, as [Charsley and Wray \(2015\)](#) rightly argue; not least because blindness towards vulnerabilities of specific groups of men, in the end, runs the risk of reifying ideas of female weakness ([Rowe, 2009](#)).

Despite the numerous discursive, social and legal exclusions, migrants with a precarious legal status continue to navigate and subvert states' attempts to control their presence. The [next chapter](#) will turn the focus on how my interlocutors navigate migration control practices that paradoxically both prevent and enforce mobility. They react to state efforts of 'managing' their movement with subversive tactics including attempts to elude the aforementioned infantilising and constraining asylum and detention structures as when they go into hiding in order to avoid imprisonment. Tying in with the theme of this chapter, it should be said at this point that this high degree of mobility is probably possible not least because the protagonists of this book are young, healthy and single men.