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Embodying Difference: Iranian Women's Working Life Experiences in Norway

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ABSTRACT

With reference to postcolonial intersectional scholarship, this article examines working life narratives of Iranian immigrant women before and after migration to Norway in relation to questions of equality along gender and racial lines. This interview-based study asks, 'How do Iranian immigrant women who have resettled in Norway narrate their work experiences in their home and host countries, and how does this inform us about processes of othering and discrimination in both contexts?' To what extent these othering processes can be understood in terms of the intersectional dimensions of gender and race. The study shows that although the move from a state considered repressive to one considered a model of gender equality entails positive experiences at work along gendered lines, these positive experiences are often encountered by the processes of racial and ethnic sorting, thus leading to distress and alienation. Accordingly, the interviews show a nuanced picture of working life in both countries, with both positive and negative stories of work in each context. Overall, the paper addresses a need to move beyond reductionist interpretations of migration that portrays immigration to the West as an unproblematic journey towards a better life in the accounts of immigrants coming from the East.

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Iranian immigrant women; Norway; work organizations; postcolonial intersectionality; embodiment; gender; racialization

Introduction

Being a political activist in Iran, Ziba, one of the participants of this study, described the challenges she faced in trying to be taken seriously by Iranian men whom she worked with back in Iran. Having moved to a country where traditional gender norms have less influence in shaping working life in comparison to her home country, Ziba is supposed to feel empowered in Norway. However, her work experiences in the public sector in Norway show that she has to deal with similar challenges at work to claim legitimacy for herself and for what she knows.

In Iran, I worked with Iranian men who were older than me. I would express an idea and they would ignore it, but after a few minutes another man would suggest my idea and they would all praise him. [...] Here in Norway, I face similar challenges, not because I am a woman but because I am a foreigner. For example, once in an annual meeting at work, the [female] manager interrupted me while I was elaborating on some research on welfare state policies. She said, 'I have some advice for you. You'd better keep your experiences to yourself. Just sit and listen'.

Ziba described herself as an experienced and educated person, having obtained two master's degrees, one in social science and one in management. Despite her background, she found it difficult to earn respect and credibility at work. Being marked on the basis of being an outsider, Ziba is not automatically assumed to have the desired competencies in organizational spaces.

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Having a body marked with gender and racial differences, Ziba's body is a matter "out of place" in work organizations, which highlights how spaces and bodies, as Puwar (2004) notes, are historically and conceptually imagined (p. 8). Ziba's professional identity is intermeshed with her gender and racial identities, and they simultaneously contribute to her marginalization in workplace.

Having a postcolonial intersectional perspective is significant in explaining the complex positions the women in this study have occupied in work organizations when reflecting on their move from Iran to Norway, with particular regard for the two countries' contrasting approaches to women's rights. While in Iran, women's working life is conditioned by the political ideologies grounded in the perceived roles of women as "mothers", in Norway, the demand for equality has granted women privileged positions in work organizations. The interaction between Ziba and her white female manager raises questions around why having a shared identity of being "female" in a Norwegian organization does not necessarily position Ziba, a female immigrant, on a level playing field with her female Norwegian colleagues. As Puwar (2004) points out, the legal and formal right to enter white organizations does not guarantee respectful inclusion of immigrants. The demand for equality in white organizations, according to Holvino, (2010), has granted a "special place for white women only" to collaborate with privileged whites, while women of colour are deprived of this privileged position (p. 253). To what extent is the structure of the inequality gap shaped differently for an Iranian immigrant woman whose identity is mediated not merely by gender differences but also implied in historical weight of racism tied to bodily image? How do the women in this study narrate their work experiences in their home and host countries? What barriers do they describe encountering in the Iranian workplace governed by the Islamic politics? How differently do they narrate their experiences in Norwegian work organizations? How their identities as "Muslim", "Middle Eastern" and "Iranian" affect their experiences in the "secular" Norwegian workplace play into these narrations? To what extent do their narratives about working life in Norway interpolate a sense of personal agency or authority? With these questions as a starting point, I emphasize the importance of analysing Iranian women's stories of migration in a way that goes beyond a linear reading of their move from a marginalized past to a privileged present. Rather, I suggest an approach that takes into consideration the effect of different types of social divisions on their experiences across various times and locations by "linking the past to the present and making it whole" (Mirza, 2009, p. 2).

This article contributes to research on women's working life experiences. It draws on empirical data collected through 13 narrative interviews with Iranian immigrant women living in Norway with the purpose of conducting an intersectional analysis underpinned by feminist postcolonial theory. Within the existing scholarship on Iranian immigrant women's working life experiences, the majority of studies examine the gender and race dimensions of Iranian women's experiences separately, thus overlooking the complex ways in which the simultaneity and conclusive nature of these categories impact the women's lived experiences (Hojati, 2012; Naghavi, Manderson, & Vasey, 2014; Yahya, 2019). Only a few academics have deployed an intersectional framework to more effectively address injustice and advocate for social change (Dallalfar, 1994; Fathi, 2017). These studies have used an intersectional framework to show how Iranian women's interlocking identities of race, gender and class affect and are affected by different social, political and economic projects. However, they have dismissed the importance of the body in (re)producing intersectional inequality. Engaging mostly in a discursive investigation of intersectionality, these studies have reduced "the factual complexity and practicality of practice, in favour of a selected number of categories" (Villa, 2011, p. 177). In order to overcome this shortcoming, the findings in my study add an embodiment perspective in the discussion of the women's working life experiences by deploying a postcolonial intersectional approach. In the following, I first provide a background of gender (in) equality and the economic participation of women in Iran and Norway. I then proceed with an explanation of theoretical concepts, after which I will map out the research methods and present the findings of the study.

Background

According to the 2021 Global Gender Gap Index, the economic participation of women in Iran is significantly lower than that of women in both developed countries and other countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The Index, for instance, ranks Iranian women's economic participation at 150th out of 156 countries. According to the Human Rights Watch Report (2017), while Iranian women represent 50% of university graduates, their occupational opportunities are limited, as they comprise merely 17% of the Iranian workforce. This underrepresentation can be explained by public policies and traditional cultural norms—especially after the 1979 Islamic revolution. In the first decade after the revolution (1979–1988), the institutionalization of gender inequality was accelerated by the implementation of a series of radical measures against women. These included enforcing the compulsory veil, gender segregation policies and drastic changes in the family law aimed at prioritizing men as breadwinners over women, the latter of whom were assumed to merely be capable of undertaking domestic work. With the termination of the Iran-Iraq War in 1988, Iran experienced numerous sociocultural changes and a dramatic increase in educational and professional possibilities for women. Since then, the regime has become gradually more tolerant of the presence of women in the public sphere. However, it continues to maintain a double ideological standpoint by which women's roles as mothers and wives are promoted through the regime's propaganda instruments, even while it responds to the ever-increasing demands of (professional) women for better social status (Kian, 1995).

The institutionalization of Islamic law has affected women's participation in the labour market directly and indirectly in various ways. On the one hand, family responsibilities, including caregiving and housework, have become an obstacle to women's participation in labour market. On the other hand, it has granted men control over women's economic opportunities. For instance, under certain circumstances, a husband can prevent his wife from participating in a particular job. Husbands can also prevent women from obtaining a passport or travelling abroad, making women less likely to be employed in jobs requiring extensive travel. These social and legal restrictions create uncertainty, thus either discouraging employers from hiring women at all (Alaedini & Razavi, 2005) or compelling them to only do so with written permission from the women's husbands.

Iranian regulation of the labour market further restricts women's access to employment. Both the public and private sectors favour hiring men over women, especially in technical and managerial occupations. This limits women's opportunities to occupations that either exclusively deal with women or are traditionally considered feminine, such as administration, teaching and nursing. In the private sector, women are often required to have higher qualifications and accept lower wages than their male peers in order to get hired. In the public sector, while basic pay is the same for men and women, men often get extra benefits supplementing their wages (Alaedini & Razavi, 2005). Moreover, by investing money in projects that exclusively increase men's access to the job market—such as the construction sector or capital-intensive industries—the government takes away resources from projects that would increase women's employment. Furthermore, global competition and economic sanctions have taken away many opportunities from women who worked in labour-intensive informal industries, such as carpets and textiles (Mirzaie, 2015).

In contrast to Iran, the 2021 Global Gender Gap Index ranks Norway as the third most gender-equal country, with women's economic participation ranked 20th among the 156 countries. The Norwegian labour market is highly regulated and provides high job protection for all employees, regardless of their gender, sex, age or race. Women in particular enjoy long parental leave and can combine a long-term employment while taking care of their children (SaLDO, 2008). However, despite intensive measures taken over the years to narrow gender inequalities in the labour force, women are still lagging behind men in two major indicators: the degree of occupational segregation and the gender wage gap (Traavik & Richardsen, 2004). Women are mostly employed in the public

sectors, while men dominate the private sectors. The proportion of men employed in managerial professions is higher than that of women. Women are over-represented in part-time occupations, and, on average, they earn less than men (Hamre, 2018).

According to Statistics Norway (2019), immigrants and their children constitute over 17% of the population in Norway. With a population of 18 075, Iranian immigrants rank as the 13th largest ethnic group in Norway. Iranian immigration to Norway started in the early 1980s following the Islamic Revolution (1979) and Iran-Iraq War (1981–1988). The migration flow, however, began slowing in 1994, following the introduction of strict immigration policies in Norway. Since then, Iranian immigration has been restricted to family reunification and to the employment of skilled workers (Alyasan, 2000). Reports produced by Statistics Norway (2009, 2017) highlight Iranian immigrants as over-represented in occupations that require higher education. For example, 50% of Iranians work in managerial occupations (Blom & Henriksen, 2009; Vrålstad & Wiggen, 2017, p. 106).

Many studies conducted on the living condition of immigrants in Norway have demonstrated that immigrant populations are more likely than the majority population to experience discrimination, violence and threats (Horverak, Bye, Sandal, & Pallesen, 2013; Midtbøen, 2015; Rogstad, 2001). The 2017 Statistics Norway report, conducted by Vrålstad and Wiggen, shows that Iranian immigrants experience more immigrant-related differential treatment in the workplace than any other ethnic group in Norway. According to this report, 26% of Iranians have experienced discrimination based on their immigrant background. This result is consistent with another survey on the living condition of immigrants (Tronstad, 2008a, as cited in Vrålstad & Wiggen, 2017). Similarly, the 2009 report, written by Blom and Henriksen (2009), describes Iranian immigrants as “a particularly frustrated group”. According to this report, although Iranian immigrants are highly educated, they suffer a lower employment rate. In addition, 54% perceive their job as mentally taxing and around 17% claim that they are often bullied or emotionally abused at work (Blom & Henriksen, 2009, p. 91).

Framing the inquiry

The question of difference has long been at the heart of feminists’ and antiracists’ theory and practice. Initially, the focus was exclusively on the experiences of women (who were implicitly defined as middle class white) and black people (mainly men). Both feminist and antiracist activists questioned the falsity of class-based universal approaches that dominated the liberal paradigm of equality in which the white middle class masculine subject was the universal norm (Marion Young, 2008). Obviously, Marxist feminist scholars acknowledged the importance of class differences among women; however, other differences were overlooked in favour of creating a collective feminist subject (Sawiwki, 1986). Black women activists were among the first to highlight the specific and complex position they occupied as subjects who embodied the black as a female and the woman as a black person (Brah & Phoenix, 2004; Collins, 1989). In the late 1980s, the term “intersectionality,” introduced by the American critical legal scholar, Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), gave black women’s struggle a name and powerful visual metaphor. Crenshaw drew on a traffic analogy to question the single-axis framework that dominated legal doctrines. Describing the African-American position as caught at the intersection of two different political lanes of identification—namely, gender and race—she addressed the law’s inefficacy in recognizing and reconstructing African-American women’s injuries. Crenshaw’s visual metaphor illustrates how multiple structures of domination simultaneously interact, collide, collaborate and reinforce each other, thus producing distinct forms of inequality. These distinct forms are (often inadvertently) perpetuated by advocates of marginalized groups, because they prioritize the interests of the most advantaged members in an effort to gain traction in the broader socio-political realm (Crenshaw, 1989; Nash, 2011).

While many feminist scholars have advanced Crenshaw's formulation of intersectionality, there is great contestation on how to conceptualize intersectionality and which variety and complexity of processes to include. For instance, Nash (2008) problematizes Crenshaw's main, if not exclusive, attention to race and gender categories, arguing that this limited focus precludes the importance of other categories, such as nationality, class and sexuality, in shaping the lived experiences of black women. To the contrary, some scholars contend that the nature of some research makes it impossible to focus on all aspects of identity at the same time (Dhamoon, 2011; Staunæs, 2003; Yuval-Davis, 2006). Anthias (2021) claims that, depending on time and context, some categories are more entrenched and virulent than others, and therefore "people are haunted by them differently" (p. 10). In the same vein in this study, I have inevitably referred to gendered marginalization in the Iranian context, while in the Norwegian context my focus is turned to the intersection of racial and gendered marginalization. However, I avoid analysing the participants' experiences exclusively in terms of these intersections. Rather, while analysing the excerpts from the narratives, wherever applicable, I refer to other intersections and interactions found in the excerpts (including age, religion, sexuality, language and migration) as well as the systems and processes of differentiation that appear to have a role in shaping the participants' experiences of both privilege and oppression.

Another important issue is at what level of social processes intersectionality has to be analysed. Some studies concentrate on systemic dynamics of power and explore intersections at structural and institutional levels. This is exemplified in Acker's (2006) conception of "inequality regimes", which views the processes of capitalism as central to gender, race and class inequalities in work organizations. A great number of intersectional studies focus their analysis on the subjective level, examining simultaneity of inequalities as experienced by individuals and groups. On this level of analysis, the emphasis is on the inclusion of the perspective/voice of multiply marginalized people. Hancock (2007) calls this practice "content specialization", McCall (2005) defines it as "intracategorical approach", and Dhamoon, 2011) locates studies that focus on identity or categories of difference in this group. In this study, I refer to identities and categories of difference to develop my analytical framework. The focus on identity processes, as Dhamoon, 2011) argues, are useful in giving a voice to marginalized people, to open up collective relationships and advancing group agency (p. 4). However, poststructuralists and deconstructive researchers have long criticized the conceptualization of identity as fixed and clear-cut categories that reduce marginalized people to representative of a social group (Zanoni, Janssens, Benschop, & Nkomo, 2010). While I argue against the fixities of categories and identities, I see them as an essential characteristic of social relations. As Anthias (2021) writes, "They are constituted through social regulations" and are "a major facet of sociabilities and the management of resources" (p. 29), but they also become "generative of forms of resistance", agency and collective struggle through their contestation, refashioning and disidentification (p. 30–31). To avoid conceptualization of categories in a reductive or essentialised way, I examine them in relation to structures (broader economic and political institutions) and social processes (discourses and representations) within various historical contexts and time frames. In doing so, I attempt to tighten the connections among power relations, institutional contexts and lived experiences of the participants.

The use of the concept of intersectionality on the subjective level is also problematized for the sole focus on multiply marginalized subjects. According to Staunæs (2003), in their endeavour to recover the marginalized subject's voice, intersectional theorists have overlooked the examination of the identity of privileged subjects. This exclusive focus also obscures the fact that many individuals inhabit both privileged and oppressed identities. As Nash (2008) argues, marginalized subjects are not wholly oppressed; they might be victimized by some systems but privileged by others. As the findings in this research show, the women in this study occupied positions of privilege and oppression simultaneously. Throughout the research, I attempt to highlight the nuanced nature of their working life experiences. I do this by capturing their agency in making the world they inhabit as well as revealing the enabling and constraining forces that construct their realities.

Some intersectional scholars have combined intersectionality with other feminist approaches to difference to produce a more robust analysis. In this study I have chosen to combine intersectionality with postcolonial feminist perspectives, namely those developed by Sara Ahmed (2000, 2014) and Nirmal Puwar (2004). According to Kerner (2017), the two perspectives differ in their take on space and time. While intersectionality addresses simultaneity and entanglement of categories of difference in the present by focusing on national/local context, postcolonial theory has a historical perspective and thus concentrates on transnational contexts (Kerner, 2017, p. 847). Postcolonial feminist scholars' attention to "the historically and contextually specific material and discursive practices," as Holvino, (2010) points out, complement intersectional approaches by inserting "the agency of women of colour" and "rewriting history from the social location of women of colour" (p. 260). A dialogue between these two approaches helps tracking past and present marginalization and resistance that the women in this study have experienced by illuminating colonial discourses that affect their working life experiences on many levels.

There are many common points of entry in the works of Ahmed (2000, 2014) and Puwar (2004). They both question the ubiquitous use of diversity as an official concept by institutions, given how it masks and underplays power and privilege. Understanding space and body as mutually constituted over time through sedimented historical processes, they show how racism and sexism are embodied in everyday interactions in institutions. In her book *Strange Encounters*, Ahmed (2000) primarily focuses on the notion of encounter and the recognition that takes place within the encounter. She directs our attention to the constitutive nature of knowing, suggesting that the stranger is materialized through encounters that are not merely face-to-face meetings shaped in the present moment, but are also mediated by broader social and historical relationships that are presupposed and concealed within the encounter. According to Ahmed (2000), the recognizability of the stranger takes place at the bodily level and involves ways of seeing (visual economies) and touching (affective economies). Visual economy implicates acts of seeing that are simultaneously acts of reading. It involves differentiating between the familiar and the strange by reading visual codes off the surface of the body. This act of reading involves confirmation and refutation of that which we already know. As such it involves fixation and the possibility of fixation, but also surprise and conflict.

Similarly, Nirmal Puwar (2004), in her book *Space Invaders*, explores the production of differences, focusing primarily on organizations as contested social spaces. Questioning dominant discourses which assume that the legal inclusion of different bodies in privileged positions amounts to equality, Puwar (2004) directs our attention to the informal processes that operate with the inclusion of women and racialized minorities in white masculine organizational spaces. Being an outsider on the inside, the presence of women and racial minorities in privileged positions brings on a state of disorientation and ontological anxiety (p. 13). Unlike whites, who are automatically accepted and expected, they do not have an undisputed right to occupy the space (p. 42). They endure a burden of doubt, a burden of representation, infantilisation and super-surveillance. There is a great suspicion and reluctance concerning their capabilities to measure up to the job (p. 59). The slightest mistakes and imperfections are noticed and amplified, which are then taken as the evidence of their incompetence (p. 61). Hence, they are pressured to work "twice as hard to be accepted" (p. 145).

Likewise, in Norwegian context, Gullestad (2004) questions the Norwegian claim to colour-neutrality and extraordinary hospitality towards racialized minorities. She argues that the myth of Norway as "colonial innocent" is partly due to Norwegians' perception of racism as an extremist political project, which is viewed as contrary to Norwegian progressive policies. However, positing racism as a way of living and thinking, Gullestad (2004) asserts that, similar to other "Western" countries, Norway draws its value systems from the Enlightenment, in which equality is translated as *likhet*, meaning "sameness". As such, it becomes a precondition for resolving the ideological conflict between the individual and the community. Therefore, cultural differences between Norwegians and immigrants are viewed as a barrier to achieving equality, and forced integration is often introduced as a solution. Drawing on these insights, this article reveals the

complex and multiple ways raced and gendered boundaries are produced and lived through Iranian immigrant women's subjectivities across different (historical) times and (national) geographical places.

Method

The empirical evidence of this study was collected through 13 narrative interviews with Iranian-born women living in Norway, lasting between two and five hours. The interviewees were recruited through snowball sampling. After identifying the initial participants, I asked them for assistance in identifying further potential participants. All interviews were conducted in Persian and, after verbatim transcription, were translated into English. To maintain confidentiality, all identifying information was removed from the interview transcripts, and each participant was provided with a pseudonym. The interviews covered broader aspects of the participants' lived experiences; in this study the focus is mainly turned to the participants' working life experiences. Each interview opened with the question, "Can you tell me about your migration experiences?" To engage the participants to think and speak of their lives in terms relevant to their bodily experiences, open-ended questions were posited based on the participants' wording and phrasing.

The women in this study were aged 31–59. They can be distinguished in two age groups. Four (Ziba, Neda, Taraneh, Shadi) were in their 50s; they had left Iran soon after the Islamic Revolution and had been working in Norway for a substantial period (17–30 years). The rest were in their 30s or 40s and had migrated to Norway on different bases: two were skilled workers (Samira and Sima), one was a master's student (Bahar) and the rest had accompanied or were reunited with their husbands who had been working in different Norwegian institutions. Five were unemployed at the time of interview (Simin, Negin, Samira, Soheila and Taraneh). Two did not have any working experience in Iran because they left Iran when they were very young (Shirin and Farideh). Most of the women introduced themselves with a middle-class background. However, their narratives shows that the loss of resources and lack of proficiency in Norwegian language, particularly in the beginning of their migration, seems likely to have led to status loss.

A thematic narrative method designed by Catherine K. Riessman (2008) was adapted to interpret the women's narratives. The primary attention in thematic narrative analysis is on "what is said" (the content of speech) rather than aspects of "the telling" (the structure of speech) (p. 53). To make sense of the participants' reports of events and experiences, I employed an inductive approach, whereby the themes were determined by the data. The produced themes were then critically interpreted through the lens of narrative inquiry, where the link between the social (macro) and the personal (micro) were reflected upon to foster a deeper understanding of the participants' negotiations of subjectivity.

Table of the participants working life background.

Participants Name	Age	Education in Iran	Occupation in Iran	Education in Norway		Occupation in Norway	
				Years	Years		
Neda	59	BA	Health sector	8	Some courses	Health sector	28
Shadi	57	High school	Education	-	BA	Education	17
Ziba	56	High school	Education		BA, MA	Public sector	17
Taraneh	54	BA	Private sector	2	-	Unemployed, had part time & temporary jobs	20
Shirin	46	BA	-	-	MA	Private sector	10
Soqra	42	BA	Education	3	BA	Education	5
Simin	40	BA	Public sector	18	MA	Full-time student	-
Bahar	40	BA, MA	Private sector	9	MA	Part time jobs-Service	

(Continued)

(Continued).

Participants Name	Age	Education in Iran	Occupation in Iran	Education in Norway	Occupation in Norway		
Sima	37	BA, MA	-	-	PhD, Post-Doc	Science	1
Farideh	36	High school	-	-	BA	Public sector	6
Soheila	35	BA	Public sector		BA, MA	Unemployed	-
Samira	34	BA, MA	Private sector	2	PhD	Unemployed recently	4
Negin	31	BA	Education	3	MA	Unemployed recently	-

Analysis

In this section, I present the findings focusing on the complex position the women in this study occupied in work organizations in their home and host countries. Linking the past to the present, I examine the effect of different types of social divisions on their working life experience across various times and locations. The findings are presented in two main sections: the working life narratives covering participants' experiences in Iran and their working life narratives covering participants' experiences in Norway. The first section concentrates on three participants whose narratives could be seen as representative of all the women's narratives in this study. I have centred my analysis on these three women because they elaborated more deeply into the main selected themes, which made it possible to display a variety of findings within data. Two main themes emerged from the data on the participants' working life narratives in Iran: the barriers the women faced when entering male-dominated workplaces, and the implementation of Islamic politics of control on the workplace through partitioning space and conducting compulsory Islamic prayers at work.

Working life experiences in Iran

Barriers in entering male-dominated professions

Interactions and decision-making processes in Iranian work organizations are highly influenced by gender-segregation policies and sex-role assumptions that are also rooted in larger society. Cultural representations of women as domestic, inferior and passive, as opposed to men who are perceived to be the sole figure of authority, competence and professionalism, contribute to the restraints that Iranian women face while ascending to top managerial positions. The encounter of women with masculine privileged bodies within patriarchal organizations is marked with disruption, suspicion and anxiety. This intrusion—or, in Puwar's words (2004), "invasion"—of space causes insecurity in the taken-for-granted orders of belonging and casts doubts on the boundaries of familiarity and strangeness. As such, the privileged figures are inclined to restore the spatial boundaries.

The following passages from Simin's narrative highlight the challenges she experiences in her encounters with male colleagues who view her gender and sexuality as incompatible with male-dominated organizations in Iran. She undertook various survival strategies to navigate a male-dominated workplace in which her intersecting identities (as a woman, young and unmarried) conflict with the masculine position she holds as the manager of a department. At the time of the interview, Simin was 45 years old and a full time master's student at a Norwegian university. She had been living in Norway for eight years. Prior to her immigration, she had worked for 18 years as a manager in a company in Iran. The following excerpt from her working life narrative in Iran highlights the symbolic systems through which Simin's subjectivity has been formed, including male supremacy, misogyny and heterosexual norms in which married women are more privileged than single women.

Being a single young woman, I was 23 years old and the manager of a department—this was something that propelled male colleagues to talk behind my back. They'd pester me in various ways. I was left with two options: either quitting my job or ignoring them and toughening up.

By undertaking the interlocking identities of being a woman and a manager, Simin embodies a “difference” that leaves the normative gendered oppositions undone, which in turn brings uncertainty to her interactions at work. Centring on an interaction with a male colleague who viewed Simin's professional position as incompatible with the feminine traits of being modest and decent, the next quote highlights how Simin's working conditions are complicated by the intersection of sexuality, a clear indicator of gender differences, with religion.

One day, one of my colleagues, who was a nice, religious young man, advised me to quit my job. Warning me that people were talking behind my back, saying things like, I've got this position mainly by having sexual relationship or sucking up to someone on top, while also mentioning his belief in my worth and deservedness for the position. Later, I talked about it to my boss, and he advised me not to mind people's opinions.

Taking up a job position for which she is not, in Puwar's (2004) words, “a somatic norm”, Simin's femininity and sexuality constitute “a muted sense of terror and threat” and endanger the organizational spaces predominantly occupied by masculine figures. The male colleague, whom Simin describes as “nice” and “religious”, informs Simin that others accused her of obtaining her position by the aid of her sexuality and femininity rather than her earned competence. However, not all her male colleagues have a stereotypical view of women, as the excerpt shows; she is supported by her boss, who advises her “not to mind people's opinions”, which highlights the nuanced nature of her interactions at work.

As Simin advances in her career, she realizes that in order “to be taken seriously” by her male colleagues, she is expected to adopt attitudes that are often associated with masculine roles.

After working for a few years, I learned I had to act like a man—speaking louder, bolder, with more authority—to be taken seriously by my male colleagues and to not be ridiculed for my femininity. I'd change my body language, and I'd even kick someone out of my office, if I had to, to avoid being bullied.

Since Simin's body is marked with her femininity, achieving a job position as a manager, is obtained not just by being qualified as a competent manager but also through the alteration of her “bodily hexis”. In an organizational space where “masculine bodily displays of aggression” are a norm (Puwar, 2004, p. 83), Simin had to change her “body language”, speak “louder” and “bolder” and even kick someone out of her office to be accepted and to avoid harassment (Puwar, 2004, p. 83).

Likewise, Bahar's narrative highlights the incompatibility between her female identity and the position she holds as an engineer in a masculine workplace. At the time of the interview, Bahar, who was 40 years old, had been studying her second master's degree in a Norwegian university while working part time in a café as a waitress. She has been living in Norway for four years. Prior to her migration she had been working in a petroleum company in Iran as an engineer for nine years. In the following quote, she explains the difficulties she had faced in finding a way into a historically male dominated occupation in Iran.

After I got my master's degree, I found a job I was very interested in. I was the only woman who worked there as an engineer; the other women worked as secretaries or administrators. It was a small company, but the idea of having a career in line with my education was intriguing. After three months working, I was laid off, I assume because I was the only female engineer among the other eight male engineers.

Constructing her identity as distinct from the other women who worked in female dominated jobs, Bahar asserts that her female identity was in conflict with her position as an engineer. Despite Bahar's claim of being competent in the job, she was laid off, demonstrating the fact that her professional identity as an engineer could not be, in Puwar's (2004) words, “the main point of engagement” (p. 55). Her exclusion is shaped by gendered and sexualized assumptions and attitudes in male-dominated organizations, which makes it impossible, according to Bahar, to work as “the only female engineer among the other eight male engineers”. Moreover, Bahar constructs her

identity in the intersection of being privileged (when compared to female colleagues who work in feminine occupations) and oppressed (when compared to male engineer colleagues), showing the importance of attending to the variation in her experiences and avoiding portraying her as wholly marginalized. As Choo and Ferree (2010) point out, “No one is ever just privileged or oppressed” (p. 133).

Space and Islamic politics of control

The narratives presented in this section illustrate the ways in which religion, gender and space intersect to shape women’s working life experiences both discursively and materially. While gender segregation has a long history in Iranian society, the institutionalization of Islam following the 1979 Revolution has given it a new dynamic force. One of the main ways in which this segregation takes place is through gendered division of physical spaces. According to Shahrokni (2013, p. 5), the division of space has taken three forms: a) separate spaces for men and women within a single larger space (e.g., buses, mosques, beaches, etc.); b) men-only spaces where women are prohibited from entering (e.g., sport stadiums); and, c) women-only spaces where men are prohibited from entering (e.g., women-only parks, banks and buses). These “privatised spaces” within the public domain are built on the fundamental premises of Islamic ideologies that are highly gendered and serve to control and regulate women’s bodies and their mobility (Fenster, 2005).

In the following passage, Neda, a 59-year-old Iranian woman who prior to her immigration to Norway had been working in a health sector for 8 years in Iran, describes how the change of regimes in Iran from monarchy to theocracy transformed the material conditions of her working life.

After the Revolution, the Islamic intervention in the medical system became too much to bear. I worked in an operation room. Before operations we’d wash our hands in a section of the room, both men and women, but after Revolution the medical jurisprudence built up separated places, to avoid contact between men and women. I found it so weird, in a wartime, when the hospital was overcrowded by injured soldiers, why these unworthy issues should gain attention.

The partitioning of the hospital as a way to create spatial boundaries between men and women can be viewed as a mechanism for excluding women. As Fenster (2005) asserts, they limit the spatial mobility of women more than men, because cultural and Islamic values such as “modesty”, “shame” and “honour”, which are projected onto the space, are more associated with women’s bodies than men’s bodies.

Similarly, Bahar refers to another aspect of the imposition of Islamic values upon the workplace and workers’ bodies. The following quote illustrates how religion as a structural power in collaboration with organizational power spreads its influence on workers’ bodies and workplaces.

I always found the obligation to go to prayers every day at work very unfair. To me it was pretentious. Even if I believed in religion, I wouldn’t like being forced to do that. Also, I didn’t like to follow the crowd!

The introduction of daily Muslim prayers at workplaces has been used by the Iranian authority as a mechanism to instil an authentic Islamic identity in workers. Here, Bahar reflects on the ways in which conducting compulsory daily Islamic prayers challenged her autonomy and took away her freedom to construct her identity. Regardless of her level of commitment to Islam, she was forced to act as a devoted Muslim by engaging in the practices that she describes as “pretentious”.

Working life experiences in Norway

The following section presents participants' working life experiences in Norway. Focusing on the experiences of five women who were representative of all the women in this study, the findings concentrate on two main themes. The first theme, "bearing the weight of history" addresses the ways in which participants' intersecting identities of being "Muslim", "Middle Eastern" and "Iranian" affect their working life experiences. The second theme, "authority of the immigrant others" highlights the women's struggle to have a voice in authoritative positions.

Bearing the weight of history

The formal legal right that guarantees the presence of minorities in white institutional spaces does not necessarily protect them from subtle racial indignities and insults that take place in their daily interactions with Norwegian colleagues. The following narratives highlight the tenuous moments when the participants take up positions historically "reserved" for Norwegians.

Ziba is a 56-year-old Iranian woman who has been working in the public sector in Norway for more than 28 years. Less than one year into her immigration to Norway, despite not being a fluent Norwegian speaker, Ziba gained the opportunity to enrol in a dental assistant course. In the following passage, she describes an incident where she is challenged by the manager of the institution about her personal hygiene.

After one month participating in the courses, I was called on by the instructor. We were 25 students, and I was the only foreigner among them. She said I smelled bad, and my smell disturbed other students. I wore Chloe perfume that I had bought in Turkey, it was a famous brand. She explained to me how to take shower, how to use deodorant, and what kinds of food to eat. That day, I cried all the way back home. I couldn't properly defend myself with my broken Norwegian.

This narrative highlights Ziba's transformation into "an object of disgust" by the manager (Ahmed, 2014). Once Ziba enters her office, the manager establishes a distinction between Ziba and the Norwegians in the class. She reads difference off the surface of her body and casts her as disgusting. Disgust here is a response to an event in the present, but it is also shaped, in Sara Ahmed's (2014) words, by "past histories of contact" between Norwegians and immigrants. These histories are "unavailable in the present" but allow a foreigner/newcomer to be apprehended as physically repulsive. As Keskinen (2009) shows that even though Norway is not a colonial power, it has long been complicit in colonial processes that continue to shape the perception of non-Western migrants as essentially different "others" who represent a potential threat to social norms and who both need to and are inherently unable to learn Norwegian-ness.

The manager reinforces the perceived difference between Ziba and native Norwegians by making it explicit that the disgust she produces is collective disgust: "my smell disturbed other students". This suggests that Ziba's classmates are complicit in the "lesson" Ziba is getting and may have complained to the manager. By giving her instructions in everyday hygiene and nutrition, the manager's way of relating to her can be understood as a way of patronizing and infantilising Ziba. Ziba's humiliation is compounded by the fact that her perceived "disgustingness" is reinforced by her perceived "ignorance". She tries to defend herself by talking back, which she finds difficult because of her "broken Norwegian". The "othering" which takes place here is unsurprisingly internalized by Ziba, who is emotionally distressed, alienated from her classmates and pushed away from the very institutions where authorities' work is to "care for" their students.

Similarly, Neda, a 59-year-old Iranian woman who has been working as a nurse for 28 years in different Norwegian hospitals, recalls a scene from her work in which she felt subjected to denigration. Having worked as a nurse in Iran for almost 8 years prior to her migration, Neda has educational resources that can easily be translated into the Norwegian labour market, which suffers from a shortage of nurses. This meant that one year after her arrival to Norway, despite a lack

of proficiency in the Norwegian language, she was employed as a nurse. In the following narrative, she recalls an episode of being humiliated by a Norwegian colleague who offered her the discarded clothes of a deceased patient.

One day a patient in our department died, and a Norwegian colleague offered me her clothes. I felt so bad, I found it so humiliating. I don't know why I accepted it. I got it, but then I burst into tears. Other colleagues sympathised with me, saying things like, I shouldn't mind it, since she was known to be offensive. There were few other occasions where she denigrated me by commenting on my broken Norwegian. I took courses while working, my colleagues would ask me about the courses, and I tried to communicate with my broken Norwegian. She'd bring me down by saying how bad I spoke and that I'd never pass the courses given how poorly I spoke Norwegian.

By offering Neda the discarded clothes of a deceased patient, the Norwegian co-worker objectifies Neda and treats her as a poor and deprived person. Neda works in a professional position equal to the Norwegian colleague; however, her competence is discredited based on her inability to speak Norwegian properly. As Puwar (2004) points out, "Language is an important distinguishing feature of measurement. It acts as a boundary marker" (p. 150). However, the objectification of Neda by the Norwegian colleague, I suggest, cannot merely be explained in terms of Neda's lack of competence in Norwegian language. Rather, it is embedded in discourses of racism and colonialism that informs the Norwegian colleague's evaluation of Neda. As an immigrant other, Neda cannot be perceived of as an equal member since she is working in a professional position that is reserved for whites. In white organizational space, she and people like her are expected to be, in Puwar's (2004) words, "service staffs (porters, cleaners, clerks and nannies), who take up a different rhythm in the occupation of space" (p. 42). Her presence challenges the fixed categories through which racialized bodies are historically defined and portrayed.

Here, Neda couples the experience of being treated unfairly with the experience of being sympathized with and supported by other colleagues. This highlights the nuanced nature of her relationship with her Norwegian colleagues and the necessity of going beyond a unidimensional analysis of women's experiences. However, it is worth noting that such forms of objectification, as Hübinette and Tigervall (2009) point out, exist at all levels of culture and should be considered as everyday encounters with racism instead of being viewed, as suggested by Neda's co-workers, as random incidents performed by an odd individual who is "known to be offensive".

Authority of the immigrant others

The narratives presented in this section reveal the incompatibility between inhabiting a racialized body and simultaneously claiming an agentic role in organizations. Despite Norwegians' claim to diversity, racial processes exist and continue to be primarily linked to the body. Bodily markers of difference—including colour of skin, demeanor, accent, tone of voice and style of dress—have the potential to place non-white immigrants in a peculiar position of visible invisibility within institutional spaces. Reading non-white immigrants' bodies through their phenotypic features makes them visible as a singular monolithic group whose otherness allegedly poses a threat to the order of things. Paradoxically, this method of identification renders them invisible by playing down their individuality and thus concealing the complexity of their personal, social and professional experiences (Ford, 2011). These processes of invisibility and visibility involve inequitable power relations; it is this power domination, in Patton's (2004) words, "whether in terms of classism, racism and sexism, and so on, that allows hegemony to not only be widespread, but also appear natural and inevitable" (p. 193). The following two narratives are examples of the visible invisibility of the women in professions requiring influence and authority.

At the start of her time in Norway, when doing a public sector internship in a front desk job, Farideh was confronted with openly racist behaviour located firmly in her gender.

During my training period, I worked at a counter in a department. Once a male client refused to receive my help and asked for a Norwegian to help him, I assume because he thought I am not in a position to help him as a foreigner. I felt so bad; it destroyed my day. My [Norwegian] colleagues also found it so weird.

Ahmed's (2014) use of "a comfortable chair" as a metaphor is very apt for describing this excerpt. She argues that "comfort is the effect of bodies being able to 'sink' into spaces that have already taken their shape". Just like a chair that has acquired its shape by the repetition of certain bodies inhabiting it, the surface of a space can become less receptive to other bodies (Ahmed, 2014, pp. 147–152). Here, a front desk job is characterized by structural borders, the counter in the front functions as a boundary and symbolizes the employees' bodies with authority, power and knowledge. However, Farideh's body at the counter does not signify the same meanings; her body does not "sink" into the space that has taken its shape from white bodies. The man's refusal to accept her help calls into question her knowledge and expertise in the role undertaken. As an immigrant other, Farideh's body comes to symbolize inferiority; the authority accorded to her role within the organizational setting cannot be legitimized as it would for a white body. Indeed, there is a mismatch between Farideh's body and the organizational setting; the space does not accommodate her body and her failure to fit causes discomfort for the male client.

In a diverse society where race is ignored or denied, Farideh's response to the incident, unsurprisingly, is not through confrontation. Rather, she experiences a visceral reaction of shame and shock: "I felt bad, it destroyed my day". Farideh's recounting of her colleagues' response reveals two important points. Farideh sees her Norwegian colleagues as supportive and sympathetic to what she has experienced. However, one could argue that their surprise is a reflection of their own position as privileged white people. As Kamaloni (2019) asserts, white people do not experience the "post-racial world" the same way people of colour do; therefore, it is normal for them to find such experiences surprising and odd. Following Kamaloni (2019), I would argue such kind of responses, while supportive, simultaneously "disempower the victim by taking away their right to see and name racial injustice" (p. 37).

Similarly, Ziba perceives her identity as an opinionated and outspoken immigrant as an obstacle to her success at workplace.

I experience racial discrimination every day. The more educated you are, the more likely you face obstacles. If they find you weak, miserable, then you'd be a problem they have to solve. They'd have mercy on you. But if you're strong, having your own opinion and speaking up, then they would put obstacles in your way.

Ziba's words attest to the fact that immigrants are more acceptable when they present as "needy"—in other words, as "problems" ready to be solved or as people to be saved by "good" Norwegians. She should "know her place" in society, and that place does not allow her to question her "superiors" (in both senses of the word). Immigrants are favoured if they make themselves invisible, and any signs of assertion are not appreciated. Ziba provided another example of her being silenced by a manager who assumed her position did not give her the authority to speak on specific issues.

Once, in an annual meeting, the [female] manager interrupted me while I was elaborating on some research on welfare state policies by saying, 'I have some advice for you. You'd better keep your experiences to yourself. Just sit and listen'.

Here, Ziba's bodily and speech act does not fit the "authentic" image of a white social worker who can speak up from a position of authority. Her utterance is marked by her racial identity, which makes it impossible for her to claim legitimacy for herself and for what she knows. As Bourdieu (1977) puts it so aptly, "Speech always owes a major part of its value to the value of the person who utters it" (p. 652). Ziba's identity is locked in her racial history, as evidenced by her perceived inferiority as a Middle Eastern, Muslim immigrant woman. She is not allowed to speak up as a human because her body and her voice is delimited into a particular racial embodiment. According to Puwar (2004), "Whom and what people can speak for is a revealing measure of hierarchies of inclusion" in white organizational spaces (p. 74).

These findings highlight the complex position the women in this study occupy in work organizations in the two seemingly contrasting national contexts of Iran and Norway. The othering processes illustrated in the narrative excerpts highlight the part that intersections of gender and race play in hierarchical inclusion of the women in spaces that they do not belong. While in Iranian work organizations, their gendered and sexualized bodies disrupted “the sheer maleness” (Puwar, 2004) of Iranian organizational spaces, in Norwegian work organizations, their gendered and racialized body was inconsistent with historically white organizational spaces.

Conclusion

This article aims to contribute to research on women’s working life experiences by applying an intersectional analysis in conjunction with feminist postcolonial theory, namely that of Sara Ahmed (2000, 2014) and Nirmal Puwar (2004). The study examines working life experiences of Iranian immigrant women before and after migration to Norway in relation to questions of equality along gender and racial lines. Drawing on 13 narrative interviews, the study explores the women’s understandings and experiences of discrimination in both contexts.

The findings show the need to move beyond reductionist interpretations of migration that portray immigration to the West as an unproblematic journey towards a better life in the accounts of immigrants coming from the East. The narratives show a nuanced picture of working life in both countries, with stories of both positive and negative encounters in the workplace in each context. The forms and content of discrimination differed in each country. In Iran, the participants were openly discriminated along gender lines informed by Islamic and cultural discourses, whereas in Norway, they experienced subtler racialized forms of discrimination that were anchored in gender-based discrimination.

In both national contexts, religion was influential in placing the participants in a disadvantaged position. In Iran, the participants’ working lives were delimited by the Islamic regulations that controlled their bodies and restricted their movement and activities in the workplace. For instances, the gendered division of physical workspaces in accordance with Islamic moral codes was significant in limiting the participants’ opportunities at work. They were compelled to take up an Islamic identity regardless of their level of interest and commitment to Islamic beliefs. In the Norwegian context, the interlocking categories of being “Muslim” as well as “Iranian” that were integrated with the participants’ gender identity were influential in placing them in a disadvantaged position.

The participants’ competence and capabilities in both contexts were measured through their bodily and speech acts. In Iranian work organizations, the participants described the incompatibility of their bodies with the “sheer maleness” of Iranian work organizations where their gendered and sexualized bodies, which have historically been perceived as “mother”, “caregiver” and “secretary”, were incompatible with the masculine roles they held. To assert their place in all male organizational spaces, they had to diminish their femininity by altering their bodily gestures and movements and tone of their voice in accordance with a masculine identity. Similarly, in Norwegian work organizations, the women’s competence could not be perceived as the main point of their engagement. Being marked with visual markers of difference—including colour of skin, demeanor, accent and tone of voice—their presence was noticeable and disruptive to the boundaries of “us” and “them”. They felt othered, patronized and humiliated in diverse, subtle (and sometimes unsubtle) ways. Their claims to authenticity and any signs of assertiveness were met with resistance and unease. Their racial identity, anchored in gender identity, played a great role in their hierarchical inclusion in Norwegian work organizations.

Interviews in this study also show that, in addition to gender, age and marital status often become the points of reference in social relations, thus disadvantaging Iranian women in Iranian work organizations. Being young and unmarried, they could not be perceived of as having a senior position, which caused male colleagues’ resistance to acceptance of their authority. In the Norwegian context, however, immigrant status and a lack of proficiency in Norwegian language

become the reference points for their discrimination and marginalization at work. Nonetheless, it is worth acknowledging the privilege that the participants had in entering Norwegian work organizations despite their lack of competence in Norwegian language. Similarly, the loss of job and educational qualification was an important factor in making the participants vulnerable to discrimination and marginalization at work, except for those who could utilize their educational and professional recourses in Norway (e.g., Neda who had worked in Iran as a professional nurse). Nevertheless, their competence did not inoculate them against daily prejudices and rejections in workplace.

However, the narratives illustrate a nuanced picture of the participants' working life experiences. In both Iranian and Norwegian contexts, the experiences of being discriminated against by a colleague were coupled with support and sympathy by other colleagues. Nonetheless, I argue that while the women's colleagues' responses to their experiences of racism and sexism were supportive in both contexts, they simultaneously disempowered the women by taking away their right to see and name gendered and racial injustice. Such responses decontextualize racism and sexism from its historical and socio-political constructions, therefore silencing or dismissing these experiences while simultaneously sustaining them.

The findings call into attention the importance of examining the complexity of Iranian immigrant women's working life experiences through an intersectional framework to highlight the interconnectedness and intertwined nature of their gendered and racialized identities. The participants' working life experiences cannot be explained merely through a gender-only or race-only framework. Rather different facets of the women's identity as being Muslim, Iranian, Middle eastern, woman, young, unmarried, immigrant and so on informed and complicated their working life experiences. Migration to Norway, a country internationally known for its human rights record, does not necessarily lead to a welcome inclusion of Iranian immigrant women in Norwegian work organizations. Everyday micro-social encounters in these organizations are tense with subtle forms of gendered and racialized discrimination that put racialized minorities in a precarious situation. More importantly, these intersubjective encounters have broader effects in racialized minorities' inclusion in work organizations in terms of access to resources, considering that many opportunities and decision-making processes in workplaces take place through informal channels. Having a postcolonial intersectional approach offers fruitful avenues for future research on Iranian immigrant women's working life experiences in Norway. Comparing working life experiences of Iranian immigrant women and Norwegian women in male-dominated professions in Norway can provide insightful knowledge by foregrounding a comparative analysis between the dominant and subordinated groups.

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