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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

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From shared experiences of gendered racism to converging interpretations? Exploring the formation of a decolonial standpoint by women of Moroccan descent in postcolonial France

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Abstract

This article invites a dialogue between decolonial perspectives on diasporas and feminist standpoint theories by exploring processes of standpoint formation by women of Moroccan descent who grew up in postcolonial France. The article draws on 18 interviews with women aged in their 20s to their 40s, as well as a long-term engagement with these questions through 'patchwork ethnography'. While emphasising that these women were neither exposed to identical experiences nor have the same worldviews, the article shows that they have navigated a set of shared experiences that pertain to their social position and that they are thus aware of the manifestations in their everyday lives and of the workings of gendered and racialised social hierarchies that affect them. The article explores participants' experiences of racism and of its gendered inflections; the formation of 'shared angles of visions' (Hill Collins, 1997) around specific issues as a result; and finally, participants' assessments of the different terms used to describe them in public and in everyday discourses. The article seeks to contribute to thinking through empirically the formation of an epistemological standpoint at the crossroads of feminist and decolonial approaches.

Keywords Racism, Gender, France, Postcolonial, Decolonial, Diaspora, Standpoint theory, Feminism

Introduction

It's never said that France colonised so many countries, never that the Senegalese infantrymen came to help France. (...). And we never say that our ancestors came to liberate France, or anything like that. So we have to learn about it ourselves when we grow up, when we're 21, 22, you learn from documentaries, films, here and there, but they don't teach it to you at school. And I find that... I don't think that's right.

Nada, a 27 year-old young woman of Moroccan descent who grew up in a Northern Parisian arrondissement, shared with me her thoughts about what growing up in France

meant to her. Nada expressed her frustration at the silence of school programmes about the history of colonisation and the lack of recognition of the sacrifices made by colonised people enrolled in French wars and later postcolonial labour migrants mobilised in many sectors of the French economy. She pointed out during the interview, how, as an elected member of a local city council, she was involved in initiatives that sought to make visible this history, for instance by naming new Parisian squares and station to honour the sacrifices of colonial troops in European wars, an engagement she deemed crucial to symbolically combat this absence in formal curricula. In this article, drawing on interviews with women of Moroccan descent in France, I explore the question of how to think about the formation of a standpoint from an empirical perspective. The paper reveals the interlocking dimensions of converging experiences of gendered racism, the emergence of common perspectives around issues of shared concern, as well as the relational and shifting meanings participants attribute to the labels used to describe them.

Over the course of this research, between September 2021 and March 2023, I met with 18 women of Moroccan descent who grew up in France to discuss their experiences of, and views around, identity, gender and inclusion in France. As I observed a significant convergence among participants in voicing not only a certain shared consciousness of colonial histories, as illustrated by Nada's point, but also many instances of shared interpretations and understandings, I set out to explore theoretically and empirically the politics of standpoint formation, from both a feminist and a decolonial perspective. To situate this endeavour in a longer tradition, these reflections resonate with the notion of 'double consciousness', initially described by Du Bois over a century ago and for whom the dispossession of a sense of self for African-Americans was inherently articulated with the gift of the 'second-sight' (Du Bois, 1903/2007; Itzigsohn & Brown, 2020). More recently and in the European context, Ipek Demir argued, building on many years of research with the Kurdish diaspora, that 'diasporas bring various disruptions and destabilisations to the Global North. I see the provincialising and decolonising carried out by postcolonial diasporas as a form of 'talking back' to the metropole' (2022, p. 57). Demir would qualify Nada's discourse as a form of 'radical remembering' contributing to such a decolonial endeavour.

In this paper I seek to foster a dialogue between decolonial perspectives on diasporas with feminist theories around standpoint. Accounting for the depth of the scholarly discussion around differences and convergences between postcolonial and decolonial intellectual influences lies beyond the scope of this article (for an informative summary, see Bhabra, 2014), yet I specify that I use 'postcolonial' as a descriptive term that aims at a specific historicization and 'decolonial' as reflecting an epistemological undertaking that engages with coloniality of power (Quijano, 2000) in thinking about knowledge production. As for feminist standpoint epistemology, it considers women's everyday lives as privileged sites of knowledge production to understand the workings of patriarchy and sexism in society. Standpoint theory does not suppose that all individuals who share a specific social position, for instance for what concerns us here women of Moroccan descent in France, have necessarily similar worldviews and opinions. Rather, the epistemological claim lies in the collective emergence of shared perspectives around a selection of issues that resonate with individual experiences of structures of power. In the case at hand, respondents faced similar structural inequalities, notably, but not only, in terms of class (as most respondents grew up in working class families and experienced

upward social mobility), gender (as women in a patriarchal society), and race (as individuals read as of North-African origin and Muslim, no matter their actual religious beliefs and practices). This article hence articulates the question of minority experiences with that of the formation of a particular standpoint through an empirical case-study.

After a description of the social position of women of Moroccan descent in postcolonial France by way of a brief literature review, I present the theoretical tenets of the article at the crossroads of a decolonial perspective on diasporas and feminist standpoint theories. The empirical sections are structured around what I argue are three revealing dimensions of the formation of a standpoint: (1) shared lived experiences, in this case of racism and of its gendered inflections, (2) converging interpretations around prominent social and political issues of particular concern to this group, here illustrated by participants' perspectives on asylum and migration politics, and finally, (3) an examination of group formation through the situated and shifting meanings, for participants, of categories and labels mobilised to describe them in public discourses as well as in interpersonal relations.

Women of North African descent in postcolonial France: a brief review of the literature

A wealth of studies has by now demonstrated the discrimination faced by people of North-African descent on the French labour market (see for instance Meurs et al., 2008; Brinbaum et al., 2016). In a national context in which no ethnic and racial statistics are allowed, crucial statistical evidence has in large part been provided further to the launching in 2008 by the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE) of a survey entitled 'Trajectories and Origins' with a second edition rolled out in 2019. It shows that 8% of the French population aged 18–50 declares themselves to be Muslim and among them 70% have North-African origins (Simon, 2020). These surveys have demonstrated higher rates of unemployment among people of North-African background and specific patterns of labour market discrimination affecting women in this group (Arnoult et al., 2021), who have higher levels of education than men racialized as North-African (with 45% of women and only 24% of men having a higher education degree (Brinbaum, 2021). In particular, women who wear the hijab face strong labour market discrimination, both formal and informal, leading many to try private entrepreneurship, as shown by Karimi (2020).

Qualitative research has furthermore provided crucial insights into the lived experiences of discrimination and racism, pointing to its centrality and omni-presence in the lives of youth from so-called *quartiers populaires*, inhabited by working-class and racialized populations, so much so that it became the central focus of a major collective sociological enquiry initially designed to explore questions of civic and political participation (Talpin et al., 2021). Drawing on the 'Trajectories and Origins' survey as well as on another focusing on discrimination conducted in 2015, Patrick Simon finds that the share of individuals declaring themselves Muslim and reporting discrimination on religious grounds rose from 5% in 2008 to 40% in 2015 (Simon, 2020, p. 150). Against this background, several studies have foregrounded experiences of racism and explored coping mechanisms in the French context (Cognet and Eberhard, 2013; Beaman, 2017; Dazey, 2021), and qualitative research has also helped in identifying extensive under-reporting of experiences of racism and discrimination, whereby research

participants do not recognise having been discriminated against whilst recounting explicit instances of discrimination (Hamidi, 2010) or whereby denial of discrimination becomes a stigma management mechanism (Bouchareb, 2022). Although researchers have also explored ethnographically the upward social mobility of racialised individuals, for instance those from the socio-economically marginalised department of Seine-Saint-Denis obtaining a Master's degree (Truong, 2015), Shirin Shahrokni's research pointed out how the everyday experiences of even upwardly mobile and middle-class descendants of North African immigrants do not escape various forms of racism to which they are exposed at elite higher education institutions (Shahrokni, 2021). A mixed method study by Olivier Esteves, Alice Picard and Julien Talpin further emphasized the perceived lack of career progression of many of those highly educated young professionals of North-African descent whom these authors surveyed and interviewed (Esteves et al., 2024). Their 2024 book demonstrates the existence of a pattern of emigration among what the authors qualify as the French Muslim diaspora, with over 2/3 of their respondents being of North-African descent (Esteves et al., 2024, p. 57). A central argument of this recent book revolves around islamophobia as a key driver of emigration with 71% of their respondents stating that they have left France in order to be less subject to racism and discrimination (ibid., 40).

As for research more specifically into women's experiences among those of North African decent in France, a major ethnographic enquiry is the now over two-decade-old monograph by Nacira Guénif Souilamas based on her research exploring the daily lives of these young women in the family, at school and in the labour market (Guénif Souilamas, 2000). Later articles by the same author significantly contributed to providing a critical perspective on the specifically gendered manifestations of postcolonial racism in France. Guénif Souilamas unpacked for instance how the figure of the 'beurette' (the slang version of 'arab', feminised) was one of a desirable woman, to be emancipated by French institutions and saved from other racialised men (Guénif-Souilamas, 2006), echoing Spivak's famous formulations about saving brown women from brown men (Spivak, 2010, see also Abu-Lughod, 2016).

In a striking essentialization across media and political discourses, racialised women read as Muslim exist mostly through two narrow framings: the issue of the hijab and Islamic clothing more broadly and the question of these women's sexuality as a measure of their emancipation and integration (Étiemble, 2018). With the politization of the hijab harking back to French colonialism, and notably the unveiling ceremonies that took place in Algeria (MacMaster, 2020), contemporary accounts and political uses of French secularism have ensured its continued centrality in French politics (Scott, 2007). The successive bans and on-going mediatisation of clothing perceived as Muslim - of the hijab since 1989, the burkini since 2016 and most recently in 2024 the 'abaya', a long dress that school heads were instructed in September 2024 to 'spot' in order to refuse entry to school to the adolescents wearing them - engender a stigmatisation of women read as Muslim without their voices being conceded much (often any) space in mainstream media (Killian, 2003; Chouder et al., 2008) and their agency being virtually dismissed a priori (Freedman, 2007; Bilge, 2010). Although islamophobia takes various forms across Europe (Morgan, 2016), France appears to stand out by the number and reach of its bans and stigmatizing polemics underpinned by an allegedly unique understanding of secularism (Bentouhami, 2017; Zia-Ebrahimi, 2020; Fauray, 2023).

The relatively recent translation of Scott's *The politics of the Veil* into French in 2017, as well as the translation in 2021 of Sara Farris' *In the Name of Women Rights*, that theorizes the notion of femonationalism, seem to point to a growing resonance of these critical analyses in France, while simultaneously revealing that most of this literature tends to be produced outside of French academic structures. For instance, the edited volume 'Genre et Islamophobie' (2021) was put together by researchers based in Switzerland (though several chapters do address the French context). This needs to be understood in the context of 'an academic under-investment in studying this form of racism' in France (Hajjat, 2021). Publications in English have thus dominated academic writings on these issues even as concerns the French setting. The case of women wearing a hijab and its politicization have attracted significant attention, spanning different topics and methodologies, from critical discourse analysis (see for instance the transnational analysis of newspapers as well as policy and legal documents conducted by Korteweg & Yurdakul, 2021), to lived experiences (Hancock & Mobillion, 2019; Najib & Hopkins, 2019; Laxer et al., 2023), to the study of 'ordinary perpetrators' (Faury, 2023). Most of these studies converge in demonstrating a heightened level of oppression while documenting women's coping strategies and agency. Yet, the focus on the topic of the hijab and on women who wear it, though responding to its stigmatization and paradigmatic construction as a problem, might however, if inadvertently, reproduce a framing that conceals the continuities of gendered racism for women of North-African descent more broadly. The design of this research aimed thus neither at focusing on hijab-wearing women, nor at excluding them, with the intention of simply not centering the 'hijab' but the experiences of women of Moroccan descent at large.

Overall, in an intersectional fashion, women of North African descent in postcolonial France might simultaneously face less stigmatization than men in certain encounters with agents of the State, such as at the hands of the police, and in specific settings such as the school, with more benevolent attitudes of school instructors towards them (Guénif-Souilamas & Macé, 2004); yet also more stigmatization and discrimination in others, being for instance highly sexualized in everyday encounters or being exposed to verbal and physical aggressions in public spaces, particularly so if they wear a hijab (Mohammed and Hajjat, 2013; Simon, 2020). Given all of the above, I here consider the social position of women of Moroccan background to be one of 'women of North-African descent' owing to shared patterns of classed, gendered and racialized domination. The following section presents the tenets of feminist standpoint theories and decolonial perspectives on diasporas that inspire the theoretical framing of this paper.

Feminist standpoint theories in conversation with decolonial perspectives on diasporas: a theoretical framing

Feminist standpoint theories foreground the everyday lives of women as a privileged site for the production of knowledge if that knowledge is to have emancipatory goals and foster social justice. Dorothy Smith, a Canadian sociologist and prominent figure of the emergence of standpoint theories, foregrounded that 'we know as a matter of doing,' meaning that our actions reveal a way of knowing, even if at times beyond consciousness (1997, p. 395). By constructing a collective social position as a matter of everyday doing, standpoint theory makes 'the claim that some social situations are scientifically better than others as places from which to start off knowledge projects' (Harding, 1992,

p. 131). Thus, it is about being able to identify sites and voices which - because of the specific patterns of oppression that concern them - are best situated to shed light on these specific inequalities and the processes underpinning their reproduction. Yet, to clarify, a shared standpoint does not necessarily correspond to shared views but to a similar position within the organisation of social relations - and thus within power configurations - which engenders certain patterns of exclusion (Smith, 1997). What is more, we need to be wary of reifying the meaning of a standpoint, as the transformation of subject-positions into standpoints supposes an awareness-raising collective effort, as argued by Kathi Weeks: 'a standpoint is project, not an inheritance; it is achieved, not given' (Weeks, 1996, p. 101). The questions thus raised are epistemological: Who 'knows' what racialised and gendered oppression is? Whose voices count and what 'counts' as knowledge in what concerns said individuals and groups? How can sociologists study and reveal processes of standpoint formation?

In her recent theoretical proposition, Ipek Demir invites us to think about diasporas' positionality and potential epistemic privilege in terms that resemble feminist standpoint theory: 'If empires used translation for creating and sustaining a system of coloniality and for governance, exploitation and conversion, can diasporic translations act as a challenge to colonisation through the previously conquered peoples talking back to the Global North, in the North?' (Demir, 2022, p.57). Demir makes a decolonial proposition in that she sees in diasporas' voices the opportunity to change what counts as the national story. Yet, as for thinkers of standpoint theory, a social position cannot in and of itself be equated with a specific worldview. Thus, Demir warns us: 'Diaspora, then, is not just about migration or the movement of peoples in general. As I discuss, what transforms 'overseas' people who migrate into a diaspora is that they 'speak back' to the metropole or the homeland, and engage in the dislodging of coloniality' (ibid., p. 9). Demir hence identifies 'translation' in diaspora settings as the process of acquiring an oppositional consciousness that disrupts dominant narratives. Demir's approach resonates with feminist standpoint theorists' concern with the epistemological relevance of groups and collectives beyond the individual (Hartsock, 1997) as a prior condition to the building of an oppositional consciousness (Sandoval, 1991).

In her critique of some tenets of feminist standpoint theory, and drawing on Weber, Susan Hekman argues for the need for 'social analysts' to use concepts that are distinct from those of 'social actors' in order to be able to 'understand and clarify that world' in which social actors operate (Hekman, 1997, p. 401). This distinction matters and the researcher needs to clarify his, her or their positionality and their methodology to acknowledge the distinct position of the 'social analyst' and that of the research participants. Yet, to go beyond Hekman's point, there remains a crucial epistemological question at stake in understanding what 'concepts' become legitimate knowledge and how acknowledging social groups as standpoints might play a role in processes of knowledge production against the background of broader power configurations. In that sense, by centring an analysis of power relations, it is the sociologist's very legitimacy 'to understand and clarify', as Hekman puts it, that is simultaneously questioned. In other words, a Foucauldian perspective on power and knowledge necessarily questions what are the 'subjugated knowledges' of our time, these 'disqualified knowledges' that carry with them the possibility of critique (Foucault, 1976/2003). In sum, the horizon of making

knowledge claims anchored in specific social positions is crucial for knowledge (or for what counts as scientific knowledge) to stand a chance to foster social justice.

Positionality, methodology and patchwork ethnography

This paper stems from a 2-year research project in the framework of which I conducted about 25 interviews with anti-racist and civil society organizations, 18 interviews with women of Moroccan descent who grew up in France aged 20–40, and 25 interviews with women of Turkish background who grew up in Germany, also falling within the 20–40 age range. In this article I draw only on the interviews conducted with women of Moroccan descent in France. Fieldwork in France included several in-person interviews in Paris, but most were conducted online. I contacted these women through NGOs and cultural associations as well as a few personal contacts who acted as intermediaries and relied on snowballing. The interviews spanned several themes: growing up in France, questions of identity, inclusion, gendered inequalities and the role of social media. In this article, I delve in particular into participants' experiences of gendered racism, without centring the analysis on the notion of identity. In terms of the interview format, the intention was to combine aspects of a 'biographical interview' with that of a 'conversation' in which the respondents' views, perspectives and opinions were placed centre-stage.

Importantly, my positionality as a woman in my mid-thirties who grew up in France to Moroccan and Polish parents necessarily played a role in shaping the interview interaction as I shared significant elements in terms of social position with the participants, including for some age, and for all, gender and a higher education trajectory. Yet it is important to highlight as well varied geographical contexts. Some grew up in rural areas, others in middle-sized cities, yet others in Parisian suburbs. Most were in their 20s (7) and 30s (6) and a few in their early 40s (5). While most were of working-class background, all were either studying or had completed a higher education degree, with the snowballing method producing admittedly a self-selection bias. In spite of sharing some socially meaningful characteristics with the women who took part in this research, I do not fully claim an insider position to acknowledge both socio-geographical differences within this group and the unavoidably distinct position of the researcher. This resonates with points made by Jørgen Carling, Marta Bivand Erdal and Rojan Ezzati (Carling et al., 2014) who question the insider-outsider binary and outline the many ways in which migration researchers' positionalities in relation to research participants are often more complex and nuanced than this binary can account for. They noted that even an 'apparent insider', which to some extent may apply to the part of the research I conducted in the French setting, can be perceived as an outsider by participants on another ground, such as age or class. Yet, this should also not conceal the epistemological opportunities opened up by such positions of 'apparent insider' and 'insider by proxy' in creating (or seeking to create) more horizontal relations. The interviewee-interviewer social distance was thus lesser this time, as compared to research I have conducted over previous years with migrant and asylum-seeking women in precarious administrative and socio-economic positions.

Finally, this research unfolded during a European fellowship that started with a maternity leave in the midst of a global pandemic. These circumstances necessarily shaped the ways fieldwork developed and given that most participants were well-versed in using

online conferencing tools, conducting interviews online appeared as a self-evident solution. I thus consider this fieldwork to have been an instance of ‘patchwork ethnography’ (Günel & Watanabe, 2024), introduced to me by my colleague Amandine Desille, with whom I have discussed various methodological challenges and opportunities around combining fieldwork with maternity. These reflections, first published in a patchwork ethnography manifesto, resonated with my experience of conducting fieldwork in ‘bits and pieces’ while maintaining a continuous deep commitment to the issues and questions I was researching: ‘Patchwork ethnography refers not to one-time, short, instrumental trips and relationships à la consultants, but rather, to research efforts that maintain the long-term commitments, language proficiency, contextual knowledge, and slow thinking that characterizes so-called traditional fieldwork (Faubion 2009; Pigg 2013; Adams, Burke, and Whitmarsh 2014), while fully attending to how changing living and working conditions are profoundly and irrevocably changing knowledge production.’¹

Referring to the notion of ‘patchwork ethnography’ is also about revisiting home/field boundaries in the feminist spirit of making the private political. What follows from that is a questioning of the ‘autonomous’ and unattached figure of the (male) researcher that has historically served to create standards of ‘good’ qualitative research. This expectation that a researcher is able to immerse him, her or themselves in a given context or community, and that the researcher is a neutral and overhanging observer, is not only informed by a positivist understanding of science, it also tends to reproduce hierarchical relationships between the ‘knower’ and an ‘object of knowledge’. In contrast, an approach to qualitative research anchored in feminist care ethics acknowledges the research process as an encounter of various subjectivities, embedded in power relations that need to be recognised. While the online interviews I conducted for this research at times took place after a sleepless night or in-between breastfeeding times, the notion of patchwork ethnography was meaningful to me as I continuously engaged over the years with books (for instance keeping up to date with most auto-biographical testimonies and many essays by women of North-African descent in France), newspaper articles, and numerous podcasts that provided space for political discussions by and with racialised women, notably but not only in the French context; all of which also informs my analysis and shapes my interpretations. In what follows, I turn to the empirical contributions of this piece, exploring first participants’ experiences of gendered racism, then foregrounding what can be described as a sense of a postcolonial diasporic consciousness, and finally accounting for the situated meanings of labels and categories of concern to participants.

‘It’s an atmosphere, it was ways of treating people to make them feel a certain way’: a shared experience of racism and of its gendered inflections

In this section, I present three dimensions of gendered racism that traversed most accounts. To clarify, while the notion of gendered islamophobia helps grasping the specific experiences of racialised women read as Muslim and most prominently that of women who wear a hijab (Zine, 2006; Alimahomed-Wilson, 2020), I here refer to gendered forms of anti-Muslim racism (Razack, 2022) to reflect the design of this research that includes yet does not focus on the experiences of women who wear a hijab. The first dimension of this gendered racism entails a sense of unease in work environments,

¹ The Manifesto was published on the website of the Society for Cultural Anthropology: <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/a-manifesto-for-patchwork-ethnography>.

forms of indirect marginalisation and degradation that were deeply felt but at the same time seemed virtually impossible to prove. Second, several participants also recounted overt instances of racism, such as discrimination on the labour market or verbal aggressions in public spaces. Women wearing the hijab experienced the most acute forms of such exclusions, yet these experiences were not exclusive to hijab-wearing women. Finally, several participants explained how they had to navigate a sense of being sexualised in a racialised manner which included upsetting scrutinization of their sexuality and intimacy.

Soukaina is a 30 years old woman of Moroccan descent who grew up in the North of France in a working-class family. She holds a Master's degree and worked (as an intern and on short contracts) in various French institutions including a Ministry. She spoke of a sense of unease in the face of unwelcoming social attitudes and provided a specific example:

I've mainly worked in the cultural sector in general and I find that in this type of sector discrimination is more obvious. I don't really know how to explain it, but it's kind of a set of attitudes, of social behaviour that makes me feel that I'm not necessarily welcome or that I'm not necessarily suited to that environment.

(...)

There's one person, for example, who says she's French-German. Nobody says anything. Then one day, I had the misfortune to say that I am French-Moroccan and people said 'no, you're just French,' but no! I have both nationalities. So technically, even on paper, I'm French-Moroccan... In fact, it's just to make you feel that not all double cultures are equal.

With a similar choice of words, Salma, aged 29, also pointed to 'an atmosphere' perceived as hostile. As documented in studies of discrimination and racism (Hamidi, 2010), most discriminations and micro-aggressions are neither reported nor registered. For Salma, it is the implicitly consensual acceptance of this type of environment that turned it into a 'culture':

I couldn't see myself going up to someone and saying so-and-so didn't mention me even though I'd taken part, so-and-so didn't say hi, or so-and-so rolled his eyes when I spoke. I couldn't see myself saying that because it sounds a bit like... who cares, it's not a real problem. Even that incident in the doctoral students' open space, I was chased away but nobody threw stones at me either, it's hard to describe I find... and as a result... it's not as if I had received a letter with insults and I can say, well, I received that, it's not normal... and I also had the feeling that it was a culture shared by a lot of people.

This situation finally brought Salma to leave this professional environment and later on to even leave France to establish herself in Belgium listing islamophobia as a key reason in this decision. Soukaina too, had recently moved to the UK and emphasized that this represented a significant relief to her, her situation in London offering her better professional prospects and a break from what she saw as a loaded political context in France. Although moving abroad was not the initial focus of this research, this choice resonates with recent research that clearly established a pattern of emigration of highly educated

French Muslims driven by islamophobia and discrimination (Alloul, 2020; Esteves et al., 2024). Soukaina commented for instance 'I started counting time in France in terms of presidential campaigns,' the political context becoming so hostile that she concluded 'I should have left before the last one,' referring to the 2022 presidential elections.

Naima, a 38 years old mother of two who grew up in a rural area outside of Paris, has not left France. Yet, as a hijab wearing woman, she felt aggressions could happen any-time. As mentioned above, 'visibly Muslim' women are indeed particularly exposed to verbal, and at times physical, aggressions in public spaces (Mohammed and Hajjat, 2013; Simon, 2020).

The violence that comes from someone you've never even suspected, from the little granny who pulls her shopping bag and spits at your feet. These things, for example, are real, they're lived experience. Well, you don't expect it, you don't know how... I've never really known how to react. It's called ruminating, I'm going to ruminate. Maybe I should have told her, maybe I should have done something. The next time I see her...

(...)

Unfortunately, you get used to it. And we put strategies in place to survive discrimination in general. It's really everywhere, it's sad but we live, we live well, we live in the moment. We know it's there. It's really this kind of monster that will startle you on a street corner and then go away immediately afterwards. So obviously you're going to be thinking about it for a long time. It's bound to leave a scar.

Deeply affected not only by her everyday experiences as a woman wearing a hijab but also by several instances of humiliation and discrimination as a child, Naima decided to resume her studies in the field of psychology. The words chosen by Salma and Naima to recount these experiences demonstrate how racism is simultaneously omnipresent yet most often covert and latent or stealthy and elusive, leaving them unable to act upon such everyday racism.

Several participants pointed further to a form of gendered stigmatization, one that revealed a racialization of sexism (Hamel, 2005; Farris, 2017), through the hypersexualized figure of the 'beurette' and the dominant gaze on the sexuality of women of North-African descent. Soraya, an enthusiastic and dynamic woman in her mid-thirties, living in a region with very little so-called 'diversity' as she specified, often felt distress at the sexualization of many daily interactions in her new environment:

I came to live in Brittany [region in the north-west of France]. I moved here five months ago and sometimes people look at me like 'oh my'. There really aren't any 'rebeus' [persons of Arab descent] here, hardly any at all. And you see, at the moment I'm starting to get a bit paranoid. For example, I watch a lot how people behave, especially guys. There's this flirting thing going on. And it's not harmless flirting, it's flirting like 'oh she's a beurette'.

Later on in the interview, Soraya recounted how one day in the city she stumbled upon a neighbour who had visited her husband a few days earlier, and about whom she had in the meantime learned that he openly supported the RN, the main French far-right political party (former Front National). In their encounter in the city this man made her feel

very uncomfortable and Soraya's use of the word ' beurette ' points to a form of sexualised othering. The feminine declination of the word ' beur ' (the vernacular version of ' arab '), which started to be used in France in the 1980s, carries racist and sexist connotations anchored in colonial imaginaries around Muslim and Arab women. To situate the use of this term, it is worth mentioning that some have claimed to make the term ' beurette ' their own as a strategy of stigma reversal, as for instance fashion designer Lisa Bouteldja, who coined the term ' beurettocratie ' on social media. More voices on social media from women of North-African descent have however denounced the use of this term, most prominently Nesrine Slaoui, a French-Moroccan (as she describes herself) journalist and author who circulated the hashtag ' jenesuispasune beurette ' (I'm not a beurette) in 2020².

The sexualisation of women seen as of Arab and Muslim background engenders a misplaced interest of the dominant gaze into these women's sexual lives. Similarly to Soraya, a visceral sense of uneasiness was felt by Salma during a student party at a prestigious ' grande école ' (higher education institution):

At one point I found myself at a party where I realised that people... for example, it was a discussion about Islam and women in Islam. Towards the end of the discussion I realised that people were focusing more and more of their questions on whether or not I was a virgin. And so there are several people who want to know, who are directing their questions to whether I'm a virgin, and that for example was a big breaking point when I decided that I could no longer be friends with these people. So there's a lot of sexualization of Arab and Moroccan women, from the Maghreb.

The experiences recounted by Soukaina, Naima, Salma and Soraya, all four aged from their late 20s up to their mid-30s, reveal the ubiquity of gendered forms of racist incidents, from direct aggressions, which concerned a minority of participants, to more diffuse patterns of gendered minorisation, shared by all interviewees. The figure of the ' beurette ' weighted heavily on them as a vehicle of gendered othering anchored in decades long sexualisation of bodies read as feminine, Arab (or ' Berber ' for that matter, yet the distinction is unsurprisingly rarely mentioned in homogenising stereotypes) and Muslim. Though their individual experiences are obviously unique, the fact that all were exposed to some manifestations of such gendered othering creates a shared set of experiences, a sort of common ground. Participants would not necessarily describe themselves as victims of racism but all highlighted in one way or another the prevalence of racializing patterns of exclusion, often articulated with forms of racialised sexism, across different settings of their everyday lives in France. Building on this, I turn in the next section to the articulation between shared experiences and shared interpretations of certain manifestations of the coloniality of power in a postcolonial setting, here through the example of participants' comments on French asylum and migration politics.

'Nobody would be able to name a Ukrainian dish': pointing out postcolonial double standards

In this section, I explore participants' views on French asylum and migration politics in the context of the war in Ukraine, a topic that emerged from the interviews without it being initially included in the interview questions. I understand the voicing of these shared concerns as the result of a ' double consciousness ' that brings women of

² Source : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J2zHiJ3Gy0I>.

North-African descent in postcolonial France to see and feel the racializing double standards of contemporary asylum politics. Much like Du Bois' notion of second sight that made African American deeply aware of the gap between United States' stated ideals and the racist structures of American society, in a way that might not appear to the majority of White US citizens (Balfour, 1998), postcolonial minorities in Europe today might have in common a sharpened awareness of such gaps. By highlighting the articulation between shared sets of experiences and shared concerns, I seek to trace empirically the ways in which a 'common placement in hierarchical power relations' produces 'shared angles of vision' that tend to produce comparable interpretations (Hill Collins, 1997, p. 377). The decolonial potential of this specific standpoint lies in what Demir understands as 'diaspora as translation' whereby postcolonial diasporas speak back and challenge North-centric worldviews (Demir, 2022, 63–64). Analysing the postcolonial and gendered social position as standpoint further opens up the epistemological question not only of whose voices are heard but also of whose categorizations and framings prevail.

In my online conversation with Soukaina, which I conducted in early 2023, I did not plan on touching upon contemporary migration and asylum policies, nor upon the arrival of Ukrainian refugees. And yet, while discussing questions of gender, identity and inclusion in postcolonial France, several participants brought the issue of the differential treatment of Ukrainian and Syrian (and other non-white) refugees to the fore. Though none of the women I interviewed were migrants themselves (as all were either born in France or arrived as young children), in a political and media context characterized by the generalization of far-right discourses, several participants spontaneously referred to the political sequence around the arrival of Ukrainian refugees as a case in point of obvious double standards in asylum reception. Soukaina for instance shared her political outlook on this matter by practicing a form of 'radical remembering', to use Demir's words, anchored in her family history.

When the debate about 'they're like us, they drive cars that are like our cars' came up, it's true that there was... I'm sorry, nobody knows anything about Ukraine in France. Nobody would be able to name a Ukrainian dish. So at some point, culturally speaking, you have to accept that France is closer to North Africa or West Africa than to Ukraine. And that's because, once again, there's a history and, what's more, it's a history that was generated by France, so it wasn't us who imposed it... it wasn't the racialised people who imposed it. And it's true that there's a bit of this unbearable thing about the treatment of African refugees. I find the number of deaths in the Mediterranean intolerable, and in fact there is a kind of moral bankruptcy.

In this quote Soukaina points to the paradox of having Ukrainians depicted as much closer to French culture and betting that no one would actually be able to name a Ukrainian dish. Even though unavoidably inscribed in racializing food hierarchies (Cohen, 2021), the North-African traditional dish 'couscous' has been presented for years, if not decades, as French people's favorite dish based on popular polls relayed in mainstream media, which was still the case in 2023. With this comment, Soukaina thus points to the distancing of North-African cultures, despite an undeniable everyday presence in French society, and the discursive construction of social proximity on the racialized criteria of whiteness, in spite of a lack of everyday interactions. While all participants who mentioned this differential treatment simultaneously insisted on the necessity to support and

welcome Ukrainian refugees, several also shared that the ways in which the political and media debates were framed reignited long-felt observations, at times wounds, around racialized hierarchies of who is deemed worthy of consideration, of who is allowed to belong. A few years younger and still studying, Amina, who had co-funded with a friend a local association to help migrant and asylum-seeking newcomers to her hometown, shared a similar sentiment:

And there were also the debates during the unfortunate war in Ukraine, when Ukrainians fled their country because it was at war. And that's normal. But the comments we heard from journalists and politicians were just... unbelievable. 'Yes, but they're white.' And I said to myself, they may be white, but their culture is so far removed from ours. Because you'd hear 'they have the same culture as us.' But no, the culture of Eastern European countries is not at all the same as French culture. I said to myself, but it's not a question of culture. In fact, it's really a question of skin colour.

The welcoming tone across the political landscape and the quick adoption of concrete reception policies for Ukrainians amounted for several participants to a sort of moment of truth as to the actual possibility of more humane migration and asylum policies. Naima, the 38 years old woman and mother who recently resumed her studies, explicitly articulated the utilitarian approach to former immigrants that shaped her family trajectory, the lethal consequences of contemporary migration policies and her recent astonishment in the face of flagrant double standards.

When you see the way non-European refugees are treated, it breaks my heart. It revolts me. It drives me crazy. How did we get to this in this country... (...) You were able to go looking for people because you needed the little rotten workforce, in brackets, I'm not saying that my dad had a shitty job, but you went looking for this labour force because your own people didn't want to do the dirty work. You could take in these people, even if it wasn't in the best of conditions...why are you doing this today with these people? Why are you letting people die in the Mediterranean? Why are you passing the buck to Italy or Greece? Why are people dying today because they're trying to cross the Alps in the middle of winter when they've only got a sweater on? Why do you also condemn people who help these people? But why when...I'm going to be blunt, you've got blond people with blue eyes arriving, you find flats for them, you find them places in schools, you find them jobs. (...) And to see the difference in the reception. I'm incapable of reasoning beyond emotional reasoning. Injustice, discrimination, racism, all the words you can put on this situation.

These interview extracts show, I argue, that Soukaina, Amina and Naima developed a shared interpretation of this political sequence as a consequence of their common social position, as French yet racialized women whose family trajectories result from migration. All three articulate a decolonial anti-racist lens to understand contemporary migration and asylum policies. This critical perspective on the normalization of such differential treatment, otherwise presented as self-evident, achieves a deconstruction of the dominant narrative around migration and asylum. After having delved into the articulation of shared experiences of racism with converging postcolonial perspectives, I explore

in the following section how participants assessed the dominant terms used to categorize them and foreground the shifting and relational meanings of these labels.

'It depends on who uses the words': remembering, reframing and shifting meanings

In the anticategorical spirit of intersectionality (McCall, 2005), operationalizing categories that need to be critically examined and deconstructed represents an epistemological challenge. Categories such as '2nd or 3rd generation', or even 'children of immigrants', which circulate in media and political discourses, are not exempt from stigmatizing connotations as they reproduce assumptions of 'unbelonging' and 'foreignness'. The hypothesis of a gendered and racialised standpoint of women of Moroccan descent in France also relies on an assumption of difference, yet not essentialised differences that cast these women as Other, but lived differences, that result from the gendered and racialised hierarchies that structure French society. To understand group formation from this perspective, I explore in this section what research participants thought about dominant categorisations of concern to them, how they related to these 'labels' and what meanings these terms carried in their perception.

For Naima and Salma, as for many other participants, what mattered most was, at the end of the day, the intention beyond the words themselves and understanding the intent was necessarily related to who was speaking and in what context. Naima for instance would even have accepted the term '*immigré*' (immigrant), a label rejected by most others, or '*descendante d'immigrée*' (of immigrant descent) quite interchangeably, if the context were not hostile (as it however was in her perception).

I don't have a problem with "descendant of immigrants", it depends on who pronounces these words. In fact, it's always who says it and it's always the context. These words, when you hear them after terrorists attacks, it will bother me. Because it will inevitably associate what happened with this population. And that's what's going to bother me. If it's about immigration or colonisation, it's going to depend on who's using the words. So it's very complex this question about words. There are words with which I fully identify and of which I'm not ashamed, I mean I do consider myself as an immigrant. And I consider myself as descendant of immigrants. I'm not ashamed of that and I don't mind it being used to represent me or to talk about me. Once again, it depends on who's using it and in what context.

This context could not be ignored and Naima mentioned indeed having entirely stopped watching mainstream media channels because she felt constantly stigmatised and insulted. Naima even sensitized her family relatives not to watch conservative channels such as Cnews to avoid adding to their ratings. Also pointing to the overall negative media coverage and growing islamophobia, Salma, who defined herself as a feminist Muslim woman, considered 'children of immigrants' as the lesser of two evils given the 'context'.

Well, in the current context, they are rather positive words, children of immigrants, 2nd/3rd generation...I mean in the sense that there are so many more insulting words that in fact we've come to say OK, that's pretty neutral. But because to me in the context of islamophobia, we're called separatists a lot [in reference to a law passed in August 2021 and framed as addressing separatism], islamo-leftists, all these words...So, children of immigrants, all these words, it depends on the context

but I consider myself as a child of immigrants (...). Of course, it depends on the context in which you are assigned to it.

In a gesture demanding 'radical inclusion' as phrased by sociologist Ipek Demir, Zahra, a 36 years old woman, born in France and who grew up in a French South-eastern village, referred to her family's migration history, as many other participants did too, to contest the negative connotation of the phrase 'descendants of immigrants' and the implicit underpinning claim of unbelonging.

What I think is a shame about the discourse, it's that the way we present things or the terms we use it's going to be perceived as pejorative, whereas personally, there's nothing pejorative about saying that I'm from an immigrant background. Immigration was wanted [by France]. They needed immigrants at some point to build France. It was them who needed immigrants. So you see, basically, don't come and tell us that we don't belong here. You're the ones who came to get us, who came to get our parents, you facilitated everything, so there's a bit of hypocrisy, you know, in saying that they're immigrants and that they're already happy just to be here. No, that's how it is now, I'm French, I was born in France, I'm studying in France. Why don't you accept that we're French? And why do you have to reduce us to the category of immigrants, as if that wasn't something that can be valued?

A by now central tenet of critical approaches to postcolonial migrations, the notion that 'we are here because you were there' traversed many of the accounts collected for this research. As Demir highlights 'the decolonisation role of diasporas does not need to be reduced to them speaking about the evils of empire and colonisation. It is also there in terms of changing the national story and demanding radical inclusion in the new home' (Demir, 2022, 69). The different terms used to describe those of North-African descent in France, the politicization of these terms, and participants' voicing their own perspectives, are part and parcel of this conversation about diasporas 'as translation'.

An instance of this conversation unfolds around the use of the word '*racisé*', more often used in French than '*racialisé*'; the difference being that the former supposes a minority position in society while the second is also used for the description of privileged forms of racialisation such as whiteness (Mazouz, 2020). Anchored in decades of critical theory developments (for some major works: Guillaumin, 1972/2002; Miles, 1993; Hall, 2017; Solomos & Collins, 2010), these terms are also increasingly part of a public conversation in France and mobilized by popular cultural products against the background of a dominant colour-blind narrative (Escafré-Dublet et al., 2023). In the words of Soukaina, the use of the term '*racisé*' is associated with a process of political historicization as illustrated by her preference for the expression 'descendants of colonised people' rather than 'descendants of immigrants':

It reminds me of 'racisé' that's something I found myself saying in France, I'm a racialised woman and so that's a term that I find very appropriate. Second, third generation, I don't find it appropriate. I don't find it a very natural term. For me, it doesn't encompass a real social reality, or even real human experiences, compared to the term 'racialised'. Descendants of immigrants... In fact, I think it's often used in a pejorative way. I mean, there's a bit of a thing where I prefer to say descendants of

colonised people because it reminds us of the history that North Africans and West Africans from French-speaking countries are not here by chance.

As a matter of fact, the term ‘*racisé*’ circulates not only within marginalised activist or academic spaces but is also increasingly part of a slightly more public conversation around racism. Asma mentions the role of podcasts in shaping her discourse and subjectivity:

I know that I use the term ‘racialized people’ a lot, maybe because I’ve heard it on podcasts... (...) And I know that this term, it often embarrasses, it can bother people who are not racialised, who are white in society’s eyes, and it can bother them precisely because it is always more comforting not to use terms that make a direct link with racism. But I know that even with my friends I use the term racialised people, because it implies that they are oppressed, so it’s a social construction and it’s systemic oppression in society because they are actually categorised as such in everyday life and so on. So, I don’t see why we shouldn’t use that term if there are realities that relate to that.

Asma, the youngest in the cohort (22) and a student of political science, articulated a political consciousness she acquired through different channels. If one observes the large number of podcasts that have seen the light of day in the past few years in France to provide a space for voices of racialised youth, one would think that Asma is one of many and that the unease with the notion of racialisation fades away among certain audiences (to quote a few: *Les enfants du Bruit et de l’Odeur*, *À l’intersection*, *Beurn Out*; many are made by women such as *Kiffe ta race*, *Dialna*, *Illégitimes*, and some centre-stage gender-related issues, for instance *na3na3*, *On est là*, *Tarab*, *YESSS*, *HeyA*).

Reflections shared by Naima, Salma, Zahra, Soukaina and Asma in relation to the different terms used to designate ‘them’ show that standpoint is not about narrow identity categories. It is about being able to read an intention behind the words, it is about understanding what is at stake for individuals concerned by the chosen terms, a practice resonating with Anzaldúa’s notion of ‘*facultad*’ that is, in a context of domination, the ‘capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface’ (1987:85). Meanings carried by categories are not fixed, they are relational and can shift owing to the subjective positions of those who voice and make use of these categories. Beyond the labels, it is the contextual understanding of a term and of its use that accounted for how respondents felt about particular wordings.

Conclusion

Drawing on the experiences and views of women of Moroccan descent in France as expressed in interviews revolving initially around questions of identity, gender and inclusion, this article proposed to bring into conversation feminist standpoint theories and decolonial perspectives on diasporas to think about how shared sets of experiences might articulate with converging interpretations and sustain an empirical process of standpoint formation. In doing so, I present participants’ varied experiences of gendered racism, from ubiquitous yet difficult to prove patterns of marginalisation at work or discrimination in the labour market, to having to deal with a male gaze that is both racializing and sexualising in everyday interactions, to manifest aggressions in public spaces. This most extreme pattern concerned here women who were wearing a hijab, which is

in line with previous research findings on gendered islamophobia. Understanding these shared sets of experiences as engendered by intersectional structures of domination that traverse French society, the article then moves to exploring the ways in which this social position might produce a standpoint manifested in converging interpretations. The second empirical section thus analyses participants' unanticipated voicing of a critique towards contemporary asylum and migration politics and their media depiction as an instance of a 'shared angle of vision' (Hill Collins, 1997), which arguably demonstrates Demir's interpretative lens of postcolonial diasporas in the Global North talking back to the metropole. It appears indeed in the third empirical section that practicing 'radical remembering' and striving for 'radical inclusion' (Demir, 2022) permeates participants' reflections around the terms and labels used to define them in public and media discourses. This section further shows that beyond specific words, it is the relational meaning of the term that matters to participants, who display a situated faculty (Anzaldúa, 1987) to retrieve the deeper meanings of these labels in their subjective context. Beyond its specific case-study related insights, this article seeks to contribute to conversations around how to empirically study the formation of marginalized standpoints and how to make space for knowledge claims that disrupt dominant narratives.

Supplementary Information

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Supplementary Material 1

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Authors' contributions

The sole author of this article has conducted all steps of the research (design, data collection, analysis, writing).

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Data availability

The datasets generated and/or analysed during the current study are not publicly available due to protection of individual privacy of research participants but are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Declarations

Ethics, consent and permissions

Informed consent was given by all participants in the research.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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